

Article

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The Métis-ization of Canada: The Process of Claiming Louis Riel, Métissage, and the Métis People as Canada's Mythical Origin¹

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Abstract: *The historical narrative around Métis political leader Louis Riel has undergone an extraordinary change since the 1960s—once reviled by Anglo-Canadians, Riel is now paradoxically celebrated as a Canadian hero, and this “Riel-as-Canadian” narrative has become a common trope in contemporary Canadian political culture. Emanating from the Canadianization of Louis Riel is a parallel colonial discourse that distances itself from past attempts to assimilate Indigenous people into Canada, arguing instead for the assimilation of Canadians into a pan-Indigenous political identity. Central to this dialogue is a discourse on “métissage” and “Canadian métisness” that is heralded as the founding myth of Canada. This paper deconstructs this logic, as put forward by Jennifer Reid in *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada* and John Ralston Saul in *A Fair Country*. Both works uncritically assume that Canada's colonial problem is largely a failure of non-Indigenous people to embrace their underlying Indigenous political identity and acclimate themselves to this continent as a people of mixed political descent. This claim, however, is simply an inversion of colonization, a re-hashing of age-old colonial fantasies of unity, and an attempt to unite all the Indigenous and non-Indigenous polities in Canadian territory under a single sovereign entity—Canada.*

Introduction

Métis occupy an ambiguous position in the Canadian imagination, and perhaps no individual Métis more than Louis Riel, the famed traitor/martyr who, much to the jubilation of the Anglo-Canadian citizenry, was executed in 1885. For nearly a century after the hanging of Riel, Canadian understandings of the Métis people proved vital to Canadian self-understandings as, historically speaking, Métis were at the centre of the political events from which modern Canada emerged. The Métis–Canadian conflicts of the 1870s and 1880s,

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along with Riel's execution in 1885, occurred at pivotal moments in Canada's development. As a result, much of Canada's history in this era is understood *in relation* to Métis people, and this history today has an impact on contemporary Canadian identity. Historians, social scientists, and cultural theorists have long been aware of this; George Stanley has argued that "the politico-racial crisis of 1885 was, perhaps, the most serious crisis in the early history of Canada" (1960, 380). For English Canada, Métis resistance unified Ontarians against the Métis "rebels," allowing them to organize their push westward, lusting for new Indigenous lands to settle (Bumsted 1996, 171–75). Stanley imagines that the events of 1885 in particular were central to the emerging national unity in Canada's infancy: "all parts of Canada had rallied to the call to arms" (1960, 380). In contrast, for Quebec and French Canada generally, the Métis resistance, as well as Louis Riel's execution, stood as a reminder of the assimilationist drive of English Canada (de Trémaudan 1982, x-xi). The young Wilfrid Laurier, protesting the upcoming execution of Riel in 1885, famously said, "there never had been a people who suffered such gross injustice as the métis ... if [I] had lived on the shore of the Saskatchewan [I] would have taken up a rifle [myself]" (quoted in Stanley 1960, 398). In the 1870s and 1880s, French and English Canadians began to demarcate themselves from one another based on their support or suppression of Métis political independence. However, neither of the representations of Métisness used to understand French and English Canadian identities fit well with nineteenth-century Métis self-understandings. In Riel's *Last Memoir*, he clearly describes the Métis as they saw themselves: a people in the fullest sense of the term. Métis possessed their own laws, system of governance, and political authority, all independent from the foreign powers:

The Hudson's Bay Company was surrounded by Métis government all through the fertile zone. It did not resent this. On the contrary, its traders and hunters, in the camps, in the "wintering over" quarters, in the Métis settlements, hunted, traded and carried on business under the Prairie Council and under the protection of Métis laws (1982, 204).

Riel also openly contested what he saw as unilateral claims by Canada to govern the Métis. In Prince Albert, he said,

existed a Métis Government, of which the Canadian Government cannot become trustee unless by the consent of the people. Because this consent had neither been asked nor given, the Council of the Métis of the Saskatchewan and their Laws of the Prairie continued to be the true government and the true laws of that country, as they virtually still are today (1982, 207).

Métis clearly have a tradition of seeing themselves as different and distinct from Canada and Canadianness. A number of narratives about the Métis people have, nonetheless, been central to the development of Canadian identities and self-perceptions, for both French and English Canadians.

At the heart of this identification with or against the Métis people is an identification with different mythologies about Louis Riel, who for many Canadians personifies an overarching Métis-ness. Braz (2003) makes extensive analysis of the ongoing appropriation of Riel, particularly by Anglophone writers, and concludes that "judging by most literary

works on him since at least the end of the Second World War, Riel would seem to be basically a Canadian visionary who advocated nothing less than the social welfare and multicultural policies that the nation would embrace a century later” (4). Braz is quite skeptical about the truthfulness of Riel’s place as a Canadian visionary, arguing that, “there is a direct link between the fact the discourse on Riel is dominated by Euro-Canadians and the fact that he is usually situated not in a Métis context but in a Canadian one” (4). Such analysis is demonstrative of the extent to which Canadian identification with Louis Riel has created a mythological cult around the man who was, at his core, antithetical to the emerging Canadian project, and who fought for Métis political independence from an expanding Canadian colonialism until his death at Canadian hands.

However, Canadian identification with Riel has also been expanded to include an identification with Métis people as a whole, using Riel as a kind of cultural representative for the social, economic, and political circumstances that led to the development of *métissage*, and later the Métis nation, in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North-West. This paper will examine how Canadian political theory has internalized Riel by incorporating him (and by extension the entire Métis people), into a foundational mythology describing the founding of Canada as a multicultural *métissage*. It will also examine the role that this internalization of the Métis has played in attempts to erase Canada’s colonial past, present, and future. Through this process, Riel and the Métis have become a gateway through which political theorists can identify a post-colonial Canada; a project which is, at its core, disingenuous in its erasure of ongoing colonial occupation of Indigenous lands and governments. Despite our common colonial reality, theorists have, through the internalization of Métis-ness by Canadians, been able to construct a Canadian identity premised on a supposed mixedness—*métissage*—represented by Louis Riel and the Métis people, and a kind of *Métis-ized* Canada.

To demonstrate the problematic and ahistoric logic behind a Métis-ized Canada, this article will critically interrogate two recent works that adopt this position: Jennifer Reid’s *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse and the Postcolonial State* (2008)² and John Ralston Saul’s *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (2008). Both works appropriate Métisness/*métissage* as a foundational Canadian value, while downplaying the resistance of both Riel and the Métis people to involuntary incorporation into Canada. In *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada*, Jennifer Reid situates a “post-colonial” Canada in a cultural and political *métissage*, arguing that Louis Riel is better suited as a founding mythological Canadian than many of the more commonplace historical figures who typically represent Canadian values. In doing so, Reid assimilates Riel into the Canadian political consciousness *as a Canadian*, and adopts for him a contemporary Canadian value system, much of which Riel himself would have seen as oppositional to his interests, as well as to those of his people.³ Using similar logic, John Ralston Saul argues for

² This paper’s citations all refer to the first edition of Jennifer Reid’s book, *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse and the Postcolonial State* (2008). The book has also been republished in Canada as *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse and the Postcolonial State*, (2012).

