

Reading Scofield through Riel: *Louis: The Heretic Poems* as Dissonance

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GREGORY SCOFIELD'S BOOK OF POETRY *Louis: The Heretic Poems*, compared with his earlier works, has garnered surprisingly little academic interest. Although many works of literature have attempted to tackle the myth and history of the famed nineteenth-century Métis leader, Louis Riel, and parse out the man behind the large and complex shadow cast on Métis, French, and English Canadian cultures, Scofield's collection is one of the few literary works on the historical Métis leader by a contemporary Métis writer. What is more, Scofield's work represents a reimagining and reappropriation of Riel for a contemporary Indigenous audience. Riel has been variously depicted as everything from "a traitor to Confederation . . . [to] a Father of Confederation" (Braz 3), but Scofield aims to portray him more intimately, as "a human being" ("Poet"). However, despite attempts to shift away from well-worn depictions and to plumb more intimate aspects of Riel, Scofield's collection engages in narratives of Métis national history, in turn blurring ethnic, cultural, and linguistic articulations of Métis identity in critical ways. In light of growing claims of métis identity in eastern Canada (see Gaudry and Leroux),¹ along with the Métis National Council's publication of a map outlining the Métis homeland, I contend in this essay that it is vital to respond to Emma LaRocque's call for a "more focused study of Metis literature" (139). While underlining "meaning[s] of nationalism, resistance, or agency in Metis history and ethnocultural development," as well as attending to "Metis poetics" (LaRocque 143), I bridge historical and contemporary Métis literature by performing a close reading of Scofield's book through select excerpts from Riel's own writings. I contend that Scofield's representation of Riel not only evidences significant cultural ruptures with the historical Métis leader but also produces unresolved tensions between historical and contemporary articulations of Métis national identity through cultural and linguistic dissonance.

In his comprehensive survey of Riel in Canadian culture, *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture*, Albert Braz notes that "Riel has

been transformed not just into a white Canadian hero but, increasingly, into an English-speaking one” (198). With the view that Riel’s narrative remains both culturally and politically significant for the Métis Nation, as well as for settler Canadians, I consider how Scofield’s representation functions partly as a sort of corrective, counterbalancing settler-written versions of this historical narrative. In this way, his book might be read as a resistance to settler narratives. After briefly locating Scofield’s work within a larger body of texts on Riel and considering how his text both differs from and occasionally echoes other English-language texts that generally position the historical Métis leader as a sympathetic figure, I provide a critical summary of Scofield’s text. I demonstrate how, through its content and structure, the collection largely de-emphasizes Red River Métis nationalism compared with the historical Riel. I return to closely read selected poems, comparing them with Riel’s own writings before situating Scofield’s representation of Riel amid contemporary discourse on Métis identity, race, and language. Then, dwelling on resonances and dissonances, I demonstrate how the tension between Scofield’s and Riel’s texts demands more historically comprehensive literary analysis of Métis literature. Thus, rooting my analysis in historical and contemporary Métis contexts, I read Scofield through Riel.

In contrast to other English-language texts on Riel published within the past few decades, Scofield’s book covers a wide portion of Riel’s life. Chester Brown’s graphic novel, for instance, which casts Riel as a complex but tragically flawed hero, tends to centre its narrative on political machinations: the dramatic events surrounding the last fifteen years of Riel’s life. Joseph Boyden’s focus, in his biography of Riel and Gabriel Dumont, is even narrower, concerned primarily with the 1885 North-West Resistance.² Boyden collapses forty-odd years of Riel’s life into one chapter, briefly summarizing his childhood in Manitoba, his eastern-acquired education, and his role in the Red River Resistance, as well as his subsequent exile, wandering, and eventual settlement in Montana. While trafficking in narratives of the Red River and North-West Resistances, Scofield does not strictly adhere to narrating Riel’s political machinations. The poems read partly as a tracing of Riel’s life path, initially flirting with his roots in the Northwest Territories, and his education in Montreal, before turning to the resistances in his later years. Divided into four parts, Scofield’s collection presents Riel as a boy, an exiled leader of the Red River Resistance, a spokesman of the North-West Resistance, and a

martyred statesman. Each part is prefaced by a section title, in both French and English, “Le Garçon/The Boy” (11), “Le Président/The President” (27), “Le Porte-parole/The Spokesman” (45), and “L’Homme d’État/The Statesman” (75), with the French appearing first, in larger font than the English, which seems to gesture toward the pre-eminence and centrality of the French language in Riel’s life, even as the poems that follow are almost entirely in English.

