

From Two-Eyed to Three-Eyed Seeing: A Third Space Beyond Binaries

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Abstract

As a Métis therapist and academic, it is not unusual for me to write from the margins. I live on land that is referred to, by Indigenous people, as (northern) Turtle Island, aka Canada. Referring to this land by one of its Indigenous names means that we situate this space apart from the dominant, British and French colonized society. We project our Indigenous inner landscape (ways of knowing and being) onto the landscape and fortify our Indigenous inner world with reinforcing experiences of interacting with the social and natural world. As Métis people, I believe we try to also call forth a Métis space in which we can dwell, a virtual “road allowance”. In this space, we can laugh and cry together, scheme, strategize, and grieve (Richardson, 2006; Troupe and Gaudet, 2024). This article explores the “third space” and what it means for Métis people to live across multiple spaces and to resist notions of “pure race” and other forms of colonial claptrap.

Citation Link

Introduction

As a Métis therapist and academic, it is not unusual for me to write from the margins. In this writing, I draw from Métis teachings and experience to transcend the trap of the double-bind, of “either or” and duality. It is important for me to acknowledge that I feel uneasy in most spaces but, like many Métis, I have become an expert in moving through them as if I have a right to be there.

Here on Turtle Island, my ancestors, *les Michifs*, were forced onto the edges of prairie communities. As such, they were dubbed *the road allowance people*. There is a double bind associated with being excluded. There is the violence of being ousted and the ensuing belonging and cultural ‘gelling’ that takes place in the spaces of exile, such as on the road allowance. There, Michif was spoken, Métis music flourished (although outlawed) and Métis culture had a space in which to grow. Amongst the poverty and hardship, this liminal space was home to Métis culture.

However, it was necessary to leave this Métis space in order to earn a living and feed the family, so cultural safety had to be sacrificed for economic survival. With so many unmet needs, one form of security was sacrificed for another. Deprivation and indignity were ever-present.

Social justice theories typically refer to the 'thesis' and 'anti-thesis', the oppressors and the oppressed, those who occupy the centre and those in the margins. There is less attention paid to the "synthesis" that is the Métis. On Turtle Island (aka North America), both Europeans and First Nations were the subjects of colonial analysis. However, many scholars and activists did not know where to situate the Métis in all of this; we were just 'the Halfbreeds.'

In the midst of trying to land in a holistic, appreciative identity, Métis students are exposed to theorists, Europeans and First Nations alike, who see the Métis through the lens "miscegenation" – a people created from the rape of Indigenous people and lands, based on slavery and debasement. In contrast, Louis Riel encouraged Métis people to appreciate the gifts of both sides of their family (both Indigenous and First Nations) while being proud of who they are as a people. Riel, followed later by Métis writers and artists, articulated our mixed ancestry as a strength and a blessing, reminding us that we can be whole as people (Arnott, 1994; Dumont, 1996; Menard 2001; Richardson, 2004; Seaborn, 2004). "Many Tender Ties" author reminds us that many of the fur trade intimate relationships were based on love and mutual attraction, often outside of the colonial metropoli. These were referred to as "marriages au façon du pays", where there were not yet priests to sanctify the relationships in Christianity. Kim Tallbear also reminds us that many of these romances were love-filled and fluid, with categories and roles less rigidified and less patriarchal before the Victorian era.

Critical theory did not offer enough complexity for embracing the experience of my people. For we are neither of the dominant European culture nor First Nations even if we embody both these ancestries. We exist beyond these binaries. In this paper I will consider how these Métis knowledges have helped me conceptualize and carry out my work as a therapist.

Beyond the first (European) and second (First Nations) cultural spaces, this 'virtual road allowance' is a third space occupied by the Métis, a space existing both literally and metaphorically. This in-between spaced has been described as one where we can laugh and cry together, scheme, strategize, and grieve (Richardson, 2006; Troupe and Gaudet, 2024).

The "third space", a term derived from post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1983) as well as other knowledges, acknowledges that people may live across multiple spaces and to resist notions of "pure race" and other forms of colonial nonsense. In my 2004 dissertation "Becoming Métis: The Relationship Between the Sense of Métis Self and Cultural Stories" I explored Métis cultural stories and forms of resistance to the binary.

Here I should add two points. The First Nations should not be reduced to one cultural group, nor should Europeans. This is done for simplicity in expression. In accordance with the colonial literature, "Natives" or Indigenous people are typically lumped together for easy analysis despite the vast cultural and linguistic differences. Also, for readers outside of Canada, the Métis became a separate people through a process of ethnogenesis in the fur trade era. We are one of the three Indigenous groups recognized in the Canadian constitution – they are the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit. Now, back to the third space.

In this third space, the Métis may experience heightened cultural safety, intimacy and implicit understanding, where stories of resistance, refusal and survivance are shared in ways that bring tears, laughter, and a sense of belonging. Here, everyone 'gets it' at a deep level. Some post colonial theorists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), saw the borderlands as deplorable. I think the Métis managed to create cultural hubs and appreciated the fact that they were Métis spaces, where they could live in the embrace of their unique culture.

In many ways, this 'space beyond' resembles the kind of safe space we aim to co-create in counselling conversations with people, humans seeking refuge from the violence of petro-capitalism (Neubauer, 2018), racism, misogyny, and interpersonal violence. Irish systemic therapist Imelda McCarthy reminds us that the counselling space is a sacred space. We sit with families, going to intimate places and practicing deep listening in an attempt to understand and co-construct meaning. In this intimate engagement with others, we aim to help by creating space for increased safety, possibility, and dignity into their daily living.

