

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

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When the playwright Mavor Moore and the publisher Floyd Chalmers first discussed the idea, in 1963, of a grand opera based on the life of Louis Riel,¹ their subject had been in his grave for seventy-eight years. In most parts of Canada at the time, Riel was a controversial figure. In Métis territory, and in francophone Québec, his adherents remained fiercely loyal to his memory and his cause. His execution was regarded as a betrayal and a reminder that English-speaking Canada could not be trusted. Anglophone Canadians, on the other hand, had long seen Riel and his legacy as a threat to Confederation and had branded him a traitor. His hanging in 1885 had provoked celebrations in Ontario.

I was born into a Naval family. The English-speaking Canada I grew up in was self-contained and unreflective. It was still emotionally and intellectually tied to Britain and the Royal family, although I later discovered that this sense of belonging, and the concept of British fair play, were rarely shared by the non-British families fleeing Europe and elsewhere after the war. My father's colleagues in the Canadian Navy modelled themselves on

British Naval officers and some learned to speak with a British accent. We were regularly told that the best things in the world were British, which had the effect of making everything else seem cheap and poorly made. At school, thanks to a systematically muzzled educational system, we memorized the Kings and Queens of England and the counties of Nova Scotia. Canada, we believed, would never become a prodigal son; its destiny would be white, English-speaking and Protestant, and this seemed as inevitable as the bag of margarine we pounded the colour into each week on the kitchen floor. We did not think about the Indigenous nations that had greeted, supported and struggled against the early hunters, fishermen, traders, and settlers from Europe. No one pointed out that the Dominion government's policy of "assimilation" concealed the dark, unspoken implications at the heart of colonialism and its successor ideologies in the twentieth century, ideologies my father had gone to war to defeat.

But the world appeared to be changing. The old certainties were collapsing. Freedom was in the air. Decolonization had transformed our maps. Leaders of independence

1 Brian Cherny, *Harry Somers* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 129

movements were becoming the fathers of new nations and their populations were dancing in the streets. Louis Riel, the visionary poet, patriot, peacemaker, legislator, and armed insurrectionist, was, in hindsight, beginning to look like a revolutionary hero. Like Ernesto Che Guevara, he'd been hounded by the army and executed by the state, and everyone knew that it was because he'd sought to free his people from tyranny. A new biography by a senior, well-respected historian helped transform him from traitor to martyr.² The moral legitimacy of his cause was a direct challenge to the one-sided, triumphalist narrative of Canada's colonial history. Not unsurprisingly, his rehabilitation coincided with growing demands for self-determination in Québec, demands that would challenge the very foundation of the Canadian state, just as its centennial year was fast approaching.

In preparation for the centennial celebrations, the Floyd S. Chambers Foundation provided the initial commission for an opera, and further funding came from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Centennial Commission. Mavor Moore would write the libretto, and Harry Somers, one of Canada's pre-eminent contemporary composers, would compose the music. By 1965 they were hard at work.³

A world exposition was being planned for Montréal. It was an opportunity, as the world looked on, to unite Canada's "two founding nations." Perhaps the example of Riel's passionate, selfless love for his people would help to heal the wounds embedded in Confederation and lead the country toward a progressive, united future. Riel, the insurrectionist, was being recast as an English Canadian patriot.

Over the next few years, Canada came very close to breaking apart. The promise of the democratic nation state is that it will end injustice and legislate equality, but language, culture, race and colonial heritage have often proved intractable, or, to put it another way, the ruling castes never intend to relinquish the reins. Composer Murray Schafer observed in 1972 that Riel, the man, embodies "the dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament." The opera, he suggested, exposes the tensions between "native and white, church and state, colonialism and independence, civilization and frontier wilderness,"⁴ and we can hear the strain in Somers's score with its habit of cycling back to reintegrate itself. Histories in Canada are interred only millimetres deep; allegiance is always contingent. As an act of preservation, and an act of faith, Canada is evolving into an archipelago of overlapping sovereignties.

2 George F. G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963).

3 Cherny, 129.

4 Murray Schafer, *The Public of the Music Theatre: Louis Riel - A Case Study* (Vienna, 1972), 18. See Cherny, 129-130.

Riel will always be a controversial, charismatic, divisive figure. Many believed he was insane. He declared himself the “Prophet of the New World” in an era of charismatic prophets promoting millenarian visions of death and resurrection across western North America.⁵ At the same time, he respected secular and sacred authority, and like Indigenous leaders he looked to the British Crown when faced with the mendacity of politicians. Historian George Stanley described Riel as “the man who saw a new heaven and a new earth on the North American continent; the man who talked of a reformed papacy in the New World; the man who proclaimed his hope that the western plains would be peopled by the oppressed thousands of Europe.”⁶ It was the visionary Riel that English Canadians came to embrace, the seer punished for placing the spiritual and material welfare of his people ahead of profit.

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Louis Riel was the first Canadian Opera Company (COC) production written

and composed entirely by Canadians and performed by an all-Canadian cast. It received its world premiere in Toronto on the 23rd of September 1967, and travelled to Expo 67 in Montréal. Moore had based his libretto on *Riel: A Play in Two Parts* (1950) by John Coulter,⁷ and collaborated with Québec playwright Jacques Languirand on the French language dialogue.⁸ Somers’s score is an angular, thoughtful, often surprising work that explores atonality, juxtaposes and superimposes melodies from various genres, and experiments with pre-recorded electro-acoustic elements. Writing in *The Toronto Telegram*, Kenneth Winters described the opera, not inaccurately, as a “pastiche...big, efficient, exciting, heterogenous...It had no ring of eternity but it was a vigorous harnessing of current and choice; a brash, smart, cool hand on the pulse of a number of fashions, social, dramatic and musical.”⁹ The production was broadcast across Canada on radio and in 1969 televised nationally, in colour, with the original cast and company. Over 1.4 million Canadians are said to have tuned in.

