

Review

Darryl Leroux. *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$70.00 cloth. ISBN: 978-0887558979. \$31.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0887558467.

For the past decade, one of the fastest growing census groups in Canada has been “métis.”¹ However, considerable confusion and controversy has arisen in recent years because of the proliferation of people, organized groups, and identity claims made under the banner of “métis” (and in some cases, other Indigenous identities). The new “métis” historical narratives are at odds with the histories that many Indigenous nations, including the historic Métis, have known to be true. As Darryl Leroux explains, the new “métis” are not an extension of, nor descendants to, the historic Red River Métis; instead, the so-called Québec métis and/or the eastern métis (contemporary terms popularized in French-language media, as noted by Leroux) are White race shifters who employ a variety of moves to reimagine their family histories and then assert modern Indigenous identities.

Leroux begins by clearly saying that this is not a book about Indigenous peoples; it is not about generations of dispossession through colonial mechanisms; it is not about reclaiming a political, cultural, or community-based identity that was disrupted; and Leroux’s work is not to be confused with “the multi-generational efforts at reconnection that take place as a response to government policies and laws” (p. 1). Quite simply, this is an in-depth look at a modern-day form of genealogical fraud: the phenomenon of self-indigenization within French Canada.

The book is organized into five chapters. In the introductory chapter, Leroux reviews key terms, such as the origin of the term “métis,” and explores where they overlap with other concepts like “race,” “métissage,” or “lineage.” The meanings of these terms have changed over time, and, in fact, the so-called métissage of French Canada is largely a historical fiction (which Leroux further details in chapter 1). The importance of terminology is key, most crucially because the historic Métis are impeded in their claims to constitutional rights in Canada by the contested use of the same terms by the race shifters studied in this text. “It is crucial to discuss these dual, and at times competing, meanings of ‘métis/sage’ now in order to set the stage for arguments throughout this book,” Leroux notes, “since at times individuals or organizations using the French language display a rather open slippage between different meanings of the concept, fuelling the self-indigenization process” (p. 5). As Leroux explains, these White-turned-Indigenous people claim a “métis” identity, which causes considerable confusion and, more gravely, negatively affects the historic Métis, a nation recognized under Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution as having rights as Indigenous peoples.

¹ As Leroux notes, the capitalized usage of “Métis” in the book, and in this article, will be reserved for reference to the historic Métis, a continuous, legitimate, and established Indigenous nation in Canada that has a distinct history and culture. Leroux states: “In this book, I use ‘Métis’ to refer to the people recognized as Indigenous by their Plains Cree, Sauteaux, Assiniboine, and Dene kin.... I use ‘métis’ to refer to individuals and/or organizations that have no connection to the Métis people yet are claiming a Métis identity” (p. 7).

The introductory chapter lays out some relevant history and explains some of the mechanics of Québec and French-descendant genealogy in Canada, which, thanks to much careful record keeping by the Catholic Church, is detailed, accurate, and widely available to the layperson. Several of the largest online databases for French-descendant genealogy provide Leroux's data set, which includes conversations between members on genealogy forums, as well as Leroux's own family history.

The middle chapters of the book look at the mechanisms for how so many French descendants use the same ancestors (called "root ancestors") to reimagine their White identities into Indigenous identities. Using what Leroux calls "lineal descent," White French descendants find a long-ago Indigenous ancestor in their family tree and use this as the basis of an identity today. Remarkably, Leroux's careful attention to the hundreds of posts on genealogy forums reveals that "some of the same seventeenth-century Indigenous women are now being reclaimed by French-descendant people as the sole basis for several different Indigenous identities" (p. 43). Leroux's research on Marie Sylvestre shows that hundreds of people have used this root ancestor to claim métis, Algonquin (Anishnaabe) identity in Ontario and Québec, gaining membership in federally recognized Indigenous organizations.² There are serious implications to these formal identity claims, not least is the time and effort that organizations like the Algonquins of Ontario have had to spend sorting through the large numbers of such applications, Leroux notes. These lineal identity claims, going back to ancestors some three hundred or more years ago, is not a new problem for Indigenous communities, and Leroux's work is richer here because he includes a discussion of the phenomenon of many White Americans who seek to become (in particular but not exclusively) Cherokee. It is a move that shifts how Indigeneity is understood and is in contrast to how Indigenous peoples define kinship, community, and belonging. As Leroux states, "I have seen neither any evidence of kinship relations with living Indigenous peoples, nor any effort to articulate the specific territorial basis for their identity. Instead, as in the case of Sylvestre, a long-ago Indigenous woman's identity is transformed in such a way that today's race shifters claim that a genealogical link to her leads one to be 'Indigenous' to anywhere they happen to live" (p. 62).

