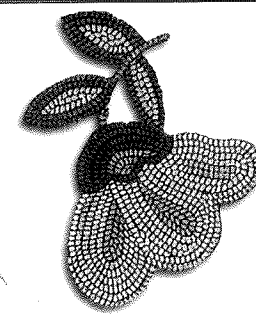




Doris McDougall and Marlene Vandale, River Road Métis Festival, 2018.



Lii Taab di Faam Michif / Métis

Women's Kitchen Table:

Practising Our Sovereignty

Janice Cindy Gaudet and Angela Rancourt

Dedication

We dedicate this work to the late Michif Matriarch Marlene Vandale. Even though she left this world before we could share this chapter with her, we know that she is still with us. She has advised us throughout this project and continues to do so. She is alive in our hearts, and she is a perfect example of why Lii Taab di Faam needs to prosper.

Marlene Vandale was born in 1949 and was the eldest of nine children. Her mother, Eva Lafontaine, was originally from the Batoche area and her father, Albert Richard, resided in the Métis community of St. Louis. Marlene speaks about her mother's relations in Montana, and her memories of her father sawing ice from the South Saskatchewan River in order to provide financially for their family. As the first-born child, she had various responsibilities in keeping the household happy and healthy.

In 1967, Marlene married her life partner, Sonny Vandale. Marlene and Sonny had four children of their own and also graciously welcomed a number of children into their family through the fostering system over their lifetime. Many of them still come back to visit from time to time. It is obvious that, with Marlene's gentle soul and kind heart, at her kitchen table and in their home, these children realized that they were family.

Marlene took pride in the Michif language. She and Sonny spoke Michif with each other frequently and she explained that while their children understand it, they are hesitant to speak it. She worried that the Michif language is being lost, and wanted to see more and more people speak it!

Acknowledgement

We recognize that this work is possible because our ancestors defended our rights, our land, our peoples, our language, and our ways of life. Our Michif grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunties compel us to stand up firmly and lovingly to ongoing harm, and they continue to help us return to the power of Métis women's kitchen table.

We are grateful for the encouragement and wisdom shared by Métis Matriarchs Sophie McDougall and Maria Campbell.¹ We also acknowledge Graham Andrews, our Michif relative, for sitting with us at Lii Taab and for sharing, listening, and entrusting us with the wisdom of his Matriarchs (also respected as his noohkooms), Leona (née McDougall) and Nancy Boyer (née Anderson).

Responsible Research: Situating Ourselves in Relation to Lii Taab di Faam Michif

In the ways of our grandparents who engage in conversation by asking "Who do you belong to?," "Who are you related to?," we situate ourselves by ensuring that our Métis kinship connections are respected, and in doing so we unsettle the power structures of the academy, which insists that we situate ourselves as experts within a certain field of study. In doing so, we share why this work matters to us as we come together as Michif, drawing strength from oral histories and our aunties' and grandmothers' ways to help strengthen family and community. In this way, we connect with our specific roles and responsibilities in relation to Lii Taab di Faam Michif.² This is the beginning point of community-engaged research, but more importantly, it is our responsibility to the place and the people that guide our story of belonging at Lii Taab.

Janice Cindy Gaudet

I am the youngest daughter of Norma (Morrison) and Sylvio (Gaudet). I grew up in the farming community near Bellevue, Saskatchewan, with my five older siblings. My mom is the daughter of Auxile Lépine (born

in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan) and Norman Morrison (born in Hoey, Saskatchewan, son of Harriet Bremner and Jack Morrison), who raised their ten children on their first home quarter purchased in 1928 in the Hoey area. Auxile is the daughter of Margaret Boucher and Maxime Lépine, Jr. Some of the first families who made their homes in St. Louis were Maxime Lépine, Sr., and Josephete Lavallee, and Jean-Baptiste Boucher and Caroline Lesperance. I am so proud to be learning from the generation of Métis women belonging to the rich stories of this region. Learning with and from Métis women keeps me connected and grounded to this place. I learned about our values of generosity, visiting, and sharing guided by and at my mom's, maymairs', and aunties' kitchen tables. For me, they were as important as, if not more important than, the church altar. In many ways, Lii Taab was and is our home altar kept up by our Matriarchs. The sharing at Lii Taab in creating Lii Kaart made me reflect on what our Métis Matriarchs have fought for so many to have, a good life—miyo pimaatisiwin.³

Angela Rancourt

I am the first of three children born to Leslie Rancourt and Betty Morrison. I currently reside in, grew up in, and teach in the community of St. Louis. My maternal grandfather, Duncan Morrison, is the son of Auxile Lépine and Norman Morrison. The Lépine family is well-known in the area for their great contributions to the 1885 Resistance in Batoche as well as their commitment to the Métis way of life for generations that followed.