5 See Wayne Suttles, “The Plateau Prophet Dance among the Coast Salish” in Wayne Suttles, *Coast Salish Essays* (Vancouver/Seattle: Talonbooks/University of Washington Press, 1987), 152-178, 185-198.

6 George F. G. Stanley, “The Last Word on Louis Riel—The Man of Several Faces,” Hartwell Bowsfield, ed., *Louis Riel: Selected Readings* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1988), 54-55.

7 Colleen L. Renihan, “The Politics of Genre: Exposing Historical Tensions in Harry Somers’s *Louis Riel*” in Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, eds., *Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 259.

8 Cherny, 131.

9 “Louis Riel (opera)”, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca, accessed 9 August 2017.

The COC revived the opera in 1975 and performed it in Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and in Washington, D.C. for the American bicentennial, where *Washington Star* music critic Wendall Margrave famously praised it for what he called “one of the most imaginative and powerful scores to have been written in this century.”¹⁰ After two subsequent university productions, the University of British Columbia School of Music and Theatre, Opera Ensemble and Symphony Orchestra produced the work in the week leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. The production was supported by an ambitious academic symposium exploring the issues raised by the opera, and by a Louis Riel Youth Symposium. Professor Nancy Hermiston, the stage director, regarded the production and the symposium as “an important opportunity for us to highlight Canadian opera and Canadian history and to inspire a debate on human rights and indigenous human rights.”¹¹ As Canada and its First Nations welcomed athletes and visitors to Vancouver to enjoy the privilege of winter sports, *Louis Riel*, and perhaps Canada itself, were being placed on trial.

The opera’s three acts cover Riel’s political life from the “Red River Resistance” (1869–1870) to the “Northwest Rebellion” (1884–1885) from a Central Canadian perspective. Its eighteen scenes occasionally descend

to caricature as the opera juggles its documentary responsibility with the desire for a more complex portrait of Riel’s inner life. The text is animated by the question of means and ends: what moral legitimacy does a nation state possess beyond its own self-regard, and what are the consequences of its tumultuous birth? To what claim of legitimacy can the nation state cling if even a single life is terminated to make way for its violent consummation?

It’s quickly apparent that *Louis Riel* was created for the purpose of engaging with the politics of its day. The central conflict over territorial sovereignty between Riel and the Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, alludes directly to the struggle between Ottawa and Québec during the 1960s. Apart from Riel, the prominent characters in the opera are white politicians and religious figures. The Métis are present, collectively. Riel, who was born a British subject, and who in March 1883 became a U.S. citizen, is represented as a Canadian revolutionary figure. For Métis scholar Adam Gaudry, the depiction of Riel as a Canadian is misplaced, not only because “Canadian citizenship” did not exist at the time. “The Métis in Riel’s day,” he writes, “were a nation independent of foreign power and unaffiliated with the Dominion of Canada...For Riel, treaties like the Manitoba Treaty, which created a new

10 J. Drew Stephen, “Louis Riel,” a review of Centrediscs DVD, CMCDVD 16711 (2011), *CAML Review* 39, No. 3, (November 2011): 21–23.

11 “Canada’s Chief Justice takes part in Western Premiere of Louis Riel opera,” UBC Public Affairs media release, February 2, 2010, www.news.ubc.ca, accessed 13 September 2017.

Métis-majority province in 1870, imply not a merging or integration of cultures, political communities, and identities, but the basis for the respectful, independent co-existence of distinct peoples.”¹²

With one or two exceptions, the Indigenous nations of the “North West” are not represented in the libretto, although many were allied to Riel’s cause. The single reference to Indigenous communities is sympathetic, but the absence is a matter of grave concern to anyone producing the opera today. When the COC and the National Arts Centre (NAC) announced a new production for 2017, they vowed to address this concern. Harry Somers’s intelligent, moving score remains as vital as ever and deserves to be heard, but how would the producers adapt the work to reflect the active presence of the First Nations during the resistance? How might their roles be articulated, and how would a revival stand up to scrutiny? These questions made *Louis Riel* the most anticipated opera of the season and shone a critical light on one of the opera’s most luminous and controversial moments, the moving aria at the beginning of Act III sung by Riel’s wife Marguerite.

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In order to approach the opera’s historical shortcomings, director Peter Hinton created a body of Indigenous witnesses he called the Land Assembly. Dressed in red, the Land Assembly represents the Indigenous populations of Canada and remains silent throughout. (It is difficult not to think of this silence as accusatory). In Hinton’s words, “They are in all of the action, they frame the action, they resist the action, and they are affected by everything that happens, but they are silent. So there is immediately a kind of dichotomy in the production between voice and silence. Where is voice power, and where is it noise? Where is silence resistance and protest, and where is it oppression?”¹³

Voice is at the heart of this opera. Who gets to speak? Who remains silent? Cole Alvis, of Métis-Irish/English heritage from Turtle Mountain, Manitoba, who played the role of The Activist and the leader of the Land Assembly, told *Macleans*, “There’s a huge imbalance when it comes to who’s speaking, who’s controlling the narrative, who’s running the show. We represent ourselves, responding, silently. I hope the audience [will] wonder what we’re thinking and what we would say if we were speaking.”¹⁴ Joanna Burt, the Ojibwe soprano who plays Riel’s sister

12 Adam Gaudry, “A Canadianized Riel: Making Space for Métis to Speak,” *Canadian Opera Company Spring Program 2017: Louis Riel & Tosca*, 16.

13 Michael Cooper, “Canada Turns 150, but a Silent Chorus Isn’t Celebrating,” *New York Times*, 19 April 2017.

14 Mike Doherty, “The real challenges of reviving a Louis Riel Opera,” *Macleans*, 20 April 2017, www.macleans.ca, accessed 8 September 2017.

