

Paul Chaput: *The Métis Sash—Weaving Translocal Histories into Fibers of Nationhood*

The Métis sash that originated in Quebec found its way to many parts of North America, and is representative of translocality. The sash is a cultural construction that was first known by the name of the small Québec town where it was originally manufactured: l'Assomption. The l'Assomption sash was extraordinarily versatile, rendering it an indispensable object among the quickly growing “mixed blood” population (First Nations and European), whose members dominated the fur trade in North America. The multi-functional sash served Métis people in their daily lives as voyageurs, traders, trappers, guides, ‘coureurs de bois’ who were lumberjacks and loggers, as well as buffalo hunters on the Western Plains. The long, colourful woven belt acted as a sling, a key holder, a washcloth, a towel, a rope, an emergency bridle, a saddle blanket, and a tumpline for portaging canoes amongst others; its fringe became part of a sewing kit when thread was needed for mending.

The Métis sash is finger-woven, usually using worsted wool of varying colours, which produces a distinctive arrowhead or chevron pattern. When tightly woven and treated with beeswax it serves as a cup. Like the sash, the Métis culture is woven of intersecting traditions, beliefs and languages of the Cree, Ojibway, Chippewa, French, Scots and English cultures and embodies a far-reaching translocal history. Most significantly, this distinguishable aspect of the traditional Métis apparel has been adopted as a cultural symbol for the Métis Nation.

My decision to use the varicoloured Métis sash as a translocal artifact for the Workshop project triggers an unexpected mix of deep-seated and nuanced emotions. While anticipating the moment of explaining my choice of artifact, I hesitate to make myself visibly Aboriginal by wearing my sash. Suddenly, I am transported and paddling through the whitewaters of an ancestral Red River Métis diasporic exodus. My unraveled sash stretches back to distant muddy riverbanks. Translocal travel is no longer coloured by freedom and joy. There is a foreshadowing of coming loss and dispossession. Portaging around the turbulent blend of my ancestral streams, I feel at once proud, fearful, defiant, vulnerable, defensive and yet determined to confront the dangers that play among the shadows of “mixed” ancestral memories. I return from that journey and wrap myself in that colourful symbol.

The Métis sash continues to be an integral part of Métis cultural celebrations. Worn proudly as a cummerbund, knotted at the waist, it brightens up ceremonial places, keeps the wearer warm and warms the eye of the beholder. It is a vivid part of Métis history, part of our wardrobe that has helped us survive many cold and windy days and nights of exploration, trapping, hunting, logging and weaving; as I canoe my way back to the Red River banks in the captive lands of my Nation.