Our community has always immersed our children in the Michif way of life, even when it was labelled as less valuable. As a child, one's way of life is simply that, no questions asked. As we grow older, we begin to question where these traditions came from, how they were able to survive colonization, how we will continue to pass these valuable ways of living on to future generations, and most importantly, why it is necessary to hold on to these ways of being. In looking to answer these questions, many researchers find themselves lost in a pile of literature, attending numerous conferences and interviewing endless numbers of people. I, however, found myself down the street from my own home, at a kitchen table covered with fried chicken, bannock, and snacks, in the company of our local female Elders. That kitchen table is where I learned to reclaim and practise our sovereignty through our Michif language.

My role as an educator in our community has provided the opportunity to participate in passing these traditional values and practices on to our youth. Many of our youth no longer have that kitchen table to learn from, but I am hopeful that my classroom can play the role of a similar setting—a place where we visit, learn, and grow with each other.

Situating Place and People

The St. Louis community, located on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, is a vibrant community first settled by Métis families in the late nineteenth century. It is located approximately sixty kilometres south of the city of Prince Albert, and twenty-five kilometres east of the historic site of the 1885 Métis Resistance in Batoche, Saskatchewan. The St. Louis region was historically a hub for vibrant trading and gathering activities along the central North and South Saskatchewan river systems. The kinship region includes the Métis communities of Batoche, St. Laurent, Duck Lake, Halcro, Red Deer Hill, and MacDowall, among other former Métis settlements such as Boucherville, Petite Ville, Fish Creek, and Lépine Flats. Trading, freighting, and visiting occurred on the rivers and the overland-connected trails within this region.⁴ There is little contemporary research on the vibrancy of this part of our homeland and on Michif women's governing ways.

With this in mind, we introduce our mataant, Doris McDougall, a Michif woman who held and guided—in multiple ways—our Michif language project at her kitchen table. Doris was born in the St. Louis area in 1935. She is the second of seven children to Mederic McDougall (whose great-great-grandfather was Peter Fiddler, married to Mary Muskegeon) and Marie Anne Lépine, granddaughter of Maxime Lépine (Sr.) and Josephette Lavalée. Doris spent the first five years of her life living in a region called Lépine Flats, which is approximately seven miles west of St. Louis. The families that lived in this region were all Métis, and the language spoken by everyone was what is now known as Michif. In 1941 her family moved to St. Louis, where Doris started school. The children were encouraged to speak what was considered to be “proper” English and French. Nevertheless, the Métis way of life was very important to the McDougall family. They faithfully attended the local Métis monthly political meetings, provincial meetings, and

rallies. Doris was also close to her first cousin Howard Adams, a Métis activist. They often met and discussed the plight of the Métis people at the kitchen table.

The Significance of Lii Taab di Faam

In this chapter, we share our story of Lii Taab as inseparable from our community-engaged language project, co-created with Michif Matriarchs from St. Louis, Saskatchewan. The Lii Kaart aen Michif project was, as Métis Maria Campbell pointed out, a way in which we practised our sovereignty. This practice involved a) learning from our female Michif Matriarchs; b) reclaiming women's kitchen table spaces (Lii Taab di Faam) as systems of authority; c) the ways of visiting with one another; and d) appropriately sharing the gifts of what we know. We hope this chapter inspires a return to the ways of Lii Taab di Faam for many generations to come.

Graham Andrews explained during one of our many visits working on this chapter that the late Michif Matriarch Leona Boyer née McDougall decried European-led and -influenced scholarly attempts to isolate, categorize, and define the language of the Michif people. She specifically bristled at labelling our language as “Michif.” In addressing, particularly, the efforts of non-Indigenous scholars, she explained that “they are only talking about the words we speak. We are Michif; we are our language.”