Opening the book with a poem focalized through Riel’s Chipewyan paternal great-grandmother, Marie-Joseph LeBlanc, Scofield immediately proffers a fresh perspective, first establishing and foregrounding Riel’s origins through an Indigenous voice. This opening sits in stark contrast to older histories and biographies, such as George Stanley’s *Louis Riel*, which foregrounds not Indigenous history but Riel’s white maternal ancestry, noting, for instance, how Marie-Anne Gaboury, his maternal grandmother, “had come from Canada” (1). By way of a few key notes and lines, Scofield instead underscores Riel’s origins in the North-West. In *Louis*, tracing generations of Riel’s ancestors on his paternal side, and noting how the poem is “translated from Chipewyan to English,”³ as well as referencing Île-à-la-Crosse and “Marie-Joseph’s Recitation of Names” (13), Scofield links Riel both linguistically and geographically to the North-West. Building upon Riel’s own poetic image of “Indian blood,” which Scofield cites through an epigraph, he uses “blood” as a powerful metaphor to root Riel. “You are in the blood,” he writes, and, via repetition and emphasis of the line “In the blood” (13), threads together Marie-Joseph’s genealogical recitation (13-14). The poem also reads as a litany, which foreshadows important themes in Riel’s life: the “good devotion” (14) and repeated references to “Jesus” (13, 14) are clear allusions to Riel’s deep Catholic faith. Moreover, the repetition of “he love me more than coins” (13, 14) perhaps gestures toward an ethical bent distinct from settler commercial interests at the heart of Riel’s philosophical and political thought, one that will bring Riel into conflict with settler governments later in his life. However, our first glimpse of Riel as “The Boy” (11) is through his journey eastward, already a young teenager, and having already left “Pembina [North Dakota]” (15) for Montreal in 1858. Scofield omits some thirteen years of Riel’s childhood, along with any reference to the Red River Settlement. Without attending to Red River, and introducing Riel only after first situating him more broadly in the North-West, Scofield seems initially to elide Riel’s attachment to Red River, to Saint-

Vital and Saint-Boniface, collapsing historical specifics under a more general sketch, which in turn allows Scofield to continue to position Riel more generically as a child of the North-West.

In the poems that follow, Scofield features Riel as a young man afflicted by puberty and wracked by rousing sexual urges, experimenting with masturbation,

at night, alone, I am swollen by
The sins of my soul,
the sins of my body,

.....
 my flowing hand
 the dousing, the expulsion (17),

attempting to reconcile his embodied desires with an austere, deeply conservative Catholicism. Next, Riel falls in love, lusting after the girl with “the neck of a trumpeter swan” (19) and desiring to “eat her. / Sweet bread of youth” (21), followed by his finding his voice as a poet (23), yet ironically foreshadowing, as Jonathan Ball notes, how Riel’s “fate will be written by others.” Drawing the opening section to a close, Scofield presents Riel as tormented by Euro-Canadian racism (25-26); spurned by his lover’s parents, and having failed to become a priest (not because of intellectual deficiency, as Scofield suggests through a plethora of erudite biblical references, but because of deep and cutting cultural and racial antagonisms), the young Riel laments that “Maybe I am too wild for afflictions. / Sauvage! Sauvage!” (25).

Together, the poems of the first section reflect Scofield’s stated desire to have readers perceive Riel more intimately as “a man [and] . . . a lover” (“Poet”). However, whatever joy and intimacy are present in the opening section evaporate as Scofield begins the second section and writes of “surveyors’ stakes [springing] up like crosses” (29), a powerful line that not only references the struggles of the Métis against a Canadian land grab but also alludes to religious tension and assimilation and, through the suggestion of a cemetery, foreshadows the violent conflict that would sweep through the heart of the Métis homeland. Turning his gaze more fully toward the Red River Resistance, Scofield introduces an angry Riel who rants “Be damned that son of a bitch / whose mouth it was raved me” (31) about Thomas Scott,⁴ in vivid contrast to his previously established subject. The “wide-eyed garçon” (23) of the first section is transformed,

hardened, and replaced by the man who would “[coax] fire” from his “countrymen” (33), preside over Scott’s execution, as well as hurl expletives at the Canadian prime minister.

An unresolved tension arises from this jarring transformation from young lover to leader of an armed national resistance. Scofield does not name Riel’s “countrymen,” the men and women who supported the resistance, and instead allows an epigraph by John A. Macdonald to name them as “*half-breeds*” (33; italics in original). Juxtaposed with the palpable anger rooted in the closing lament of the first section, most viscerally through the derogatory epithet “Sauvage,” the suite of poems about the Red River Resistance de-emphasizes Métis nationalism and instead foregrounds Canadian bigotry. Moreover, as poems shift from the intimacy of Riel’s boyhood to a vision of Riel as resistance leader and public figure, they seem to decontextualize the resistance, eliding, for instance, the complex web of kinship in which Riel dwells and that undergirds the Métis Nation. There is little allusion to the culture or governance structure of Métis buffalo-hunters or “the Laws of the Prairie” that informed the organization of the Métis “National Committee” in 1869 (Teillet 183). Although in the second section of *Louis* Scofield turns, thematically, to tropes of revolution, writing of “a coaxing fire / we must set ablaze” (33) and echoing prevalent narratives of Riel with reference to surveyors (29) and the execution of Scott, who through darkly stunning lines is made to “disappear like oranges / on Christmas morning” (31), he builds a contradictory momentum different from that of the first section even as he maintains the generalizing thrust of the opening poem. That is, Scofield opens up an ironic contradiction by presenting a largely denationalized Riel leading what Jean Teillet calls “the third national resistance” (159). Riel’s own writings from the era, in contrast, tend to emphasize the national. In his famous song “La Métisse,” for instance, focalized through a young Métis woman, Riel opens with an unequivocal declaration of national belonging: “Je suis métisse et je suis orgueilleuse / D’appartenir à cette nation” (*Collected Writings* 4: 88).⁵

In the poems that follow in *Louis*, which touch on Riel’s exile from the homeland, his family, and his “dear sweet mother” (36); his time in an insane asylum (39); and his religious visions (41), Scofield reveals the immense personal toll that the resistance takes on Riel. With pervasive religious and political references, Scofield demonstrates how Riel’s life has become inextricably intertwined with and consumed by political struggles.

