

SINGING *LOUIS RIEL*: THE CENTENNIAL QUEST FOR REPRESENTATIVE CANADIAN HEROES

Albert Braz

University of Alberta

Canadian national identity was born in opposition to First Nations and Metis people. To reconstruct an understanding of these conflicts is to deconstruct Canada. (Farrell Racette 46)

107

The most striking thing about the afterlife of Louis Riel is his metamorphosis from an enemy of Canada into the quintessential Canadian hero. After having been hanged for treason in 1885, the Métis politician, poet, and mystic has emerged as an iconic figure in Canadian culture. One of the pivotal texts in this transformation is the 1967 opera *Louis Riel*, composed by Harry Somers, with a libretto by Mavor Moore in collaboration with Jacques Languirand. The opera was actually a Canadian Centennial project, designed to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the very country that twice had clashed militarily with Riel and that was responsible for his death. The desire to articulate a more inclusive vision of Canadian citizenship is evident in the number of cultures and languages included in the text. Of course, it is not possible for a country to convert a former foe into a national hero without effacing its earlier defenders, or at least caricaturing them for their now ostensibly anachronistic worldviews. No less important, as the controversial 2017 remake of the opera has illustrated,¹ some of those individuals and groups that one claims as kin may resist the fraternal embrace. Still, whatever the aims of its creators, *Louis Riel* remains a testament to the challenges of fashioning a national culture in a multination state.

The selective construction of a national past is neither a new phenomenon nor restricted to Canada. Nation-building is necessarily an exercise in myth-making, and historical truth is just one of its myriad casualties. As the French historian Ernest Renan asserted in his famous 1882 lecture on nationhood, “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is essential to the creation of a nation, which is why the advance of historical study often poses a threat to nationality” (19). Speaking of his own country,

Renan remarked that in order to adopt the idea of national oneness, “every French citizen must have forgotten the Saint Barthélemy massacre [of 1572] or the massacres of the Midi in the thirteenth century” (21). Such a forgetting process, argues Benedict Anderson, is what enables military conflicts between enemies to be transmuted over time into “reassuringly fratricidal wars” between compatriots (200; see also Gaudry, “Métis-ization” 74). This is evidently what has happened in the Canadian reception of Riel, who has gone from being condemned as an “apostle of insurrection and unrest” (Collins 5) to being extolled as someone who is “first and foremost a patriotic Canadian” (Charlebois 9). By 2010, no less a figure than the then-Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverley McLachlin, could declare that “Riel fought against Canada in the name of values that Canada now proudly embraces: respect and accommodation for pluralism” (11). In other words, Confederation’s nemesis not only has been incorporated into the Canadian family but somehow embodies the truest of Canadian values, values that the country’s founders presumably did not share. The complication with this reversal is that, unlike the Albigenses, the Métis have not vanished. In fact, the crucial difference between the response to the 1967 version of *Louis Riel* and its 2017 remount is that the Métis, and Indigenous people in general, have a much greater presence in today’s Canada than they have ever had (Gaudry, “Métis Night”; Giroux). Moreover, some of them are now contesting Canada’s right to claim their leader as its own, a development that perhaps should have been anticipated by the creators of the Centennial opera.

Like any other opera, *Louis Riel* was a collaborative project, but it is especially associated with Somers, Moore, and, to a lesser degree, Languirand. All three were already prominent figures in Canadian cultural circles, with Somers considered “Canada’s leading composer” (Schafer 17) and Moore and Languirand rising stars in the Toronto and Montréal theatre communities. Interestingly, the venture was not initiated by any of them; rather, the catalyst was the publishing executive and philanthropist Floyd Chalmers. In the early 1960s, Chalmers and his family decided to establish a foundation to support the performing arts in Canada. One of their primary objectives, along with helping build the infrastructure of Ontario’s fledgling Stratford Festival, was to commission “an opera for Canada’s centennial year, a project [they] put in gear in 1963” (Chalmers 239). When Chalmers approached the director-general of the Canadian Opera Company, Herman Geiger-Torel, he was enthusiastic and suggested a number of potential subjects, notably Brian Moore’s *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. But Chalmers rejected the idea outright, since the novel dealt with a recent immigrant to Canada and he “wanted an opera that was Canadian through and through” (239), a yardstick that led him to Riel.

Chalmers relates that he had been reading George F.G. Stanley’s then-recently-published biography of Riel, a dramatic story that he felt not only had “all the dimensions of grand opera” but was “a capsule history” of Canada (239; see also Moore, *Reinventing* 313). Tellingly, one of the aspects of Riel that appealed to Chalmers was his bilingualism and biculturalism, two of the very attributes that

English-speaking Canadians had opposed so forcefully in the late nineteenth century. Although Chalmers was never able to master French despite his valiant efforts to learn the language, he fully accepted “the premise that Canada, whether everyone likes it or not, is a bilingual country” and, indeed, that Canadians should “turn bilingualism into a national asset rather than the divisive force” it was at the time (Chalmers 233). Chalmers discussed the idea of the Riel opera with numerous people, but eventually concluded that Mavor Moore “was obviously the man to write the libretto,” since “Moore, a sensitive writer and playwright, had been thinking along the same lines about Riel” (239). Chalmers and Moore decided that Somers should compose the score, and once he saw the libretto, Somers was so impressed that “from there on it was just a matter of accepting” (Somers, “Harry Somers” 26), even if privately he had “reservations [...] with the possibility of interference by the backer” (*Secret Agent* 60; my ellipsis). Meanwhile, Chalmers and Moore had also agreed to invite Languirand to be the “co-librettist in French” (Chalmers 240), thus assembling the trio most responsible for the “outstanding achievement” (Feldbrill 31) that would be *Louis Riel*.