³ Braz notes that it is ironic that “despite Riel’s fervent Métis nationalism, and his skepticism if not antagonism toward Confederation, he has become basically a Euro-Canadian hero” (2003, 197).

an Indigenized Canada in *A Fair Country*, claiming that a national métisness, which was supposedly suppressed by the country's Anglo elite, is the foundation of Canadianness. Saul's "métis civilization" thesis re-conceptualizes Canadian-Indigenous relations by imagining a mythical "métis" union between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, based on cultural mixing in the early moments of Canadian history. These works have been chosen because they make the most explicit claims of the Métis-ization of Canada, and serve as important points of discussion when examining Canadian colonialism more broadly, including Canada's relationship with Indigenous nations, and the Métis nation in particular. It is my contention that Reid's and Saul's claims rely on an ahistorical interpretation of both Louis Riel and Métis-Canadian relations, interpretations that function as part of a myth-making apparatus hiding a pervasive settler-colonial reality within a mythological post-colonial fantasy.⁴ The implication of such a mythology, and the imagining of a Métis-ized Canada, is the *inversion of colonialism*.

Both Reid and Saul claim that Canada is a *métissage*/Métis civilization and, as a result, re-imagine the history of Canadian colonialism as a series of Canadian-Indigenous interactions that built a *new society*, prefiguring, or even avoiding, an exploitative colonial relationship. For both of these thinkers, Indigenous cultures are the foundation for, or at the very least a central component of, a uniquely Canadian polity and society in which all Indigenous peoples and Canadians are unproblematic members. However, by making these mythological claims, these theorists reject the very real history of Canadian colonialism, as well as a colonial present and future. Instead, they construct a historical narrative where Canadians are actually assimilated by Indigenous people (in a rather benign fashion) into a pseudo-Indigenous "Métis" identity. It is through the inversion of colonialism, and the supposed acculturation of Indigenous values by Canadians, that Reid and Saul have attempted to envision a more just Canada. However, this goal is accomplished by erasing the very real colonial context in which Canadians and Indigenous peoples live, have lived, and will, in all likelihood, still be living for the foreseeable future.

While the theoretical implications of these arguments will be the major focus of this paper, there are also important policy implications for Métis-ization arguments, most of which involve the dismissal of centuries-old international legal and political institutions in exchange for a mythical, pseudo-Métis identity. By using this logic, Reid and Saul are not just erasing the injustice of the past and present by imagining a Canadianized Louis Riel, a Métis-ized Canada, and a mythological, ahistorical inverted colonialism: they are also subverting the already existing set treaty relationships. These treaties clearly lay out institutionalized, nation-to-nation arrangements between Canada and Indigenous nations that preserve the political independence and cultural integrity of both peoples. These bilateral agreements are predicated on the existence of both Canada and Indigenous nations *as separate political entities*, who may live side-by-side but remain their own people with their distinct cultures, ways of living, and fully independent political institutions. Rather than engaging with these complex political arrangements, which have clear political and historical origins, Reid and Saul choose to imagining a relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada that is

⁴ The colonial fantasy of a unified post-colonial, multicultural society has been well documented in R.J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (2000).

premised on a self-consciously mythologized intercultural “Métis” identity, ignoring the historically constituted and concrete political relationships negotiated by our forbears for the benefit of both Indigenous peoples and Canadians. Given the self-conscious focus of national mythmaking by both writers, it is no surprise that actual treaty agreements are, for the most part, unanalyzed and unacknowledged in both of these works. By shying away from these historical relationships, and mythologizing a timeless and ahistorical “métis” past, Reid and Saul manage to disencumber Canada from its colonial context, envisioning instead a mythological, post-colonial, Métis-ized Canada.

This article will examine the Métis-ization of Canada from four different angles. The first section of this paper will examine how Riel and the Métis people have been re-situated as unproblematic Canadian subjects in the disciplines of Canadian political theory and Canadian history. The second section will examine how Canadianized Métis subjects, and most notably a Canadianized Louis Riel, have been reimagined as the basis for a collective Canadian identity in Reid’s *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada*. The third section will then examine how a Canadianized Métis people are appropriated to Métis-ize Canada in Saul’s *A Fair Country*. In the fourth and final section, this paper will examine the implications of such arguments in Métis–Canadian relations and, more broadly, in Indigenous–Canadian relations, including how arguments about the existence of a Métis-ized Canada undermine much older relationships based on international diplomacy and Canadian–Indigenous treaty-making.

Externalizing and Internalizing Louis Riel: Two Common Ahistorical Interpretations of Riel’s Life and Politics

In the theoretical process of reimagining Canada as an Indigenously inspired social and political entity of mixed Indigenous and European *métissage*, Métis must first be conceived of as *Canadian*. The vehicle for Canadians to understand the Métis people is Louis Riel, and how Riel is understood is usually the basis for understanding Métis identity as a whole. With Riel’s importance for defining Métis identity in Canadian scholarship, the first theoretical move in Canadianizing the Métis people, and Métis-izing Canada, is to claim Riel as a Canadian leader who is representative of Canadian values.

The appropriation of Riel as a Canadian icon is a relatively recent phenomenon; in the past, Riel was considered an oppositional figure, whose important role in understanding Canadian identity was, mainly, to define what Canada *was not*. Recently, Riel has become more palatable to Canadians, and this change of mood has led to Riel’s inclusion by more “progressive” scholars into Canadianness as a mythological leader. Regardless of how Canadian scholars view him, the majority of these Riel representations are wildly inconsistent with how he saw himself. While many scholars today seem to uncritically accept his Canadianness, Riel continually resisted this label in many of his most important writings.⁵ The various stories told about Riel by Canadians should be read as stories by Canadians about Canadians, using Riel as a stand-in for the values that they wish to highlight and espouse or, alternatively, the values they wish to condemn and externalize.

⁵ Albert Brazeau’s *False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture* (2003) makes this argument quite clearly, outlining the many representations of Riel since his death, and how his image has been used by many different groups in support of ideals that would have been at odds with his own.

In this process of re-defining Riel as a Canadian, Métis have traditionally had very little influence on the conversation; in many ways, Riel has become the object of someone else's discourse.

The discourses on Riel can be divided into roughly two different camps, which associate Riel with two very different sets of values. The *oppositional set of values* approach, prominent among conservative “old-guard” scholars like Thomas Flanagan (1979) and George Stanley (1960; 1963),⁶ positions Riel in a kind of liminal space—neither truly Métis nor truly Canadian, Riel is crazy, violent, and incapable of foresight as he drags ignorant, unwilling Métis into his schemes. This set of discourses uses Riel as a signifier of what Canada is not—a rational, law-abiding, legally-constituted nation of men capable dutifully expanding Crown sovereignty into new “unoccupied” lands. In the oppositional values discourse, Riel's Eastern Canadian education and his supposedly non-Métis upbringing are factors that isolate him from his countrymen, and make him “something-other-than-Métis.” Thinkers in this mindset do not consider Riel to be a good, civilized Canadian either, but the antithesis of what Canada aspires to be—a powerful, loyal, unified, and patriotic nation *a mari usque ad mare*. Robert Hancock and I have argued elsewhere (Gaudry and Hancock, forthcoming) that oppositional values scholars situate Riel in the paradoxical position of an “outside agitator”—an outsider whose charisma is powerful enough to invoke feelings of violence within a passive, compliant, or ignorant Métis population. Within this view, Riel is an unstable element who led an otherwise unwilling and politically backwards Métis population to “rebel” against legally constituted and wholly legitimate Canadian authority, and is an obstacle that loyal Canadians must overcome to realize their dream of a sea-to-sea Canada. These discourses, paradoxically, situate Riel at the core of Canadian identity by highlighting his non-Canadianness—his Catholicism, his Métis-otherness and, (most gleefully) his supposed insanity—to describe what Canada is, and what should be: a “civilized,” white, Anglo-Protestant nation. Old-guard Canadian scholars have typically constructed Riel as something antithetical to Canadianness but, in doing so, have still situated him at the core of what it means to be Canadian. In many ways, for thinkers like Stanley and Flanagan, to be Canadian is to not be Riel.

