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Distorted Descent. White Claims to Indigenous Identity by Darryl Leroux

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See table of contents

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Book Reviews

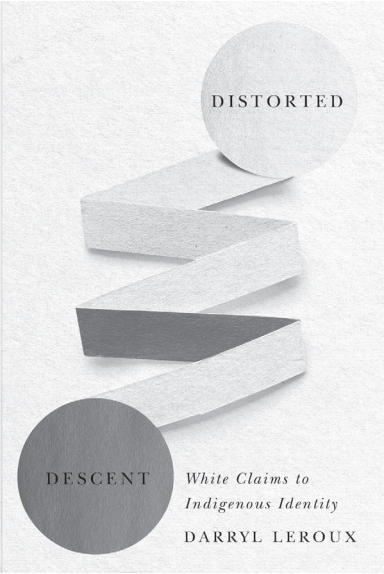
Autumn 2022

Distorted Descent. White Claims to Indigenous Identity

By Darryl Leroux

(Winnipeg : University of Manitoba Press, 2019)

First published in 2019, and recently translated into French, *Distorted Descent* is both a courageous and much-needed piece of scholarship written by Saint Mary's University professor Darryl Leroux. I say courageous because a book dedicated to the phenomenon of race-shifting among white settlers claiming Indigenous identity to "further dispossesses Indigenous peoples of land, of sovereignty, and of identity" won't go unnoticed. As a matter of fact, no less than two years after the publication of the book, there was fierce opposition to Leroux's analysis of the *practices of descent* used by some French descendents in Canada voiced by individuals and organizations representing self-identified Eastern métis groups and interests. When Professor Leroux was invited to deliver a talk at Université de Montréal in 2017, these groups tried to cancel the event, claiming that his work was "a blatant case of historical negationist and incitement to hatred against" métis in eastern Canada.[1] While this unreasonable attempt to censor academic discourse ultimately failed, the threats were troubling enough for the university to provide protection to the professor who delivered his talk in a room guarded by three security officers.[2] As anecdotal as this affair may be, it nonetheless reveals the heated nature of the debate surrounding métis identity since the 2003 Powley decision made by the Supreme Court of Canada. Since this landmark ruling, Ontario, Québec, and the Maritimes have seen an exponential increase in the numbers of people self-identifying as métis. In fact, it is precisely that court ruling which



[1] « Les Métis du Québec accusent un conférencier invité à l'UdeM de négationisme historique », *Radio-Canada*, 26 September 2017. Our translation.

[2] Darryl Leroux, « Réplique au professeur Malette », *Trahir*, 25 November 2017.

recognized the Aboriginal rights of Sault Ste. Marie Métis and laid out criteria to define who is entitled to Métis rights that sparked the eastern métis identity crisis which Leroux explores.

The first part of the book is composed of three chapters providing a theoretical definition of the various mechanics at play in the uses (and abuses) of genealogy in practices of descent designed to indigenize white settlers. Leroux makes connections with other scholars who study parallel movement in the United States, and explores the specific nature of race-shifting among French descendants in North America. Supported by the "unique genealogical infrastructure available to French descendants," (32) aspiring race shifters who trace part of their ancestry up to the settlers of New-France have developed specific practices that support their "mobility *away from* a settler identity toward that of an 'Indigenous' people in a manner that solidifies existing colonial logics." (28) To theorize the mechanics at play in what he identified as lineal, aspirational, and lateral forms of descents used by race shifters, Leroux visited several genealogy blogs to examine the very heart of these communities. By listening to individual voices from the grassroots movement composed of people communicating on websites where they can ask questions, exchange information, and share opinions, the virtual ethnography methodology creates fruitful bridges between two drastically different episteme. Far from entrenching himself in a position of authority looking down at amateur genealogists and opportunistic race shifters, Leroux steps out of the ivory tower to become genealogist himself. The meticulous reconstruction of his own ancestral family tree thirteen generations back allows him to play on the same field as race shifters using distant connection with "root ancestors" as a way to validate their personal conviction (69) and fulfill a desire for identification. It is also a powerful way to criticize the mechanics of descent used by race shifters and expose the limits of blood and "communion with the dead" (128-29) as the sole base to create an Indigenous identity.

In the second part of the book, Leroux focus on two neo-métis organisation in Quebec, the Communauté métisse du Domaine-du-Roy et de la Seigneurie de Mingan (since renamed Communauté autochtone du Domaine-du-Roy) and the Nation Métisse du Soleil Levant (now style as the Nation Métisse Autochtone Gaspésie, Bas-Saint-Laurent, Île de la Madeleine). Analyzing the genesis of both organizations located in rural Quebec in the aftermath of Powley, he makes a convincing demonstration that race-shifting became "an attractive political strategy" (215-16) for white settlers opposed to Indigenous land claim negotiations. As the two case studies presented in this book suggest, the transformation of white rights and anti-land claim movement into neo-métis organizations that "repurposed descent to intervene politically in Indigenous land claims and territorial rights to the advantage of the white French-descendant population" (165-66) is primarily fuelled by settlers' anxieties regarding the perceived threats of Indigenous land claims negotiations to their control of public land, as well as their hunting and fishing privileges. Noting a significant gender gap in self-identification, Leroux explains that the "disproportionate number of men who self-identify as 'métis' in these regions" is linked to the "movement's origins in struggles over hunting and fishing rights and the specific platforms it created for dominant displays of masculinity." (140-41, 215)