109

Chalmers’s choice of Moore as the architect of his opera was nothing short of inspired; if anything, the polymath actor, playwright, theatre director, television producer, and cultural mandarin was even more fascinated by Riel. In 1946, Moore and his mother, the Canadian theatre pioneer Dora Mavor Moore, had founded the New Play Society, the first professional theatre company in English-speaking Canada that included domestic plays (Sperdakos 150, 154). One of its most influential productions was the 1950 staging of John Coulter’s *Riel*, which Moore himself contends “sparked the revival of Rieliana that swept across the country” (*Reinventing* 177), and in which the Anglo-Scottish Moore played the Métis leader. This production would simply mark the first of his many encounters with Riel. Moore subsequently adapted Coulter’s epic play for both radio and television. He also contemplated producing an operatic treatment of Riel for the Charlottetown Festival, of which he became the founding artistic director in 1964. While Moore “longed to marry Riel and Somers” in musical theatre, he realized that such a creation “would fit neither Charlottetown’s budget nor its merry image” (*Reinventing* 312). Therefore, he committed himself wholeheartedly to Chalmers’s project.

Louis Riel is divided into three parts. Acts I and II deal with the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, during which Riel led the largely Métis opposition to Canada’s purchase from the Hudson’s Bay Company of Rupert’s Land, specifically what is now the province of Manitoba. Act III, which is the longest, focuses on the North-West War of 1885, which culminated in the Battle of Batoche in present-day Saskatchewan and Riel’s hanging for treason. Most of the action fluctuates between either Red River or Batoche and Ottawa, and revolves around two triangles. The first triumvirate consists of Riel, the founding Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, and Thomas Scott, an obscure Ontario Orangeman who provocatively defied Red River’s Provisional Government and was executed after a polemical court martial in

what is widely considered Riel's great error in his political career. The second is composed of Riel, Macdonald, and Alexandre-Antonin Taché, the Bishop of St. Boniface (Winnipeg) who served as the mediator between the Métis and the Canadian government and who became enmeshed in the controversial negotiations for an amnesty for Riel and his supporters during the Red River troubles. These triangles, in turn, are linked to two central issues in the text, and thus the conflict between Riel and Macdonald and, by extension, between the Métis and Canada: the ownership of the North-West and whether or not an amnesty was ever promised by the federal government.

There are several striking features in the Moore-Languirand libretto, especially in relation to Canadian representations of Riel prior to the Second World War. The first of these is the way the text caricatures—and thereby distances itself from or even disowns—the most boisterous opponents of Riel on behalf of Canada, or what members of the Métis National Committee call “le Canada d’Ottawa!” (Moore and Languirand 4). This bias is apparent from the outset, when the arrival of the new Canadian Lieutenant-Governor William McDougall is heralded by “A SERIES OF CRASHING POMPOSITIES,” something the self-important Ontarian proceeds to reinforce by broadcasting that he is determined to show the Métis “who is master here” and to “teach them to be civilized” (2). The text’s partiality, though, is most conspicuous in the characterization of Scott, who is ultimately othered even by his own confederates. As John Christian Schultz, the leader of Red River’s Canadian Party, confides as he travels across Ontario to raise funds to build a statue for the Orange martyr: “Thomas Scott alive / was a pain in every ass / but his corpse’ll be a hero by and by” (25). Schultz reveals that he is not just a cultural and religious chauvinist, but also a hypocrite who actually detests Scott, proving the Métis assessment of him. Yet one wonders if there is not some truth to the Orangeman’s purported cry, as he is being “shot [...] down in cold blood” by the Métis, that “I die for Canada!” (24). No matter how problematic his politics may be deemed today, the fact is that the main reason Scott is eliminated by Riel, besides the latter believing he “n’est rien” (8), is his incessant championing of Canada.