Being Métis and occupying spaces such as counsellor, researcher, teacher implies a kind of insider/outsider positioning. I am at once a community member, a woman, a mother, a daughter and an activist and a healer of sorts. I am a "synthesis" of a number of colliding universes, some flowing seamlessly into one another, others jarring and colliding. Being positioned as such, I necessarily embody many incongruent, juxtaposing and sometimes paradoxical influences. It is with the teaching and guidance of our cultural teachers and ancestors, as well as co-resistors, that I learned to navigate these numerous and often risky spaces. My erasure is always a possibility.

Métis, (pronounced Maytiss) the Greek/Titan goddess of knowledge. Is known for her intelligence, cunning and strategic planning. Her image hangs on my wall. We resonate with each other. Métis is the mother of Athena and one of the wives of Zeus. Zeus was an abusive husband who tried to suppress her resistance by eating her. She refused to be digested and invoked a state of heartburn for him each and every day. Something in this story resonates with being Métis, refusing to let this nation state become comfortable with us in its belly, remind it daily of what is tried to consume.

Seeking to control our resistance and facilitate access to our lands, Canada created a police force initially designated to deal with the particular resistance of the Métis on the prairies - the Northwest Mounted Police. These agents on horseback were the foot soldiers of state violence given the mandate to destroy my people. In one of his last speeches, Métis leader Louis Riel wrote, 1885 an essay entitled "An Appeal for Justice". He wrote:

"in their treatment of us, however, the treatment of the English is not singular. Follow these pirates the world over, and you will find that everywhere and at all times they adopt the same tactics and operate on the same thievish lines... "follow these butchers around the world and you will see how they have drenched the earth with blood." (Riel, 1885)

These police exist today, as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and tend to terrorize Indigenous populations, particularly youth and land-defenders, with an ongoing violence, including deaths in custody, death by tazer, force, restraint and shooting. A disproportionate number of people experiencing 'mental illness' also die at the hands of police in Turtle Island.

The Colonial Code

One of the ongoing challenges consists of a form of violence that has permeated the field of counselling and psychology. It can be referred to as 'the colonial code of relations'. Todd and Wade (1997) articulate it as follows, referring in part to the American Psychological Association's proposed relationship between therapist and client (Black & Grant, 2014):

You are deficient (sick, brown-skinned, uneducated, pagan, inferior), I am proficient (The European, educated, christian, intelligent, superior). Therefore, I have the right (duty, responsibility, mandate) to perform certain functions upon you (label you, diagnose you, pathologize you, assess you, measure your body, et cetera), for your own good.

Perhaps one of the most egregious acts of modern counselling is the de-contextualizing of one's life story and experience in order to fit standardized diagnoses. This wide-spread cultural erasure can be seen as a devastating and violent colonial practice.

What is Two-Eyed Seeing?

The concept of "double-eyed seeing," also known as "Two-Eyed Seeing," was developed by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall who described it as a way to see the world using both Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge simultaneously, essentially "seeing with one eye through Indigenous ways of knowing and the other eye through Western ways of knowing (Riley et al, 2023). While in some ways helpful for mainstream therapists, this approach collapses all Indigenous peoples together disregarding the vast differences between Inuit, Métis from different regions and between the many different First Nations. As a Métis researcher, I see through a third eye, facilitating tri-level or multi-level thinking.

Colonialism created misinformation and obfuscation. A social worker once told me that Indigenous people are 'not right' because they rip planks of wood off their deck, that this was a mystery to her. She hadn't taken time to learn about Canada's Indian Act and how First Nations people were prohibited from cutting down trees. These families had no wood for the fire, were freezing and resorted to burning parts of their house since no other option was available. Indigenous people have hundreds of similar stories. While the Métis weren't mentioned by the Indian Act, legislation, we were treated with similar derision and state control. For example, the Métis had their own system of law but it was over-shadowed by the Canadian-European systems of common law and civil law.

The power of the third space is expressed eloquently by Billy Chapata who wrote:

In the right spaces, you won't have to shout to be heard. You won't have to shine a flashlight on your wounds to be seen. You won't have to change the language in your soul's dictionary to be understood, and you will be able to come as you are without having to alter your identity (Chapata, 2020)

This is what the counselling space can be, particularly when it is seen as a space for dignity and acknowledged resistance (Wade, 1997); a sacred space (McCarthy, 2025), a space of gift exchange (Kinman, 2025), or a space of "collaborative and egalitarian relationships" (Anderson, 2007). Today, the counselling/therapy profession has been colonized by approaches whose proponents claim to be more "scientific" (read European/"scientific" method). They include evidence-based approaches,

cognitive-behavioural therapy, and discourses of trauma derived from neuro-science. These methods erase culture and relevant histories including genocide, colonization, femicide and racism. Equally, they erase the substantive and integral parts of culture, including non-European worldviews embodying holism, collectivism and collective care, ritual, ceremony and relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. These approaches have infiltrated public mental health systems across Europe and Turtle Island. Their assumptions are based on inequality, professional superiority and that people's lives are measurable and repeatable. They believe that clients are people needing to be fixed, which validates our existence as helpers.

So how can third and liminal spaces offer push-back and rejection to such colonial practices? I believe it is the conversations and interaction based on upholding dignity, deep listening, exploring responses and resistance that take us to helpful places. Much of counselling is actually about helping people navigate the systemic violence of capitalism, regardless of racial or cultural background. 'Third spaces' may be integral as sites of ongoing humanity and freedom from oppressive state and colonial violence.

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