Having “slain Goliath” (39), and “eaten the King of the Hebrews” (41), Riel has become a Christ-like figure, a New World prophet whose politics are couched in religious rhetoric and whose mission has taken on a divine resonance. A more intimate vision of Riel surfaces in the poem “Confession of Evelina” (43), but in contrast to the earlier poems, in which Scofield depicts Riel’s internal reflections, the poetic voice shifts perspective and is focalized not through Riel but through Evelina Barnabé.⁶ Scofield distances readers from Riel, rendering him the object rather than the voice of the poem. Although this shift in perspective might evoke Riel’s lost years, his exile and institutionalization, and perhaps serve as an oblique allusion to his diminished influence and collapsed political career, the shift ironically elides fertile ground for an exploration of Riel as husband, father, and lover, or a consideration of his desires, and suggests that he remains largely unknowable.

In the third section, Scofield turns his gaze to the politics of the North-West Territories and moves inevitably toward the events and fallout of the 1885 Resistance. Titled “Le Porte-Parole/The Spokesman,” this section deepens an ironic tension as it begins with a series of poems not in Riel’s voice but with a pastiche of other voices. Drawing on settler documents advertising immigration to the North-West, Scofield juxtaposes English Canadian imperialism with “excerpts from the last great speeches” (47) of notable Cree chiefs such as Big Bear (48-49), One Arrow (50), Little Pine (51), Poundmaker (52-53), and Starblanket (54-55) to craft a devastatingly ironic portrait of the North-West. On the one hand, Scofield’s foregrounding of Cree voices subverts the notion of the North-West as empty land awaiting settlement, exposes First Nations suffering and poverty under Canadian expansionism, and demonstrates settler-colonial hypocrisy. The poems set the scene for the later resistance. On the other hand, they do not evoke or address Métis-specific concerns. Rather, they seem anachronistically to ascribe a pseudo pan-Indigenous constituency to Louis Riel — perhaps suggested more strongly because of the positioning of the poems immediately after the section title. What is more, Scofield does not delve into Cree and Métis kinship or antagonism but conflates their stories and histories in the lead up to the resistance. Much like in the opening poems, in which he positions Riel as a child of the North-West, Scofield offers a generalized vision of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism and collapses disparate histories and strategies, cultures and differences, into a binary of settler-Indigenous conflict. The lack of Métis

historical specificity positions Métis and First Nations concerns as matching symptoms of settler colonialism.⁷ Scofield ignores historical tensions between the Métis and Cree leaders such as Big Bear, who, as Braz notes, “chose not to support Riel . . . [because] he mistrusted not just the Métis leader but his people” (35), and implies a closer coordination where none occurred. The generalization created by the poems’ pastiche of voices, and the pastiche’s positioning relative to the section title, sustains what Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser suggest is the “persistent myth that the Indians and Métis acted in concert” (239). They argue that, in contrast to Riel and the Métis, “many of those [First Nations people] who were dragged into the conflict such as Poundmaker and Big Bear . . . counselled restraint and did all they could within their limited power to promote peace” (240). Although agreeing with Stonechild and Waiser that, though “there were First Nations involved in the fighting alongside the Métis, most chiefs did not participate or condone violence as a means of settling their grievances,” Robert Innis also shows how kinship links, economic relationships, and political and military alliances among Métis, Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine bands created far more complex societies than has been generally noted (69). “Scholars,” Innis writes, “have for the most part failed to convey the complexities of Aboriginal societies in southern Saskatchewan” (69). Although Scofield might gesture toward a similar complexity through the pastiche of voices, this complexity is obscured by the binary of pan-Indigenous-settler conflict.

As the third section of *Louis* progresses, and the pastiche of voices continues, poems focalized through John A. Macdonald (63), a soldier (possibly General Frederick Middleton) (69), and Gabriel Dumont (72-73) draw readers further away from Riel’s interior perspectives. Although some poems are focalized through his voice, less than half of the section represents his perspective. Dissonance similar to that in the earlier representations of the Red River Resistance arises in the narration of the North-West Resistance. Again, the culture and governance structure of Plains Métis buffalo-hunters, as well as the French-Michif linguistic heritage of Batoche, are obscured. The relationship between Riel and Dumont is reduced to a hauntingly affective epistolary reflection, “when I see you next — in Heaven some say” (73), after Riel’s surrender to Canadian forces. Unlike in the poems about the earlier resistance, in “The Sewing Circle” (65-68) Scofield does touch on expansive Métis kinship through a litany of references to the women of Batoche, if only briefly,

before its rupture under Canadian military assault. However, even the poignant final struggle of the military conflict, in the poem “The Last Day,” in which “men / from [their] trenches / . . . sing / for the people” (70), is tempered by persistent uncertainties: which people and which songs? Teillet writes that “the Saskatchewan Métis called their part in the North-West Resistance ‘La Guerre Nationale’” (315), but there is little in Scofield’s representation of this resistance that underscores a national war. A broader Métis nationalism is attenuated, and partially eclipsed, by the foregrounding of personal antagonism between Riel and Macdonald, by the fact that in this section Riel is mostly drowned out by others, and by concerted generalization throughout the collection.

