

## Leaving home: the post-secondary transition as seen by a Labrador Metis Woman

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**Abstract:** An interview and discussion by Maura Hanrahan exploring the post-secondary education transition experience for Indigenous people focusing on personal experiences of Amy Hudson as a Labrador Metis Woman.

The people of the territorial heart of NunatuKavut – the South Coast of Labrador – have Inuit roots reaching back millennia. Their Inuit ancestors made families with men who came from the British Isles to trap small fur-bearing animals for Fequet’s, the Hudson’s Bay Company, or other fur-trading companies. Or they came to fish the rich waters off the Coast, especially around Black Tickle, Batteau and Domino on the Island of Ponds. The social and economic adaptations of these men and the families they would create were Inuit in nature; with its spruce forests and thin soil, Labrador is sub-Arctic tundra and its small population is widely dispersed. The agricultural and market-based adaptations of the British men could not be replicated here; survival dictated that they adopt Inuit ways, which they did.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, visiting missionaries and traders referred to them as “Esquimaux/Eskimos”, “Natives”, “Breeds”, “Half-breeds”, “Metis”, and “Settlers”<sup>4</sup>. The Moravian missionaries who had established themselves north of Makkovik tried to keep the Metis away from the Northern Inuit whom they were trying to settle into year-round communities; they feared the “wild” (read Indigenous) ways of the Metis, who were not under missionary control. As with most Indigenous peoples, the people of NunatuKavut lost their Inuit language; only *pieces of it* survive. But the values that mark Indigenous peoples remain strong, as do many cultural and economic practices<sup>5</sup>; in Black Tickle it is not unusual to have goose meat for dinner, the bird having been shot only that morning.

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<sup>4</sup> De Boillieu, L. (1969) *Recollections of Labrador Life*. First published 1861. T. Bredin, ed. Toronto: Ryerson Press; Rompkey, R. (ed.) (1996) *Labrador Odyssey: The Journal and Photographs of Eliot Curwen on the Second Voyage of Wilfred Grenfell, 1893*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press. Wallace, D. (1983) *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. First published 1905. St. John’s: Breakwater Books.

<sup>5</sup> Hanrahan, M. (2008) Tracing Social Change among the Labrador Inuit and Inuit-Metis: What does the nutrition literature tell us? *Food, Culture and Society: Special Issue on Canada*. 11 (3): 315-333; Hanrahan, M. (2001) Salmon at the Centre: Ritual, Identity and the Negotiation of Life Space in Labrador Metis Society. In *From Red Ochre to Black Gold* (D. McGrath, ed., St. John’s, NL: Flanker Press), 146-155; Hanrahan M. (2000) *Industrialization and the Politicization of Health in Labrador Métis Society*. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 20 (2): 233-250; J. Howell (transcribed by M. Hanrahan) (1998) Taking Care of Each Other: the Relationship between the Labrador Metis and

The Labrador Metis Nation (LMN) was formed in the early 1980s to advocate for the Indigenous rights of the Metis. Now the LMN is NunatuKavut Community Council and its people have adopted the name “Southern Inuit”. Located on the Island of Ponds with a population of approximately 140, Black Tickle is the most isolated of the Metis communities. In common with over 60 Northern Indigenous communities, it lacks running water and a sewage system.

**Maura Hanrahan:** Here I talk with Amy Hudson, who is from Black Tickle, and is my colleague in the Office of the Special Advisor to the President for Aboriginal Affairs. Amy is a Memorial University graduate in Sociology and Women’s Studies and is completing her master’s degree at the University of Victoria. She studied at Memorial beginning in 2000 when there were almost no support services for Indigenous students and very little awareness of the cultures and histories of the Indigenous peoples of the province<sup>6</sup>. As discussed in the last section of the special issue, there is now a much-improved suite of support services for Indigenous students. Amy and I frequently talk about the transition she and other Indigenous students – especially those from remote communities – have made to post-secondary education (PSE). What follows is one of our discussions with a focus on Amy’s particular experience as a case study. This article is not an interview but a conversation with my role being to contextualize Amy’s experiences as a young university student from a remote Labrador Metis community. Readers will recognize in the following discussion some of the phenomena that Jodie Lane has identified in the preceding article.