Our understanding of the nuanced ways of being Michif originated in our mothers' wombs, where we first heard our language, one that emphasized our connections to the world around us. Following our graduation from this “first classroom,” as infants, toddlers, and young children—regardless of gender—we spent the majority of our time in the company of our mothers, grandmothers, and aunties at or near Lii Taab di Faam Michif. As a result of multiple colonial interventions, including separation from our land and our people, the proliferation of Christianity at the expense of our “savage” traditional ways, residential schools, and our common experiences as targets of Indigenous cultural genocide, the critical role of our matriarchy as knowledge stewards was devalued and silenced, and systematically, Lii Taab started to become an isolated structure rather than a focus that provides the most dynamic way to meet ourselves and our responsibilities. Lii Taab is the simplest

and most profound way to support the energy of keeoukaywin (the way of visiting), a way of being in relation that operationalizes our kinship way of governing ourselves. Patriarchal culture has attempted to domesticate our sovereignty, isolating the ontology of Lii Taab to a “physical structure” in the kitchen, and in doing so, colonizing and depoliticizing Michif women’s bodies and ways of good governance. Yet, Lii Taab is about practising sovereignty. This is evidenced in our Lii Kaart aen Michif project, which honoured the source of our creativity, learning, friendship, and exchanges, taking us beyond the physical structure of Lii Taab. It is a point of balance carrying its own consciousness, whereby pimaatsiwin (life) itself is supported to be in constant movement, reinforcing our Michif interconnectedness to people and place.

Reasserting and returning to Métis women’s governing authority as expressed through Lii Taab is a decolonial act, as it unsettles the historical degradation of Indigenous women’s spiritual and political authority upheld at Lii Taab.⁵ Although Métis women’s knowledge as recorded in writing remains minimal, we are part of each other’s stories, often returning to our grandmothers’ and aunties’ kitchen tables to understand their living experiences and therefore ours. We have also experienced how incomplete views and narratives of a homogeneous Métis identity make us vulnerable to predatory behaviours, founded upon our story of being outcasts, never fitting into the white or “Indian” worlds, and often being referred to as a mixed-race or forgotten people.

Regenerating the epistemological significance of Lii Taab di Faam Michif is an effort to delink from white possessiveness, to feel sovereign once again. While there is much research on the harmful consequences of colonial oppression, violence experienced by Indigenous women, and the shattering of our kinship relationships, our aim is to share the strength, intelligence, gifts, and resilience of Métis women who are the heart of this project and the heart of our lives. Our approach lived as Lii Taab di Faam Michif reasserts our inherent right and responsibility to practise our sovereignty as expressed in the Lii Kaart project. Other scholars have referred to kitchen table methodology in their relational and dialogical research approaches.⁶ We add to their contribution by recognizing that the kitchen table goes far beyond a physical structure. As Dr. Cheryl Troupe reminded us in her presentation at the Gabriel Dumont Institute Culture Conference on 6 February 2020 that

“women’s agency is in their kitchen as they own their property.”⁷ She was referring to the historical context of Métis women’s governing roles and cultural and economic contributions to family, community, and land connectivity. A social and economic understanding of the kitchen table situates Lii Taab as a simple yet complex form of governance, an expression of practising our sovereignty in respectful relationship to pimaatsiwin.

Theoretically and practically, Lii Taab regulated the life force inside and outside the home, including the spiritual and physical worlds upheld by women’s agency. As Diane Payment explains, “These [Métis] women had agency. Their moral, emotional, rhetorical, and political resources were manifold. They were the bosses in their homes and were responsible for the education and survival of future generations. They got together to work at activities such as sewing, herb-gathering, and berry picking. They also helped each other in core community and family functions such as health care and childbirth. There were at least two practising midwives in each community along the South Saskatchewan River.”⁸

Dr. Kim Anderson’s extensive research on life stage roles and responsibilities discusses extensively the authority that the grandmothers held within the family and extended family.⁹ As respected decision makers, they considered first of all the well-being of children. This included decisions about, but not limited to, when to harvest and gather, equitable food sharing and economic distribution, arranging marriages, administering justice, and watching over the safety of the children. Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette also explores and applies “Metis Kitchen Table Talk” as a legitimate, Métis-specific methodology of knowledge making, learning, and being in relation.¹⁰