The fourth section, “L’Homme d’État/The Statesman,” marks the return to a gentler voice. The poems are drained of vitriolic rhetoric and infused instead with longing and regret and tinged with sadness. The section is also a return of sorts to the boy from the first section, now bloodied, wearied, irrevocably changed. Scofield imbues Riel with a fatalistic serenity as he writes “In God do I put my trust / as I do the hangman. For him I pray a blessing” (85). There is also a bitter irony in that the poems in this section are all located within the prison. Wistful longing infuses “The Swing” (84-85); the lines “I would like to see in the distance / Mother’s house and her there, the flowers, / and relatives lining up to kiss you, one by one” (84), present a longing for a time and a place that no longer exist, a vision of his people untainted by war, prior to their dispossession and dispersal. In the end, Scofield’s focus is less on depicting Riel “as a lover . . . father . . . friend . . . visionary” (“Poet”) than on offering a broad, albeit sympathetic, representation. The inability to disentangle his vision of Riel from larger political narratives — that is, to separate Riel’s own politics from broader narratives of Canadian settler colonialism — is most apparent in poems in which the eponymous subject plays no part at all, as in “A Settler’s Almanac” (47), which seems to attest to the ways in which the historical and political machinations of the North-West have become so intertwined with the story of Riel as to be inseparable now. Whereas Riel is seemingly made to stand in for Indigenous people in general, Scofield does not delve into or dwell on the intersections of Riel’s personal life with his politics as a Red River Métis nationalist and francophone or his conflicts with the Catholic clergy. The insinuation of a historical pan-Indigenous alliance and the marked de-emphasis on Riel’s own nationalism suggest that the renarrativization of the resistances by

a contemporary Métis writer is an inherently political act that not only reveals more about a contemporary moment than its apparent historical subject but also, by operating at the level of national myth, influences or blurs articulations of Métis national identity.

Scotfield's Riel then sits awkwardly in relation to expressions of Métis national identity: that is, an identity rooted in its "connection to a 'national core' historically located in Red River and in the shared memories of the territory, leaders, events, and culture that sustain the Métis people today" (Andersen 13). Admittedly, Métis identity is complicated by continual negotiation and debate over terminology and meaning, such as the small m/big M dichotomy, or the centring of racialized, hybridized, or mixed-race identities, in contrast to national definitions anchored in distinct culture, territory, and peoplehood.⁸ Although below I briefly consider mixed-race meanings of Métis identity in relation to Scotfield's representation of Riel, I do so primarily in contrast to a national definition grounded in the cultural and political history of Riel's own community at Red River. In light of Métis history at Red River, the awkwardness of Scotfield's Riel becomes apparent in the opening poem of *Louis*, "Marie-Joseph's Recitation of Names," in which, though building upon Riel's own literary imagery, Scotfield presents readers with an identity appeal located "in the blood" (13). Through emphasis and repetition, he establishes blood as a central vehicle, a thematic framework that undergirds the poem and weaves together Marie-Joseph's recitation. Linking together generations of Riel's ancestors, Scotfield appears to use blood less as a racial signifier than as a metonym to convey kinship, relation, and descent. Lines such as "the blood of my grandson Jean-Louis Riel / Your father / The one whose mother Marguerite Boucher / Is my daughter" (14) evoke the idea of a genealogical tree and function to establish Riel's origins, to situate Riel. Together with previously mentioned links to the language, "Translated from Chipewyan to English," and the geography of the North-West, Île-à-la-Crosse (13), Scotfield's use of blood imagery seems to deploy what Chadwick Allen identifies as the "blood/land/memory complex" (16). This complex, "[an] expansion of [Scott] Momaday's controversial trope blood memory," writes Allen,

makes explicit the central role that land plays both in the specific project of defining indigenous minority personal, familial, and communal identities (blood) and in the larger project of reclaiming and reimagining indigenous minority histories (memory). . . . [It]

attempt[s] to seize control of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of indigenous “blood,” “land,” and “memory” . . . from definitions of authenticity imposed by dominant settler cultures. (16)

Might Scofield’s use of blood imagery represent less a vision of the Métis as mixed-blood than an attempt to seize control of the narrative of Riel’s origins? In other words, might Scofield deploy blood as a more complex and symbolic signifier of Riel’s indigeneity than tracing his blood quantum? Then again, if “land” plays a “central role” in the “blood/land/memory complex,” then might the relative lack of reference or allusion, other than a single geographic signifier such as Île-à-la-Crosse, suggest that Scofield distances blood from land, linking instead blood and memory? The effects of tracing Riel’s genealogy, without obvious, and attendant, references or allusions to the Métis Nation, or specific Métis cultural practices, historical events, or experiences, produce an origin less rooted in what makes the Métis a people and one dependent instead on a racialized conception. This in turn risks recentring a narrative of Métis origins as essentially biological. This identitary ambivalence is woven into the collection’s very structure. For instance, following up the opening poem with poems that narrate Riel’s journey eastward and explore his adolescence in Montreal, Scofield decentres important elements that inform Métis national identity. Despite the opening poem’s evocation of kinship, in eschewing Riel’s childhood in Red River in the subsequent poems, Scofield produces an initial portrait of Riel as largely separated from his family,⁹ kinship networks, and community connections that in turn foregrounds his blood and raises the spectre of a racialized Métis identity.