Another notable facet of the libretto is its minimization of the considerable Canadian anxieties about the United States’ plans to annex the North-West, as well as Riel’s ambiguous overtures to prominent US political figures. In the decade before the conflagration at Red River, while Riel was studying for the Catholic priesthood in Montréal, “Americans were talking openly of annexing” Rupert’s Land to the United States (Stanley 38). One of their best-known operatives was “a secret agent” named James Wickes Taylor, whom “Canada knew [...] as a wise counselor and a considerate friend,” but who “dreamed of American annexation of the British North-west and worked hard for it” (Howard 76-77). After Taylor became the United States consul in Winnipeg, Riel wrote to him complaining about the treatment that he and the Métis had received at the hands of the Canadian government. More significantly, he sent petitions to two US presidents, Ulysses S. Grant and Grover Cleveland, requesting

protection from Canada. In his letter to Cleveland, Riel asked that “the international line between the United States and the Northwest be blot[t]ed out from lake Superior to the Pacific ocean” (*Collected Writings* III. 187).² In addition, he urged that Taylor “be appointed governor General of these vast territories” and that Riel be designated “First Minister and secretary of the Northwest under Honorable James W. Taylor” (187-88; see also II. 6-17). Needless to say, if the United States had intervened and succeeded, Macdonald’s dream of a transcontinental country would have vanished rather quickly. Yet none of these issues is addressed in any depth in the Moore-Languirand text, certainly not at Red River. Instead, Riel states that he and his people “are not rebels against the Queen / only against the [Hudson’s Bay] Company / that sells us off like cattle.” Or, as he tells his Canadian adversaries, he is not “starting a prairie fire” but “stopping one from breaking out” (Moore and Languirand 6). If the hostilities at Red River are the result of irrationality or bad faith, it is hard to imagine that Riel and the Métis could possibly be the guilty party.

Similarly, the libretto conveys the impression that Riel is not merely the leader of the Métis, but of a pan-Indigenous alliance. Thus, the Saskatchewan Valley delegation that travels to Montana Territory in 1884 to invite Riel to help prepare their grievances against Ottawa includes not only French-speaking Métis and English-speaking Halfbreeds but also the Cree chief Poundmaker (35), when the historical record shows no First Nations representation (Stanley 250). Also, just before Riel announces publicly that he is breaking with the Catholic Church and starting a new religion, the Cree war chief Wandering Spirit enters a little church outside Batoche in “FULL WAR REGALIA” (Moore and Languirand 39), ostensibly making the way for the so-called Prophet of the World. Finally, Riel’s wife Marguerite is not a “Métisse canadienne française” (Riel, Letter 279; see also Stanley 238) but an “INDIAN” (Moore and Languirand 34), once more implying that Riel appeals to various Indigenous ethnocultural groups.³

In contrast, Moore and Languirand emphasize the Britishness of English Canada—something that is even more glaring in the TV adaptation of the opera, but which is already noticeable in the libretto. To begin with, in both conflicts, the Canadian forces are led by British commanders: Colonel Garnet Wolseley at Red River and General Frederick Middleton at Batoche. Thus, these are not quite “Canadian” military expeditions, but are more like Imperial enterprises, reflecting the ideological orientation of most of the participants. Typically, when McDougall reaches Red River, he is thrilled not to take possession of the territory for Canada, but to be “back on British soil” (2). Even Confederation’s great champion, Macdonald, at times seems uncertain if he is fighting for Canada or for the Empire. As he banters with Taché, “Bishop, we are men of the world: / horse-traders—you for God and I for Queen” (11). Riel himself expresses his pride in being a British subject. One of the most curious incidents in the text involves a confrontation over the flying of the Union Jack at Fort Garry, Red River’s main military and trading post. After a strident Irish supporter of the Métis cause not only lowers the British flag but “STAMPS ON IT,” Riel forces him

to pick it up, before blessing his followers “for having faith / in the crown of England” (28, 29).⁴ But then, as he stresses early on, he and the Métis “only fight for our British rights” (6). Although the Red River combatants may not consider themselves kin, they are supposedly all British subjects.

Moore and Languirand are more subtle in their portrayal of Macdonald than of the Red River Canadian expansionists, but the Prime Minister still comes across as ethically challenged. Macdonald’s sole aim appears to be to safeguard Confederation. As he responds to the news of Riel’s seizure of Fort Garry:

Nothing can stop this country now.
There may be local obstacles,
jealousy and hate and pride:
but the wheel, my friends, is turning and
we are only flies upon the wheel.
Nothing can stop us. Nothing will.
If we unite from sea to sea
we shall become a mighty power:
if we do not, we’ll all be naught! ...
shouting unheard in French and English both. (11; ellipsis in original)

112

Even so, Macdonald immediately asks Donald Smith of the Hudson’s Bay Company to head back west to persuade Riel to abandon his opposition to Canada, trying “the sugar first,” which is “the oil for political machines” (11). Despite his position as the leader of the country, he remains a consummate politician whose initial solution to any crisis is to attempt to bribe his opponents.

Admittedly, the behaviour of Macdonald may be affected by the fact that Canada confronts major challenges not only externally but also internally, for his cabinet is helplessly divided. His Québec lieutenant George-Étienne Cartier reminds the Prime Minister that if he sends an army to Red River, “Quebec will start a war—right here!” Conversely, if he gives an amnesty to Riel and the Métis, counters Colonel Wolseley, “Ontario will start your war” (26). There is no easy way to satisfy the conflicting interests of his different constituencies, and Macdonald knows it. Therefore, he prevaricates. He readily accepts Bishop Taché’s demand that he serve as Ottawa’s Commissioner to the Métis on the condition that a general “amnesty” be granted to Riel and his supporters for their roles at Red River (10), but never delivers it. After endless requests for a copy of the document, Taché at last realizes that Macdonald will not produce the amnesty that he has so often promised. Almost against his will, Taché has to accept that he has been “made a tool” by the Prime Minister, a deception that will have devastating ramifications for his relations with his Métis parishioners. As he cries out, he has been lied to so often that “now my own flock thinks I lied!” (32). Or, as the Chorus underlines, “Un prêtre nous a trompés!” (31).⁵ Yet, Macdonald seems untouched by the effects of his actions for such a steadfast ally. As he points out to Cartier why they “mustn’t touch” the amnesty during the coming election, right after having assured Taché that “all the past will be erased” by his pardon, “what

shall it profit a man if he gain / the whole world, and lose his seat?" (17). For the Prime Minister, one is led to infer, political expediency always trumps ethics.