Sara, explains how crucial it was to have an Indigenous presence on stage: “It’s about broken promises to Indigenous people back in 1885 and now, because promises are still being broken. I want people to realize that this isn’t just a thing of the past. We still have problems—the Kinder Morgan pipeline, for instance.”¹⁵

The opera was sung in English, French, Cree and Michif, the “Métis language.” Hinton had some of the dialogue translated into Michif, and the sur-titles carried a Michif translation throughout. Much of the activity took place within a large circle painted onto the stage. I viewed it as a sacred circle that throughout the opera is respected and violated—a gesture profound in its simplicity, for is the earth itself not our stage and sacred circle, where we embrace and combat our destinies?

One of the luminous moments in *Louis Riel* occurs at the beginning of Act III when Riel’s Métisse wife Marguerite (the gifted Canadian soprano Simone Osborn) sings in Cree to her sleeping child. The “Kuyas” aria, as it’s called in the score, is intended to be a lullaby, although it is hardly a song to lull a baby to sleep. According to music scholar Dr. Réa Beaumont, the title, chosen by Somers, is a Cree expression for “long ago.” In a program note she adds: “To

help the singer replicate a First Nations vocal style, Somers provides elaborate and extensive performance instructions for Marguerite’s character that include phonetic spellings and 11 types of *fermata* to indicate pauses of different durations. Initially accompanied only by sparse flute and percussion, the intensity of her role continues to build thought the scene.”¹⁶

“Kuyas” was originally written for the 1967 Montréal International Voice Competition. Somers told biographer Brian Cherny in 1975 that he regarded the song “as a lament for the passing of a people.” Its inclusion in *Louis Riel* suggests that what Somers intended Marguerite to sing was more than a soothing lullaby. It was a mother’s lament for a way of life that was changing rapidly and under assault by settler culture. Her child would grow into a world convulsed by Modernity, a world she was unable to imagine. Somers had located the opening motif for “Kuyas” in the first five or six notes of a transcription of a powerful, moving Nisga’a elegy entitled “Hano.”¹⁷ According to a COC press release, Somers sought out new words, adapting them from *Cree Grammar* by the Rev. H. E. Hivers and the *English-Cree Primer and Vocabulary* by the Rev. F. G. Stevens, perhaps in an attempt to be faithful to Marguerite’s heritage, which

15 *Ibid.*

16 Réa Beaumont, “Composer Harry Somers Adopts a Modern Tone in *Louis Riel*,” *Canadian Opera Company Spring Program 2017: Louis Riel & Tosca*, 15.

17 Cherny, 134.

he seems to have understood to be Cree. In fact, she was born into two old Métis families, and so Somers had either been misled or he chose to use Cree words as a way to acknowledge the aria's Indigenous, if not Nisga'a, origin. He's also said to have consulted oral histories recounted by *kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw* (Coming-Day) to American linguist Leonard Bloomfield on the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan in 1925.¹⁸ Today "Kuyas" is celebrated as one of the great arias in Canadian opera, and is often recommended for sopranos studying in Canadian opera programs.

Somers was likely aware that in choosing a motif from "Hano" he was taking elements from a funeral lament sung only on the most solemn occasion by members of a single family. He may have assumed or been told that the protocols associated with the song no longer applied, which underlines the deplorable lack of knowledge and respect at the time when he was seeking advice and/or permission. He would have been aware that "Hano" was one of a collection

of songs recorded during the summer of 1927 by anthropologist Marius Barbeau (1883-1969) of the National Museum of Canada, and composer Ernest MacMillan (1893-1973), in the cannery town of Arrandale in Nisga'a territory at the mouth of the Nass River in British Columbia.¹⁹ Would he have been aware that in 1927 it would have been illegal for an Indigenous person with the hereditary rights to this lament to sing it at a Potlatch?

Concerned that songs like "Hano" might be lost or forgotten, MacMillan and Barbeau had worked industriously that summer to record songs and to transcribe the music and words. Barbeau copied down translations and prepared biographical and explanatory notes. MacMillan tried to find ways to adapt the music to Western notation. By season's end they'd recorded 139 songs.²⁰ That summer Barbeau also managed to acquire fishing hooks, spoons, masks, rattles and a Nisga'a frontlet, taking them back to the Museum in Ottawa along with photographs of re-

18 See Leonard Bloomfield, *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*, Bulletin No. 60, Anthropological Series No. 11 (Ottawa: F. A. Acland, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1930). See: <http://contentdm.ucalgary.ca/cdm/ref/collection/stories/id/11084>. I could not find a narrative in *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* that relates directly to the song. The collection includes two oral histories told by Coming-Day: "Flute-Bearer" (p. 162), about a supernatural boy who carves a miraculous flute from the bone on the upper part of an eagle's wing, and "Sun-Child" (p. 177), which relates the exploits of a young man named Sun-Child. "Flute-Bearer" may have inspired Somers to choose the flute to accompany Marguerite's song.

19 This was the year the Dominion government altered the Indian Act to make it illegal for Indigenous people to meet and talk about land claims. See Nisga'a Lisims Government, *Honouring Our Past*, www.nisgaanation.ca.