Métis as mixed is a narrative that continues to haunt discourses of Métis identity. In her book *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, Bonita Lawrence, for example, declares that she uses the term “*Métis* . . . primarily to refer to those individuals who are mixed-race and nonstatus from western Canada” (21). In her examination of the consequences of settler-colonial racial categorization in Canada, Lawrence “deconstruct[s] the various categories that have been created by the Indian Act, such as *status Indian*, and *Métis*” (26), but she minimizes the fact that the word *Métis* was also used prior to the establishment of the Indian Act. Chris Andersen points out that “Lawrence . . . reduces being Métis to being mixed-raced,” and “[b]ecause of this . . . she is able to switch fairly seamlessly among ‘Métis,’ ‘half-breed,’ and ‘mixed-blood’” (56-57). This racialized conflation of mixed-bloodedness

with Métis thus allows Lawrence to declare that, “in western Canada, any nonstatus Native individual, no matter what their Indigenous heritage, is commonly referred to by others and refers to himself or herself in everyday terms as Métis” (86). Without an attendant examination of historical Métis nationhood, this generalization suggests a fundamental confusion between a Métis national identity rooted in ethnogenesis centred on Red River, what Riel dubs “Le peuple Métis-Canadien-français” (*Collected Writings* 4: 319), or what Andersen refers to as “the history, events, leaders, territories, language, and culture associated with the growth of buffalo hunting and trading Métis of the northern Plains” (24), and a general catch-all term for anyone with Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry or parents. More recently, Kristina Fagan Bidwell has discussed how the word *Métis* has been “hotly debated” and shown how it has been “taken up for different reasons and used differently by various Indigenous groups over time” (118). Presenting a brief survey of how Métis identity has been variously articulated in literature, Bidwell emphasizes a Métis-as-mixed conception of Métis identity. “The Red River Metis are not the only distinctive community of mixed European and Indigenous descent in Canada,” Bidwell writes, “[but] they are the most well known, in part because their armed resistance has led to their presence in historical documents” (128). Drawing attention to how “externally imposed identity can eventually lead to community” (124), Bidwell largely eschews reference to the Métis Nation, and she de-emphasizes the significance of national self-definition. Seemingly wary of the exclusionary powers of nationalism, Bidwell dances around the issue of Métis nationhood, on the one hand noting that “for those descended from the Red River Metis . . . historic resistance forms the core of their claim to Metis identity” (125) and on the other taking exception to the Métis National Council’s definition of Métis identity as insufficiently “reflect[ive of] the historic fluidity and internal diversity of the Metis” (126). In the end, though Bidwell indicates that “Riel himself argues for an expansive meaning of Metis that is grounded not in race but in feeling and kinship,” she also calls for an “understanding of Metis identity that is expansive, inclusive, and grounded in the experiences of those who call themselves Metis” (133). This call sits awkwardly, however, in relation to Métis kinship; how might an “expansive” understanding emerge from kinship?¹⁰ What grounds “feeling” alongside kinship? Moreover, though Riel himself speaks of Métis mixedness as a historical reality, which the Métis should not deny, how “le mot français

. . . exprime l'idée de ce mélange d'une manière aussi satisfaisante que possible; et devient par là même un nom convenable de race" (*Collected Writings* 3: 278),¹¹ he clearly frames, and grounds, this historical mixedness in a nationalist narrative that recognizes Métis peoplehood as rooted in the North-West. "[Le Canada] y trouva les Métis," Riel writes, "qui, par le même fait d'être chez eux et d'avoir leur pays à eux, avaient comme tout autre peuple, leur avenir" (3: 281).¹² Riel does not deny mixedness, but he does emphasize a national identity.

I dwell on these examples of identitary contestation, and on questions of Métis identity, because of their larger implications. When calls to ground our understanding of Métis identity in "the experiences of those who call themselves Metis" are framed as inclusive, this inclusivity can mask problematic claims of Métis identity. Without attending to how "feeling and kinship" are rooted in distinct histories and places, in specific cultural and economic practices, and how they are intertwined with expressions of nationhood and peoplehood, "expansive" understandings of Métis identity open the door to misrecognition and appropriation. For instance, in their study of the rise of métis self-identification in eastern Canada, Adam Gaudry and Darryl Leroux reveal particularly egregious instances of such misrecognition and appropriation. Noting the "tactical use of long-ago racial mixing to reimagine a 'Métis' identity that prioritizes mixed-race ancestry and disregards the historical development of Métis peoplehood" (116-17), they demonstrate how recent settler moves toward Indigenization not only conflate the Métis Nation with a "bio-racial concept of métissage" (136) but also undermine Métis nationhood as well as First Nations rights in those territories. These are the muddy waters into which Scofield wades. Whether he intends to foreground an essentially mixed-race conception of Métis identity or not matters little when the effusive repetition of "in the blood" in "Marie-Joseph's Recitation of Names" insinuates it (13). Without attendant demonstrations of Métis peoplehood or, as Métis scholar Jennifer Adese writes, "what brings Métis together as a collective people . . . [such as] kinship and relatedness, mobility, and geography" (61), and exemplified by poems that immediately remove Riel from his homeland and people, Scofield's opening section generates a racialized portrait of Riel's origins that collapses cultural distinctiveness under the weight of blood.