MH: First of all, Amy, I know that you are from Black Tickle, Labrador, and that you attended and graduated from St. Peter’s School, which is very small, thirteen years ago. There are only 24 students there now from kindergarten to grade 12. I wonder if you could tell me about your school experiences there and your classmates there.

AH: It was a very small school, small class sizes. Everybody knew each other and grew up together from preschool to grade 12. We were all with each other along the way. For the most part it was pretty collegial, there weren’t very many of us.

MH: While some First Nations have assumed jurisdiction over education – the Innu of Labrador are in the process of doing this – this is not an option for the Southern Inuit, at least at this stage<sup>7</sup>. So this means that St. Peter’s came under the Labrador School Board, as it does currently, and the provincial curriculum was, and is, followed. Meanwhile I know from spending a great deal of time in Black Tickle that Indigenous cultural values remain strong there; there’s a deep attachment to the land and a consistent emphasis on the communal rather than the individual, for instance. I wonder if your experience as a student at St. Peter’s gel with the community’s values and culture?

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the Environment. *Terra Borealis: Traditional and Western Scientific Environmental Knowledge Workshop Proceedings*, Northwest River, Labrador, 10 & 11 September, 1997, 26-28. M. Manseau, ed. Institute for Environmental Monitoring and Research.

<sup>6</sup> As explained in Hanrahan’s and Baehre’s papers, the Indian Act had not been applied in Newfoundland following Confederation in 1949, which contributed to the invisibility of Indigenous peoples in the province. While the Indian Act does not apply to people of Inuit descent, its absence in the province had negative repercussions for them as well as for First Nations.

<sup>7</sup> The land claim of NunatuKavut Community Council has not yet been accepted for negotiation by the federal government.

AH: No. Not at all. I remember learning stuff about Inuit history and culture a bit. To my memory, we were never taught that it had anything to do with us when we were taught this material in school. There was never any connection that I could remember drawn between us, the community, our ancestors, and Aboriginal culture – not inside the school. The most we had was the Labrador flag.

MH: The Labrador flag which acknowledges all the cultures of Labrador in a symbolic way and flags themselves are symbols, of course. So there was little or no reference to the students' Inuit ancestry and what that meant. Was there any sort of a conflict between these Southern Inuit or Inuit-Metis values or culture and school curriculum or content? Were there instances or examples of how the approach in school was at odds with the local Indigenous culture?

AH: In our early years, our school was a Roman Catholic school which was very interesting. It was run mostly by sisters (nuns) as our community is a Catholic community as such, at least nominally. But I didn't necessarily grow up in a very traditional Catholic home. In the beginning, there was always a balance between – I want to say Metis culture and Catholicism, the only thing that would have been identified there is Catholicism because back then we didn't talk about being Metis but it just was what it was. But for the sake of making this clear, I say 'Metis culture' and 'Catholicism' and I remember that being very difficult in school. We would have to stand up in front of the classrooms as late as grade 5 and 6 and have our hands checked for dirt and religious instruction was quite intense. Certain religious sacraments were carried out with the school. It was all very structured and it certainly didn't mesh well with my values as a Metis person. That was very intimidating and isolating experience for me in school. It's difficult for me to say whether or not other students felt this way with regards to the impact of religion on their lives. Certainly, like in many other Aboriginal communities, Christianity was "introduced" and adopted by many. Religious teachings and values became 'tradition' alongside Aboriginal values and traditions, I think sometimes to the detriment of Aboriginal values. Certainly though, I was not the only student/youth who resisted religious instruction or ideology, or at least aspects of it. Back then though, I should clarify, I don't think I clearly understood that my resistance to Catholicism came largely as a result of my culture, particularly since I did not spend much time reflecting on the fact that my actions, values, or behavior were as they were because of being Metis. I cannot emphasize enough that this was just the normal, natural state of being. It was not until later in life, especially after moving from my community and spending time in urban, non-Aboriginal surroundings that I began to reflect on this and understand that the life I had lived, and the values I held, and continue to hold, were that of a Labrador Metis.

