

Rediscovering Our Ancestors And Understanding the Root Causes of Intergenerational Trauma

Step 1 The Question

Interrogating the Effects of Intergenerational Trauma

After spending many years trapped in the revolving door of homelessness and incarceration, I wanted to know why substance abuse, child abandonment, poor mental health, criminality, and physical and sexual abuse were prevalent in my Métis family. While studying Indigenous history, I came to realize that my family and I were suffering from the effects of intergenerational trauma. Maria Brave Heart defines historical/intergenerational trauma as collective cumulative trauma compounding emotional and psychic wounding both over life spans and across generations; it is inherited Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Peter Menzies notes that historical trauma sabotages Aboriginal decision-making, facilitating the breakdown of personal, family, and community networks across time thus leading to higher rates of social maladies among indigenous communities.

Intergenerational Trauma Pyramid

Step 2 The Template

Methodology: AA's Moral Inventory Applied to Genealogy

Before sobriety my life was dominated by substance abuse informed by intergenerational trauma. In rehabilitation I found the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and got sober. However, the steps did not resolve my historical trauma so I decided to try something new to prevent relapsing: I combined AA's principles with historical research. Step 4 of AA clearly states that one must compile an extensive moral inventory of one's past actions. The moral inventory is pivotal to recovery because it provides understanding of hurtful addiction behavior that is otherwise incomprehensible. Understanding helps addicts come to terms with their past, allowing for personal forgiveness, which sets the stage for later amendment-making, and finally liberation from addiction. While trying to come to terms with my 1976 adoption, I retrofitted AA's fourth step template to my family's genealogy and history.

Research Template

Step 3 Genealogical Mapping

Locating the Roots of Intergenerational Trauma

Building a genealogical chart helped me locate and understand historical trauma within my family and trace how it impacted my parents and me. Novak and Rodseth posit that intergenerational trauma is borne out of collective incidents of extreme physical, social, and cultural violence, and that those who witness such overt trauma become carrier groups, or carrier individuals, who pass trauma to their children. Aided by my research supervisor Dr. Carolyn Podruchny, I located the root of my family's trauma to the Northwest Resistance of 1885. My family suffered particularly in the crushing Métis defeat at the Battle of Batoche, where the Canadian government sent thousands of soldiers to fight to hundred of Métis families. Societal implosions on this scale are what Brave Heart has deemed the genesis of intergenerational trauma, which is a natural reaction to massive group trauma, the seed of which grows in successive generations.

Poster Legend

- Red circle: First Generation: Métis witness to extreme violence/carrier group
- Blue circle: Second Generation: Métis directly impacted by carrier trauma
- Yellow circle: Third Generation: Contemporary Métis affected by intergenerational trauma

Morrisette Family Tree

Thistle Family Tree

The Battle of Batoche: May 10, 1885
"The whole place was looted [Batoche]. The houses were burnt... There are so many stories I remember after the rebellion my Mushoom [Grandfather] would talk about it of how the people were starving. He said "The children were starving. They simply lost everything."
Yvonne Morrisette-Richer. June 22, 2013.

Step 4 The Field

Using the Landscape and Cultural Memory of Saskatchewan as an Archive

Between June 12-26, 2013, Dr. Carolyn Podruchny and I set out to visit significant sites of Métis history in Saskatchewan. Our adventure led us all over the province. We learned a great deal from Saskatchewan's rich landscape, museums, public history monuments, and people. The southern leg took us to many trading forts and old Métis bison and freighting routes. While along the northern leg we visited many battle sites in and around the Batoche area where family members fought during the Northwest Resistance. It is also where many of my family still reside.

Step 5 Data Collection

Interviewing Descendants of Northwest Resistance Veterans

While travelling to historic battle sites and places of Métis cultural significance across northern Saskatchewan, Dr. Podruchny and I conducted fluid interviews with my mother Blanche Morrisette, Aunt Yvonne Morrisette-Richer, Uncle Paul Morrisette and cousin Martha Smith, all descendants of Batoche veterans. We did not plan scripts or questions, rather we simply turned on our recording devices and talked. The loose interview structure made our informants feel at ease and provided us with extremely rich and layered conversations. We heard stories passed down from ancestors, in some cases from carrier individuals directly to contemporary Métis, yielding new historical information not found in any published history or primary documents, and all fortified my theory that my family suffers from unresolved historical trauma stretching back to the Northwest Resistance.