This foregrounding of blood suggests a fundamental estrangement from cultural heritage; it echoes the rhetoric and the painful unfolding

consequences of colonialism. This estrangement is situated in what Braz sees as the “considerable alienation by contemporary Métis from [Riel’s] linguistic and cultural heritage” (201). Riel is a difficult figure to inhabit, and his motivations are clouded through time, mediated through innumerable interpretations and translations, and largely divorced from the particular set of cultural and political conditions that informed them. Scofield admits in an interview that his French is “terrible” (“Poet”); nor is he Catholic, having documented his journey through Indigenous spiritualities in his autobiography, *Thunder through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood*. His challenge as a contemporary, non-Catholic, English-speaking Métis in inhabiting and writing about Riel, a long-dead, Catholic, French-speaking Métis, is enormous. Although Scofield gestures in *Louis* toward Riel’s primary (written) language through the use of French section titles and the occasional insertion of French words, such as “garçon [boy]” (23), “sauvage [savage]” (25), and “frère [brother]” (72), the gesture is tempered by its sparseness. There is more Cree than French in the collection, though even the use of Cree is sparse, mostly relegated to “A Settler’s Almanac” (47-55). French and Cree rarely appear together. However, Scofield does use both French and Cree in “The Revolutionary” (33-35), which features a rallying address to Riel’s countrymen as well as a parody of the Lord’s Prayer. Through tactical code-switching, and particularly the use of Cree in the parody, Scofield attempts to “challenge those ideas around Catholicism and being devout and the church and the expectations [that it engenders]” (“Poet”). This juxtaposition of French and Cree, and Riel’s Catholicism, allows Scofield not only to demonstrate the width of cultural differences between the Red River Métis and English Canadians such as John A. Macdonald but also to challenge the image of Riel as a Europeanized subject. The use of Cree subverts the prayer’s Eurocentrism and foregrounds Riel and the Métis, more broadly, as Indigenous; it “allows,” as Jennifer Andrews argues, Scofield “to mock presumptions of dominance by a variety of populations . . . and to articulate a distinct sense of . . . identities in linguistic terms” (11). Yet the use of Cree still raises questions about whose “identity” Scofield is articulating. The parody of the prayer does not quite resonate with Riel’s “conservative Catholicism” (Braz 201) but suggests an instance of the poet bleeding through his poetic persona. Scofield’s attempt to blur Riel’s French Catholicism with an English-language parody of the Lord’s Prayer, interspersed with Cree, indigenizes his Christianity, but it also

creates dissonance through historical inaccuracy when compared with the historical Riel and thus re-emphasizes contemporary political investments in reclaiming his narrative.

Perhaps attempting to avoid “considerable alienation” (Braz 201), Scofield uses Riel’s words as an intertext in many of the poems in *Louis*. For instance, in “Epitaph,” the words in italics, “*Be sweet to my words: and listen / When I write you with a golden / Pen*” (88), are drawn from a poem that Riel wrote to his wife, Marguerite, from his jail cell (*Collected Writings* 4: 434). In this case, he wrote in English, and Scofield uses his words to thread his voice directly into the poem. However, the majority of Riel’s writings are in French, and, as noted above, hardly any French appears in *Louis*. It is likely that Scofield did not translate Riel’s poetry but relied instead on available translations. Whereas the intertexts purport to draw readers closer to Riel, the use of translation further distends cultural and linguistic rapprochement; translation becomes yet another representation of Riel. Although he does note that the last stanza of “The Revolutionary” (33–35) is taken from an “ode” (35) that Riel wrote called “The French-Canadian-Métis,” Scofield does not reveal that it is a translation from a poem originally written in French, “Le peuple Métis-Canadien-français.” Scofield likely draws this intertextual reference from Paul Savoie’s translation in *Selected Poetry of Louis Riel*, thus relying on another voice to mediate his representation of Riel.¹³ As a native French speaker, I compare Savoie’s translation to the original, below, to demonstrate how Scofield’s use of translated works affects his representation of Riel.

Manitoba, still a sapling,	Le Manitoba si précoce
Dibbled by deft hands in firm ground,	Est grand, parce qu’il l’a fondé
With sacerdotal nurturing	Sous le beau frein du Sacerdoce
Its taproot is secure and sound.	Qui l’a toujours si bien guidé.
(trans. Paul Savoie 113; Scofield 35)	(Riel, <i>Selected Poetry</i> 112)

The stanza is not a word-for-word translation: there is no sapling in the French verse. Although Riel’s description of Manitoba as “précoce” carries potential horticultural allusions, as in early ripening fruit, the word *precocious* also often denotes brilliant children. Savoie seems to be working in the metaphorical, meaning-for-meaning, vein of translation; although his translation imparts the basic, original meaning that the Catholic Church assisted Manitoba’s precocious growth, the imagery used to convey this meaning, the vehicle in which the metaphor travels, is very different.