20 Laurence Nowry, *Marius Barbeau, Man of Mana* (Toronto: NC Press Limited, 1995), 228-231.

enacted scenes of shamanic healing.²¹ In August, while MacMillan was present, the process was filmed and a three-reel silent motion picture entitled “Nass River Indians” was produced; Barbeau presented a few months later at the ground-breaking *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art—Native and Modern* at the National Gallery of Canada.²² Associated Screen News of Montréal later produced two silent shorts for commercial release from the Nass River footage: “Fish and Medicine Men” and “Saving the Sagas,” a nine-minute reel documenting the musical salvage operation. “Saving the Sagas” includes scenes of Barbeau, MacMillan, and interpreter Gwisge’en (William Benyon) in Arrandale recording Gadim Gaidoo’o of Gitanmaax (Albert Allen), Wii Xha’a or Weexae of Gitanyou (Robert Pearl), Pahl (Charles Barton) and Txaa Laxhatkw or T_xalaxaet

of Gwinwoḵ (Frank Bolton) singing into the horn of the Edison phonograph.²³ They were assisted by another interpreter, Benjamin Monroe of Gitlarhdamks.²⁴ The inter-title that concludes the sequence, written by Barbeau, reads: “The cannery cans the salmon. The camera cans the dances and now the phonograph cans the songs—everything canned but the Indians!”²⁵

In “salvaging” Tsimshian songs, Barbeau and MacMillan were following in the footsteps of late 19th and early 20th century classical composers such as Grieg, Sibelius, Berio, Dvorák, Bartok, Prokofiev, and Copland who took inspiration — and melodies — from peasant or “folk” songs they recorded in the “pre-Modern” countryside. As the composer John Beckwith suggests, there was a nationalist

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- 21 *Nisga'a Treaty Negotiations: Agreement in Principle*, issued jointly by the Government of Canada, the province of British Columbia and the Nisga'a Tribal Council, February 15, 1996, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Appendix O, 4-5.
 - 22 Lynda Jessup, “Tin Cans and Machinery: Saving the Sagas and Other Stuff,” Rev. ed., http://canadianfilm.com/Nass/tin_cans.pdf, 25. Originally published in *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 12, 1999, 10, 26. The exhibition opened on November 20th, 1927. The cinematographers were Dr. Alex H. Gunn and Dr. James Sibley Watson. The films, “Nass River Indians,” “Fish and Medicine Men,” and “Saving the Sagas,” were edited by Terry Ramsaye, co-editor of *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) and author of the first comprehensive history of cinema, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (1926). Barbeau claimed that it was his encounter with Emily Carr’s paintings that encouraged him to initiate the “West Coast Art” exhibition that brought the National Museum and the National Gallery together in 1927. See: <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/tresors/barbeau/mbh1100e.shtml>
 - 23 Jessup, 25. Associated Screen News was the filmmaking arm of the Canadian Pacific Railway.
 - 24 Marius Barbeau, “Tsimshian Songs” in Viola E. Garfield, Paul S. Wingert and Marius Barbeau, *The Tsimshian: Their Arts and Music*, Publications of the American Ethnological Society XVIII, ed. Marian W. Smith (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1951), 99.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 20.

angle to their salvage operations,²⁶ a desire to identify and generate a national music — particularly on behalf of English-Canadian culture, which lacks a single sentimental or patriotic song that identifies its national character. According to his memoir, housed today in the Canadian Museum of History, Barbeau was encouraged by linguist Edward Sapir to record Indigenous songs in 1911: “Sapir said: ‘Why don’t you study the Hurons? It is near your home. Lorette is near the city of Québec.’ Well, at once I remembered Prosper Vincent, the singer. ‘Yes, I’ll go and see about him.’ In April, I went the city of Québec equipped with a little Standard Edison phonograph and the old wax cylinders which I knew were to be used for recording songs.”²⁷ In 1914 Franz Boas implored him to record “French-Canadian” folksongs and stories in rural Québec. Within two years he had collected over 500 songs.²⁸ He believed that a national music would be born from the songs and dances of agricultural workers, fishermen, loggers and other labourers, and Indigenous people. These melodies would later be transformed into symphonies, chamber music, recitals and operas like *Louis Riel* for urban audiences. Barbeau concludes his memoir with the following vision of Canadian art to come:

Folksongs and traditions, as collected today, are materials for the future arts of Canada, either musical, literary or plastic arts. They are the basic materials. These are available to all Canadians and the modern arts cannot develop in a way that reveals originality unless these are known by our artists and creators of present day. In order to create good music you have to have a basic material somewhere and this is in our folk music either Indian or French-Canadian or Scottish or Irish. These have to be consulted and absorbed by the creators, the composers. If they don’t do that, they miss the boat.²⁹

It’s startling to think that the ceremonial singing of Indigenous communities, much of it sacred and held in perpetuity through hereditary rights, was likened by Barbeau to the folksongs of French and English-speaking immigrants, and that non-Indigenous composers were being encouraged to appropriate these songs as their own even as Canadian governments were actively engaged in dispossession, assimilation and cultural genocide. Until 1951, a non-Indigenous composer in Toronto would be praised for performing a piano transcription of a Northwest Coast song in a concert hall, but if the person

26 John Beckwith, “The Importance of Being Sir Ernest,” review of *Sir Ernest MacMillan: The Importance of Being Canadian* by Ezra Schabas, *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music / La Revue de musique folklorique canadienne*, vol. 24, 1996, 68-71.

27 Marius Barbeau, “Barbeau’s Story,” www.historymuseum.ca, accessed 19 October 2017.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

with hereditary rights to the song were to sing it in ceremony, they would be arrested.

Barbeau and MacMillan mined their Nass River research for ethnographic and aesthetic purposes, publishing a 14-page suite for unspecified voice and piano entitled *Three Songs of the West Coast Recorded from Singers of the Nass River Tribes, Canada* in 1928.³⁰ The words were “translated” into English by the poet Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs remembered for his vigorous enforcement of Canada’s aggressive assimilation policies. Barbeau managed, by the end of 1930, to complete an ambitious book-length monograph, *100 Tsimshian Songs*. This did not appear until 1951, and then as Part Three of a larger volume with only seventy-five songs under the title “Tsimshian Songs.”³¹ Barbeau’s introduction is precise about hereditary rights: “The function of singing at the edge of the sea is largely confined to rites and ceremonies. The majority of these songs are the exclusive property of definite clans or families. Like crests or coats-of-arms they are heirlooms. They almost never changed hands in the past. If someone challenged

their ownership, quarrels would follow and, failing compensation, bloodshed.”³² He adds, “Privately owned lullabies and dirges greeted new-born children and sped the departed on the threshold of death.”³³ “Tsimshian Songs” would have been the text Somers consulted.

