MÉTIS AND/OR *AFRO-MÉTIS*: WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

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Yes, my teasing essay title riffs on the refrain to Soul singer Jean Knight's smash hit, "Mr. Big Stuff" (1971)! However, the issue teased out herein doth ask our considered and most considerate meditation on nomenclature, *national* identity, and definition, all in relation to a racialized puzzle: Can the rubric, *Métis*, encapsulate that upstart neologism, *Afro-Métis?*[1] Or are the terms polarities, so that *Afro-Métis* is a parasitic arriviste upon the beleaguered host that is *Métis*?

Surely, the primary stumbling block to resolving the preceding interrogative is, evidently, that conjunction, "Afro" – African/Black – and *Métis*, a word that, in Canadian bureaucracy and jurisprudence, is interpreted as denominating those persons descended from "French and Scottish fur traders who married Aboriginal women..." ("*Métis* Nation"). Apparently, European ethnicity plus Indigenous "race"[2] is the prerequisite for the formation of *Métis* nations (at least in Canada), plus a historical connection to the fur trade in a defined, geopolitical territory:

> Distinct *Métis* communities developed along the fur trade routes. This *Métis* Nation Homeland includes the three Prairie Provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta), as well as, parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the Northern United States. ("*Métis* Nation")

Missing from the statist (and gussied up) history[3] and geography lessons are the complications of fact, such as the recognition that the fur-trade was *not* the only occupation that brought imperialist (and/or profit-seeking and/or refugee) Europeans into contact with racialized "others." There was also slavery, and that New France "industry" ensured that both Indigenous people and Africans[4] gave birth (*merci*, Caucasian fornicators) to *Métis* and/or to *Mulattos*. To adhere to the vaunted histories and genealogies of the *Métis* is to eschew the claims to such status of the progeny of, say, an Acadian farmer or a Montréal slave trader, who happened to impregnate Indigenous partners. According to the ruling-class definition cited above, neither the Acadian nor the *Montréalais* sire may increase a – or *the* – *Métis* Nation, even if the child/ren are – by definition, *métis* – i.e., "cross-bred" or "mixed-

1 See Wendell Nii Laryea Adjetey.

2 To paraphrase scholar Ann duCille, French dudes gotta be so potent that one drop of their white semen turns a "Red" woman white and her babies brown. Cf. duCille (303-304).

3 What? There were zero instances of polygamy, polyandry, common-law shacking up, as well as sexual assault? Are the *Métis* only derived from legally sanctioned union? *Incroyable*!

4 Historian Robin Winks tells us that the colonial French enslaved Indigenous and African peoples and had cavalier intimacies with both: "The French settlers especially were attracted to Indian women, and 75.9% of all panis children were *batards*, while only 32.1% of Negro children were born out of wedlock" (11). He accepts that "Indian *and* Negro blood was mixed with French Canadian" (11, my emphasis).

race." How very Canadian this prejudice (pre-judgment) is! To utilize *occupation* (related to class) as well as *region* and *race/ethnicity* to essay to grant the identity of *métis* to folks only of European and Indigenous admixture, then to only one economic pursuit, and then to only one geographical territory (pretending, magically, that there was no fur-trade in Québec – despite the *coureurs du bois* – nor in Atlantic Canada, where beaver pelts were gold). Shades of John Porter's *Vertical Mosaic* (1965), which insists class stratification in Canada is based on *race*, ethnicity, and occupation, as well as territory.[5] Yet the term *métis* – like most words – is protean, and thus defiant of judicial or legislative constraint, and is as profligate as were the progenitors of the original *Métis* (and *Mulattos*). The fundamental issue? It seems impossible to copyright a people or to trademark their nomenclature...