Building upon the image of a sapling cared for by “sacerdotal nurturing,” Savoie’s translation implies a sedentary rooting — Manitoba as a plant rooted in the ground and cultivated — that in turn imparts a more Eurocentric image of community and settlement. Riel’s version, in contrast, imparts a distinct sense of mobility through lines such as “sous le beau frein” and “toujours si bien guidé,” literally translated as “under the beautiful brake” and “always so well guided.” Words such as *frein* and *guidé* bring to mind horsemanship; they suggest an image of priests guiding the province as though guiding horses. This mobility resonates more closely with Métis history; it recalls the buffalo hunt, the wide-open prairie, the network of Red River Cart trails, and travel through the Métis homeland. Savoie’s translation attempts to maintain the original poem’s form, using the same rhyme scheme, but by jettisoning Riel’s metaphorical vehicle and replacing it with one that does not quite match the original, the translation sacrifices specificity and fidelity; it elides, at least in this stanza, Métis mobility, and it obscures a critical aspect of historical Métis lifeways and peoplehood.

Scotfield’s use of Riel’s words through translation, though perhaps an attempt to reweave his narrative, as well as to draw readers closer to Riel the man, seems instead to reveal how this cannot be more than suggestive, because translation, even as it approximates the original, also functions as a recreation. It casts a veil over the original, distorting its meaning; much as how light carried through the lens of a camera is then reconstituted into a representation of an image, translation foregrounds the processes of representation active in Scotfield’s work. His version of Riel seems to become just one more reflection in that literary hall of mirrors in which “there is not one Riel but a series of Riels” (Braz 191). However, whether culturally and/or linguistically estranged or not, Scotfield’s version might not simply be one more Riel in that series. Since Riel’s narrative cannot be separated from the political, as I argued above, Scotfield’s representation, as a literary work by a major Métis poet, which consciously reshapes a fundamentally Indigenous story, also functions as a political act. Despite his stated desire to show Riel “as a man” (“Poet”), Scotfield works with a major Métis national symbol that has the potential to influence articulations of national Métis identity. Operating at the level of the national symbol, historical hyper-accuracy is perhaps less critical; Savoie’s translation takes on a different tenor when juxtaposed with the poems that follow immediately in the collection, those of Riel’s exile and wandering.

In this wider reading, juxtaposed with loss and exile, the “taproot” (35) underscores the importance of the homeland; this not only conveys the depth of Riel’s deracination, which in turn alludes to the enormous strain on his mental health, but also gestures to the loss of land among the Métis and the devastating impacts of that loss — yanking out the taproot from the soil is surely devastating for the plant. Similarly, a reconsideration of Scofield’s use of blood imagery in the opening poem, and how it might also be operating at the level of the symbolic, suggests that the risk of ironically undermining national self-definitions of Métis identity is likely calculated. In an essay examining Scofield’s and Marilyn Dumont’s use of irony in their poetry, Andrews argues that, in their earlier poetry, both writers use “a form of strategic essentialism to assert the ethnic/racial category of Métis, but paradoxically couple this assertion with irony . . . to ensure that the individuality of their speakers is acknowledged in all of its complexities” (8). This “strategic essentialism” resonates with Allen’s “blood/land/memory complex,” in particular with the struggle to “seize control of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of indigenous ‘blood,’ ‘land,’ and ‘memory’ . . . from definitions of authenticity imposed by dominant settler cultures” (16). The use of blood imagery, the rooting of Riel in the Northwest Territories, and the subversion of a Europeanized portrait of Riel through the strategic use of Cree code-switching in the parody of the Lord’s Prayer are just some of the ways in which Scofield not only foregrounds Riel’s indigeneity but also signals a Métis reappropriation, or the wresting of control from settlers, of Riel’s narrative, history, and symbolism. Whereas “Riel has been transformed not just into a white Canadian hero but, increasingly, into an English-speaking one” (Braz 198), Scofield’s collection represents an important countertug.

In this struggle over the meaning and authenticity of Riel’s narrative, and of Métis national identity, Scofield is not alone, nor is the struggle one-sided or static. Riel continues to draw popular and academic attention. Jennifer Reid, a settler-scholar, claims in her book *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada* that he represents the perfect foundational hero for a postcolonial Canada that lacks foundational heroes. Eliding continued settler-colonial realities, Reid positions Riel as a prototypical liberal multicultural hybrid figure. Métis scholar Adam Gaudry contends that “Reid uses Métis history and Métis peoplehood for her own purposes” and points out how “[in] her calls for *métissage* to be seen as a Canadian value personified by Riel . . . [Reid] relies on either a fundamental mis-

understanding of the Métis people or an ahistorical appropriation of Riel's mythmaking power" (76). Settler-writer John Ralston Saul also appropriates métis-ness in his book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, performing a wholesale erasure of Métis peoplehood as he attempts to position hybridity as a means of establishing an "imagined community" and suggests that Canada is a "métis civilization" (3). However, many Métis thinkers are reclaiming Métis narratives alongside Scofield, not only academics such as Chris Andersen, Adam Gaudry, Emma LaRocque, and Brenda Macdougall (to name only a few) but also poets and novelists such as Marilyn Dumont, Katherena Vermette, and Maia Caron (among many others). This surge suggests that Métis authors, writing in the wake of earlier writers such as Maria Campbell and Beatrice Mosionier, are not only asserting their presence and redefining Métis self-identity but also actively reclaiming narrative authority over Métis stories and histories.