“Hano” appears in “Tsimshian Songs” as No. 69.³⁴ The title is taken from the words that were transcribed onto the sheet music, which begin, “*ha • no - ha • no - hi - hi - ye - - ye - - ha • no - ha • no*”³⁵ According to Dr. Dylan Robinson, a Stó:lō scholar and the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts at Queen’s University in Kingston, Somers inquired about the man who’d recorded the song to ask for permission. Hearing that he’d died, Somers assumed that the rights were no longer attainable.³⁶ His actions would have seemed respectful, even sensitive, in 1967, despite being insensitive to the protocols laid out by Barbeau in “Tsimshian Songs.” It surprised me to discover that the rights to the Barbeau-MacMillan song collection are at this time a matter of dispute. The National Museum of Canada is of the opinion that it holds the copyright, although in 1927, when the singers on the

30 Marius Barbeau, Duncan Campbell Scott, and Ernest MacMillan, *Three Songs of the West Coast Recorded from Singers of the Nass River Tribes, Canada*, (London: Frederick Harris Co., 1928)

31 Nowry, 229.

32 Barbeau, “Tsimshian Songs,” 98.

33 *Ibid.*, 97.

34 *Ibid.*, 153, 270.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Telephone conversation with Dr. Dylan Robinson, Assistant Professor & Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts, Queen’s University, 9 August 2017.

Nass provided their songs for safekeeping, it was not their intention to cede their hereditary rights to the Dominion of Canada. As far as they were concerned, the songs remained theirs, to be used solely in accord with their laws. The song Harry Somers chose to adapt for *Louis Riel* has not been erased by colonialism or cultural change. It is sung today as it has always been.

“Hano” is a sacred lament, and is reserved for a single purpose: to grieve and to mark the passing of the Chief of the Nisga’a clan with the ancient name Skateen, or Sgat’iin. Although Barbeau appears to have understood this, he chose to make the music and the words available to the general reader through his publications. Like others in his profession, he seemed to have considered it perfectly legitimate for professional anthropologists/ folklorists to exempt themselves from Indigenous protocols. Along with most of his colleagues, Barbeau probably believed that the old ways were about to “vanish.” The schools and the reserve system were certainly designed to achieve this end. According to the salvage paradigm of

his day, he’d have seen the preservation and dissemination of songs as part of his professional duty.

According to “Tsimshian Songs,” MacMillan and Barbeau recorded “Hano” directly from Chief Albert Skateen. Barbeau calls it “a magnificent, yet primitive, chant, with a gripping, tragic grandeur. It is very close to a pure natural lament and cannot be analysed according to our usual musical standards... This is the dirge (*lemaw’i*) of Skateen, the head-chief (of the Wolf clan) of the Gitlarhdamks. It is used at the death of the chief of that name. It was sung by Alfred Skateen, the present holder of the title... Interpreted by Benjamin Munroe.”³⁷ In the program for *Louis Riel*, the COC included a prominent note by cultural advisors Dylan Robinson, Wal’aks Keane Tait, and Goothl Ts’imilx Mike Dangeli, who provide a detailed articulation of Nisga’a law regarding the use of songs, honouring the intentions of the singers on the Nass in 1927 and introducing a more suitable title for the lament:

Little did our ancestors know that

37 Barbeau, “Tsimshian Songs,” 153. Barbeau’s annotations with regard to another of the songs recorded on the Nass, “Temraks Maylih,” further indicate that he was aware of the protocols: “The singer, Skateen (Alfred Skateen, of Gitlarhdamks), is the chief of the leading clan of the Wolves at Gitlarhdamks. When questioned as to his right to use this song (as it belongs to another phratry), Skateen answered: “I learned this song from my father when I was young. He was the last to use it, as he was Tsenshoot himself. I also have a right to use it—though his son. It is seldom done, and this is called, “Where born from (‘amwilkse’ waetkus),” that is, from the father. When a man has no nephew (on the maternal side), he can make his son his heir and raise him to his rank... The interpreter was Pahl of Kincolith,” 138-139.

when they shared their songs with ethnographers for safekeeping, their songs might also become “pinned down” in contemporary compositions like *Louis Riel* without their consent. The “Song of Skateen,” a Nisga’a mourning song, was used by Harry Somers without knowledge of Nisga’a protocol that dictates that such songs must only be sung at the appropriate times, and only by those who hold the hereditary rights to sing such songs. To sing mourning songs in other contexts is a legal offence for Nisga’a people and can also have negative spiritual impacts upon the lives of singers and listeners.³⁸

The name Skateen, or Sgat’iin, is revered in Nisga’a territory. According to oral histories, in 1888 Chief Israel Sgat’iin encountered a party of government surveyors near Gitlaxt’aamiks, formerly New Aiyansh, B.C. He spotted their survey instruments and asked, “What’s that in your canoe?” The surveyors responded that they were measuring out the land to give it to the Nisga’a. Chief Sgat’iin looked at them sharply and replied: “How could you give us land that is already ours?”

It’s said that he then pointed his rifle at the lead surveyor, demanded they hand over the instruments, and sent the canoe back down the river.³⁹ The story of Chief Sgat’iin’s reply and the pointing of the rifle are also attributed to Chief David McKay, Sim’oogit Axlhlaawaals.⁴⁰

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The newspaper articles that preceded the opening night of *Louis Riel* on April 29th, 2017, foregrounded the efforts to create an Indigenous context for the opera. In a time of heightened awareness about Indigenous rights and living conditions in Canada, journalists saw in the production a moment of reckoning. How would the opera be adapted to address the fact that it was composed during a time of denial when there were still at least 60 residential and industrial schools operating in Canada? Cole Alvis admitted that it would be difficult: “Perhaps this piece can’t be built on the most solid Indigenous foundation. So we shift our goals to the long game. We look for cracks in the foundation, for small victories now that can lead to Indigenous-led projects in the future...I will have patience if I can see we’re having

38 Robinson, Dylan, Wal’aks Keane Tait and Goothl Ts’imilx Mike Dangeli, “The Nisga’a History of the ‘Kuyas’ Aria,” *Canadian Opera Company Spring Program 2017: Louis Riel and Tosca*, 15.