We also had a lot of freedom growing up coming from Black Tickle. I remember teachers having trouble getting us to come back to school after lunch, especially on nice days and during the winters when there is a great deal of outdoor activity. Winter brought us so much freedom as kids/youth, and our generation embraced it. So much time spent outside, on the land. I remember sitting in class and students just gazing out the window during instruction. Daydreaming of the bell ringing so we can get outside get to our skidoos and spend the afternoon and evening outside. I actually remember occasions in which the teacher would actually have to close the curtains in the class room to gain our attention. Due to the size of our school, we went home during lunch hour. In the winter we would rush out the door on the lunch hour bell, get home as fast as possible, very quickly grab something to eat, sometimes not at all and get back outside before we had to return to school in the afternoon. Upon our return to school in the afternoon, there were so many days when the principal would have to stand outside on the bridge and flag so many of us down as we were driving back and forth on our skidoos. I remember some students who would drive back and

forth intentionally, just for the humor of it. I remember that there were some years that teachers would take it upon themselves and suggest that an afternoon class would be spent outside. We would cover the curriculum, but we would simply sit outside to do this. Reflecting back, I guess what happened is that they realized how important it was for us to be outside and that we were actually more studious when we were outside so they took some classes outside both in the winter and the summer – well spring. We would have our instruction outside. Now this didn't happen a lot but it did occasionally happen.

There was always sort of a bit of division between your home life and school, it didn't really seem to mesh. Certainly, school life in my mind was sometimes over-structured – not sure that is the exact word I am looking for – but I think it depended on who was teaching at the time. Teachers who were more integrated into the community and that sort of had a place maybe in the community were a little bit more understanding and probably a little bit more. I don't want to say lenient, but a bit more knowledgeable I guess of community values. Whereas there were a couple teachers I would come in and literally spend all their time at the teacher's residence<sup>8</sup> and not speak to anyone in the community. They tended not to mesh very well with the students.

MH: Did you have any Metis teachers or Indigenous teachers?

AH: My aunt. But she didn't teach me, she taught my sister. She was very, very well respected in the community. Also, a teacher that married into the community, she is from Labrador but I don't think that she is Metis but she was well respected as well. I don't recall any others that would have been.

MH: It seems that an ability to work cross-culturally would be important for teachers going to the work in the community and other Indigenous communities along the Labrador Coast. I've talked to teachers in the past couple of years who want to do well when they teach in Labrador but don't feel prepared for their time there. Besides preparing teachers – giving them the opportunity to develop cross-cultural skills and tools – there ought to be more Indigenous teachers who serve as role models and have an easier time integrating or working with the students and community. Memorial University's proposed Community-Based Teacher Education Program, which will be delivered in Labrador, initially with the Nunatsiavut Government, is one response to this. Do you have any experience with Indigenous teachers? If so, can you describe their relationship(s) to the community?

AH: My aunt (Audrey) taught in Black Tickle and was well respected, she taught primary and she did a lot for the kids. It wasn't the situation in which you go to school and when school is over it's done and you have no contact with community life or the kids or the families. There was always open contact with her; she had an open door policy. I remember her being so busy and so involved in so many areas of her students' lives. I know that because I used to spend a lot of time volunteering with her, helping her. People still talk about her today when I go home to Black Tickle. Talk about what a great teacher she was. Actually, there are a lot of comparisons made between one of the teachers in Black Tickle now who is from Black Tickle – Nicole Roberts – and my aunt. Another teacher who was well respected was just very patient and personable and she fit into the community well, too. She married someone there and she had a good reputation.

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<sup>8</sup> Many Coastal communities in Labrador have residences for teachers. In Black Tickle, the teachers' residences are among the very few in the community with running water and connections to a sewage system.

