



Nathalie Bertin | Multidisciplinary Visual Artist | www.nathaliebertin.com

Artist Statement: Loup Garou & Mocassins

In 2021, I had a conversation with an ecologist, Alison Lake, who was studying wolves and coyote populations in our neck of the woods. Within the larger discussion, we talked about observed behaviours and interesting DNA discoveries where some wolves (looked like wolves and acted like wolves) had full coyote DNA and coyotes (looked like coyotes and acted like coyotes) had wolf DNA. In some cases, they found coyotes with coyote DNA behaved like wolves, and so on for the wolves acting like coyote. She said it basically turned everything they thought they knew about coyotes and wolves out the window. But now, academics are having a hard time naming these animals. (She even found the name "Algonquin wolf" to be unfortunate as it makes it seem like they are a distinct breed when they are actually Eastern Wolves.) Apparently, naming these creatures has become a huge point of contention among these biologists. Are they wolves because they have wolf DNA or because they behave like wolves? Same for the coyotes.

This got me thinking. What is this really all about? Beyond just placing animals within a taxonomic ranking system, it's about the funding academics and other organizations will get to either study the animal (gain more knowledge about them) or to "manage" the population. If it wasn't to fund or to cull, why else would it matter how wolves or coyotes are named? The animals know what they are! Who wins or loses in this debate?

My friend, Heidi Kimberly, said "Society has a compulsive need to place things (people or animals) in neat little boxes. This helps academics believe they have some control over Nature. Most of us know Nature is not something that can be controlled or kept in tidy little boxes."

But this situation is something that Metis people have had to deal with over and over again.

My friend Crystal J T Kennedy said, *"For the dubious power of recognition - legitimacy - credibility – what have you. I must continually shrug off the feelings of being perceived as a wannabee. On a down day, I catch myself searching my mirror and photos for traces of my Turtle Island ancestors far more often than I look for my Italian, Irish, Scandinavian, Swiss bloodlines.... for some reason, nobody questions that history."*

The sad truth is this is mainly about the politics and how some people feel they have the right to tell others how to identify without so much as sitting down with them for a proper, respectful conversation to learn about them.

In a May 27, 2022 Opinion piece run by the Globe & Mail, Tamara Macpherson Vukusic, author of *Obittersweet: Life Lessons from Obituaries* writes: *"Did I grow up in a home with fiddling, spoon-playing and the Red River Jig? No. Do I feel that I missed educational or career opportunities on the basis of cultural discrimination? No. Have I ever felt that my voice was discounted because I am a visible minority? No."*

Do I feel that I have a responsibility to give rise to the lost voices of my Métis grandmothers whose contributions were overshadowed, undercelebrated and are only now finding their rightful place in Canada's history? Damn right I do."

Damn right she does and so do I.



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The thing I keep coming back to when I think about cultures is that they evolve over several generations and continue to evolve over generations. A distinct culture doesn't just pop up out of nowhere and become a "nation" with an intact language, arts, or distinct venison pie. It takes several generations. So, if we look at the Metis -- from wherever geographic location they root from -- does it not make sense that the family lines that start in the 1600s are simply more seasoned (for lack of better word)? There've been extra generations to evolve the culture. I just don't see how government or any of the provincial Metis organizations can say any Metis that predates British takeover doesn't count - unless they just don't want to fund them.

As a person of mixed ancestry who identifies as Franco-Metis, I am often confronted by those academics or politicians or even AnonyBullies who insist on telling me how I can or should identify. I am accepted by my community and those who know me but have been accused of race shifting by others who don't. After years of hard research, I know my story, my ancestors and the culture I live. I look forward to learning more as it reveals itself too.

In the end, I couldn't care less what others call me. I'm a human being first regardless of my name, my heritage, my roots or even my spirit name. In terms of "proof", I'm pretty comfortable and transparent about whom I am although I am always happy to learn more about my family line. There are so many of us who share anecdotal histories, who can identify family members with distant cousins -- and sometimes perfect strangers - that help to strengthen our ties and prove, not only who we are but where we come from. Many of us also have Elders and community members who accept us as we are -- as human beings who share family (however near or distant), values, traits, traditions and, most importantly, respect for one another. These are the people my art is for first. If I am able to inspire them to simply be and have pride in their own stories, then I will have done my job.

For everyone else, I am happy to share my story. Whether to understand the nuances of Metis culture, or to enjoy my artistic style or learn a little bit of Canadian history you wouldn't learn in school books, you are welcome to take it all in. *Loup Garou and Moccasins* is simply my story (so far) told in four parts.

Starting at the center, the moccushions represent my early learning and stories I've been told. They are my internal world of knowledge and imagination. They represent my foundation. You can read some of the stories in my book "Loup garou, moccasins and Metis Folklore". The book is written in both English and French too!

Part 2 is made of pieces that represent my growth. The paintings reflect my thoughts, dreams and life experiences. The photo essays show real life, death, beauty and everything else I have observed while seeking my place on earth.

Part 3 is work that represents some key figures in my ancestry. Starting with my oldest Metis root ancestors and followed by a couple of generations of females. Marie's story is only known to us because her European husband was a soldier and historic key figure. Her daughter, Jeanne, whose story is briefly



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described in my book, reminds us of the dangers faced by women (especially Indigenous and women of colour) and the lack of justice even 300 years later. Elizabeth and Isabelle were the two first women with mixed blood to go west with their Voyageur husbands at a time when European women were considered too fragile. They were intrepid, courageous and strong. They spoke 5 Indigenous languages (learning English and French much later) and became wealthy merchants in addition to diplomatic key figures in the politics of the day. We only learn about them because of the men they married. And then there are the missing stories of my most recent grandmother and great grandmother. My great grandmother died at an early age from tuberculosis. She's buried in a mass grave somewhere in North Bay. We don't know much about her because my grandmother didn't speak of the old days. She went to a school where they cut her hair short. She was a tough and stern woman and so I never had the opportunity to get close to her. I mostly remember her being bed ridden with Parkinson's Disease. The stories of these women inspire me to be who I am today, to keep working at being a better human being and to inspire others. All of these women have important stories that deserve to be told and so I honour them. The last piece in this part is me with my dodem. My clan reminds me of the work I am meant to do.

The last part is made of photo essays of what is really important to me and what is most important in life. You may notice that the only labels exist on paint tubes.