The most distinctive feature of the Moore-Languirand libretto, however, is the implicit equivalency between the roles played by Riel and Macdonald in the deaths of Scott and Riel, respectively. Halfway through Act II, Riel apprises Smith that he will not pardon Scott because "I cannot let one foolish man / stand in the way of a whole nation!" (21). This is a response that Riel has already voiced a few pages earlier when he says basically the same thing in French: "Je ne peux pas laisser un imbecile / Compromettre les plans de toute une nation!" (19). Then, at the very end of the opera, Macdonald echoes Riel when he tells Bishop Taché why he will not reprieve the Métis leader: "I cannot let one foolish man / stand in the way of a whole nation!" (52). The articulation of the same political rationale by Riel and Macdonald suggests a parity between the two executions, a premise that some critics find "deeply flawed" (Teillet 31). That said, the historical Riel agreed with this interpretation. Just before he was hanged at Regina in 1885, he reportedly told his last confessor, Father André Alexis, that "Sir John Macdonald is now committing me to death for the same reason I committed Scott, because it is necessary for the country's good" (Riel, *Collected Writings* III. 583). Still, by implying that the two antagonists share a similar moral code, the authors intimate that there is no discernible difference between Riel and Macdonald. In the process, they also justify the hanging of Riel, raising the question of who is the opera's real protagonist.

113

Moore and Languirand's equation of the morals of Riel and Macdonald is surprising for several reasons, starting with the substantial difference in age between the two adversaries. When Riel elects not to grant clemency to Scott, he is in his mid-twenties and has had little experience of the world, having spent almost half of his life sheltered in a Catholic seminary. But when Macdonald determines that Riel "shall hang, though every dog / in all Quebec bark in his favour" (Moore and Languirand 51), he is a seasoned seventy-year-old who is reaching the end of an eventful political career and life. As well, throughout the text, the authors portray Macdonald in a much more negative manner than Riel. It is certainly revealing that when the director Franz Kraemer adapted the opera for television in 1969, the one major change in characterization that he felt compelled to effect was to make Macdonald seem "a little less farcical" (qtd. in Schafer 24; see also 19). What is most unexpected about *Louis Riel*, though, is that a largely English-Canadian production would even consider presenting the Métis leader as a hero. As the historian Douglas Owsram has written, for English-speaking Canadians until the 1930s "Riel was simply not thought to symbolize anything positive for Canada" (12; see also 14). Canada's transcontinental ambitions, Owsram asserts, precluded the possibility that an individual "who stood in the way of [...] expansion, even if with some reason," could emerge as "a Canadian folk hero" (15). Yet the fact is that the opera is not named after Macdonald but Riel, making one wonder about the political and cultural factors that account for such a transformation.

Owram traces the genesis of “the mythification of Riel for English Canadians” to the 1952 publication of Montana writer Joseph Kinsey Howard’s *Strange Empire: A Narrative of the Northwest* (18), usually issued in Canada under the subtitle *Louis Riel and the Métis People*. Despite its US origins, or perhaps because of them, Howard’s popular history is, arguably, the single most important book on Riel and the Métis. Time and again, Canadian writers and visual artists testify to the indelible impact that *Strange Empire* has had on their conceptions of Riel. Moore, too, is an admirer of Howard’s “evocative novel” (*Reinventing* 312). But *Strange Empire* could not really have served as a model for a work celebrating Confederation, given its undisguised continentalism. Howard, who depicts the international border between Canada and the United States as “wholly artificial” (49), does not vilify merely the Canadian Party at Red River, but all Canadian nationalists, presenting the Canadian campaign against the Métis as nothing short of “genocide” (17). There can be little doubt that the libretto’s main influences lie elsewhere, from Canadian biographies of Riel to

114 histories of the relations between the Métis and Canada. In particular, I would argue, it is profoundly shaped by John Coulter’s *Riel*, the 1950 play in which Moore gave “a memorable” performance as the title character (Sperdakos 190), and which predates *Strange Empire* by two years.