MH: We saw in Amarjit Singh's interviews of Bill Edmunds and Bart Jack in this issue of *The Morning Watch* that there no high schools on the Labrador Coast in the mid-1970s and some students went to residential schools to complete high school. Not surprisingly, early school leaving rates were very high. The establishment of high schools was a slow process. St. Peter's School in Black Tickle became a high school in the late eighties and the first graduating class of Grade 12 students graduated in 1989. I'm wondering how education played out in Black Tickle prior to this and how people felt about education?

AH: Before St. Peter's itself was set up, my grandfather taught in a one room school in Black Tickle a bit. I am not sure what years that was. Some people did go to residential school in North West River in Central Labrador and some people went to residential school in Cartwright, which is two hours by skidoo. But from what I remember from talking to people, they went to school for as long as they wanted to and then came back. They went for a year and came back-that kind of thing, from what I recall hearing about. Once they were early teens, a lot of people in the community didn't go back to school at all because fishing was so prosperous then that they didn't need to or they couldn't because they needed to help their families with other things, such as fishing, hunting, getting water, and basically maintaining the household).

But education was big in my family. It started with my grandfather. It was always an expectation that I would go to university so I grew up really not knowing any other options. I didn't actually think about it, it was a norm; in my family, it was something that you did after high school. I came from a family of entrepreneurs who were self-employed. In a sense, my family was politicized and that certainly influenced my thinking.

Many of my graduating class went on to post-secondary of some sort. I think education was impressed upon us during our final years in high school, perhaps in part due to the state of the economy in Black Tickle. Things were different at that point. The fishery had really slowed down, it was harder to make a living and I guess parents thought that the best option for the kids would be to go away for school or work, given the fact that making a living at home was becoming much more complicated and, sadly, near impossible at times. It's really too bad this happened. My parents later moved away as well. This was not a desirable circumstance. People from Black Tickle have a reputation of being very hard working and resourceful, whether they currently live in the community or live away.

MH: You came to the St. John's Campus of Memorial University in 2000. We are a large university in the middle of an urban conglomeration of up to 250,000 people with the nearest community with a significant Indigenous population – Grand Falls-Windsor where there are many Mi'kmaq – being a four to five hour drive away. When you first came here, Memorial had limited support services for Indigenous students at that time. The report of the Presidential Task Force on Aboriginal Initiatives was nine years away. In this issue of *The Morning Watch*, Jodie Lane discusses the processes that Inuit students go through as they become university students and I know from our previous conversations working together that you had some fears and worries about going to university.

AH: Oh, my god, yes. I went with somebody else from the community. We went together and we were very nervous. I remember our first day being left alone in St. John's. We saw my father off at the airport and we just didn't even know what to think because it was so big to us. We would go into a university classroom and there were more people in our class than in our community. It was quite intimidating to navigate around campus. With the two of us together we managed to do it. But we were

always really happy when terms were over. So we would go home to our apartment and try to negotiate our exam schedule so that we could go home to Black Tickle earlier.

MH: We talked a lot about what your early classroom experience was like. What was university like as an academic experience?

AH: It shifted over the years. The first year I remember being pretty into my studies; I was kind of anxious about how I would do and what people and family would think if I couldn't do it – especially not knowing what to expect. It's not something that I can really articulate in writing. I just remember that I would feel embarrassed, at the very least. When I thought about failing or quitting, it was both my family and my community that came to mind. Both are interconnected though – when I think of home, I think of family. Growing up in a small community like that, the way we did, as family, influenced by every member of the community, touched or “scolded” in some way. (I sometimes feel like this sense of family is less prominent to many young people now – or at least less respected or appreciated. This is very sad to me, and I hope I am mistaken). I know for sure I was not, or I am not, the only person who felt or feels this community/family connection. The second year I was really homesick. So I didn't care as much as I had in the first year it seemed. The homesickness affected my focus in finding out what I wanted to do in university. Possibly a lot of that comes from the fact I never really knew, we didn't know what these courses even were before we came to university, we had no exposure to them so, it was almost like we needed time to figure out what university or particular disciplines were about before we could decide what career path we were going to go down. Honestly a career path wasn't even in my mind in the second and third year of university because I wanted to go home to Black Tickle. It was hard, but you couldn't go home because you couldn't drop out of university.