More recently, cultural theorists, in specific opposition to the oppositional set, have reimagined a *representational set of values* for Riel: Riel as the prototypical Canadian; an exemplar of a multicultural way of life; and representative of the social injustice caused by the historic rejection of cultural diversity, which Canada has now overcome. The reaction to the problematic histories of Riel and the Métis by “oppositional values” scholars led to the arrival of new scholarship on Riel, which has attempted to situate Riel's demands that Canada deal fairly with his people amongst many other subaltern voices in an updated, multicultural Canadian history.⁷ In these narratives, the representational values of Riel

⁶ It should be noted that Stanley's 1963 biography, *Louis Riel*, while anything but sympathetic, is much less inflammatory than his earlier *The Birth of Western Canada* (originally published in 1936) or Flanagan's *Louis 'David' Riel*. Stanley's opinion of Riel seems to have softened by the time he wrote *Louis Riel*, and one must wonder if the cultural revolutions of the 1960s reached even conservative historians like Stanley.

⁷ It is interesting that this new understanding of the values that Riel is supposed to embody is the territory of cultural theorists and political scientists, while the oppositional values school is dominated almost entirely by historians.

reconstitute him as an *explicitly* mythologized, unproblematic (if still complicated) Canadian, and as a visionary for the current manifestation of a multicultural and bilingual Canadian Confederation. In these new mythologies, Louis Riel is given a position as a Canadian nation-builder—a position that he would almost certainly have rejected, given how the Canadian project has so carelessly marginalized his people, both during his life and after his death. This ahistorical reading of Riel's life, however, does not stop Canadian scholars from placing him more firmly within the mythology of Canada. The result of the new mythology has been the transformation of Riel into the personification of Métis-ness, and the attachment of the Métis-ness that he now represents to the values that Canada is supposed to represent—bilingualism, multicultural, positive relationships with Indigenous peoples, cultural hybridity, and a coming-together of diverse voices. The discourses on Riel that claim his values represent foundational Canadian values ultimately use Riel and *métissage* to claim the existence of a postcolonial, multicultural nation-state, with values similar to those that Riel is supposed to embody. The works that claim Riel or the Métis people best represent the fundamental values of Canada have been met with surprisingly uncritical reception. Jennifer Reid and John Ralston Saul have used these discourses on Riel and the Métis people (with very little opposition) to make claims about a postcolonial, Métis-ized Canada. However, these arguments are deeply problematic because they erase the past, present, and future of a violent, oppressive, and ongoing Canadian imperialism.

In reality, both Louis Riel and a large number of Métis were opposed to the Canadian project. Riel was a prominent critic of Canada's presumed claim to Métis lands, as well as the Canadian pretension to govern the Métis people. In the December 1869 *Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land and the North-West*, which Riel was the primary author for, he quite clearly states:

That we refuse to recognize the authority of Canada, which pretends to have the right to coerce us, and impose upon us a despotic form of government still more contrary to our rights and interests as British subjects, than was that [Hudson's Bay] Government to which we had subjected ourselves, through necessity up to recent date (Provisional Government of Assiniboia, 1869).

Riel strenuously objected to the legitimacy of Canada's presumed authority over the Métis people right up to his execution by Canadians in 1885. His 1885 *Last Memoir* describes a similar understanding of Métis political authority equal to that of Canada, sixteen years after *The Declaration* was published:

When the Government of Canada presented itself at our doors it found us at peace. It found that the Métis people of the North-West could not only live well without it ... but that it had a government of its own, free, peaceful, well-functioning ... It was a government with an organized constitution, whose jurisdiction was more legitimate and worthy of respect, because it was exercised over a country that belonged to it (Riel 1982, 204).

In seeming contrast to his opposition to English Canadian imperialism, Riel aspired to build a close relationship with French Canadians, whom he saw as powerful allies in the Métis struggle against English Canadian assimilation. In his poem "O Québec," he writes:

Québec, beloved home,
 Never forget your many Métis sons
 By Manitoba shunned (1993, 47).

But Riel's identification with French Canada came through a deep connection to the idea of their combined resistance to the involuntary incorporation of the Québec and Métis peoples by English Canada. In Riel's poem "The French-Canadian-Métis," he envisions a sustained alliance between the three great French speaking nations—France, Quebec, and the Métis—as well as their ability to support each other against the English:

The Dominion ultimately
 Dreams his annihilation
 He lashes out, reluctantly,
 Asking leave to keep his station.
 French-Canadians require resolve.
 Malleable must be their metal
 If they're to challenge or involve
 Themselves with the English at all.
 Only a diplomat can handle
 And tame the men of Albion,
 And entice and entangle

The unicorn and the lion (1993, 117).⁸

Any solidarity expressed by Riel to Québec or French Canada was deeply enmeshed with resistance to English domination. Riel's attraction to other French-speaking people was indeed a cultural connection, but the importance of this relationship is in the ability of both the Métis and French Canada to defend its culture from those who would eradicate it. Given this information, it is quite ironic that Riel himself has been so thoroughly Canadianized when he was opposed to Canadian control over Métis lands, language, and lives, even sacrificing his life for this end. The identities that have been ascribed to Riel typically involve a kind of historical erasure of the Canadian violence and assimilation attempts that continually confronted Riel and the Métis in the 1870s and 1880s.

⁸ The unicorn and lion adorn Canada's coat-of-arms, which is an obvious reference to his opponent, the Dominion of Canada.

Mythologizing Riel as the Prototypical Canadian in *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada*

Jennifer Reid's *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada* (2008) is an excellent example of the "representational values" school of thought, which reimagines Riel as a mythologized Canadian while representing Canada as a postcolonial nation. Reid depicts a thoroughly Canadianized Riel who is representative of the ideals expressed by a progressive, multicultural, and bilingual Canada and who, she argues, is rooted in Canada's mythological foundation as a *métissage*. Reid's mythologization of Riel is both explicit and self-conscious. According to Reid, part of Riel's popularity is his presumed ability to speak to the many different social divides that affect Canada, including still-central cleavages like French–English relations, the integration of new migrants to Canada, and the breakdown of Indigenous–Canadian diplomacy. His charismatic persona and tactical political reasoning has resulted in the support of a diverse group of contemporary, non-Métis sympathizers. To these sympathizers, Riel's myth is "a model that resonates with their various experiences of being Canadians," a situation that has led to the creation of what Reid calls "ambiguous images and interpretations" of Riel (47). These images of Riel stress his position as a bi-racial, French-speaking Métis, and a man who embraced diversity in social and political relations. This identity has retained a central place in the Canadian imaginary because Riel seems to straddle continuously "the dichotomies of the Canadian social body" (71). Because Riel appeals to a large number of social groups, some of whom have histories of conflict with one another, Reid argues that he can create "a different kind of order," based on diversity and hybridity, allowing Canadians to make sense of their country's "history of disjunction" (71). From this vantage point, Reid sees Riel, and the Métis people more generally,

as the emblem of 'in-between-ness' who expresses a most basic fact of the Canadian experience: that of cultural hybridity or, as I will choose to describe it, *métissage*. It is this hybridity that I wish to suggest rests at the foundation of an elusive Canadian identity (71).