Leroux also analyzes the use, and sexualization and exploitation, of Indigenous women in settler narratives, which is relevant insofar as all of the root ancestors were Indigenous women. A key finding throughout Leroux's work is that the claim that many Indigenous women married French men is historical fiction: in fact, very few Indigenous women were known to marry French settlers. As Leroux lays out in the introduction, "So few Indigenous women elected to marry French men that prior to the arrival of the first shipment of 'filles du roi' (the approximately 700 young French women sent to New France by the king of France in order to produce French, Catholic colonists) in 1663, Louis XIV offered 150 livres to the families of Indigenous women who married French settlers" (p. 11).

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss two other ways that French descendants make dubious claims to Indigenous identities. In the case of aspirational descent, long-ago French ancestors are rediscovered to be Indigenous (when they are not) and a lineal descent claim is then made. Usually, this involves finding a

² The organizations discussed here do not grant federal Indian status, which is only granted to members of First Nations bands who are recognized under the Indian Act and have historically signed treaties with Canada/the Crown. While these organizations may call their membership system one that uses "status," this does not confer any federal Indigenous rights to these members.

woman ancestor with missing information (e.g., a missing birth record) and claiming the missing information means the person was Indigenous. “Aspirational descent ... is about much more than simply knowing one’s ancestral origins. It involves remaking those origins to fit one’s desired identity in the present” (p. 102). In an even more questionable move, people who claim lateral descent use a nonlineal ancestor (e.g., a cousin or relation through marriage) to claim a present-day Indigenous identity. Leroux’s own ancestry includes some of the same root ancestors who are used by other French descendants as lateral ancestors to claim Indigenous ancestry, a fact he learned while researching for this book. In Leroux’s case, his “great-great-great-great-great grandfather Sylvestre’s brother Augustin had Métis children” (p. 126). The chapter on lateral descent also includes important historical and contextual information about the historic Métis, who have long had kinship and community relations with Indigenous peoples in the Prairies.

Leroux offers a thought in chapter 3 that deserves more attention and will be of interest to scholars of identities and Whiteness. That is to say, these race-shifting maneuvers by French descendants are perhaps partially motivated by the desire to reconcile the guilt and anxiety that White Canadians may feel for being part of the ongoing colonial violence and dispossession of Indigenous peoples in Canada. By becoming Indigenous, one escapes the need to deal with their identity as a member of the White/settler/colonizer group. Leroux points to the work of Adam Gaudry and Jennifer Adese, who consider the repurposing of Louis Riel and the way the mythology of a Canada founded on “métissage” and mixing not only is false but also is an attempt to rewrite the story of Canada, such that actual historic, Indigenous communities that have had continuous presence and political struggle in Canada are overshadowed by the claims of these new so-called Indigenous rights seekers.

It is precisely a rights-based claim to identity that motivates many of the new “métis” to form organizations and become politically active, and chapters 5 and 6 delve into the court cases and organizational documents of two of Canada’s largest eastern “métis” organizations, La Communauté Métisse de Domaine-du-Roy et de la Seigneurie de Mingan (CMDRSM) and the Métis Nation of the Rising Sun (MNRS). It is in these chapters that the deceptive nature of these new Indigenous identity claims, as well as the harm they cause to Indigenous rights seeking, is presented most effectively. The timeline of events speaks volumes: these are organizations created to meet the Powley test, and all emerged in the past two decades post-Powley, with nearly all of their members claiming Indigeneity using aspirational or lineal descent via root ancestors from the 1600s and 1700s, including some whose “actual indigeneity has been disproven” (p. 159).³ These organizations have engaged in over seventy court cases that are Powley related, and though none have won, several have appealed or are ongoing, and the efforts to seek recognition in the courts is not slowing down (see the appendix, pp. 223–37).

