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Book Review

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Robert-Falcon Ouellette's interview with the author, Jennifer Reid

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The following is a conversation that took place on the radio show *At the Edge of Canada: Indigenous Research* between the host, Dr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette, and Dr. Jennifer Reid. First broadcast on April 17, 2012, the two talk about Reid's new book *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada—Mythic Discourse in the Post-Colonial State* (published by University of Manitoba Press). This interview was broadcast by the UMFM radio station and the podcast is hosted at www.attheedgeofcanada.blogspot.com. The interview was transcribed by Bryan Tordon.

Robert: Welcome to *At the Edge of Canada*. I'm your host, Dr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette, and today I have with me Dr. Jennifer Reid from the University of Maine. Dr Reid received her PhD in religious studies from the University of Ottawa; she is the author of *Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter; Worse than Beasts: An Anatomy of Melancholy;* and *The Literature of Travel in 17th and 18th Century England,* as well as numerous articles in the history of religions. She has edited the volume *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion*, and she has just published her new book, called *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada—Mythic Discourse in the Post-Colonial State*, published by the University of Manitoba Press: so welcome, Jennifer. Tansai.

Jennifer: Well, thank you Robert.

Robert: I was reading your new book—well, it's not a new book, in fact it's an "old" book republished here in Canada for the first time. It's called *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada—Mythic Discourse in the Post-Colonial State.* So why would you reissue a book in 2011 that was published in 2008?

Jennifer: Well, it was published in 2008 by University of New Mexico Press, so I think it probably targeted an American audience. I actually didn't know it was going to be published again in Canada until I heard from University of Manitoba Press last fall saying that the press had negotiated the Canadian rights and were going to reissue it in Canada which was great. I was really happy.

Robert: Wow, that's very exciting,

Jennifer: Yes, it's what I wanted in the first place but I couldn't get a bite in terms of Canadian publishers, so that's why I went with the US publisher.

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Robert: This book looks at the mythic significance that surrounds Louis Riel and explores the search for Canadian national identity. I was wondering if you could just talk a bit about the premise of the book.

Jennifer: There are a few things going on simultaneously in the book. One of the basic things that I'm interested in is how, in a broader sense, the notion of the nation state doesn't work very well with post-colonial states. It's a European construction, and with a nation state you need to have broad geopolitical notions of identity that rest on traditional things like religion, language, or ethnicity. This is what makes a nation, but in post-colonial states we lack those traditional markers for community. We don't have a single nation in any post-colonial state. That's the nature of colonialism: it mishmashes everybody together. So I started thinking about how, maybe, identity in this context has to reflect disjunctures and tensions rather than commonalities. Immediately, my long-term interest in Riel just kind of congealed around that. I thought about the constructions of Riel by so many different communities, and the so many different Riels that are out there, and it occurred to me that perhaps he could be one of those linchpins for thinking about identity in terms of disjuncture and tension. So that's what it came out of.

Robert: Because you also write about the *métissage* and the creolization of the Canadian state.

Jennifer: Yes, I think that the fundamental thing we have to come to terms with in the modern period is that post-colonial states, the Atlantic world – essentially Africa, North America, South America – these states are incredibly variegated in terms of culture and we already know that we have different ways of talking about that. The US has its melting pot, and we want a mosaic, but we're all trying to find a way to—of talking about the fact that we don't have that unity. I like the idea of *métissage* partly because we get the term from an actual group of people who have lived through these tensions and have created something absolutely new in the New World. And Métis peoples hearken to a process, not of struggling to maintain discreet Old World nationalities, but of creating something very new. I think that's what we have; we just haven't created a language to talk about that.

Robert: In the beginning of the book, you talk about Canadian myths and the Canadian identity, and the myth of Canada being this one unified nation, and you go about taking that apart slowly in the beginning of the book. I was really interested in one story you had about two policemen who pacified a group of angry Indians, I don't know if you remember that.

Jennifer: I do, it was sort of the myth of the RCMP, the whole kind of notion that the force was created to bring order and cultural homogeneity to the West.