39 Nisga’a Lisims Government, “Coming of Christianity,” www.nisgaanation.ca, accessed 14 September 2017.

40 Sim’oogit Hleek Chief James Gosnell, *Lock Stock and Barrel: Nisga’a Ownership Statement*, (New Aiyansh: Nisga’a Tribal Council, n.d.), 13. There is a photo of Israel Sgat’iin on p. 23. www.nisgaanation.ca.

a conversation and a willingness to find somewhere new to go together.” Not every potential cast member saw things this way; a number of Indigenous performers turned down the offer to participate in the project.⁴¹

It was not until I read the program that I became aware of the concerns around Marguerite’s “Kuyas” aria. Colleagues in Vancouver had mentioned that they’d attended a meeting in Toronto with another to follow in Ottawa. The meetings were the result of a dialogue set in motion the previous February. Dylan Robinson, Keane Tait, and Mike Dangeli had written to the COC and the NAC, drawing their attention to Marguerite’s aria. Tait and Dangeli are Nisga’a artists; both are leaders of dance groups that perform nationally and internationally. Dangeli and his wife Sm Łoodm ’Nüüsm Mique’l Dangeli, a Tsimshian artist, scholar, choreographer, and, at the time, an Assistant Professor at University of Alaska Southeast who’d recently completed two years as Indigenous Protocols in the Performing Arts Consultant for the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, have spent the past few years educating audiences and collaborators about Nisga’a protocols. The public presentation of the “Song of Skateen,” they told the meeting, is a crime under Nisga’a law and has legal and

spiritual consequences.

Mique’l Dangeli’s experiences as a choreographer/dancer bring an Indigenous perspective to collaborative projects like *Louis Riel*. She suggests a new model which “is about non-Indigenous people taking the backseat and not being the ones that are driving these collaborations in the name of reconciliation, but [instead] taking the time to learn from Indigenous peoples and the ways in which they create. On the Northwest Coast, our primary method of creation is through our protocols, which are our bodies of Indigenous laws that are essential to new songs and dances and the performance of our ancient songs and dances. Until non-Indigenous artists stop working within the colonial mindset that has been ingrained [into] their mentalit[ies] and their practices, [and until they] realize that coming to Indigenous artists and saying, ‘I want to collaborate with you, this is what I have in mind,’ or ‘This is what I am going to do,’ rather than saying, ‘I would love to collaborate with you, what is it that you could see?’ [or] ‘You know, here is my practice: what is it that you could see for possibilities in terms of collaboration?’... [we will have] a continuation of colonial paternalism... rather than reconciliation.”⁴²

Dylan Robinson has likened the plucking

41 Robert Harris, “How the COC set out to solve the problem with Louis Riel,” Toronto: *The Globe & Mail*, 17 April 2017.

42 Tatiana Zamorano-Henriquez, “An Indigenous Perspective of Reconciliation and Art,” Interview with Mique’l Dangeli, *The Colloquium*, 2 September 2017, www.thecolloquiumsite.wordpress.com, accessed 3 September 2017.

out of a First Nations song from the archive to natural resource extraction on Indigenous lands. Appropriation seems to have been acceptable, he says, but those with the hereditary rights to the songs have little or no access to their cultural wealth. “I’m tired of this,” he told me, referring to the efforts to repatriate Indigenous songs; “our hereditary rights trump Canadian copyright.”⁴³ Mike Dangeli likens hereditary rights to intellectual property rights. “Potlatch law,” he says, “is older than Canadian law.”⁴⁴ When *Louis Riel* was performed at UBC, Robinson, at the time a Postdoctoral Fellow in Music at the University of Toronto, presented a paper entitled “Métissage and Canadian Art Music” that included a discussion of the Nisga’a history of the “Kuyas” aria. Most of those in attendance, he told me, including members of the music faculty, were cool to the idea that an appropriated song inserted into a 43-year old opera should be a matter for concern. The impression he got was that the opera should not be tampered with, and audiences should be free to form their own opinions.⁴⁵ It was at this time that he began his conversations with Mique’l and Mike Dangeli.

The reaction from the COC and the NAC to the February letter of concern about “Kuyas” was positive. Robinson told me that Alexander Neef, the COC’s general

manager, and Heather Moore, producer and Executive Director of the National Art Centre’s Canada Scene, and the co-producer of *Louis Riel*, were enthusiastic about collaborating with him and with the Nisga’a advisors on a process that would acknowledge the protocols, find a temporary solution to allow the “Song of Skateen” to be performed, and lead to further discussions. The correspondents decided to meet face to face in Toronto prior to the opera’s premiere.