Theatre scholar Allan Boss, who has written extensively on Moore, dismisses what he terms “the misconception that Moore’s opera was adapted from Coulter’s play,” contending that the two texts “have nothing in common besides their subject matter” (49). Moore is more generous toward Coulter, who would go on write two more plays on the subject, including a dramatization of *The Trial of Louis Riel*, which has been produced in Regina annually for over fifty years since its premiere in 1967 (Ackerman; see also Braz, *False Traitor* 102). Although Moore maintains that Coulter’s *Riel* “lacked the incandescence to serve as a metaphor for Canada” (*Reinventing* 312), he openly admits that it was not only his “introduction” to Riel (“Theme” 29) but also that it played a crucial role in Canadian culture, “inspiring, among other works, the opera *Louis Riel*” (*Reinventing* 177). Moore goes as far as stating that it was the Irish-born playwright who “hit upon the irony that makes Louis Riel’s life into superb drama” by having the Métis leader sacrifice Scott’s life on national grounds (“Theme” 29), a strategy that Macdonald then employs against him. In fact, it seems hardly by accident that the TV adaptation of *Louis Riel* concludes with “grateful acknowledgments” to Coulter’s play (*Louis Riel*), giving credence to Coulter’s contention that the opera “resembled” his text (*In My Day* 267).

Boss’s protestations notwithstanding, Moore and Languirand’s debts to Coulter are too numerous to ignore, even excluding the outright borrowing of the song “We’ll Hang Him up the River” (Moore and Languirand 25, 49; Coulter, *Riel* 56, 141). The notion that Thomas Scott is not just a xenophobe but “the devil,” which has become an increasingly common trope (Braz, “Orange Devil”), has already been articulated by Coulter (*Riel* 15). Likewise, Coulter dramatizes the showdown between Riel and his Irish nationalist confederate over the flying of the Union Jack at Fort Garry

(23-25). Again anticipating Moore and Languirand (34), in his *Dramatis Personae* Coulter describes Riel's wife as "*Indian*" (*Riel* n. pag.), as opposed to Métis, although he later presents her as "*a half-breed Indian*" (67). Most importantly, Coulter suggests that Riel may be a Canadian hero after all, even if inadvertently. As he has Macdonald explain to one of his Québec cabinet ministers near the end of the play, "this wretch Riel is actually forcing us to take responsibility and govern Canada. How odd! The outlaw once more shapes the law" (130-31). Therefore, rather than being a "myth," the claim that the Moore-Languirand libretto is "somehow structurally linked to Coulter's play" (Boss 50) is a fair representation of the relation between the two texts.⁶ No wonder, then, that Coulter failed to perceive the opera as "a tribute" to him (Moore, *Reinventing* 354) and "felt abused" for his involuntary contribution to Chalmers's venture (Chalmers 240).

Not surprisingly, there are critical differences between Coulter's play and the libretto. The most salient of these are the latter's bilingualism and biculturalism, which almost certainly reflect Languirand's contribution, as befits the "coauteur aux dialogues français" (Paquette 163).⁷ It should be noted that *Louis Riel* is not a truly bilingual project. This is underscored by the capacious exchanges between Taché and Macdonald about Riel's amnesty all taking place in English, as the Bishop pragmatically accepts that English is "the language of court" (Moore and Languirand 9). That said, French appears throughout *Louis Riel*, often as a sign of Métis resistance to the Canadian expansion into the North-West. But it is especially pervasive in articulations of Métis religious identity, which is not always easy to differentiate from Métis political identity. Thus, Riel's mother, Julie, discloses to both Bishop Taché and her son that she only acceded to her parents' pressure to marry, instead of following her dream of becoming a nun, after she heard a divine voice. She then adds:

C'était la voix de Dieu
qui me dit aussi:
Ton premier-né sera le chef de sa nation ...
Louis, mon petit,
choisi par Dieu (13; ellipses in original)

Like his mother, Riel is guided by God, who not only counsels but empowers him, placing the former divinity student "à la tête des nations" (14). It is because of the intercession of his "libérateur," states Riel, that a "peuple que je ne connaissais pas est devenu mon sujet / Il s'est soumis au premier mot que j'ai dit" (14). Interestingly, even after he undergoes a metamorphosis into the David of the New World, he always derives his authority either from God or from eminent ecclesiastic figures, notably Montréal's Bishop Ignace Bourget. Riel claims that he only takes "possession" of Father André's church after he gleans that "Dieu a abandonné le Pape," giving him licence to perform "les sacrements" (41). As well, he is certain of the truth of his cause because Bourget has sent him a letter informing him that he has a "mission" (41), although the prelate does not specify what the mission entails, beyond his having to carry it out "au bout" (35). Also, whether from God or Bourget, these communica-

tions are invariably transmitted in French, which the historical Riel considered not just a beautiful and sophisticated language but a “moyen d’union morale très forte” (*Collected Writings* I. 390), and which might explain its centrality in his cultural and political universe.

The singularity of the Moore-Languirand libretto’s French-English bilingualism becomes apparent when contrasting it to other major representations of Riel produced around the Centennial year, and beyond. In *Riel: A Poem for Voices*, for instance, Don Gutteridge fulminates against Thomas Scott for the narrowness of his vision as a “Canadian, Orangeman, bigot, blasphemer” (26), yet then conveys the impression that Riel hears the “voice of God calling through wilderness” (37) in English. In contrast, in his monumental documentary play *Bois-Brûlés*, Jean-Louis Roux has Riel and Scott discussing the latter’s culpability in the death of what the Orangeman calls an “espion métis” (63)—en français! Judging from either text, it would be difficult to discern that Red River was a heterogeneous community and that linguistic polyphony was one of its great divides. Even a more recent text such as Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* does not adequately reproduce the discourse of characters when they express themselves in languages other than English, although it attempts to develop a strategy to do so. Brown indicates that a character is speaking in French (or other languages) by placing the text in the speech bubbles in brackets (9). The reality, though, is that the text still appears in English, meaning that Anglophone readers do not have to risk being alienated by communication in a tongue they do not understand.

