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Review of *We Know Who We Are: Metis Identity in a Montana Community* By Martha Harroun Foster

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We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community. By Martha Harroun Foster. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. xii + 306 pp. Maps, photographs, tables, diagrams, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

This book is a rigorous, yet readable, exploration of Métis ethnic identity in Montana. It focuses on the Spring Creek community near Lewiston, tracing its Red River antecedents, analyzing responses to changing economic conditions, and examining ethnicity in the context of a variety of factors. The U.S., unlike Canada, has never given its Métis population official recognition. Despite this omission, Foster argues that the community has retained a strong sense of its core identity. As the title states, "We Know Who We Are." At the same time, this identity is complex, multilayered, and situational. The boundaries are porous, enabling the community to reach out to and incorporate outsiders through marriage, adoption, and godparenting. At

the heart of Métis identity are kinship networks, a theme the author returns to again and again.

Foster makes good use of government sources, newspapers, private memoirs, interviews, and homestead and census records to tell her story. She uncovers baffling inconsistencies in the way ethnic identities are negotiated and constructed. At St. Peter's mission school, where some of the Spring Creek families sent their children, the Métis were separated from "whites" by their placement in the Indian school. St. Peter's did this because it depended on government grants that were paid according to the number of Indian students enrolled. When Blackfeet children withdrew from the school, the missionaries recruited mixed-descent students to replace them. On the other hand, part-Indian children from prosperous neighboring landowning families, who spoke English and whose fathers had British-style education and values, were enrolled in the white academy. Blood quantum and genetic heritage had a lesser role in determining race ascription than did social class and lifestyle. Thus, at first communion, seven "white" girls wore white dresses, while thirteen "Indian" girls wore pink, and yet some of the girls in the white dresses had more Indian ancestry than those in pink.

Foster suggests that her study may have broader implications in our globalizing, postmodern age where multiethnic identities are increasingly common. The notion of the melting pot seems to be passé, as is the strict preservation of traditional ethnic identities in segregated enclaves. In Canada, some politicians are saying that Canada should be "the first postmodern nation," a kind of subarctic mini-United Nations, and, as such, a model to the world. Analogously, Foster puts forward the Métis example as the path to a "Mestizo America, in which each family recognize[s] its unique heritage and comfortably assume[s] levels of identity reflecting its component aspects. . . . Métis are true citizens of North America. They are our past and our future." But, as Foster also acknowledges, Métis identity has always depended on a strong network of kin relationships. This is something that other groups simply do not have and are unlikely to develop.

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