The Aftermath of Batoche
"They'd go around picking up the dead at night, they would make a big bonfire and they would burn the bodies. There was that one story, St. Pierre said "One time a head came out of the fire" Well him being a young boy [aged 9] and being desensitized and everything he started kicking the head around, the boys were using it like a [soccer] ball."
Yvonne Morrisette-Richer. June 21, 2013

Step 6 Data Processing

Transcribing, Coding, and Analyzing the Recorded Interviews

As I transcribed the hours of interviews we collected in Saskatchewan I came to realize how much new knowledge we generated in the field, how rich and yielding our communications had been, and how ingrained intergenerational trauma is within my family. The recordings revealed the residual fright contemporary Métis feel about long-passed Resistance battles and their 135-year reluctance to trust Canada. Many Métis communities have not healed from the devastating loss at Batoche. I chose to exclude the worst stories in my research paper; however, my future work will expose the hardship endured by the Road Allowance Métis during the "Dark Age" (1885-1960), when families lost everything to government deceit, settler trickery, and cycles of addiction, and were forced to make a life in the 10-15 foot allowances on either side of roads and railway tracks.

Women and Children Fleeing Batoche
Grandma said they had left bread on the counter and in the cupboard [but] she [Marianne] had to run into the bush with the kids. Grandma said she always wished she would've brought the bread with her because she had to feed the kids... [A]fterwards the soldier came [and] burnt the houses. She always wondered "Did they eat the bread?"
Martha Smith, June 23, 2013.

Step 7 Pinpointing, Naming, and Confronting Intergenerational Trauma Head-On

The impact of intergenerational trauma became crystal clear to me when I located its genesis in my family tree, traced its path, and documented numerous stories from the carrier group through descendants. Perhaps the most dramatic story of unresolved trauma is found in the life of my great-grandmother Marianne Ledoux, pictured on the right. Louis Riel's cousin and personal cook, Marianne was present at Batoche when General Middleton opened fire on the town on May, 10, 1885—a trauma that stayed with her until she passed in 1967. Below is my great-grandmother Cecile Montour and her family. Cecile was 13 years old in 1885 and watched her brothers, male cousins, uncles, and friends fight. Her father Abraham planned the Northwest Resistance with Gabriel Dumont and Cecile watched as he was apprehended by Canada after the fighting. The opening battle at Duck Lake claimed her first cousins Jean-Baptiste and Joseph Montour. Cecile would suffer from PTSD until her death in 1915.

Rescued During the Battle
[T]hey first started firing in upon the houses, and she said That Louis [Riel] picked her up and threw her through the window to save her and she crawled out into the bushes. She used to tell us if it wasn't for him she wouldn't be alive.
Blanche Morrisette, June 21, 2013.

The Montour family
My great-grandfather Abraham [Montour] [Cecile's father]—he had the chance of escaping to Montana—and he didn't go. No he didn't. He got arrested and went to Regina but he was let go... They used to do the meetings at his house in Batoche.
Yvonne Richer-Morrisette, June 22, 2013.

Step 8 Realization

Cousin of Riel near 101 mark

BIEL'S COUSIN: Mrs. George Morcette, 101, is a cousin of Louis Riel. She cooked for him and fellow rebels at Batoche during the Riel rebellion. Her husband died nine years ago at the age of 96 and only three of her 18 children are alive today. Still enjoying an active life, she is wearing a dress which she made herself. Mrs. Morcette will be 101 on Christmas Day.
Leader Post photo of Louis Riel. She cooked for him and fellow rebels at Batoche during the Riel rebellion. Her husband died nine years ago at the age of 96 and only three of her 18 children are alive today. Still enjoying an active life, she is wearing a dress which she made herself. Mrs. Morcette will be 101 on Christmas Day.
@Regina_Leader_Post_Archives.1960