Although that de *rigueur*, Canuck i.d. (definition) of the *Métis* exists – that the initial-majuscule word denotes persons who are as *red* and *white* in background as the Maple Leaf flag, and that they inhabit the "North-West" (Manitoba to British Columbia, with Ontario as a provisional add-on) – the word itself – just like *mulatto* – originates in French imperialism, and so its extant usage encompasses all the French Empire. So, one encounters *The Métis of Senegal* (Jones) as well as "*Métis* of Vietnam" (Firpo). Wherever French *pricks* (excuse the pun) penetrated and inseminated and impregnated "Natives" (of Africa, the Americas, and Asia) and/or *Noires*, the resultant live births would be classed as mulattos and quadroons, *métis* or *métif* and octoroons, *et cetera*, to suit a sophisticated scale of racial categorization (and stratification), operative in Louisiana as well as in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and – I say – Nouvelle-France (Québec) – given its Indigenous and African slave populations. Witness a chart produced by Frederick Law Olmstead, demonstrating how "the French of the Southern [United] States classify the colored people, according to the greater or less preponderance of Negro blood..." (Reuter 12), including the categories of *Metif*[6] (designating offspring both "white and Quadroon") and "Meamelouc" (designating offspring both "white and *métif*") (Reuter 12). So, the French thought *métis*, at times, described persons of some Black/African/Negro/*Noir* heritage, *not* only those of Indigenous and European conjunction.

Then again, perhaps some *Black* Canadians merit the label of *Métis* as much as (or more than) the proponents of a Eurocentric-only (and thus pronouncedly Caucasian-rooted/*raced*) identity. For one thing, there were black fur-traders in colonial Québec as well as in the "North-West" and they, too, embraced Indigenous lovers who became moms. Mind film critic Michael Sicinski's resonant sagacity: "Every space... is hybridized from the start" (28). Thus, Frank Mackey's history of Black Montréal registers that the fur trade was "one of the principal channels through which blacks reached the city, or left it, as can be seen from the numerous references in this book to blacks owned or trafficked by fur traders" (197).[7] Mackey also provides bios for four black fur-traders, brothers Étienne and Pierre Bonga, and the latter's sons, George and Stephen[8] (198-201); the first-generation brothers Bonga travelled from Montréal to Nord-Ouest Ontario, and then to Manitoba. Pierre Bonga had four children "by a woman of the Indian country" (Mackey 198), and an image of him in a canoe served to inspire Afro-*Métis* poet Troy Burle Bailey's experimental collection, *The Pierre Bonga Loops* (2010). Clearly, the only way that Pierre Bonga, et al., can be blocked from being viewed as full-blooded *Métis* (so to speak) is due the absence of a white European forebear. For his part, Colin A. Thomson records the exploits of Alberta's "Nigger Dan" Williams, whose wife was the daughter of the Beaver (Nation) chief (61-69); Alberta's Henry Mills (whose Blackfoot name was "Six-apekwan" or "Black White Man" [71]), wed a Blackfoot wife (71); their son, David, garnered an "Indian name" – Scabby Bull (71) – and won "a Blood bride, Poosa" (71). Thomson dubs him a "Black-Indian frontiersman" (72). Thomson also showcases the criminal Jesse Williams, whose wife was "a Sarcee Indian

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5 In their Foreword to the 2015-issued, 50th Anniversary edition of Porter's classic study, Wallace Clement and Rick Helmes-Hayes teach that Porter's stratified mosaic is based on individuals and peoples possessing variously valued, "heritage" attributes, including "race, ethnicity, immigrant status, language, region, and religion" (x).