For Reid, hybridity is the central component of Canadianness, as the country's "nationalism was ultimately unsuccessful in its attempt to create a unified cultural discourse and social body in the Canadian context" (98–99). It is through the myth of Riel that Canadians can envision a common and complex identity in a mythological *métissage*:

the various mythic "Riels," and the identities to which they have spoken, underscore a collective arrangement that lacks the ethnic, cultural, or ideological purity that generally rests at the basis of nation-states. Canada is, in a sense, a geopolitical body defined by a structure of what can be called *métissage* that has proven impossible to disregard (159).

In Reid's mythic Riel, Canadians find a solution to the complex tension that exists at the nexus of Canadianness—*what does it mean to be Canadian when there is no clear cultural unity at the core of Canada?* "In a striking manner, Riel the myth speaks to the possibility of *métissage* being a foundational factor in Canadian identity," she writes (51). To Reid, Riel's multiethnic, multilinguistic, and multicultural existence is as much of a viable founding

myth for Canada as any other, and all the more so because *métissage* better represents, for her, the cultural diversity that supposedly underpins Canada.

To better understand Reid's argument that Riel and *métissage* represent common foundations for Canadian identity, we must first examine why Riel is so central to the emergence of a *métissage* in Canada. Since Riel is at the centre of several "critical revolutionary moment[s] within the country's history," he is at the centre of a wave of monumental change in the nineteenth century from which modern Canada would emerge (2008, 119). These revolutionary moments first occurred in 1869–70, when Métis expelled the Canadian government attempting to claim their lands, and negotiated for a confederal relationship between Canada and the people of Red River to form the new Province of Manitoba. Another revolutionary moment occurred in 1885, where the Métis resisted the intrusion of the Canadian government on their political freedoms, and eventually fought a guerilla war in an attempt to force Canada to negotiate a Manitoba-like treaty in Saskatchewan. While these events resulted in pivotal political moments for the Métis people, Reid imagines that these events are revolutionary for Canada in an entirely different way.

Reid understands Canada's revolutionary development following its armed confrontations with Métis in 1870 and 1885—where Riel was a major leader—primarily in terms of land acquisition and infrastructure development. These Canadian advances flowed from Canada's decision to fight with, and then dispossess, the Métis people (as well as other Indigenous peoples) of their traditional lands and homesteads.⁹ Reid describes the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) as a specifically revolutionary moment that transformed Canada, and as a direct result of the Métis skirmish with the North-West Mounted Police at Duck Lake: "had it not been for the uprising, the venture would undoubtedly have folded" but "within days of the news of events at Duck Lake¹⁰ reaching Ottawa," the Government of Canada found the money to complete the railroad and dispatch troops to fight the Métis (2008, 122–23). The completion of the CPR allowed Canada to flood the North-West with troops (and later settlers), to overpower the Métis and violate its treaty agreements with the other Indigenous nations in Saskatchewan. Without the Métis "revolution" there would be no unifying transportation link for a sea-to-sea Canada. While the completion of the CPR could be classified as a "revolutionary moment" for Canadians, it was only transformative for Riel, the Métis, and the other Indigenous people of the Saskatchewan valley, as they faced an intensification of colonialism. To understand the completion of the CPR and the war with the Métis in 1885 as revolutionary moments involves deep misunderstandings of Métis motives for resisting Canada, as well as the rejection of the idea of Métis political independence from Canada.

Reid argues that these Métis–Canadian conflicts resulted in Canada's political transformation through "a swift alteration in a society's political and social structures," and that these supposed revolutionary moments allow Canadians to re-evaluate "their geopolitical relationship with one another" (2008, 119). For example, Reid rightly identifies

⁹ Dorion and Prefontaine argue that "[t]he opening of the Métis land base to newcomers, between 1870 and 1874, was probably more traumatic for the Manitoba Métis than the final defeat of the Métis people in 1885" (1999, 24).

¹⁰ Duck Lake was the first engagement between Métis and the North-West Mounted Police, in 1885.

that the Métis–Canadian conflicts of the 1870s and 1880s drew lines in the Canadian psyche that would reformat cultural and political alliances, shattering any hope of French–English unification under a common culture, a common East–West identity, or a Protestant–Catholic mending of relations (124). But, in imagining the two conflicts as “geo-political in nature” rather than colonial/anti-colonial struggles, Reid conceptualizes them as an internal political process, and not an international conflict with an independent Métis existence outside the political reach of Canada. By doing this, Reid is able to imagine the creation of a *métissage*, or social mixture, based on regional and cultural differences that emerged *within Canada*, without having to contend with substantive Métis assertions of self-government during this time. Reid’s interpretation of the historic conflicts between the Métis people and Canada obscures the anti-colonial nature of these resistances, as well as Canada’s role as a would-be imperial power trying to appropriate Métis land and sovereignty as its own.

While it is definitely true that the events of 1885 caused a shift in the “political contours” and “political balance” of Canada, (Reid 2008, 121) and that Canada’s “nascent dichotomies of ethnicity and of region emerged as geopolitically defining properties” for Canadians (71), it would be a mistake to assume that the goal of either Riel or the Métis people as a whole was any kind of political “revolution” for Canadians. It would be even more erroneous to imagine that the fallout from these events led to a kind of *métissage* in Canada, in which the Métis people were willing partners. From all historic accounts, Métis were primarily concerned with protecting their own freedom and well-being *as a people* from Canadian colonialism by creating social and cultural space between Métis and settlers in an effort to avoid cultural and political assimilation. It would, likewise, be an error to assume that Canadians found the basis for a multicultural society in the ashes of their war against the Métis nation. For, after gaining the upper hand in early Manitoba, most of the Canadian settlers there worked to undo the central tenets of Manitoba’s entry into Confederation, including the special land provisions for future Métis generations and the French language rights enshrined in the Manitoba Act after the Manitoba schools debate.¹¹

Reid’s rather benign reading of Canada’s military history involves an erasure of Canada’s very overt colonial ambitions in the late nineteenth century, and replaces them with a kind of internalized civil conflict between Canadians of different cultures, for which Riel was the cultural mediator. The construction of this narrative can be better understood as what Benedict Anderson calls the “reassurance of fratricide,” or the rhetorical transformation of an international conflict—like the one between the Métis people and Canada—into a conflict of brothers, fighting within the same family. This tactic is used retroactively by nationalists following the cessation of conflict in order to transform a formerly international conflict into a domestic one (Anderson 1991, 201). Reid claims that 1870 and 1885 are “revolutionary moments” for Canadians, during which Riel was the central figure, and caused a large shift in Canadian political consciousness. However, if this was a moment of profound cultural transformation for Canada, this transformation did not usher in a new

¹¹ Bumsted’s “Epilogue” in *Red River Rebellion* (1996) contains informative descriptions of many aspects of post-1870 Manitoba, including Métis attempts to actualize the agreement at the heart of the Manitoba Act, 1870.

area of multiculturalism, better relations between English Canada and French Canada, or a relationship of political equality between Native and settler. These moments were revolutionary for Canada, but they were revolutionary at the expense of the Métis people and other Indigenous nations. Rather than ushering in a new cultural *métissage*, the newly arrived Canadian settlers in the 1870s and 1880s gained possession of the vast majority of Indigenous lands, and the Métis were forced into exile (Bumsted 1996, 242–44). Riel’s fate was not much different. Following a show trial that was intended to demonstrate the existence of Canadian sovereignty and the supremacy of British common law, Riel was publicly executed for treason.¹² After these so-called “revolutionary moments,” Métis experienced an intensification of colonial oppression. Riel’s values were also put on trial, and publicly admonished, situating him outside of the Canadian body politic as a traitor. Using these so-called revolutionary moments, Reid renders Canadian colonialism invisible. While she thoroughly analyzes the establishment of a mythological multiculturalism in Canada, she does so by covering up the imperial processes that eroded the independent nationhood of Indigenous peoples.

