

A Full History of the Exchange by Joe Desjarlais

Fur trade stories have long been mired in neo-classic ideas that success or failure has been dependent on the ability of indigenous people to integrate into prevailing economic structures. I got thinking about my own work as a public historian on the BC fur trade history. I encountered the fur trade post *to fur trade post* thinking in my research. This idea was that anything and anyone outside the fur trade post is drawn to the core. In this view, these people out there beyond the reach of the fort were without an economy, had no history, nor political and legal systems that mattered. Accompanying this type of thinking were ideas that a relatively empty land that settlers *discovered* was free to possess, and then others could be justifiably excluded in the process.

These dependency themes and linear ideas of progress lingered on through early assimilation legislation, the BNA Act, and the Indian Act. The reality is that historical narratives of dependency still shape the terms of the dialogue to this day in Canada, including that of Métis people. Look at the recent Powley Supreme Court decision concerning Métis people. Métis authors and historians George and Terry Goulet recently took time in a blog to explain the problems surrounding the recent Powley decision. They argue that this narrow definition fails to take into account the different historical meanings concerning Métis communities. In their words, an historic Métis community was primarily 'one of kinship, shared relationships, shared history, heritage and culture, way of life, mobility and other attributes.'

These rich complex stories yet to be unearthed suggest broader notions of exchange and point to historical agency. Agency is the power to choose, to shape and change one's own life and history. We see evidence of this in the groundbreaking work by the Goulet's on the history of the Métis in British Columbia, as Métis people interacted with their environments. We are all witnessing another kind of history slowly beginning to emerge from the margins in British Columbia that is shifting the terms of the relationship. This history is about a way of understanding each other and way of interacting with each other.

Dependency narratives have had incredible explanatory power in Canada's past. It's time to begin a meaningful conversation. Governments know that there is a historical relationship and many cross over ideas grounded in the idea of two nations, as well as a fiduciary obligation. What form will this shared history take for the Métis? Will the legislation we create simply be transitional in the prevailing notion of progress? How will Métis communities integrate their values into Canadian society? Will this be a full basket of exchange and an ongoing dialogue? Will Métis and Canadians coexist more equitably in the public domain? How will a people and their past be represented? How do we even begin to reshape the way we think about Métis traditional knowledge?

On the cusp of several nationally significant court cases concerning Métis people and a multifaceted crisis in BC Métis communities, the ongoing denial of a shared history in Canada is not a viable option. In my view, the British Columbia Métis Federation is well poised to invite governments, First Nations communities and other Canadians to seize the opportunity to participate in a 'full history of the exchange' that can strengthen and affirm this country to its core.