MH: I want to drill down to the experiences you had in the classroom. And here, I'm thinking of experiences the students on Siawita'nej<sup>9</sup> relate to us and to the Aboriginal Resource Office. I don't want to prejudice what you will say but you know that they often speak of values clashes and misunderstandings and so on and that some of these things negatively impact their time university and, occasionally, even whether or not they remain at university. And, of course, they also bring us stories about inspiring faculty members and other positive developments happen, like the Social Work students' 2012 project on the invisibility of Indigenous culture on campus and their clear support for change. What about in the classroom? What was it like for you being a student from a Metis community in the classroom at Memorial?

AH: Well, if someone found out if you were Aboriginal or if you were from Labrador only actually, you sort of became the token person when topics permitted or arose. Sometimes people were rude and said rude things and other times people were really interested and wanted to know more. Stereotypes were prominent though in many ways, even if there was no ill intention. I remember a few times I had a few friends from different classes who tried calling me and because they couldn't reach me they assumed that I had moved back to Labrador. So I quickly realized that I think there was a stereotype that we don't stay in university, we just leave.

My experience of relationships at university was mixed. I kept to myself a lot. Outside the classroom I didn't develop a lot of support or friends from class, from those circles. I didn't access much instructor or

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<sup>9</sup> This is the Aboriginal Student Council of the St. John's Campus.

professor assistance in my first few years. It wasn't until I lived in the city for a while and went back to university after dropping out for a few years that I did access faculty. I didn't realize that you could and I guess it was a part of the intimidation factor to not access the resources that are there for you.

In the classroom itself, well, in sociology in particular, I remember one time there was myself and a friend of mine from the North Coast of Labrador. The professor certainly deferred to us a lot when it came to speaking to certain social issues related to the province or anything Aboriginal, that kind of thing. There was this idea of tokenism a lot. Then sometimes a lot of people didn't know who the Metis are nor had no idea that they existed. You always felt like you had to take it upon yourself to try and educate people. It becomes very tiring – the educating, I mean.

MH: It takes the resources and will of the whole institution to effect the kind of change that is required to make our campuses culturally safe for Indigenous students. I don't think that it is the responsibility of individual students to resolve or even address these concerns, although it's important that concerns are brought to administrators and service delivery staff so they can be addressed and hopefully resolved. Having said that, I wonder how you attempted to deal with the concerns that you had?

AH: I am not sure that they were ever really resolved. I do know that from the first year here we joked about things. My friend and I joked about this last weekend actually that we didn't associate with anyone who wasn't from the Labrador coast. But for the most part we just associated with Aboriginal people from the Labrador coast. These individuals were Metis from Southern Labrador and Inuit from Northern Labrador. In a sense it was a coping mechanism for us and when we found each other out here in St. John's we sort of just stuck together for that time period. (Of course this changed over time). We also organized our schedules to match each other's because in the first year we were doing a lot of the same courses so we tried to make sure that we were in the same classes could. And if not, we helped each other; we did a lot of that. We were pretty co-dependent.

MH: So you and other Metis and Inuit students from Coastal Labrador developed your own support system. Were there any supports that you were able to find at the university itself or in the larger municipal community?

AH: Not really. Not when I first arrived here back in 2000. One of the first places that we went to was the Native Liaison Office<sup>10</sup> and I quickly stopped going there. So no, I didn't actually access any supports here on campus. Having said that, I spent as little time on campus as I could. I didn't get involved in campus life; I didn't join or participate in volunteer activities or different councils as I see students doing now. I wasn't one of those and maybe a lot of that is because I didn't feel integrated into campus life. I have always been a very politicized person and taking part in on-campus organizations is something I think that I would be interested in but I didn't feel comfortable – I felt too different in a way I guess. Things are definitely changing around here now; at the service and support level and the policy level as well.

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<sup>10</sup> For many years, the NLO at Memorial was at least partly funded by the Labrador Inuit Association. One of the unintended consequences of this was that non-Inuit Indigenous students felt that the support service was not for them, as Amy reports. The NLO is now the Aboriginal Resource Office with two permanent staff members.