The interview excerpts from members of the CMDRSM and MNRS included in these chapters, along with Leroux’s careful research into court documents and public records, show how White French

³ The Powley case (2003) was a Canadian Supreme Court case that pertained to Indigenous hunting rights. It began after a Métis father and son were charged for illegally hunting a moose in Ontario. The Métis were recognized as Indigenous under Section 35 of the repatriated 1982 constitution, and this paved the way for Métis peoples to seek Indigenous rights through the courts. The Powley test is a list of criteria that determines whether a claimant qualifies as Métis and is therefore entitled to rights under Section 35.

descendants have legitimized their claims to identity, and to the rights that supposedly follow, by fictionalizing and popularizing local histories. These revised histories are disseminated through self-published books, media appearances, and friendly media stories and through gaining the support of other legitimate organizations (e.g., the city of Saguenay funded book projects about the so-called métis history of the region). Further, Eurocentric, colonial, and racist ideologies are also in the mix here; many of the same tropes about Indigenous people that are common across Canada are presented in participants' interviews. For example, the "disappearance thesis" casts the Innu and other Indigenous peoples as at fault for "choosing" to be governed by the Indian Act, while the French are portrayed as "free" from government intervention and culturally resilient for maintaining their (French) language and culture in the face of English domination. These made-up histories and harmful ideologies are evident in local media and woven through the individual participants' interviews. The ties that the race shifters have to organized racist groups are also revealed: "several leaders and members of the [organization] are in fact former leaders of the anti-land claim/anti-Indigenous movement and/or the white rights movement" (p. 175).

Leroux's book leaves no doubt that the phenomenon of White French descendants claiming Indigenous rights and identities is entirely fraudulent. The First Peoples of the territories in which these new groups are located claim no kinship, affinity, or community relations with these métis organizations. These are strategic race shifters, motivated by a perceived threat to their rights to hunt and/or to use the land as they wish, while also opposing Indigenous peoples' rights to do the same. Their anti-Indigeneity is revealed not only in the timeline of events, and in the beliefs of the members through their interview transcripts, but also in the gender gap that exists in their identity claims, with more men in these regions claiming to be "métis" in the Canadian census than women. Essentially, these organizations went from hunting associations to Indigenous rights-seeking organizations, Leroux states. It is worth noting that despite their efforts, "none of the forty-nine 'eastern métis' (or 'Québec métis' or 'Acadian Métis') court cases ... has managed to pass the Powley test" (p. 138). However, these so-called métis organizations have emerged in the past two decades as "a strategic way to protect and consolidate white settler access to territory and resources," and they take resources (e.g., the use of the court/legal system) and attention (e.g., media) away from the pressing needs for redress that Indigenous peoples continue to face across Canada (p. 136).

While Leroux makes clear that this is not a book about Indigenous people, scholars of Indigenous rights and those with an interest in reconciliation may not fully understand present-day events, especially in eastern Canada, without Leroux's explanation of how White claims to Indigeneity are working to undermine First Nations efforts to seek justice today. This detailed case study of genealogical fraud will be of interest not only to Canadian scholars of Indigenous Studies but also to the field of Whiteness/White studies and scholars of race/racism and mixed race. Those interested in how the emerging field of DNA/blood testing is affecting identity claims, with all of the social and legal implications, will find it useful as well. In the Canadian case, this book is of note because the new "métis" have become the latest organized form of settler opposition to Indigenous rights in a country where reconciliation is only beginning to make small impacts in settlers' understandings of treaties, inherent rights, and the ways Indigenous communities sustain their well-being. The risk of not knowing about these French-descendant

claims to Indigeneity is that their false narratives will take hold before the truth (as in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada) has a chance to make the work of reconciliation possible.

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