When discussing the role of Lii Taab with our local Michif Matriarch Sophie McDougall (born 1928 in St. Louis, Saskatchewan), she explained the significance of the kitchen table: “It was so important in our home. I would even put my babies on the table when I was busy mixing my bread. I had two apple boxes for the twins and two mattresses inside. They were content. It was nothing fancy, but it worked.” She went on to say, “We did not have much material things but there was values. You ate around the table, you prayed around the table, you received visitors around the table, you made gallettes, bread, jam,

preserves, canning at the table. You even butchered at the table. My children did their homework around the table. The table was used for many things."¹¹ Graham, who was raised by Sophie's mother and his maataants, knows that those women, his aunties, watched and knew everything from Lii Taab.

The Lii Kaart aen Michif Project

Inspiration

The inspiration for a Michif-specific Lii Kaart project came from a visit with Ainu women in their community (Indigenous people in Japan).¹² They proudly shared with me (Cindy) their language revitalization project, a deck of cards with fifty-four Ainu words translated into English and Japanese. Given that playing cards at Lii Taab was, and remains, a common practice in our Métis families, the deck was shared with Doris McDougall at one of the many visits and conversations at her kitchen table. With the growing concern over Indigenous language loss, including our Matriarch stories, we discussed the possibility of a similar, Michif-specific language project produced as a deck of playing cards. Related to this expressed concern was the need for place-based language resources that honour the gifts and stories of place and people, interrupting the notion of the "right" Michif and who has authority to determine this rightness.

Doris initially dismissed the idea because of the seeming lack of interest among the younger generations in learning Michif. She also respected her generation's concerted effort to perfect their English and French. After all, she said, "they had tried to brush the Michif out of them, so why on earth would we put our energy towards reviving or preserving the language?"¹³ I (Cindy) shared that many of the younger generations were longing for nuggets of Michif knowledge, especially women's stories. Although initially unsettled by Doris's lack of interest, I became aware of the deficit view that I had adopted in terms of language loss. While the narratives of cultural loss are prevalent, I had lost sight of our Matriarchs' concerted efforts to "adapt" and "succeed" in a settler-colonial context despite the "brushing out" efforts. "Brushing out" is a reference to colonial efforts to put down the Métis for being Métis, and to assert assimilatory practices, such as valuing French and English over Michif in schools and in family and community life.

Notwithstanding the government's concerted efforts to undermine Métis people's lives, Doris was demonstrating what it meant to practise sovereignty. She embodied sovereignty, meaning owning herself, her position, and her right to refuse my (Cindy's) invitation. Without ever saying so, she pointed to her generation's labour to perfect settler languages for their families' well-being and survival. It is not often that we read or hear about the choice to "assimilate" and the valiant effort to do so. Later that week, I stopped in for an unplanned visit. To my surprise, Doris had a two-inch stack of 300 handwritten Michif words. She had selected the words from the Gabriel Dumont Michif Dictionary, which she felt reflected the Michif that was still being spoken in St. Louis.¹⁴ When I inquired as to why she had changed her mind, Doris shared that after some time thinking about it, she realized the project would be valuable as a resource for schools, so that people would know the Michif still spoken in the St. Louis area. She felt that some good would come out of promoting the interest of Michif, given that the Métis are too often not thought of.

Doris's Kitchen Table

In spring 2018, at Doris McDougall's kitchen table, the Lii Kaart project took its creative shape, becoming a fifty-four-card playing deck including fifty-four Michif words translated into French and English, six historical images, four place-based themes as the suits—Our Foods, Our Land, Our Relatives, and Numbers—and an accompanying 111-page classroom resource. A local female Métis artist, Jennifer Brown, was invited to brighten the card deck with her vibrant and unique art. It was because of our kitchen table conversations and way of visiting that we (Doris, Marlene, Angela, and Cindy) committed to this research creation initiative. Together, we shared the vision of the project and set up regular meetings to discuss and dream up possibilities for this co-creation, including the themes, words, stories, knowledge, art, and the six historical images embedded in the cards. Ideas, stories, laughter, and food were part of every visit. University of Alberta funding and ethics protocols advanced this responsible community-engaged research. We were supported with honorariums, printing, materials, research assistance, local artwork, travel costs, cultural protocols, and gifts. As part of our responsible research, to ensure that knowledge

creation was made accessible and could be celebrated in and with the community, we launched the first print of *Lii Kaart aen Michif* and its accompanying curricular resource as part of the St. Louis River Road Métis Festival in September 2018.