Robert: And they were a civilizing force.

Jennifer: Right. Bringing civilization to the landscape, to the people there who would, according to the myth, welcome them with open arms because, of course, the people there wanted to be civilized, whatever that means. Of course, the strangeness underneath civilization always is that it happens with guns, it really undermines its own logic.

Robert: There was one interesting thing, of being between two civilizations. You talk about how the Métis are between two worlds, and how the Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples, when they came up with the definition of the Métis people, defined them as a distinct Aboriginal people; this was in 1996, but they also specified that they were neither First Nations nor Status. You bring up the idea that historians have always tried to situate the Métis people as between savagery and civilization, which they've never actually been one or the other, they've always tried to be in the middle of something. You were pointing out how perhaps this was and are false premises for looking at the Métis people.

Jennifer: Yes, I think in terms of Métis peoples, and more generally in terms of the New World peoples, the idea that you can use old categories for talking about new people is, first of all, frankly erroneous. Secondly, it clouds the reality of people in the situation. If you can find a an established category in which to place a group of people like the Métis you don't have to confront the fact that they reflect something very, very new. There have to be new languages to talk about not only who they are, but who and what we are. There's nothing necessarily wrong with remaining hyphenated people – English-Canadian, French-Canadian, Polish-Canadian, Italian-Canadian – but this can deflect our attention from the utter novelty of our situation, which is where its brilliance emerges. Métis peoples haven't had the option off falling back on a hyphenated identity, and that fact tells us a lot about postcolonial culture.

Robert: And even, you write, in the 1970s a lot of Métis authors yielded to this interpretive stance, they were just looking at how they were always in between, always fighting against the encroachment of civilization—you wrote here, "a civilization facing the frontier." And this was written by Bruce Sealey and Antoine Loisier, and this was a criticism that Emma LaRocque, another scholar here at the University of Manitoba, had made against them, that they had always been trying to situate themselves at the edge of civilization, the Métis People.

Jennifer: Right, and there are all kinds of reasons for that. If you're looking at scholars, what you're looking at here is people who were working within the academy and had certain academic discourses that they had to use to talk about human beings in that context. So, to be able to function in an academic environment, to get promoted, to get tenure, to publish books, you know, there has been this pressure traditionally for scholars, even from the communities that pose a critique, to fall into the language of the thing they're opposing because there's no other way to get heard. So I think there's a dual thing going on there: one thing is, of course, that the language becomes pervasive; but the second thing is that to have any voice, at times you have to use the language of the people who are oppressing you, you know? And it becomes tricky.

Robert: You also talk about how there's a lack of a single narrative in Canada connecting everyone, there's no national hero. If you look at John A. MacDonald, at one point he was extremely hated by the French for how he had Louis Riel hanged—Louis Riel was not seen as a national hero by English Canada, by the Orange Men. In Ontario, you know, Laurier, all these figures in Canadian history, there seems to be no one unifying person that brings everyone together like in the United States with, you know, Washington or Thomas Jefferson.

Jennifer: Right, and Canadians traditionally grow up thinking, well I grew up thinking, that that was a problem, even in high school when we were taking Canadian history classes. Two thirds of the class was always about the Canadian identity having to sort of figure out what it is. The message was that if you can't come up with a unifying theory, then you don't have an identity. That's what I think the brilliance of Riel is, because in a sense he can be that kind of figure, but in an inverse fashion—it's the variety of Riels that together tell us there's something in this figure that is important about Canadian identity—it's variegated and it's dichotomous and that's truly interesting. Trying to locate one person around whom the whole Canadian people can coalesce – regionally, ethnically, religiously, whatever you want – you're not going to find that and to be honest you're not going to find that anywhere else either. The language of unity in the United States rings hollow. I've been living here, I work here, and I know there are these great grand narratives about a lot of figures, but when you start talking to people you find that they're not necessarily the heroic figures they seem to be, they're not entirely unifying figures. A lot of my African American friends don't particularly like Mr. Jefferson.

Robert: Well he did have slaves.

