

Thistle, Jesse.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau Scholar (2016) recipient Jesse Thistle is a Métis-Cree (Michif-Nehiyaw) from Saskatchewan. He overcame 10 years living on the streets to become a leading voice on intergenerational trauma. One of York University's top students, Jesse's doctoral research draws heavily from his personal background.

Doctoral research

Indigence, Invisibility, and Indifference: Métis Life in Road Allowance Communities on the Canadian Prairies

When Canada built railways and roads in the prairies they allotted ten feet on either side so workers could perform maintenance. These ribbons of Crown land were often left unused.

This seems an unlikely stage for a dramatic story in Métis history, but here Métis families found refuge and built communities, known as road allowance settlements, after they lost their land and sovereignty in the late 19th century. Dispossessed, Métis illegally squatted in tents, constructed shacks, and planted gardens on road allowances in the 20th century. It is ironic that Métis found shelter on Crown land even though the Crown orchestrated their dispossession after the 1885 Resistance. Road allowance life was marked by poverty, marginalization, government indifference, and worst of all, invisibility.

Until now, Métis scholarship has concentrated on identity, ethnogenesis, Louis Riel, or the Resistances; little addresses road allowance history. Jesse's PhD thesis will trace the history of road allowances after 1885 across the Prairies.

Biography:

Jesse Thistle is a road allowance Métis from Saskatchewan. His journey from homeless addict to successful university student is unusual among graduate students, but his path has shaped the way he approaches homeless studies, Indigenous history, criminology, social work, and addiction studies. His distinct perspectives were further developed as he participated in a wide range of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Canadian Institutes of Health Research projects as a research assistant and researcher.

While working as a field researcher for Dr. Carolyn Podruchny on the SSHRC project "Tracing Métis History through Archives, Artefacts, Oral Histories, and Landscapes: Bison Brigades, Farming Families, and Road Allowance People," Jesse and Carolyn noticed a vein of unaddressed historic trauma in their road allowance Métis informants. The intergenerational trauma Jesse wrote about linked unresolved battle trauma, or post-traumatic stress disorder, to the descendants of Métis veterans who fought during the 1885 Resistance at Batoche, Saskatchewan. Jesse's research in intergenerational trauma has already begun a process of healing within Saskatchewan Métis and Cree.

In 2012-2014, Jesse worked with Dr. Sarah Flicker on the “Taking Action for Youth II: Art and Aboriginal Youth Leadership for HIV Prevention” project, which educated Indigenous youth about the risks of HIV with focus on the AIDS epidemic that is happening in First Nation reserves. The CIHR project taught youth HIV/AIDS risk strategies, health awareness techniques, and elder re-education processes.

Jesse sits as the national representative for Indigenous homelessness in Canada at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Here, Jesse uses his lived experience as a former homeless addict to bridge policy and practice, academia and the streets, in working with and researching homeless Canadians, especially Indigenous people. He has worked as an interviewer and ghost writer for many homeless consumer survivors, encouraging them to tell their stories and creating ways for researchers to hear homeless voices.

Jesse has published in numerous academic journals, magazines, and books, and has worked on a few short documentaries. The focus of his research and writings is centered on his lived experiences, offering insight into Indigenous homelessness, history, and intergenerational trauma, crime and prison complexes, social work, and addiction studies.

In March 2017, Jesse Thistle was featured in CBC Radio’s programs “Ideas,” and “Campus.”

Source: <http://www.fondationtrudeau.ca/en/community/jesse-thistle>.



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