Reid is able to argue that the Métis benefited from these revolutionary moments only because she presumes that, by the nineteenth century, Métis were already an unproblematic part of the emergent Canadian project: a component of a new nation-state attempting to work out its differences with the dominant element. Arguing, as Reid does, that the disposessions of the Métis in the 1870s and 1885 ultimately benefited Canada requires the subordination of Métis interests, including the *de facto* elimination of Métis national independence, to Canada’s desire for unity. While Reid is right in one sense, in that Canada did see the post-1885 fissuring of its internal fault lines partially as a result of its war with the Métis, her conclusion that the Métis–Canadian conflicts were the revolutionary moment during which Canada could begin understand itself as a multicultural *métissage* has no historical basis. Such an argument involves the *writing out* of the colonial violence that underpinned these events, along with the erasure of decades of expropriation and exploitation experienced by Indigenous peoples after the arrival of Canada on their lands.

In light of Reid’s ineffectual appropriation of Riel as a Canadian, and her problematic claim that Canada constitutes a *métissage* along the lines of Riel, we can also see how she falls short of her own ethical benchmark for the discussion of a Canadian *métissage*. She notes that, while many literary scholars have a “desire for identification” with Indigenous peoples, this desire “has not tended to translate into a need for tangible relationships between Natives and non-natives; rather, it has been the *idea* of the ‘Indian’ that has fascinated Anglophone writers” (2008, 39). In *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada*, Reid is, in fact, guilty of her own criticism. She argues only in favour of mythologizing Riel in a way that fits within Canada’s vision of itself, without engaging with the larger goal of Métis political independence as articulated by Riel (or by more recent Métis leaders). While Reid uses images of Riel and *métissage* in support of her own argument, she is strangely silent on what an actual Métis–Canadian relationship would look like beyond *the idea* of Canada’s supposed *métissage*. While she remains fascinated with the idea of what Riel and the Métis people represent in her mind—*métissage* and cultural hybridity—she

12 For a thorough analysis of the legal inconsistencies in Riel’s trial, see Goulet (1999).

seems considerably less interested in building (or maintaining) real relationships with the Métis people on Métis terms.

The goals of the Métis people—which are varied, but usually include a revival of our independent nationhood and the reclamation of our land-base from Canada—are not addressed by Reid in any substantive way. Having predicted an imminent critique like this one, Reid offers only a clumsy call to the greater good that in no way addresses the fundamental contradiction of Canadian cultural unity through a supposed *métissage* and Canada's century-long disregard for Métis nationhood. She writes:

I am fully aware that I could be accused of insensitively putting forward the idea ... of *métissage* as foundational in the emergence of the Canadian social and political body, but I hope that it can be excused in the interest of the broader issue I am trying to raise concerning the nature of postcolonial society. *Métissage* is, in this sense, emblematic of a more pervasive structure of human and social generation in the modern world and particularly in Canada that has rested on a distinct and normative configuration of cultural or ethnic hybridity (2008, 164).

By focusing on Riel's mythological appeal to multiculturalism and diversity in Canada, rather than his historic goal of Métis nationhood and a institutionalized nation-to-nation relationship with Canada, Reid fails to engage with Riel on his own terms, and thus fails to imagine Riel as he would have understood himself. Instead, Reid uses Métis history and Métis peoplehood for her own purposes, and by doing so, implicitly reinforces the Canadian colonization of Western Canada by rendering it historically invisible. Her calls for *métissage* to be seen as a Canadian value personified by Riel, a value that supposedly unites the diverse cultures within Canada (including the Métis), relies on either a fundamental misunderstanding of the Métis people or an ahistorical appropriation of Riel's mythmaking power.

Riel's all-consuming goal, as well as the central aspiration of his people was the protection of their independent nationhood (Boyden 2011). While it is true that Riel "often depicts himself and his people as the natural mediators between their two ancestral groups" (Braz 2003, 205), Riel was also critical about the colonial impulses of the Canadian project, which, on the ground, were disrupting the lives of his people.¹³ His role as a cultural mediator was heavily circumscribed by Canadian injustice, and his mediation was always for the benefit of his people, and not necessarily for the benefit of Canada. In his *Last Memoir*, he gives a vivid example of his understanding of the Métis relationship to Canada:

What did the Government do? It laid its hands on the land of the Métis as if it were its own. By this one act it showed its plan to defraud them of their future. It even placed their present condition in jeopardy. For not only did it take the land from under their feet, it even took away their right to use it (Riel 1982, 205).

Reid uses Riel, or more accurately the *myth of Riel*, for a different purpose, and with little attempt to understand his own motives or the motives of his people. She ultimately fails to live up to the same critique she makes of many other Anglo-Canadian writers who use

¹³ The most clear of Riel's anticolonial writings that have been translated to English can be found in his *Last Memoir* (1982).

the concept of *métissage* without any deeper engagement with actual Métis communities—Métis communities who, by-and-large, live in poverty, and have been politically, socially, and economically marginalized by the same Canadian project that they are supposed to be the mythological origin for. By choosing to use *métissage* for her own purposes, rather than to generate a greater understanding of the Métis people, Reid obscures the injustice underpinning Métis–Canadian relations. By using Riel as the basis for Canadian multiculturalism and bilingualism, Reid subjugates Riel’s dominant goal—the freedom of his people—to Canada’s desire for a (substantively unequal) social and political union with Indigenous nations.

Indigenizing Canada: Canada as a “Métis” Civilization in John Ralston Saul’s *A Fair Country*

The idea that Canada finds its political and cultural origins in *métissage* has not been confined to academia, but can also be found in popular philosophy. A populist representation of a Métis-ized Canada is found in John Ralston Saul’s national bestseller *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* (2008). Saul’s provocative thesis is based on his construction of a Canadian historical narrative of cultural, social, and political mixing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people; his principal argument is that Canada is “a métis civilization” (3). What Saul means is that Canada is a “deeply Aboriginal” country in its thinking and culture (3). In making such a claim, Saul assumes that the Métis people are defined by cultural and biological mixedness, instead of being defined as a coherent socio-political entity with a common cultural formation, history, and set of values. The assumption that Métis people are defined by their mixedness is, at its core, an argument based on race or, more appropriately, the mixing of races: *miscegenation*. This assumption is inherently problematic. By equating Métis with a mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, Saul ultimately reproduces what Chris Andersen argues is a “fundamentally racialized system of representation,” which has “severely limited, isolated and decontextualized” contemporary Indigeneity (2008, 353). Andersen argues that not only does defining “métis” primarily as “mixed-race people” reduce “the astonishing complexity of Red River Métis to their ostensible mixedness” but it also engages in a “contemporary translation of historical outsider terms like ‘half-breed’ into apparently less ignominious terms such as ‘Métis’” (2011, 44). Such arguments lead to Saul’s mistaken assumption that there is a common experience for all mixed-identity Indigenous peoples, who—despite culture, politics, and geography that militate against such racialized reductionism—can speak of a common *acultural* “métisness.” This distinction between the historically constituted Métis nation—Riel’s people, who shared a culture, a history of political self-assertion, and actually called themselves “Métis”—and the racialized category of “métis-as-mixed” is usually signified by the use of capitalization. The “small-m métis” are defined as mixed Indigenous and European from a diversity of backgrounds, and “big-M Métis” are defined as descended from the Red River Métis people, the New Nation (see Peterson and Brown 1985). However, to treat Métis culture as a simple mixing of cultures and races, as Saul does, and not itself an independent group with a markedly distinct culture and politics is to fundamentally misunderstand the Métis people. It is with this misunderstanding that Saul makes claims about a mythical Métis-ized Canada.