Lii Kaart included English and French translations in order to make distinct the language differences, so as to reassert the value of Michif as its own sovereign language. *Lii Kaart* included images on each Ace that reflect our Métis heroes, both male and female: Gabriel Dumont, Madeleine Dumont (Wilkie), Louis Riel, and Marguerite Riel (Monet di Bellehumeur); and for the jokers, two historical Canadian figures: Sir John A. Macdonald and Major-General Middleton. Our conversation on the choice of John A. Macdonald on a joker card was sobering, as it involved the word *zhamayn* (never). Resilient statements such as “You will never do this again” and “You never succeeded to eliminate us” were spoken by our Matriarchs. We sat in a sobering silence of truth, hardship, and resilience. Without further discussion, we took the necessary steps to validate the accuracy of historical images with our local, provincial, and federal archives.

The photos on *Lii Kaart* furthered our awareness of the historical role of Métis women and their all-too-often-forgotten stories. Our choices generated dialogue around *Lii Taab*, and different perspectives, given the diverse generations involved in the project. We were alarmed at the fact that we had been socialized to prioritize the victory of Métis male heroes, with little knowledge of their wives. This awareness inspired me (Angela) to integrate these images into the accompanying curricular language resource for schools, universities, and family and community kitchen tables, which served as an additional learning tool. The images provided an opportunity for my students to see the faces of the women who stood by our Métis heroes, and provided names and stories to accompany the great influence of *Lii Faam* in sustaining their families’ lives. I also reconfigured my elementary classroom setting in the way of *Lii Taab*—a classroom full of fifth- and sixth-grade students, situated in the heart of Michif, in the village of St. Louis, where the school is made up of over 96 percent Indigenous students. The physical reconstruction of the classroom into a *Lii Taab* setting allowed us to transform the relationships we had with one another, our language, and ourselves. The themes and words chosen had meaning

for who we are as Michif people living in a specific place, with a specific history.

Our Matriarchs Giving Voice and Meaning to People, Places, and Stories

The storytelling method brought insight to all of us involved in the project. Learning through stories is a well-respected Indigenous approach to knowledge sharing. Stories are a crucial point of reference for understanding experiences, life, and the world.¹⁵ Stories elucidate the wisdom of place and people. There is strength in these stories. They breathe life back into the oral way of creating knowledge. Many of the *Lii Kaart* words chosen reflect the work in which Métis women took part. Marlene and Doris identified Michif themes that were meaningful to them. This project quickly became about more than learning Michif words; we were learning about the people, places, and stories that live within each word. In the Métis way of visiting (*keeoukaywin*),¹⁶ two Matriarchs were sharing their experience of culture, history, and ways of life. For example, when we asked Marlene to translate the first theme, she said, “It is our people’s world, the world around us”; in the language, “*la vii di moond, la vii toot alaantoor.*” This took on a new meaning; for her it was about relationships with all that she is part of. She lived Michif.

We learned about our traditional foods—“*nutr maanzhii ordinayr.*” This included the strategic process of gathering, harvesting, and preparing foods from the land or grown in gardens. We were reminded how our families relied on the diversity of skills and foods, such as berries. The traditional economy of berries served at our Matriarchs’ kitchen table in pies, jams, and syrup sustained the sweetness in life. We learned about the ways in which the river sustained life for Métis people—the types of fish, and the skills needed to survive during times of scarcity and beyond. Travel for gathering food was at times extensive, and it took incredible effort as a family system. As an example, Doris shared a vivid memory of the hazelnut bushes located across the river, and the big trip across the river on horseback with gunny sacks full of hazelnuts. We learned about *nutr paraanti* (our relatives) and the ways in which Métis kinship systems help us care for one another through the relational obligations that accompany our distinct roles and responsibilities.