By the time they gathered on April 19th, the COC and the NAC had agreed that there would be an explanatory note in the program and a Nisga’a presence on stage on opening night, including several performances by the Git Hayetsk Dancers and the Kwhlii Gibaygum Nisga’a Traditional Dance Group. The meeting was scheduled to accommodate the dancers and speakers as they arrived in Toronto for their rehearsals. Attending were members of the *Louis Riel* production team, Métis and First Nations representatives, and administrators from the Canadian Opera Company, the National Arts Centre, the Canadian Music Centre and the Canada Council. Also included were family members and executors of Harry Somers’s and Mavor Moore’s estates, and the holder of the opera’s performance rights, Michael Petrsek from Talent House. The media

43 Telephone conversation with Dr. Dylan Robinson, 9 August 2017.

44 Conversation with Sm Łoodm ’Nüüsm Mique’l Dangeli and Goothl Ts’imilx Mike Dangeli, Vancouver, B.C., 2 August 2017.

45 Telephone conversation with Dr. Dylan Robinson, 9 August 2017.

release included a preliminary statement by Dr. Robinson: “One intention of the gathering is to begin the process of developing policy related to Indigenous protocol for new music involving Indigenous participants, and music that misuses Indigenous song...This work of creative repatriation is essential in the ongoing process of reconciliation.”⁴⁶

The meeting on April 19th was closed and designed along the lines of an experimental meeting known as “The Summit” conducted three years earlier at the Banff Centre in which Indigenous participants, as Leaders, were invited to speak, while, to begin with, non-Indigenous invitees participated as Listeners, a reversal of the historical model of Canadian decision-making.⁴⁷ With Dylan Robinson as chair, the non-Indigenous participants in the *Louis Riel* meeting were similarly invited to become Listeners. The concept, I’m told, was difficult for some participants to accept, and there were moments of interruption. The Nisga’a advisors explained the severity of the issue. The “Song of Skateen” is not a song, they explained. One is not just listening to beautiful music. It is a lament, a song of grief to be sung, as it has always been, when the hereditary chief, Sim’oogit Sgat’iin, passes away. Anyone who sings

this lament for any other purpose is breaking Nisga’a law. Some of the listeners became defensive; some wanted a quick solution and wondered if it would not be possible to come up with an agreement so that this sort of indeterminacy might be avoided in the future. The Nisga’a advisors explained that they had no authority to enter into such an agreement.

The agenda did not call for a final agreement among the parties. The issue had been raised; those involved had become acquainted with the concerns. The audience would be made aware on opening night and in print through the program notes and on the website. The advisors would refer the legal issues to the Council of Elders of the Nisga’a Lisims Government, and the “Song of Skateen” would remain, for now, part of the production. The following statement was released in advance on the COC’s blog, *Parlando*:

With respect to both the Nisga’a and Métis peoples and in recognition of how the songs of one nation are not the same as another’s, the COC and NAC co-production of *Louis Riel* acknowledges the current holder of the hereditary rights to this song: Sim’oogit Sgat’iin, hereditary chief

46 “Dialogue on Use of Indigenous Songs in Canadian Compositions Hosted by COC,” Canadian Opera Company Media Release, 12 April 2017. www.files.coc.ca, accessed 3 September 2017.

47 NAC English Theatre / The Cycle, “Indigenous Theatre: Changing the Face of Canadian Theatre,” The Banff Centre, 22-24 April 2014, www.nac-cna.ca, accessed 6 September 2017. See Yvette Nolan and Sarah Garton Stanley with rapporteur Corey Payette, *The Summit: Meditations on an Indigenous Body of Work*, www.naccna-assets.s3.amazonaws.com, accessed 6 September 2017.

Isaac Gonu, Gisk'ansnaat (Grizzly Bear Clan), Gitlaxt'aamiks, B.C.

In recognition of the Nisga'a people and to correct the attribution of "Song of Skateen," the COC's opening night performance of *Louis Riel* on April 20 will begin with an oratory and musical address from Goothl Ts'imilx Mike Dangeli and Wal'aks Keane Tait of the Nisga'a First Nation with the Git Hayetsk and Kwhlii Gibaygum Nisga'a Dancers, two internationally renowned dance groups from Vancouver, B.C.⁴⁸

On opening night, at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, dressed in full regalia and accompanying himself on his drum, Mike Dangeli sang a Dangeli family victory song, passed down through his grandfather Reggie Dangeli's Tsetsaut side.

A second event, with a panel chaired by Dylan Robinson, took place at the National Arts Centre in May, before *Louis Riel* opened in Ottawa. The intention was to move the agenda forward, and the participants had hoped to engage the invited representative from the Canadian Museum of History on issues of access and repatriation. Indigenous communities would like their songs back; cultural organizations like the COC, the NAC, the

Canada Council and the Canadian Music Centre seek clear and respectful guidelines. The participants had anticipated that the representative would agree to lead a discussion about song repatriation, but were disappointed to discover that this is not a priority for the Museum. The Museum has been transferring sacred artifacts to the Nisga'a Museum in Laxgalts'ap, B.C., under provisions of the *Nisga'a Final Treaty* (1999), but the Treaty also allows for negotiations and "custodial agreements" with the Canadian Museum of History respecting "conditions of access to and use, including study, display, and reproduction, of the Nisga'a artifacts and associated records by the public, researchers, and scholars."⁴⁹ "Associated records" includes sound recordings. While the participants in the meeting were disappointed by the Museum's position, several of them, including Robin Gray (Ts'msyen), Kevin Loring (N'lakap'amux), and Trevor Reed (Hopi), were able to describe their personal initiatives with regard to song repatriation in their home communities.⁵⁰

When the Canadian Museum of History does come to the table, the fundamental question will have to do with ownership and hereditary rights. Will the songs from the Nass River, for example, be "returned" one day and what does this mean in the digital age? Will access to certain Indigenous

48 "Dialogue on Use of Indigenous Songs in Canadian Compositions," *Parlando: The COC Blog*, www.coc.ca, accessed 12 September 2017.

49 *Nisga'a Final Agreement*, www.nnkn.ca, accessed 10 October 2017.

50 Correspondence with Dr. Dylan Robinson, 5 October 2017.

songs be restricted? This is common practice in archives and libraries that hold oral histories and other materials that are not for public dissemination. Alternately, will the Canadian Museum of History designate the hundreds of First Nations recordings in its collection as Canadian songs over which, as an institution of the federal government, it has sole jurisdiction? If courts should rule that Nisga'a law takes precedence over Canadian law, however, will such a decision compel Canada's cultural institutions, including the Museum, to relinquish the songs and music extracted from Indigenous communities in anticipation of constructing an overarching Canadian culture? Song repatriation would likely lead to a more respectful relationship between Canada and the Indigenous cultural sovereignties within Canada.