Jennifer: So maybe, I guess what struck me as I was doing this project is you get to explore some issues about the modern period so well in Canada because perhaps Canadians have come closest to dealing with that in a conscious fashion. We haven't smokescreened the issue as much as Americans have, or South Africans, or Zimbabweans.

Robert: That's interesting you bring up South Africa, because in that country they're really trying to keep these tensions down, because there's always that threat of violence in South Africa.

Jennifer: Right, and South Africa's in a mess because it's trying to recover from a long term oppressive situation without having dealt with the fundamental meaning of land in their country. I think that's something Canada has been dealing with. Though it's not done highly successfully at times, at least there's a language and a discourse that somehow sometimes makes things go right in the Canadian situation where they haven't been going right in other countries.

Robert: In the book, in chapter six, you invite Riel to speak about the issues that you've raised so far in the book, and you lay out that Riel would've agreed that: one, the creation of the Canadian state had religious implications; that, two, dichotomies, particularly ethnicity,

were primary structures of the state; and that [three] the state could not will itself into being; four, that violence as a religious force was implicated in the creation of the state in Canada; and, five, the Métis reflected of New World states. I find it really interesting that you would invite Riel, if he could to speak of the issues.

Jennifer: It's tricky because everybody's been inviting Riel to speak to every issue forever, so I just fell into one more myth-making process there. I was looking at Riel's own words and trying to find in them a narrative that would work. But in some ways I was aware of the fact that I was doing exactly what we've all been doing to him all along. But I also felt that my argument was being shaped by his words, rather than the opposite. The fifteen years of reading Riel's diaries and the collected works and working with them and being fascinated in them had actually created the argument in the book rather than the other way around. It only made sense at that point to incorporate what I had learned from him into that small chapter to say, you know, to say that these weird thoughts I was having here were actually founded in some of his weird thoughts – which, actually, I think weren't so weird.

Robert: One of the prime—because you are a professor of religious studies at Maine, you also point out that the creation of the Canadian state had religious implications, and violence as a religious force was implicated in the creation of this state. I was wondering if you could just talk a bit about that.

Jennifer: Yes well, as you pointed out I was in the US and, of course, violence has a fundamental and important meaning in the US, a positive meaning. It spins out of the Revolution and the Civil War, you know, the sense that something new comes out of this violence. Growing up in Canada, I remember being taught that we were not a violent country, that we were a passive country, that we negotiated, that things were done peacefully, that the West was settled peacefully. That's what I learnt and when I started looking at what happened in 1885 I thought that it was an incredibly violent moment, and much more violent and riveting than the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada in the [18]30s, because the whole of eastern Canada was mobilizing and everybody was wanting to go out and kill Indians and kill Métis. It was an incredibly violent upswing in the culture and at that moment what we saw was so much of what we call modern Canada coming into being – from the Northwest Mounted Police to the railroad to politically charged regional identities. It's very hard to not see that as a kind of revolutionary moment in the sense of violence being implicated in state creation.

Robert: Revolution on both sides.

Jennifer: On both sides, right, exactly.

Robert: Why is religion so important in the creation of Canada?

Jennifer: Well I think religion is critically important in the creation of modernity. I happen to be Canadian, so that's what I want to write about. Since the Enlightenment, we've had this notion that we live in a secular age and that religion doesn't really matter to people,

that it's some vestige of an older time in terms of deep meanings of society. But when I look at the modern period, what I see is that it instigated an incredible crisis for most of the world's population. I mean, this small group of post-enlightenment people who were living in Western Europe undertook to tell the rest of the globe that religion didn't matter anymore. But what we really saw was the emergence of new religious forms – new gods, new spirits, new visitations, visions, and that's what we see happening in Canada just the same way. That's the reason it's important to me. It's something we haven't taken seriously and the Canadian context matters to me because it's mine.

Robert: When we think about Riel, though, in religious context, he's often portrayed as—maybe I don't want to say this—but kind of that crazy person who, at the end of his life, some of his lawyers tried to have acquitted believing him to be insane, not of right mind. He had a history of being out of the ordinary by setting up his own religion with a new pope.