Beyond Words: Practising Our Sovereignty

Indigenous language revitalization initiatives cannot and must not be awakened outside of the context of our spaces and stories, and the lives of our Matriarchs. Michif does not have to be linguistically understood in order to be spoken or lived. We understand and live Michif-ology in the way we are traditionally in relation to Lii Taab di Faam Michif; by this, we mean how we traditionally express ourselves through our culture, genealogy, environment, experience, history, and connection to people and land. This became evident in the place-based stories that our Matriarchs shared to accompany the selected Michif words in the Lii Kaart project.

Together, we came to experience Lii Taab di Faam as living and breathing space that extends to the land, people, and places. Epistemologically, Lii Taab di Faam must remain a central placeholder for us as Michif to practise our sovereignty—to know and to regulate ourselves; to own ourselves, our bodies, our minds, our responsibilities, our history, our land, our stories, and our ethics. Lii Taab is, for us, an equalizing force that begins at an early age, teaching us as children to be knowers of our specific roles and responsibilities through each life stage. Our respective gender roles, too, define how we live well. Lii Taab requests something of us, individually and collectively, that is not necessarily scripted or clearly defined until we sit, talk, and listen. As such, the Lii Kaart aen Michif project became an extension of and an inseparable connection to Lii Taab. This is no surprise, given that Lii Taab di Faam Michif has provided for and sustained our families, physical systems, and values for generations. Lii Taab invests in helping us to know our place in the world around us. Sophie McDougall, who is committed to sustaining the Michif language, helped us to imagine life without Lii Taab di Faam. She spoke of the isolation that would occur; the feelings of insecurity, anxiety, fear of failure; and feeling and living out of balance. Lii Taab has certainly been, and continues to be, overwhelmed by our colonial history of interference, harm, domination, punitive measures, and efforts to co-opt. Yet we attest that its spirited strength, produced and lived by generations of Michif Matriarchs, ensures an unshakeable and safe approach to pass through adversity and live and be well.

Sovereignty needs to be reimagined by centring Michif women's approaches, knowledge, and stories upheld at Lii Taab di Faam. Otherwise, we risk reproducing a fragmented sovereign nation, malnourished generations longing for our noohkooms, mataants, maamaas, suers.¹⁷ Returning to Lii Taab di Faam helped us to reimagine our sovereignty from within the Matriarchs' practical and complex responsibility as household pimaatsiwin regulators. This is, as Marlene reminds us, to keep our household healthy and happy.

Notes

- 1 We use the words grandmother/maymair/noohkoom or auntie/maataant to show respect to our Matriarchs and the caring ways of Métis peoples' kinship systems. It is indicative of our value system that these ways are a collective responsibility and demand relational accountability. This is the way we do our best to live today. Out of habit—and even within this chapter—we use the term Métis and Michif interchangeably. In our shared experiences as Michif people, our language, culture, history, relationships, and cosmology are inseparable from one another. It is our mission to reclaim and reinstate our traditional teachings for the rightful stewardship of Michif Matriarchs.
- 2 Lii Taab di Faam Michif translated in English refers to Métis Women's Kitchen Table.
- 3 Pimaatsiwin is a Michif concept described by Graham Andrews as a recognition that "I am a part of life. Life is good because of how I am in relationship with life itself. This is a prayer in a single word."
- 4 Payment, *The Free People*.
- 5 K. Anderson, *Life Stages*.
- 6 Farrell Racette, "Kitchen Table Theory"; Flaminio, "Kinship-Visiting"; Flaminio, Gaudet, and Dorion, "Métis Women Gathering"; Gaudet, "Keeoukaywin"; Kovach, "Conversational Method"; Kovach, "Emerging from the Margins."
- 7 Troupe, "Women's Agency."
- 8 Payment, *The Free People*, 255.
- 9 K. Anderson, *Life Stages*.
- 10 Farrell Racette and Mattes, "Métis Kitchen Table Talk."
- 11 Sophie McDougall, personal communication, 30 October 2019.
- 12 The meeting took place at the International Conference on Policy towards Indigenous Peoples, 2–4 December 2017, at Hokkaido University, Japan.
- 13 Doris McDougall, personal communication, 2018.
- 14 The Gabriel Dumont Institute delivers Métis-specific educational programs and services.

- 15 Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*.
- 16 Gaudet, "Keeoukaywin."
- 17 Michif kinship concepts meaning grandmothers, aunts, mothers, and sisters.