In September 2017, the Nisga'a Council of Elders concluded its deliberations and reported back to the Nisga'a Lisims Government on its findings with regard to the appropriated "Song of Skateen." Dylan Robinson and the Nisga'a advisors are awaiting the Government's response, anticipating that it will identify a process with which to begin addressing access, appropriation and repatriation based on the Nisga'a Nation's traditional protocols.⁵¹ The Canada Council publicly announced its

position on appropriation on the Opinion page of the national edition of the *Globe & Mail* on September 7th, 2017. Entitled "Choosing Change and Reconciliation in the Arts," the statement reads, in part, "The Canada Council recognizes that both the traditional and contemporary cultural and artistic practices of Indigenous peoples are their property, as spelled out in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Articles 11(1) and 31)."⁵² Echoes of *Louis Riel* can be heard in the Council's interpretations and recommendations. Artists seeking grants for projects "that address, deal with, incorporate, comment on, interpret or depict distinctive aspects of First Nations, Inuit or Métis culture...must demonstrate genuine respect and regard for Indigenous art and culture in their artistic process," the text reads. To this end, "we will expect some indication that authentic and respectful efforts have been made to engage with the artists or other members of the Indigenous communities whose culture or protocols are incorporated in any project for which Canada Council funding is being requested."⁵³

The Council's Adherence to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has triggered cries of censorship and political correctness in

51 Correspondence with Dr. Dylan Robinson, 5 October 2017.

52 See: *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, March 2008, www.un.org, accessed 19 October 2017.

53 Simon Brault and Steven Loft, "Choosing change and reconciliation in the arts," *The Globe & Mail*, 7 September 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com, accessed 9 September 2017.

some corners. Will granting decisions now be made for political rather than aesthetic reasons? Will radical and/or independent critiques be passed over? Some wonder if these criteria might end up prioritizing only works that are community-approved. Anyone who has been following granting procedures for provincial and national arts organizations is aware that for many years applicants have been encouraged to engage with Indigenous communities and to respect protocols. The opinion piece now makes it clear to the general public what is expected, and perhaps shields the Canada Council from criticism. Significantly, the Canada Council is moving out ahead of parliament, which is hesitant to fully embrace the UN document. As for political correctness, it's a term for false respect. Genuine respect is something else entirely.

Louis Riel is the most ambitious opera to have been written and produced in English Canada. Musically, the score retains all of its original freshness. The new production reminds audiences that, in Riel's day, suffrage was not universal; it was a privilege reserved for a small percentage of the population. Sometimes I think that Canadians, as resource extractors, still embrace Franz Fanon's second phase, in which the inheritors of a newly independent post-colonial nation replicate the model of their colonial masters. *Louis Riel's* libretto, in which the disenfranchised populations of the North West are attacked by the Militia, reflects this condition, and although the opera barely acknowledges

the Indigenous experience in Canada, it is not blind to injustice and state violence. In representing Riel's actions sympathetically, as a legitimate response to colonial trickery and manipulation, it exposes the origins of the national project and its strategy of enshrining citizenship and self-determination for the benefit of some, but not all.

After Riel's refusal to plead insanity at his trial and his sentencing to death, the opera gives him a chance to speak. In his aching final address, he declares: "I acted sensibly, in self-defence, against a government gone mad..." To God, he defers: "I leave the verdict in your hands." Riel is led to the scaffold accompanied by ascending orchestral chords, and the moment when he drops through the gallows floor in the new production drew a loud gasp from the audience. An observer snarls the final words of the opera, which express English Canada's sentiments at the time — "The goddamned son of a bitch is dead" — and a flute's ascending notes fade slowly, as if rising into heaven. Peter Hinton acknowledges that the questions about *Louis Riel* will continue. "The set is like an immense courtroom," he told Robert Harris, "so we can dramatize Riel's trial. But it's also where Thomas Scott, the Orangeman, is put on trial by the Métis Council. But Confederation is on trial in this, and, in an interesting way, the opera itself is on trial. It's not a trial whether it's a good opera or a bad opera, but whether it's a true opera. What does it say to us today?...

In essence, that's what this production is all about."⁵⁴

With the deliberations of the Nisga'a Lisims Government underway, it's possible to imagine that respectful conversations and negotiations will take place in the future within a framework of mutually recognized protocols. In 2017, Canada finally accepted the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples without qualifications. This was a positive development, but, as I write this, in October 2017, the country has yet to incorporate these principles into legislation, which means that the Declaration does not yet have the force of law. The principles are not binding. Government institutions, it appears, may choose to ignore or waive them. In the meantime, as Mique'l Dangeli reminded me at our recent meeting in Vancouver, those who perform the "Song of Skateen" on stage, or who participate in the performance, place themselves in spiritual peril. In Toronto, during the rehearsals for *Louis Riel*, the Indigenous performers were made aware of the situation and took measures to protect themselves. Mique'l Dangeli's concern is that performers in future productions of *Louis Riel* may not be aware of the risk, and she wonders who will tell them.⁵⁵ It remains a pertinent question.

54 Harris, "How the COC set out to solve the problem with Louis Riel," *The Globe & Mail*, 17 April 2017.

55 Conversation with Sm Łoodm 'Nüüsm Mique'l Dangeli and Goothl Ts'imilx Mike Dangeli, 2 August 2017.

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I would like to acknowledge the debt of thanks I owe to those who patiently answered my questions, corrected my assumptions, and helped me out at every turn: Michael Barnholden, Sm Łoodm 'Nüüsm Mique'l Dangeli, Goothl Ts'imilx Mike Dangeli, Dr. Dylan Robinson and Catriona Strang.