Step 8 Post 1885

Persecution and Destruction of Kin Networks

After 1885 Métis resistors were persecuted by Canada. During this epoch, various levels of government actively scattered Métis families so that they could not rely on old consanguineal, affinal, or fictive kin networks. These directed dispersal efforts forced some Métis to change their names; others fled south to Montana, north to the Mackenzie River area, and even as far east as Abitibi, Ontario; a few hid among First Nations relatives in nearby reserves. Some were able to return to the area after a generation or two, take homesteads, or live along road allowances. The unlucky ones ended up on forced labour camps, ironically called "experimental farms." The effects were widespread and clear: the cohesive Métis carrier group could not adequately grieve the trauma of 1885 and most, if not all, lost their economic status.

The Morrisette Stopping House, Taken Away after 1885
The Métis were not allowed to have a lot of stuff after the rebellion. It was kind of like they were allowed anything. After the rebellion [everything] was taken away from them, before that they were the wealthy ones [and] when that was all gone they became the labour force for the incoming immigrants and the homesteaders.
Martha Smith, Park Valley, Saskatchewan, June 23, 2013.

Step 9 The Foundation

Revisiting the Past: The Métis' Inability to Evolve Away from Trauma

Under such extreme circumstances it was inevitable that Métis trauma would be passed along to their children, crystallizing over time into a foundation narrative of pain, loss, and dispossession. Foundation narratives form individual and collective identity as well as societal orientation, and they have the power to turn tragic loss into triumph. If given the chance a group can glorify past traumas creating healthy foundation stories that empower survivors; however, if that grieving process is restricted, circumvented, and not cultivated, the carrier group becomes static, unable move past the trauma. They remain victims, re-traumatized over and over as they mentally revisit harmful events. Infused with so much unresolved trauma and a negative foundation narrative, Métis history and development came to a screeching halt. In such circumstances sometimes descendants of the carrier group cannot acknowledge the passage of time; distant events are remembered as if they occurred yesterday, and the trauma feels freshly inflicted.

Time Compression and Inherited Trauma Across Generations

Society oriented to the past unable to evolve away from trauma

Trauma → Trauma

Memory of trauma always revisited Time is compressed backwards

Negative foundation narrative

Step 10 Understanding and Moving Forward

The Healing Circle: Reconciling with the Past and Forging Ahead

With my new historical perspective I again applied the fourth step of AA, which states that one must fearlessly compile an extensive moral inventory of one's past actions. When I did this for my ancestors, I saw the root causes of the intergenerational trauma that had been passed from the carrier group, to my grandparents, parents, then to me. I could see their inability to heal from the trauma brought on by systematic persecution by the government. And I could see why addictions, mental health issues, misogyny, and abuse had wreaked havoc on me, my brothers, my mom, and my dad, culminating in our adoption. I finally understood what Grandpa Jeremie meant with his parting words: "Don't tell them you're Métis or they'll hang you," Just like they did to the Resistance leader Louis Riel in 1885. When I reread the AA step a word jumped out at me for the first time: "fearlessly." I had read the step a thousand times before and the adjective "fearlessly" never meant anything to me, but now it means everything. For the first time in my life I am not afraid: I know my family, I know our history, and I am no longer filled with a deep rage, or resentful of the past. I have come to forgive history and in doing so I have found personal freedom. It is in this way that I have used archives as "Good Medicine," and I strongly urge other children of colonialism to do the same.

Aunt Yvonne and Carolyn having some fun at the family picnic in Saskatoon. @Family_Photo

Meeting my family after 35 years apart. @Family_Photo

Walking with my mother Blanche Morrisette at Wanaskevin Pow Wow. @Family_Photo

Haaguing out with family in St. Louis, Saskatchewan. @Family_Photo

My grandparents Jeremie and Nancy in 1979 - the year I was adopted. @Family_Photo

First lunch after reconnecting with my mom. @Family_Photo