6 *Métif* and *Métis* (*Métive* and *Métisse*) are the same words, though as one Louisiana cultural website points out, the spelling difference was "due to the colonial S within and at the end of words which resembled a lower-case F, also similar to the German ß but with a longer stem..." (Louisiana...) The same Louisiana website asserts that the "French Period (1685-1764)" population numbered Africans, Indigenous peoples, plus "Quebecer [sic] fur traders (*pelletiers*, in French) and military officers, military officials from France, a handful of women (as wives for those Quebecers and French officers) from France and Québec..." (Louisiana....). One reason why charts of racial admixture circulated in the French Empire was that its fur-traders and soldiers and scarce white wives (plus "other" women pressed into serving "as wives") kept producing persons of various hues and *tribes* and *free* or *slave* status. Surely, French soldiers and traders (also slave-traders) roamed throughout North American French territory, fathering *black Métis* (the Octoroon) as well as *rouge Métis*, sometimes in Nouvelle-France, sometimes in *Nouvelle-Orléans*, sometimes in the Nord-Ouest (also a Haitian topography, not just Canadian), and sometimes even in *Nouvelle-Écosse*. In sum, *métis* is too unstable a term – racially and geographically – to be monopolized by one group of Prairie-to-B.C.-based Canadians (with Ontario permitted a nominal presence).

7 Note the collapse of fur-trade into slave-trade here.

8 Their irrefutable photos appear in the text (Mackey 200 & 201).

woman known only as 'Religious'" (73). In his history of blacks in British Columbia, Crawford Kilian reports significantly that both fur-trading companies competing for Indigenous-trapped, British Columbian furs (namely, the Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company) were "color-blind, and had often employed Blacks, Indians, and *Metis* (sic) of French-Indian ancestry" (30).[9] Kilian also informs us that British Columbian Governor James Douglas (who had invited African-Americans to settle in the territory) was himself of mixed-race background, a consummate fur trader (note this fact), and then married "the half-breed daughter of the Chief Factor" (31); she was, in fact, part-Cree and part-Scot, and the couple had at least seven children (*Summary*). The Douglas children – mixed African, European, and Indigenous – were, thus, I say, "Afro-*Métis*." On November 6, 2019, Canada Post issued a stamp to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Red River Resistance (I prefer *Rebellion*), of 1869-70, a demand for recognition of *Métis* rights that led to the founding of Manitoba as the first Western province to enter Confederation ("Stamp"[10]). The stamp features a photograph of Louis Riel's *Métis*-inspired, "provisional government," whose members included Pierre Poitras, apparently black, but born to a *Canadian*[11] and a *Métis* woman; Poitras himself later wed an Indigenous bride (*Pierre Poitras* 38). He served as the Honourable Member for Baie Sainte-Paul and Prairie du Cheval Blanc in the Legislative Assembly of Assiniboia and, in that capacity, seconded the motion that accepted Terms of Confederation allowing Manitoba to join the Dominion of Canada in 1870 (*Pierre Poitras* 40). Thus, one Father of Confederation may have been, in reality, "Afro-*Métis*."

Given the extensive history of Abo-Afro-Euro intermingling, not only in the fur trade, and not only in the Canadian North-West, it is impractical to maintain the noun-adjective *Métis*[12]

as precluding anyone or people of Black/African/Negro heritage, whether or not governments ever recognize "Afro-Métis" as an additional or distinct or separate *Métis* people. While there doth exists the recognized *Métis* Nation, with its particular language(s), historical territorial influence and/or administration, plus a proud history of alliance with Indigenous peoples and rejection of tyrannical, settler-government interference with their communities and culture, none of that prohibits the simultaneous existence of other Métis nations. Perhaps the saddest aspect of the current endeavor of some legislators and, well, more-or-less *white*[13] *Métis* allies, to prevent other Canadians – white and black and *Eastern* (*Québécois* and Atlantic Canadian) – from asserting their own long-repressed Indigeneity (i.e., *Métis* status), is their forgetfulness of the history of settler-government efforts to gauge, in Margaret Atwood's phrasing, "Even if all Indians are Indian, are some Indians more Indian than others?" (37).[14] The racist and sexist manipulation of the answers – plural – to that question should, in itself, give pause to state-legitimized *Métis* who credit that the same settler-regimes that have oppressed their ancestors should be permitted to administer, again, the provision of a status that was and is *decided* by (let us pray, consensual) sexual unions among the people,

9 Only the most limited or racist intelligence could imagine that none of this trio of actors ever courted and married or simply impregnated a woman or women from one of (or both of) the other fur-trade communities.