Saul's argument presumes that Métis are simply a mixed-race group and not a politically organized society with a common culture, self-awareness, and long history of self-assertion (Andersen 2011). By doing this, Saul is not only misrepresenting Métis people—he is also misrepresenting the core Indigenous values he claims that Canada represents. When claiming that Canada is a métis civilization, Saul claims that Canada has a mythological Aboriginal core, and that Canadian “institutions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European or African or Asian, even though we have created elaborate theatrical screens of language, reference and mythology to misrepresent ourselves to ourselves” (2008, 3). He also argues that the dominant Canadian intellectual class is overly concerned with the European origins of Canadian social and political life, ignoring the Aboriginal ways of being that he believes underpins Canadian values (3). In place of these European institutions, Saul looks to Aboriginal culture as the inspiration for Canadian collective life (3). However, when shifting the focus from European to a pan-Aboriginal value system, Saul confuses the creation of a Canadian intellectual tradition, specific to the Canadian political context, with *an Indigenous political tradition in Canada*. While Canada does possess a unique political culture with specific political traditions independent of the United States, France, Britain, and others, this situation does not mean that these traditions are necessarily “Aboriginal,” or that they find their basis in any of the Indigenous cultures here. Not every social or political formation that emerges on this continent is necessarily Indigenous, and the Americas have produced many powerful forms of thought and action different from Europe and other places. Whether these new ways of living are consistent with the values (and existence) of Indigenous peoples is an entirely different matter.

Without regard for this distinction, Saul argues that Canadian political culture is not only unique but “Aboriginal” as well. He writes that if Canadians look below the surface, they “will discover the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit at [Canada’s] core” and that Canadians need to “learn how to express that reality, the reality of our history” (2008, 35). Despite these rhetorical pronouncements, there is very little evidence that can be found in *A Fair Country* to support this thesis; even an empirical examination of Canadian politics turns up no real evidence to support these claims. While Saul adopts the rhetoric of Indigenous cultures; oral tradition, consensus, an ever-expanding circle of inclusive nationhood; he fails to theorize the Indigenous knowledges that he supposes is at the root of these political values in any deep and meaningful way. For example, Saul claims that Canada is descended from an oral culture because, in the nineteenth century, “[e]ach important new legal text had to be read ... in public, usually on church steps or other public gathering places. In the oral tradition, the whole idea of meaningless official language is virtually non-existent. The meaning of Canadian texts did indeed have to be read in public because Canada had a particularly high male suffrage” (126). However, since the text had to be *read*, and the legally relevant text remained in its written form (such as the Criminal Code), rather than varying oral interpretations of the citizenry, the spoken word is significantly less important than the written word in Canadian political culture. Laws, as one concrete example, are legally constituted only when they are written down and signed into law. In this sense, Canadian political culture lacks the substantive oral focus common to Indigenous cultures, and cannot be said to possess a definitive oral tradition.

Saul also argues that Canadian political culture is rooted in Aboriginal conceptions of consensus building, and that, at the heart of all political debate, “is the idea that consensus can be reached if positions are laid out fully and enough time is taken to fairly consider what all can see. You will find this idea of consensus in almost every description of Canadian negotiations going back to the seventeenth century” (2008, 68). Such an argument obscures the reality that Canada has a parliamentary system that produces clear winners and losers, and that majority governments—by far the norm in Canada—very rarely find the need to compromise, let alone reach consensus when enacting legislation. It also ignores the preference in Canadian political rhetoric for denoting clear rights and wrongs, rather than acknowledging the complexity of political decision-making. In this sense, it cannot be said that the dominant trend in Canadian political culture is to build consensus.

As a result of this lack of deep engagement with Indigenous knowledges, Saul fundamentally misunderstands how these key concepts operate in politically independent Indigenous nations and, therefore, how their functioning in Canada would produce a very different political reality than what we have today. When discussing governance, Saul argues that,

Our leaders endlessly mull over institutional and cultural inheritance from British parliamentary democracy, British and French justice, the Enlightenment, British liberalism, Western individualism with its important variations, US populism, Judeo-Christian moral questioning, Athenian principles of citizenship and democracy, Western European philosophy, Western social democracy, Western capitalism, in particular its US form. Frankly, once you get below the surface, I see very little in the way that we use all of these that would ring familiar bells in Britain, France or elsewhere in Europe or in the United States (2008, 3).

Yet, it is precisely these institutions that operate in Canada, and so constrain Indigenous peoples. If we were to examine an understanding of what Indigenous governance looks like in the deepest sense of the concept, and then articulate the values that are central to Indigenous political institutions, then we can get a better picture of what Saul is missing in his analysis of Canada’s supposed métis origins.

In *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, Kanien’kehaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred argues customary Indigenous governance “has nothing to do with tests of will or adversarial power games” (2009, 70)—a reference, no doubt, to Canada’s tradition of Westminster-style politics. Instead, Alfred describes traditional Indigenous leadership as systems where “power is not centralized,” “compliance with authority is not coerced but voluntary,” and “decision-making requires consensus”:

Because traditional systems are predicated on the ideal of harmony and the promotion of an egalitarian consensus through persuasion and debate, leaders must work through the diverse opinions and ideas that exist in any community. Because there is both an inherent respect for the autonomy of the individual and a demand for general agreement, leadership is an exercise in patient persuasion (116).

Since power in traditional Indigenous cultures tends to be consensus-based with a respect for individual autonomy, individuals are only bound to the leaders *that they freely*

consent to. Not only can leaders be removed, but individuals are also free to leave the leadership of one community for another, or to strike out on their own. These very basic foundations, common to almost all Indigenous political cultures, quite obviously clash with the very Euro-American basis for Canadian politics that Saul's writing obscures. Canadian leaders sit in a bicameral legislature called a Parliament, adopted from European tradition. In both houses of Parliament, institutionalized systems of government and opposition are central features, which ensure an atmosphere of intense partisan rivalry and adversarial debate, rather than consensus building. These houses pass laws that are not only coercive in that Canadians have no choice except to follow them, but in that they are considered supreme to all other forms of law, as Canadian sovereignty asserts them. The rule of law dictates that these laws apply equally to everyone, including those pre-existing Indigenous nations who have never consented to join this system. Indeed, the Canadian system cannot function without coercion, and it coerces Indigenous nations every day. People (especially those who are part of self-determining Indigenous nations) are not free to leave the "leadership" of Canada, to strike out on their own, and are now said to live within Canada's claimed sovereignty. Any collective political freedom Indigenous nations are said to hold in this system are defined exclusively under the auspices of Canada, and nations are typically confined to a very narrow vision of "self-government," which is circumscribed to function in ways most consistent with the goals of the state.¹⁴ The idea that Indigenous leadership prevails in the political consciousness of Canadians is simply not true. Saul's Canada has failed to embrace the much deeper aspects of freedom and independence afforded by Indigenous political knowledge, and has instead embraced a coercive sovereignty that is premised upon the most conservative elements of European political thought, shared by other European-derived nation-states, and all of which is considered to be legally superior to Indigenous understandings of governance.