Furthermore, other languages appear in *Louis Riel* besides French and English. After Riel refuses to pardon Scott, his sister Sara, a future nun, implores God to have mercy on the whole family in Latin: “Deus miseratur” (Moore and Languirand 21; see also 7). Similarly, Father André is saying Mass in Latin when his church is invaded by Wandering Spirit and then Riel (39-40). In addition, Act III opens with Marguerite Riel singing what has become the opera’s most famous aria, “Kuyas,” in Cree (*Louis Riel*). While critics like composer R. Murray Schafer deem “Kuyas” “very beautiful” (19), it has generated immense controversy because the Cree lullaby is based on a Nisga’a mourning song called “Song of Skateen.” As musicologist Dylan Robinson has documented, this is not just a case of cultural appropriation but a “serious infraction of Nisga’a law” (qtd. in Communications Staff), since the song was reproduced without the permission of the family that owns the hereditary rights to it. Ironically, the last statement that Somers made before he died in 1999, which he dictated to his wife since he was no longer able to write, was the warning: “No one can mess with *Riel* without consulting Victor [Feldbrill, the original conductor]—should only be performed in its entirety as in its last performances with COC” (*Secret Agent* 342).⁸ It is also noteworthy that in the libretto, unlike the opera, “Kuyas” appears in French, not Cree (Moore and Languirand 34-35).

Moore and Languirand’s treatment of the aria “Kuyas” highlights both the import and the limitations of the (predominant) bilingualism of their libretto, evincing its

Canadianness. Canada, as E.D. Blodgett has cogently argued, is “a federation that refuses to consider the usefulness and value of the federation” (*Five* 18). This phenomenon is conspicuously evident in literary studies, in which members of one of the two dominant cultural groups seldom engage systematically with the literary production of the other—a trend that, as Blodgett remarks (“Comparative” 5), solidified after the War Measures Act of 1970, to the detriment of Canadian comparative literature. By determining that he needed to collaborate with Languirand to capture Riel’s complexity, Moore shows that he does not share this myopia. However, what is also quite apparent is that both Moore and Languirand still subscribe to a narrow vision of Canada, basically a Canada dominated by the so-called “charter” cultures, English and French. The complication is that, as Blodgett points out, it is no longer possible “to construct a notion of Canadian culture without bearing in mind that it is not two, but many, cultures” (*Five* 207). In particular, it is no longer possible to fashion a Canada that does not foreground the contributions of Indigenous peoples.

Perhaps the idea of presenting Louis Riel as a Canadian hero was always bound to face obstacles, possibly insurmountable ones. After all, as has been noted before, and as the Moore-Languirand libretto illustrates, Riel is “either a victim of Canadian expansionism or an enemy of Canada” (Braz, *False Traitor* 101). For one, the Canadian nationalization of Riel necessitates the effacement of those who fought him on behalf of Canada, not just Scott and the other strident Anglo-Canadian expansionists but also the largely anonymous citizen-soldiers who travelled halfway across the country to defend Confederation, and whose sacrifices have not yet been forgotten by all segments of the populace. No less crucial, some contemporary Métis writers and scholars are anything but enthusiastic about the Canadianization of their nineteenth-century hero. As graphic artist and art historian Sherry Farrell Racette asserts, “Canadian national identity was born in opposition to First Nations and Metis people” (46) and, rather than championing Confederation, Riel “rejected a Canadian identity and eloquently placed himself in opposition to colonial expansionism” (48). Similarly, political scientist Adam Gaudry finds it “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” (“Métis-ization” 71). That is, the Canadianization of Riel is not just about absorbing the former foe into the national family but also about camouflaging the true nature of the relationship between the Canadian state and the Métis, both in the past and today.

No contemporary Métis has captured the resistance to the Canadianization of Riel more deftly than poet Marilyn Dumont. In her much-anthologized poem “Letter to Sir John A. Macdonald,” she mordantly reminds the architect of Confederation that, despite all the trials faced by the Métis since 1867, “we’re still here and callin ourselves halfbreed” (*Brown Girl* 52; Dumont’s spelling). In that text, Dumont also observes that “Riel is dead / but he just keeps coming back” (52), and she returns to Riel in her more recent poem “Our Prince.” The “Our” of the title refers explicitly, and exclusively, to the Métis; definitely not to Canada, or Canadians, who are held

responsible for his death, as seen in the conclusion of the poem:

They [Canadians] will regret taking our prince
 our prophet, the one among us gifted,
 our seer
 because when they look across these plains
 they will see the monuments built to him
 the days named after him in recognition
 and when their children ask
 what Louis did
 they will have no answer (*Pemmican* 61)

Of course, the reason that Canadians will not be able to explain why memorials have been erected in honour of Riel is that they have adopted a new narrative about him, but have not yet abandoned the old one, the one for which their biocultural ancestors hanged him.