10 www.canadapost.ca/web/fr/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2019/11/06/red_river_resistance&cattype=collecting&cat=stamps

11 Poitras's father worked as an *engagé* (*Pierre Poitras* 38), "a man employed to canoe in the fur-trade as an indentured servant" (*Engagé*). Given the frequent employ of blacks in this capacity (recall the Bonga men), this could be the origin of Poitras fils's not-camera-shy "blackness."

12 In their monograph, *A History of the Legislative Assembly of Assiniboia*, authors Norma Hall, Clifford P. Hall, and Erin Verrier, to describe settlers of mixed-racial heritage in Confederation-era Manitoba conclude, "As *Métis* is a name of honour for people who choose to identify with this aspect of their heritage – whether speaking French, English, or an Aboriginal language – it will serve [for us] as a universal term for past people of mixed Indigenous and non-North American heritage" (3). This interpretation does not exclude Africa(ns) from representing "non-North American heritage."

13 Leave it to Margaret Atwood to urge a controversial point that should not be controversial: "many Natives are more white, genetically, than they are Native" (37). Yes, her science is doubtful, because culture does not depend on genes, eh, but on socialization. Still, it's a tad odd that métis who look white seek to forbid the use of the term *Métis* by métis who look black. Note that Dorothy Mills-Proctor holds that "Many Red-Black people are quantitatively more Indian than Black, [but] because of their African features it is difficult for them… to claim …Indian blood" (108). Historian Wendell Nii Laryea Adjetey reports that "Indigenous people who are part white or white-passing aren't dismissed as bad white actors or "settlers" [even when] involved in controversy. They retain their indigeneity regardless" (Adjetey). However, a "double standard, rooted in white privilege, reveals a particular disdain for Black-Indigenous (or *Afro-Métis*) persons who are read as illegitimate or settlers" (Adjetey, his emphasis). It seems that white supremacist racism erases the existence of an Afro-Métis cohort within the Eurocentric-derived identification of the Métis. So, some Métis who look white, in looking upon Métis who look black, see red (I pun)…

14 Witness the shameful spectacle of Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett who, in June 2019, while celebrating the signing of Federal-authorized, self-government agreements with Métis Nation branches in Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, deplored "so-called Métis groups that have cropped up in Quebec and Atlantic Canada claiming Aboriginal rights to hunt and fish, suggesting that they do not qualify as *Métis*" (Forrest). She drew cheers and applause from *official Métis* when she said, "I think there are significant concerns of people handing out Métis cards to people who are not Métis" (Forrest). Bennett alleged, "research is showing that people misunderstand what the capital-M Métis are," pointing out that claiming an Indigenous ancestor is not enough to prove Métis heritage (Forrest). Thus, once more, a government – not unlike *apartheid*-era South Africa – posits that it can affix – or deny – cultural and/or racial identity. But Bennett's later sentence nixes her effort to excise the "so-called Eastern *Métis*" (Forrest): "This is why… nations will determine who their members are" (Forrest). Precisely! Nations – *plural* – will decide who is or are Métis, not government(s).

the working-class, the *oppressed* (including racialized Black Canadians). In other words, it is not governments who create "nations," but *the people* who denominate and nominate themselves, assuming the nomenclature that makes the best sense for themselves and their cultures and histories.

For proof, read Bailey, but also Ricky Atkinson, Dorothy Proctor-Mills, et al., the prophets of the Afro-*Métis* Nation: What's black and white and red "all over." Consider this essay, then, merely the theoretical preamble to the decisive conclusion about the need to "Assemble the Afro-Metis Syllabus: Some Preliminary Reading..." Coming soon to a discourse near you!

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