MH: You had left university before getting your degree initially? In terms of the anecdotal evidence, this seems to be a common pattern among Indigenous students. Many, especially women, leave and then return as adults.

AH: Yes, I left for about three years I think.

MH: And you eventually decided to return to university to go to Graduate Studies. So what was your rationale for that?

AH: Well, graduate school was something I knew I would have to do anyway. I always intended to go back to school. I went to grad school at the University of Victoria. I am still finishing editing the thesis for that now.

MH: I want to get your thoughts as an emerging academic and as an Indigenous person on the intersections between the academy and Indigenous identity. I realize that the *Indian Act* does not apply Inuit and Metis, but some decades ago the *Indian Act* said that if an Indian person, so called, gets formally educated they lose their Indian status. This happened in Canada to quite a few Indigenous people, as Sheila Carr-Stewart and her colleagues state in their article elsewhere in this issue. In addition to that, some First Nations people were viewed by their own communities and/or by the dominating Canadian society as not “authentic” anymore because they are educated. There are still vestiges of this. They are not perceived to be authentically Indigenous. This can be painful for some people. Can an Indigenous person be academic or an academic and still be Indigenous?

AH: Yes, of course they can. I think they can. And, I think it is important that Indigenous people choose this path, if it is something they are interested in. As it stands, Indigenous people are underrepresented in academia, and I think that increasing the proportion of Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal faculty at universities will compliment very nicely the efforts that are taking place at many universities across Canada, ensuring the visibility and place of Aboriginal people within the academy, including Memorial University.

I think it is important for Aboriginal people who pursue academia to use their skills to help their communities and to be involved. There is a bit of a balancing act going on though, sometimes at least – especially if you have lived away for a period of time in larger urban settings. When you go home you still have to speak their/your language; you can't go back thinking or acting like you're better or privileged. In fact, when I go home I don't feel like the privileged one, in the sense that I know I am the one who has to leave. And that is never easy.

MH: That is a very interesting answer actually. Do you have any advice for faculty or staff for people who deliver services for Indigenous students or for administrators? In other words do you have advice for the people who run the academy in terms of Indigenous students?

AH: I certainly think that it has to be an open and culturally safe place for Indigenous students at university. There needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that the cultures and histories of all Aboriginal peoples are reflected on campus and are visible in Aboriginal diversity events. I have found that some Aboriginal peoples are not necessarily on the radar so to speak. For example, there still seems to be much confusion surrounding the Labrador Metis, also now known as Southern Inuit. Education efforts and/or workshops could help with this perhaps. As an employee, and former student, I have and continue to hear



students discuss the lack of culturally relevant curriculum. There seems to be a consensus amongst Aboriginal students that this is an area that is need of attention. In addition to this, I think it is imperative that curriculum address histories of colonialism, both in this province and abroad. This is vital if we are to justly educate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, faculty and staff with the goal of breaking down stereotypes and engaging each other respectfully and sincerely. I know that such efforts and initiatives are taking place on campus with the implementation of the Task Force on Aboriginal Initiatives and are having very positive effects. The goal would be to address obstacles and barriers that prevent diverse Aboriginal students from going to university, and once at university, to ensure that they have equal and equitable opportunities and feel a sense of belonging. I think these are some of the things that have been missing, and it is good to see that steps are being taken to overcome these obstacles and barriers.

### Conclusion

Our discussion of one Indigenous person's education experience of more than a decade ago raises many of the issues that Jodie Lane and others writing elsewhere have raised. Among these issues is irrelevant curriculum which, in this case, is put in sharp relief because of the religious denominational school system that was in place in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador<sup>11</sup>. The scarcity of role models is also a theme that emerged through our discussion. At the academy, Amy felt alienated, as many Indigenous students do. In the near absence of support services at the university, she and her Inuit and Metis peers from Coastal Labrador created their own unofficial support network. The measures taken to address these concerns – increased support staffing and community-based teacher education – are discussed in my article later in the special issue.

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<sup>11</sup> The denominational education system has been replaced by a non-secular system with enrolment at particular schools based on place of residence rather than religious denomination.