When Saul writes "Indigenous people are already there, at the core of our civilization" (2008, 35), he fails to grasp (much as Jennifer Reid does) that, in order to understand Indigenous knowledge, Canadians cannot simply look within themselves to find their mythical Aboriginal core. Instead, they must engage in deeply meaningful relationships with actual Indigenous peoples. The claim to inspiration by a mythical Indian representation is not a new concept by any means. Reid notes that settlers often try to associate themselves with Indigenous imagery and symbols "in an attempt to establish a primordial relationship with the land, and to authenticate their presence in the country." This connection is manufactured "through a generalized appropriation of Native symbols ... as emblematic of national identity." Much like Reid, however, these experiments in appropriation fail "to translate into a need for tangible relationships between Natives and non-natives" (Reid 2008, 39).

While Saul writes extensively about Aboriginal culture in an abstract and general kind of way, his vision for Indigenous-Canadian engagement seems to exist only as "the Aboriginal

¹⁴ Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2010) describes land claims and self-government agreements as "settlements that return small fractions of lands, resources, and authorities to Indigenous peoples, and in that sense the settlements to a great extent cement rather than change the fundamental dominant-subordinate relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples" (6-7).

pillar” of Canadian society (2008, 75)—a kind of second Quebec, a distinct society within a unitary state. Saul seems to avoid the thornier question of political independence that Indigenous nations have long fought for, or to understand that Indigenous people, or his “métis” who are at the heart of Canada, are not necessarily the unproblematic Canadians he thinks we are. Thus, Saul’s over-determination of Indigenous influence on Canadian settler society, his lack of deep engagement with Indigenous knowledges, and his failure to engage in actual relationship-making with real Indigenous collectivities, makes Saul’s claims that Canada is an “métis” society unfounded, and therefore untenable.

A Métis-ized Canada vs. Treaty Constitutionalism: The Revival of Older Ways of Living Together

A failure to engage in a deep and meaningful way with actual Indigenous people and grounded Indigenous knowledge leads both Reid and Saul to a major misunderstanding of Indigenous peoples, as well of as Canada–Indigenous relations. Reid’s misunderstanding flows from her mythic representation of Louis Riel as a politico-cultural touchstone for Canada, and transforms him into the inspiration for a nation-building project that he bitterly opposed for most of his life. Saul’s error lies in the idea that Métis/métis people are the basic building blocks of a society that has historically, and on an ongoing basis, claimed our lands, interfered in our internal affairs, and constrained our traditional way of life. Both writers have highlighted what they see as the positive lessons learned from Indigenous peoples, but have simultaneously ignored the struggles and desires for independence that underlie the teachings of these peoples.

In claiming an Canadian Indigeneity, or Métis-izing Canada, these thinkers either misunderstand or misrepresent Indigenous–Canadian relationships, and it would be a mistake to think this misunderstanding benign. Ultimately, what these works accomplish is an erasure of the past, a kind of post-historical, Métis-ized reading of Indigenous–Canadian relations that overcomes an imperial past by ignoring those historical moments that are now inconvenient truths for progressive Canadians, such as the violent displacement of the South Saskatchewan Métis in 1885 and Louis Riel’s subsequent execution. While Canada has long aspired to Canadianize Indigenous peoples, as its numerous assimilation policies demonstrate, these claims of being Indigenous itself, or to be “métis,” is a new phenomenon entirely. This move at once recognizes the legitimacy of Indigenous relationships to place, yet imagines a Canada with equal claim to those places. This is a superficially Métis-ized nation whose mythical and disingenuous Indigenous ancestry exists on par with, or is even superior to, real Indigenous people, who have a deep and meaningful thousand-generation relationship to their homelands. Ultimately, the goal of Métis-izing Canada is the same as the process of Aboriginalizing Indigenous peoples described in Taiaiake Alfred’s *Wasáse*. Alfred’s concept of Aboriginalism is predicated on the elimination of relationships grounded in Indigenous worldviews, replacing them with mythical relationships to the colonial state. Instead of being defined by our kinship and community relations, we are defined by an abstracted relationship (or non-relationship) with the federal government and its departments. According to Alfred, Aboriginalism is the “psychic displacement of authentic indigenous identities, beliefs, and behaviours” (2005, 126), and is,

the final stage of the annihilation of an independent existence for the original peoples, a cultural and political-economic process of state-sponsored identity invention to dispossess and assimilate the remnants of the Onkwehonwe who are still tied to this land and to an indigenous way of life (126).

In the final analysis, what is offered to Indigenous peoples by scholars like Reid and Saul is nothing new—they offer us the opportunity join the ranks of Canadians and, by doing so, muddle the political distinction between independent Indigenous nations and the colonially driven settler societies that have long sought to displace them. Reid and Saul obfuscate the ongoing effects of colonialism, while re-painting an imperialist Canada as progressive and just. They imagine a way out of colonialism that asks Indigenous people and Canadians alike to embrace a superficial Indigeneity that is devoid of meaning, ahistorical, and unfamiliar to Canadians or Indigenous peoples alike.

Reid and Saul's ultimate shortcoming is their combined failure to envision what real relationships between Indigenous peoples and Canadians would look like *in practice*, as well as their failure to draw on the real, historically constituted political agreements that are already in place between Canada and the Métis people, as well as Canada and Indigenous nations more generally. Yet, there is exemplary scholarship that does just this, which both authors largely ignore in their works. One of the most groundbreaking books in theorizing what a modern relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada would look like is James Tully's *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (1995). Tully's work allows scholars at once to theorize peaceful Indigenous–Canadian relationships grounded in historic treaty agreements, while at the same time being able to move past unhelpful misrepresentations of a Métis-ized Canada, which marginalize the Métis as a domesticated people.

Strange Multiplicity examines the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the British Crown as agreements between two “equal, self-governing nations” (1995, 117). Tully argues that the treaty relationships between the Crown and Indigenous nations take on constitutional importance for both Indigenous nations and the settler state. In a way similar to Reid and Saul, Tully finds the legitimate constitutional origin of Canada in a relationship between the Crown and Indigenous nations. Unlike Reid and Saul, however, who imagine an unproblematic and unquestioned politico-cultural *métissage* of Indigenous peoples and Canadians, Tully recognizes that treaty relationships establish the political and physical space for both treaty partners to exist independently of one another while simultaneously maintaining a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship. He acknowledges that “treaties give rise to constitutional interdependence and protection” for both treaty partners, and they do not result in “discontinuity or subordination to a single sovereign” (126). In essence, treaties do not make Indigenous peoples Canadian, nor do they subordinate Indigenous nations to Canadian nationhood, or result in a national Canadian *métissage*. Rather, in these agreements, both parties recognize clear political boundaries that re-enforce national independence for both Canadians and Indigenous peoples. In sum, treaties in Canada have resulted Canada recognizing independent Indigenous nationhood, and the recognition by Indigenous peoples of Canada's ability to make laws and govern its own citizens on these lands, providing Indigenous nations are not constrained by these new laws.

Unlike Reid or Saul, Tully is also able to provide a clear historical example of what treaty-making looks like in practice *as a constitution process*. The *kahswentha*, or Two-Row Wampum, was used by the Haudenosaunee and Euro-American settlers to recognize each other as equal “co-existing nations, each with their own forms of government, [and] traditions of interpretation”:

The two parallel rows of purple beads, Chief Michael Mitchell explicates, “symbolize two paths or two vessels, travelling down the same river together. One, a birch bark canoe, will be for the Indian people, their laws, their customs and their ways. The other, a ship, will be for the white people and their laws, their customs and their ways. We shall each travel the same river together, side by side, but in our own boats. Neither of us will try to steer the other’s vessel.” (quoted in Tully 1995, 128).