Jennifer: And, to be fair, we're talking about a guy who was having fireside chats with the Holy Spirit. That's not exactly a normal kind of situation. There's no question that he was quite decidedly off his rocker in some ways. I mean, it's fine to say that, but that's what happens to a lot of people who are involved in creating new things in the modern period. If you look around, religious visionaries like Martin Luther King, for example, happened to become famous and loved in the United States and elsewhere, but it doesn't mean he wasn't talking about religion visions. It just happened to be acceptable to do it in the way he did. I think as much as some of Riel's behaviors and words seem off the wall, there's a deeper logic to them. The desire to have a new Catholic church was because the Métis people felt incredibly abandoned by the Catholic Church and so it made sense to find another way to make it work. Louis and the people that listened to him and cared for him didn't have much faith in Ottawa, because Ottawa didn't care about them. He started having different ideas and notions about how to remedy this situation, so I think even at the time when he appears the "craziest," there's a real logic to it [if] you stand back and look at it. He's someone who's saying, "You're pressing us to the wall; we're calling on other resources because what you're giving us isn't enough."

Robert: Do you think Riel having grown up as a Métis person really influenced his later beliefs? Because if he grew up in Quebec it would be very much more stifled, more dogmatic, the religion, but in the West he'd have much more contact with, for instance, Indigenous religions, Indigenous spirituality. Do you think that had an effect on him in the fluidity of his religious beliefs in later life?

Jennifer: I think probably it opened him up to other possibilities. He also, as a young man, traveled more than your average person. Most people who lived in rural areas didn't end up in Montreal at seventeen years old, I think he had kind of a cosmopolitan beginning in a really interesting kind of way. He studied for the priesthood and realized it wasn't going to work, which was an early critique that also helped him to have a different view of the Catholic Church. He knew something about law. I mean, I just think that he had this kind of cosmopolitan approach to the world that allowed him to be more critical maybe than someone who had grown up in, say, the Eastern Townships, and never moved from there.

Robert: Well, Jennifer, could I just have your final thoughts on your book?

Jennifer: I think it's a starting point. I haven't looked at it for a while, but it's probably over three hundred pages of starting point. I think what I tried to do was raise some questions that would pertain to Canada specifically, to North America and to the New World more broadly – questions that people will pick up on and expand on to think about how we can use the idea of *métissage* to talk more properly about the world we live in. I think that if you have the right words to talk about the world, you might start acting properly in the world. That's the thing that we lack in the modern period. We hide behind discourses that sometimes don't allow us to be able to *be* realistically in our situation and to fully deal with the issues that are confronting us. So that's what I hoped the book would do, to make a small splash in terms of having people think about some of the issues and try to expand them.

Robert: Do you think people who really defend the idea of the nation-state and that one monolithic type idea of a nation-state could criticize you for going towards a more pluralistic type of identity?

Jennifer: They could, but I think they're on the losing side. The nation-state is an obsolete notion. Even people in global studies are now telling us that the nation-state is not going to work. In the places where the nation-state was forged and seemed to work for a long time, basically Western Europe, we find it cracking at the seams. Look at modern France, with what's happening over the last five or six years, the influx of ex-colonized people into France is busting the cultural system inside out.

Robert: Even the United Kingdom there's talk of separation in Wales, in Scotland, the Irish. Northern Ireland wishes to stay but that's for other reasons. They were colonized—that was the first place that the British decided to try colonization, they failed in certain ways and learnt or did better or worse, however you want to put it, in certain places. But, yes, that's the whole thing, I think, the notion that the nation state had a shelf life and it doesn't work very well when people's own sense of self starts emerging and that's what we're watching around the glob—so multi-national states, if you want, or multi-cultural states, that's the norm and we're going to have to find a way of talking about that and dealing with it. Well, thank you very much, Jennifer, I really appreciate it.

Jennifer: Well thank you very much. It was pleasant to talk to you, Robert.

Robert: So I've been speaking with Jennifer Reid, a professor at the University of Maine in Farmington, about her book *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse in the Post-Colonial State.* Ekosani.

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