One of the significant contributions made by this book is to analyze the specificity of French descendants' race-shifting based on the "remaking of indigeneity through a long-ago relation discovered through gene-

alogy." (29) By doing so, it shows how the "intense devotion" (64) towards a handful of seventeenth-century Indigenous women root ancestors contributed to the racialization of Indigenous identity and the shift to a blood-based relationship with long-ago ancestors (real or invented), rather than kinship relations with existing Indigenous peoples. While the author specifies that French descendant is an umbrella category for a heterogenous population living mainly in Ontario, Québec, the Maritimes, Maine, Vermont, or New Hampshire and can trace their lineage back to New-France, he focuses almost exclusively on race-shifting in rural Québec. While issues with French descendant settlers in Ontario claiming Algonquin identity in the context of the Algonquin land claim are briefly mentioned (54-59), I regret that the book did not include a case study from Ontario, the United States, or the Maritimes in the second part of the book on race-shifting as anti-indigenous politics. Considering the similarities between the two regions of Québec he explores in chapters 4 and 5, it would have been interesting to synthesize the analysis in one chapter and add a comparison with movements elsewhere. As the epicentre of the Powley decision and province where many French descendants are part of the Franco-Ontarian minority, it appears that Ontario would have provided insightful comparative points. According to the author's website raceshifting.com, no less than thirteen eastern métis organizations were created in the province. At least one of them, the Historic Saugeen Métis, have been asserting rights on Indigenous land that forced the Saugeen Ojibway Nation to strongly reaffirm the exclusive Aboriginal and Treaty rights on its traditional territory.[3]

Distorted Descent provides an insightful and most needed analysis of race-shifting in Québec. With its focus on two rural regions of the province enjoying easy access to extensive crown lands used by settlers for recreational purposes, it may leave the reader with the impression that white claims to indigenous identity is necessarily associated with white rights activists, racists, or intolerant masculine settlers in rural areas. To be clear, the filiation that exists between the neo-métis movement in Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean and Côte-Nord and white rights organization is disconcerting and should be exposed to better understand why some white French descendants are claiming Indigenous identity. However, events that happened after the book was first released in 2019 invite us to consider other manifestations of the race-shifting phenomenon associated with a more progressive and urban environment. All over Canada, cases of fraudulent claims to Indigenous identity from city councillors, authors, course directors, and university professors, as well as "knowledge keepers" and activists tasked to promote Indigenous voices and decolonization in schools and institutions as the CBC or the Liberal Party, shows another aspect of race shifting.[4] While the mechanics of descent used by those white settlers are similar, the

[3] Saugeen Ojibway Nation, Affirming SON's exlusive Aboriginal and Treaty rights, Media release, 24 September 2018.

[4] L. Niosi, « Une élue de Montréal accusée d'avoir menti en prétendant être Autochtone », *Radio-Canada*, 5 November 2019 ; L. Niosi, « Remise en doute des origines d'une militante autochtone ; des chefs dénoncent », *Radio-Canada*, 7 February 2020 ; K. Deer and J. Barrera, « Award-winning filmmaker Michelle Latimer's Indigenous identity under scrutiny », *CBC*, 17 December 2020 ; A. Pfeffer and M. Allan, « Award-winning Queen's prof questioned over Indigenous identity claim », *CBC*, 23 June 2021;

profile and motivations of this mostly urban, highly educated, and much more feminine group of race shifters diverge from the rural masculine phenomenon analyzed in this book. Instead of usurping Indigenous identity as a political strategy to oppose Indigenous land claims, they appear to perceive race shifting as a personal strategy to obtain professional and economic gains and increase their symbolic capital. Yet, these remarks are in no way prejudicial to the quality of this book, and it simply shows that it will contribute greatly to informing academics, as well as politics (let's hope), and the public on a phenomenon that is rapidly evolving and continues to be a relevant issue today.

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Anonymous, "Investigation into false claims to Indigenous identity at Queen's University", 7 June 2021; T. Gerbet, "Livres détruits: la 'gardienne du savoir' n'est pas Autochtone", *Radio-Canada*, 8 September 2021; C. Oldcorn, « Fake indigenous professor resigns from the University of Saskatchewan », *Western Standard*, 2 June 2022.

Thomas Mackay: The Laird of Rideau Hall and the Founding of Ottawa

By Alastair Sweeny

Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 2022. 328 pages. $59.95 cloth, $39.95 softcover, $29.99 e-pub. Cloth ISBN 9780776636795. Softcover ISBN 9780776636788. E-pub ISBN 9780776636818 (press.uottawa.ca)

Thomas Mackay: The Laird of Rideau Hall and the Founding of Ottawa is the first published biography of Thomas Mackay, the Scotland-born mason and businessman who helped build the Rideau Canal and built Rideau Hall, the current residence of the Governor General of Canada. The goal of this monograph is to "correct a glaring deficiency in Canadian history:" the lack of a book describing Thomas Mackay's role in the founding of what would become the capital city of Canada. (2)

Sweeny has previously published a monograph on the history of BlackBerry and a biography of George-Étienne Cartier. This book combines the business history of the former and the nineteenth-century biography of the latter. The book's implicit thesis is that Thomas Mackay was essential to the founding of what is now Ottawa. Without "the Laird of Rideau Hall," Ottawa would have looked different and may not have been chosen as the site of Canada's capital city. Sweeny notes in the book's introduction that Mackay left few papers and only two years of limited correspondence. In the absence of a collection of Mackay papers, Sweeny relied on records from other sources such as the Mackay & Redpath business account records at the McCord Museum to piece together the story of Mackay's life.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One, Lachine and the Rideau Canal, introduces the two main characters, early Ottawa and Thomas Mackay, and details the construction of the Lachine and Rideau Canals. Mackay partnered with John Redpath, another Scottish builder and businessman, on both projects. Part