Scofield's book, however, remains problematic on some fronts. Although it makes use of a "strategic essentialism" (Andrews 8) to reclaim Riel's story for the Métis, combatting a lengthy string of Eurocentric appropriations of Métis stories and mythologies, it also creates dissonance between myth and history; among Riel, the Métis, and other Indigenous nations; and between Scofield's Riel and the historical Riel as evidenced in his own writings. Scofield's collection also fails to capture the extent of Riel's linguistic and cultural affinities, such as his eloquence in French. In a review, Brent Wood concludes that the collection "builds little momentum, and as a radical 'autobiography' it doesn't reach its potential. . . . [It] doesn't split open historical ironies as dramatically as Atwood's Susanna Moodie or Gwendolyn MacEwen's T.E. Lawrence" (416). Some of the ironies that Scofield avoids exploring include Riel's pacifism, which conflicts with his role as the leader of two armed resistances, and his chauvinism toward First Nations, which seems to be at odds with the juxtaposition of Cree voices, as noted above. In the end, despite his effort to show Riel as a man, lover, and poet, Scofield largely presents a vision of Riel distorted by other voices and bogged down in the mudpits of worn narrative. Although offering an Indigenous renarrativization of Riel's history, and possessing the potential to reshape crucial histories that undergird contemporary Métis national identity, *Louis* does not resonate more loudly because of its cultural, historical, and linguistic dissonances.

Notes

¹ I distinguish between lower-case and upper-case spellings of *métis*/Métis: *métis* denotes a mixed-race identity (increasingly associated with individuals or communities in eastern Canada claiming an Indigenous identity on the basis of a long-ago ancestor), whereas *Métis* refers to the Métis Nation, an Indigenous people with their own culture, traditions, and national identity largely situated in western Canada. I touch upon Métis national identity in greater detail further in the essay. Also see Andersen for more on the history of the small m/big M ethnohistorical debates.

² Published prior to the recent revelations exposing Boyden's appropriations of Indigeneity and Indigenous identity, this biography seems to presage the complex intersections of Métis history and identity and settler moves toward Indigenization.

³ There is no known source of this translation. Rather, it seems, like the French section titles, to be a gesture toward the speaker's mother tongue and culture, which works to centre the speaker, and by extension Riel, in an Indigenous context.

⁴ An Irish Protestant who immigrated to Canada in 1863, Scott first arrived in the Red River territory as part of Canadian efforts to construct Dawson Road (a route from what is now Thunder Bay to Winnipeg). Scott became involved with John Schultz and the Canadian Party, which aggressively advocated for Canadian annexation of Red River. He was executed by a Métis firing squad on 4 March 1870. See Bumsted for more on Scott.

⁵ "I am Métis and I am proud / To belong to this nation" (my translation).

⁶ Evelina Barnabé, the sister of Fabien Barnabé, a Franco-American priest from Keeseville, New York, at whose home Riel convalesced following his release from the Beauport Asylum in 1878, developed a romantic relationship with Riel.

⁷ I do not suggest that issues of settler colonialism faced by Métis and First Nations were not closely related but simply emphasize that they were not identical. Because the Métis were not subject to the Indian Act or the reserve system, and were mostly shut out of treaties, they faced different issues compared with First Nations; for instance, the Métis took exception to Canadian surveyors assigning English-style square lots to the land that they held in the seigneurial style, long narrow lots that stretched out from the water along the South Saskatchewan River.

⁸ See St-Onge et al. for more on Métis ethnogenesis, kinship, and community; see Andersen for more on Métis national identity and peoplehood.

⁹ Although Riel also had some family in Quebec, such as the Lees, with whom he spent time, Scofield neither explores nor alludes to these relationships in his collection.

¹⁰ Expansive kinship might be discerned through the Cree, or Cree-Métis, concept of *wahkohtowin*, a "broadly conceived sense of relatedness with all beings, human and non-human, living and dead, physical and spiritual" (Macdougall 3), but Bidwell does not mention it.

¹¹ "The French word . . . expresses the idea of this mixture as satisfactorily as possible, and becomes even a suitable name of race" (*Collected Writings* 3: 278; my translation).

¹² "[Canada] found the Métis . . . who, by the very fact of being at home and having their own country, had, like any other people, their future" (*Collected Writings* 3: 281; my translation).

¹³ Lawrence Venuti notes that the art of translation is not fixed, and translation theory draws from a "range of fields and approaches," including "linguistics, literary criticism, philosophical speculation, and cultural theory" (4), as it teeters between literal, word-for-word, and metaphorical, meaning-for-meaning, practices. Enmeshed in a history of "changing relationships between the relative autonomy of the translated text . . . and two other concepts: equivalence and function" (5), translation exists in an eternal tug-of-war between fidelity to the original text and ability to convey a message or meaning across language and culture.

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