By analyzing actual political agreements, grounded in an historical context, Tully is able to demonstrate that, beginning in the seventeenth century, these political agreements were undertaken by Indigenous nations to ensure their continued prosperity, as well as to create a political space for the newcomers to this continent. It is not, as Saul tends to imply, that these agreements were to create a new polity—Canada—for Indigenous peoples and settlers alike.

Like Tully, Cree legal scholar Sharon Venne argues that treaties with Canada are vitally important constitutional documents for both Cree and Canadians. Her work on Treaty 6 is rooted not in Canadian constitutional conventions, but in international law. She notes that, in 1876, “the Chiefs and the treaty commissioner followed both Cree and international laws concerning treaty-making: the two equal parties negotiated in good faith, at arm’s length without external pressure, and arrived at a meeting of the minds” (1997, 188). Therefore, each party accepted the other as a capable, authoritative representative of their people, “capable of concluding a binding agreement” with the other (191). Venne’s almost exclusive reliance on Cree knowledge and oral history is a compelling critique of the prevailing Canadian interpretation of Treaty 6. The dominant Canadian interpretation of Treaty 6 has treated it as a treaty of cession that allowed for the expansion of Canadian sovereignty into Cree territory and over the Cree people. Using the oral tradition, Venne describes how the original treaty agreement did not contain reference to the words “cede, surrender and forever give up title to the lands,” concepts which now occupy such a central place in written version of the treaty recognized by Canada (192–93). The prospect of surrendering land to Canada was never considered by the Cree, Venne argues, and that “[t]he Chiefs and Elders could not have sold the lands to the settlers as they could only share the lands,” according to Cree laws (192–93). What was negotiated was not political and territorial cession to Canada, but rather an agreement to share the land with the incoming settlers: “use of the land to the depth of the plough for the Queen’s subjects to farm, trees to construct houses, and grass for the animals brought by the settlers” (193). Not all the land was to be shared, though; some of it was to be kept for the exclusive use of the Cree for future generations (197). Venne is explicit that this treaty relationship did not mean that the Cree became Canadians or were incorporated within Confederation as Canadians. Rather, Treaty 6 safeguarded Cree nationhood, allowing them to control their own membership and exclusively dwell on and live off of their own lands. Treaty 6 institutionalized the understanding that the Cree would

“coexist and share our rich country with the non-Indigenous people” (202). Despite the original intent of the treaty, Canada’s “abuse” of Cree values of “respect, kindness, honesty, and sharing” has caused the repeated violation the treaty relationship, which has led to the degradation of lands by harmful industrial practices and the disempowerment and dispossession the Cree signatories by the government, individual settlers, and corporations (202). Like Tully, Venne rejects the notion that violations of the relationship are reasons to abandon it. Rather, she argues for the recognition by Canadians of an ongoing international relationship between two equal parties—the Cree and the Canadians—that works as an outline for fair and just relations between the many peoples cohabiting this land.

Treaties are important international agreements undertaken to protect Indigenous nationhood from being subsumed by the political and cultural ways of settler states, as well as to integrate the new arrivals into the diplomatic system of Indigenous nations. Tully is adamant that these treaties are not simple, everyday agreements with Indigenous people but that these treaties represent central constitutional documents for Canada, although they are often “hidden” constitutional elements (1995, 99). Canadian–Indigenous treaties, for Tully, also serve to limit Canada’s territorial claims, along with its pretensions for governing independent Indigenous nations. In this way there is some truth to Saul’s argument that Canada has, at its core, Indigenous institutions—treaty institutions that it has ignored for decades. However, how these two thinkers interpret these Indigenous institutions at Canada’s core couldn’t be more different. For Saul, Canadians must embrace Aboriginal underpinnings to become a kind of pseudo-native, quasi-“métis” citizen in an otherwise unified Canadian state, while Tully recognizes treaties as representations of the relationships of mutuality and equality that define the relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations. Tully’s challenge to the Constitution of Canada is to unearth the political understanding of those foundational institutions that define Canada’s binding relationships with Indigenous nations. He imagines a “chain of continual intercultural negotiations” that both limit and recognize Canada’s co-habitation of these lands, and Canada’s equal political status with the many other Indigenous nations that live here (184). In fact, Tully argues that Canada’s political legitimacy is dependent upon its recognition by Indigenous peoples. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, itself a constitutional document, established a “convention of consent” in which the Crown was obligated to engage in nation-to-nation treaty-making gain in order to access to Indigenous lands. According to Tully, the only way “the Crown could actually acquire land and establish its sovereignty in North America was to gain the consent of the Aboriginal nations,” and that the ongoing consent of Indigenous nations is required for Canada’s cohabitation of these lands with the original peoples (122). What Tully’s historically contextualized analysis provides, and what Reid’s and Saul’s analyses lacked, is the recognition that Canadian–Indigenous relations are not premised on *métissage*, or any kind of biracial mixing into some new Métis-ized Canada. Instead, they are premised upon the establishment of constitutionally important international treaty negotiations that protected the political boundaries of the treaty partners, and recognized them as separate and distinct entities inhabiting much of the same territory.

Conclusion

Perhaps John Ralston Saul is right, just in the wrong way. There are Indigenous institutions at the centre of Canada, but not the institutions that he describes, for those ones do not merge Indigenous Canadian cultures and polities into a mythical *métissage*. As Tully and Venne demonstrate, international treaties between Canada and Indigenous nations occupy an important constitutional place for both Indigenous nations and Canada. But what Tully and Venne both recognize is that these treaties protect the self-determining political capacities and cultural identities of the Indigenous nations that created them. The history of Indigenous–Canadian relations did not create a new political, social, or cultural entity called Canada, for Canada is just one treaty partner, and treaties do not represent the coming together of Indigenous and European to create a new Métis-ized Canada. What they do provide is a constitutional basis for Indigenous peoples and Canadians to live side by side, sometimes on the same land, without attempting to steer the other’s boat, or run each other’s government. While Reid and Saul have unconvincingly argued for the existence of such a mixed political/cultural/social formation—a *métissage* or a “métis civilization”—this has served only to obscure the very concrete political relations envisioned by our Indigenous and Canadian ancestors over the past four centuries. Rather than indulging in the kind of Métis-ized fantasy of racial mixing and cultural appropriation that lies at the core of Reid’s and Saul’s arguments, still-living treaties present paths for us that leads toward more just relationships with one another. But, in order to find this path again, we must all be comfortable enough with who we are to engage with one another honestly. Canadians, especially the progressive ones, must learn to feel comfortable with being from elsewhere, and find pride in a European heritage that does not involve finding their identities in someone else’s past. Indigenous peoples must also be given the space to better understand ourselves, reclaim our traditions, and to learn from our ancestors and elders how to preserve our independent spaces. The path forward, for all of us, is a way that respects these original treaty agreements as binding constitutional institutions that preserve a place for Indigenous peoples and settler polities to exist independent of one another. With these agreements, we can all remain who we are, without having to be anyone else or invent new identities for ourselves. It is not a *métissage* that lies at the heart of a postcolonial future but, rather, mutual respect, and space for all of us to be ourselves, both collectively and as individuals.

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