- 118** It may be true that Louis Riel was “a champion of fundamental values and principles that Canadians hold dear today, including equality and social justice,” as the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Carolyn Bennett, stated on November 16, 2018 (Bennett). But it is equally true that a member of Riel’s own counsel at his 1885 treason trial, the future chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Charles Fitzpatrick, described him to the jury as “a foreigner and an alien at least in language to us” (*Queen* 302) and as “an alien in race and an alien in religion, so far as you and I are concerned” (310). The latter is a detail that Mavor Moore and Jacques Languirand, as well as Floyd Chambers and Harry Somers, would have to forget before they could contemplate transforming Riel into the national hero that Canadians ought to celebrate during the Centennial. The Canadianization of Riel is not nearly as positive as it seems at first glance, since it requires the effacement of his national specificity as a Métis, the collective identity that led him to clash with Canada, and which cannot yet be fully acknowledged. Thus, whatever else it may accomplish, *Louis Riel* dramatizes the difficulties of accommodating, even discursively, the various nations that exist within the nation-state called Canada.

NOTES

1. Although I refer occasionally to the 2017 remount of *Louis Riel*, this essay focuses exclusively on the 1967 version of the opera, particularly the libretto. For a comparative overview of the politics of the two productions, see Hutcheon and Hutcheon.
2. Riel’s English spelling and capitalization are often idiosyncratic; his texts are reproduced as they appear in the original.
3. In reality, even his support among the Métis was far from being universal, something that Riel was not always able to accept without threatening to exact retribution (see Howard 383–86).
4. The historical Riel seemed much less enthusiastic about the Union Jack, helping to hoist “the flag of the provisional government on the big flag pole in the centre of the square at Fort Garry” (Stanley 77).

5. Though Taché was not the first Catholic clergyman that Riel appointed to negotiate with Ottawa, a role played by Abbé Noël-Joseph Ritchot (Stanley 123-26), he subsequently became deeply involved in the process. More significantly, largely because of the controversy over the amnesty, Taché was suspected by many of Riel's supporters of betraying the Métis (Huel 103-41).
6. This interpretation is supported by Robin Elliott, who asserts: "At the very least [...], Coulter's play must have alerted Moore to the dramatic potential of the story of Riel" (12).
7. Languirand's contribution to the libretto is frequently erased in the recent scholarship on *Louis Riel*, which purportedly was "written by two white, English-Canadian men, from the cultural elite of the day" (Danckert 41).
8. Another irony is that, as Colette Simonot-Maiello notes, "Somers incorporated very little music of the Métis people into his opera" (76).

WORKS CITED

- Ackerman, Jennifer. "50th Anniversary of Production Reunites Riel Louis Actors from Years Past." *Regina Leader-Post*, 24 Sept. 2017, leaderpost.com/news/local-news/50th-anniversary-of-production-reunites-louis-riel-actors-from-years-past. Accessed 8 Jan. 2019.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition, Verso, 2006.
- Bennett, Carolyn. "Statement by Minister Carolyn Bennett on Louis Riel Day." Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 16 Nov. 2018, www.canada.ca/en/crown-indigenous-relations-northern-affairs/news/2018/11/state-ment-by-minister-carolyn-bennett-on-louis-riel-day.html. Accessed 19 Apr. 2019.
- Blodgett, E.D. "Comparative Literature in Canada: A Case Study." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2013, pp. 308-20.
- . *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*. U of Toronto P, 2003.
- Boss, Allan. *Identifying Mavor Moore: A Historical and Literary Study*. Playwrights Canada P, 2011.
- Braz, Albert. *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture*. U of Toronto P, 2003.
- . "The Orange Devil: Thomas Scott and the Canadian Historical Novel." *National Plots: Historical Fiction and Changing Ideas of Canada*, edited by Andrea Cabajsky and Brett Josef Grubisic, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 39-52.
- Brown, Chester. *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*. Drawn and Quarterly Publications, 2003.
- Chalmers, Floyd S. *Both Sides of the Street: One Man's Life in Business and the Arts*

in Canada. Macmillan of Canada, 1983.

Charlebois, Peter. *The Life of Louis Riel*. NC Press, 1975.

[Collins, Joseph Edmund.] *The Story of Louis Riel the Rebel Chief*. 1885. Coles Canadiana Collection, 1970.

Communications Staff. "A Dialogue on Indigenous Law, Song and Opera." *Queen's Gazette*, 24 Apr. 2017, www.queensu.ca/gazette/stories/dialogue-indigenous-law-song-and-opera. Accessed 6 Aug. 2017.

Coulter, John. *In My Day*. Hounslow P, 1980.

---. *Riel*. 1950. Cromlech P, 1972.

Danckert, Paula. "Louis Riel: History, Theatre, and a National Narrative—An Evolving ... Story." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2018, pp. 39-50.

Dumont, Marilyn. *The Pemmican Eaters*. ECW P, 2015.

120 ---. *A Really Good Brown Girl*. Brick Books, 1996.

Elliott, Robin. "The Genesis and First Production of *Louis Riel*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2018, pp. 10-21.

Farrell Racette, Sherry. "Metis Man or Canadian Icon: Who Owns Louis Riel?" *Rielisms*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2001, pp. 42-53.

Feldbrill, Victor. "Louis Riel." *Opera Canada*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1968, p. 31.

Gaudry, Adam. "A Métis Night at the Opera: Louis Riel, Cultural Ownership, and Making Canada Métis." 18 May 2017, adamgaudry.wordpress.com/2017/05/18/a-metis-night-at-the-opera-louis-riel-cultural-ownership-and-making-canada-metis. Accessed 24 Sept. 2018.

---. "The Métis-ization of Canada: The Process of Claiming Louis Riel, Métissage, and the Métis People as Canada's Mythical Origin." *aboriginal policy studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 64-87, journals.library.ualberta.ca/aps/index.php/aps/article/view/17889. Accessed 5 Sept. 2018.

Giroux, Monique. "The Goddamn [Opera] Is Dead!" *Canadian Notes and Queries*, Jan 2018, notesandqueries.ca/essays/the-goddamn-opera-is-dead. Accessed 8 Aug. 2018.

Gutteridge, Don. *Riel: A Poem for Voices*. Fiddlehead Books, 1968.

Howard, Joseph Kinsey. *Strange Empire: Louis Riel and the Métis People*. 1952. James Lewis and Samuel, 1974.

Huel, Raymond J.A. *Archbishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface: The "Good Fight" and the Illusive Vision*. U of Alberta P, 2003.

Hutcheon, Linda, and Michael Hutcheon. "Identity Crisis." *Opera Canada*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2017, pp. 18-24.

Louis Riel. Music by Harry Somers. Libretto by Mavor Moore and Jacques

- Languirand, directed by Franz Kraemer, conducted by Victor Feldbrill, performed by Bernard Turgeon, Donald Rutherford, Joseph Rouleau, Patricia Rideout, Mary Morrison, and Roxolana Roslak. CBC TV, 1969. Centrediscs, 2011.
- McLachlin, Beverley. "Louis Riel: Patriot Rebel." *Manitoba Law Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1-13, uoftmusicicm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/McLachlin-Riel_Patriot_Rebel-Manitoba-Law-Journal-351-2011.pdf. Accessed 25 Mar. 2019.
- Moore, Mavor. *Reinventing Myself*. Stoddart Publishing, 1994.
- . "The Theme Is Timeless." 1967. *Opera Canada*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2017, pp. 28-29.
- Moore, Mavor, with Jacques Languirand. *Louis Riel*. Composed by Harry Somers, 1967, Canadian Opera Company, n.d.
- Owram, Douglas. "The Myth of Louis Riel." 1982. *Louis Riel: Selected Readings*, edited by Hartwell Bowsfield, Copp Clark Pitman, 1988, pp. 11-29.
- Paquette, Claude. *Jacques Languirand: Biographie*. Libre Expression, 1998.
- Queen v Louis Riel*. 1885. U of Toronto P, 1974.
- Renan, Ernest. *Qu'est-ce qu'une [sic] nation?/What Is a Nation?* 1882. Translated by Wanda Romer Taylor, Tapir P, 1996.
- Riel, Louis. *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les écrits complets de Louis Riel*, vol. 1, 29 Dec. 1861-7 Dec. 1875. Edited by Raymond Huel and George F.G. Stanley, U of Alberta P, 1985.
- . *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les écrits complets de Louis Riel*, vol. 2, 8 Dec. 1875-4 June 1884. Edited by Gilles Martel and George F.G. Stanley, U of Alberta P, 1985.
- . *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les écrits complets de Louis Riel*, vol. 3, 5 June 1884-16 Nov. 1885. Edited by Thomas Flanagan and George F.G. Stanley, U of Alberta P, 1985.
- . Letter to Julie Riel, 9 Aug. 1882. "Updating The Collected Writings of Louis Riel," by Thomas Flanagan and Glen Campbell, pp. 279-31. *From Rupert's Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster*, edited by Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens, and R.C. McLeod, U of Alberta P, 2001, pp. 271-88.
- Roux, Jean-Louis. *Bois-Brûlés*. Éditions du Jour, 1968.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Public of the Music Theatre—Louis Riel: A Case Study*. Universal Edition, 1972.
- Simonot-Maiello, Colette. "'Decolonizing' Riel." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2018, pp. 73-82.
- Somers, Harry. "Harry Somers on the Score." 1967. *Opera Canada*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2017, pp. 25-27.
- . *Secret Agent: The Selected Journals and Letters of Harry Somers*. Edited by William Scoular, n. pub, 2009.

Sperdakos, Paula. *Dora Mavor Moore: Pioneer of the Canadian Theatre*. ECW P, 1995.

Stanley, George F.G. *Louis Riel*. Ryerson P, 1963.

Teillet, Jean. "The Sermon from the Mount: The Messages in the Canadian Opera Company's Remount of the *Riel* Opera." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2018, pp. 29-36.