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Deconstructing History: An analysis of Rita Bouvier's poem "Riel is dead and I am alive"

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Deconstructing History:

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The term Métis has often been used as a kind of comprehensive distinction for any Canadian or American with a 'mixed-heritage' of European and Aboriginal origins. A very rigid and authoritative definition of what it means to be a Métis has also been employed to limit those who can lay claim to the title of Métis to people who have an ancestral link to the 1900s Red River Colony in Manitoba and are descendants of a typically French, English or Scottish patrilineal history and an Aboriginal matrilineal one. However, the concept of self-identification¹ as a Métis is incredibly important to Métis culture, and this lack of a solid and distinct definition of what it means to be a Métis is paralleled in the inconsistency of Canadian history and its complex definitions of Canadian citizens, not just those that pertain to people with Aboriginal origins, and this complicated historical narrative is often explored by artists and academics alike.

Rita Bouvier is a Métis poet and educator from Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan who, through her poems and her work as a teacher, attempts to connect Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals together on an emotional, cultural and intellectual level. Her poem "Riel is dead, and I am alive," though seemingly simple in its content, is replete with complex arguments and notions concerning the changeability of history because

¹ See Purich, especially chapter 1, for more information about self-identification in Métis culture.

individuals' biases and perspectives influence it. Bouvier confronts the themes of Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal, colonizer versus colonized, and female versus male, and the effects each binary can have on remembering the past and the movement toward the future. The title of the poem itself is a cry for people to pay attention to what is happening in the present and works to draw the reader's focus away from the controversial and irreconcilable arguments of the past. Bouvier's adamant tone and final connection to her own female ancestors, and in turn their connection with nature, pulls the reader away from these questions about history. Instead she raises more important questions concerning academic discourse and its usefulness in the preservation of the past and present Métis culture and in the education of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens alike.

Bouvier's poem explores the idea of history and the ways in which different perspectives can create a bias regarding one's interpretation of a particular event or historic figure. In Canadian history, the Métis leader and politician Louis Riel has myriad identities, each one dependent on the individual recounting the story. Riel has, as Flanagan writes "been called a rebel and a patriot, a villain and a hero, a madman and a saint" (3), and yet still today there has been very little agreement between historians, academics, and ordinary Canadian citizens that might produce a singular, defining, truthful identity for him. This controversial historical figure is surrounded by many undisputable facts regarding the rebellions he led and participated in, and yet, the way he is viewed is entirely subjective; as Donald Swainson states, "Louis Riel cannot be all things to all Canadians but he can be a lot of things to a variety of disparate groups " (qtd. in Osborne 307). Bouvier, a Métis herself, uses Riel as a comprehensive symbol for the

complexity and unreliability of purportedly truthful history, since she attempts to pull the reader's attention away from the 'facts' and toward the reality of her culture and her people. Poets, artists, and novelists have repeatedly sought to depict Riel, producing varying results, for the "tremendous fluidity in the aesthetic representation of the Métis leader calls into question the necessary connection between an individual and the manner in which he or she is portrayed" (Braz 3). Though Bouvier is evoking the image of Riel through her poem, her aim is not to explore or solidify a persona for Riel but to show the reader the futility and asininity of such an endeavour.

As I myself attempted to learn about Riel, I found these conflicting interpretations of history in each and every book I read. Since Bouvier's poem seems to address both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers, I felt it crucial to gain the perspectives of a non-Aboriginal and a Métis historian in order to explore this incredible disconnect between these depictions of one singular historical figure. It is important to note, however, that while Thomas Flanagan, an American non-Aboriginal, and Howard Adams, a Canadian Métis, represent two distinct groups, neither Flanagan nor Adams can be seen as speaking on behalf of all non-Aboriginal or Métis respectively. In my comparison of the reported history of Louis Riel I found three obvious inconsistencies between the perspectives of Flanagan and Adams. In scholarship on Riel, most academics believe that it was the execution of the government surveyor Thomas Scott at the hands of the Métis that acted as a turning point in the Red River Rebellion. Interestingly, Flanagan focuses the blame for Scott's execution almost entirely on Riel's shoulders, while Adams claims that it was a jury of seven men who decided on Scott's fate and that Riel actually "pleaded that leniency be shown to the accused" (58). Through only a slight change of words, Riel has

been transformed: from a merciless rebel leader, he emerges in Adams's account as a forgiving and sympathetic Catholic man.

The second contrast I noticed was the way in which the interval between the two rebellions is reported. For Flanagan, this period is notable because of the deterioration of Riel's mental state and his residence in two separate asylums; Flanagan is obviously hinting at the very real possibility that Riel was insane. Adams, however, focuses almost entirely on Riel's election to and subsequent exclusion from the Canadian government and the House of Commons, thereby drawing attention to the notion that "racism was apparently stronger than justice in the Canadian House of Commons" (63) and away from any of Riel's concrete actions in that period.

Finally, the most important inconsistency between these apparently factual accounts of history is the way in which each writer explores Riel's death at the hands of the Canadian government. Flanagan writes, "he was charged with treason, for which the only penalty was death...Riel was hanged early on the morning of November 16, 1885" (20-21), and it is this succinct relation of the actual charge against Riel that stands in stark contrast to that of Adams's more aggressive report, which states that "by hanging Riel, Ottawa silenced revolutionary and separatist ideas in the Northwest...on November 16, 1885, Riel was murdered on the colonizer's scaffold" (137). Both Flanagan and Adams are relating an important moment in Canadian history, but each account is full of their personal interpretations regarding Riel and the Canadian government. Flanagan writes as a staunch supporter of the Canadian government of the time, alluding to the idea that the government had no choice but to execute the rebellious and insane Riel. Adams,

however, writes as if determined to hold the government responsible for Riel's unjust death and for suppressing a much needed revolution of the Métis people.

These obviously contrasting reports of history show the unreliability of what is so often believed by so many Canadian citizens to be undisputable fact. In her poem Bouvier writes that the past is not only irreconcilable but the arguments behind it are just "mumbo-jumbo" (18), since different individuals "claim monopoly of the truth" (2). Bouvier is clearly not ignoring the fact that history is controversial, especially in regards to Aboriginal history, for, as Adams asserts, "native people in a colony are not allowed a valid interpretation of their history, because the conquered do not write their own history. They must endure a history that shames them....those in power command the present and shape the future by controlling the past" (43). What Bouvier seems to be advocating, however, is a move away from arguing about the past and unknowable historical figures and toward a focus on the important and current aspects of her culture.

Early in the poem in the lines,
 presenting the life of a living people,
 sometime in eighteen eighty five.
 now, some time in nineteen ninety five
 a celebration of some odd sort. (6-9)

Bouvier is lamenting the fact that despite Riel's death in 1885, and his incredibly controversial nature, Canadian citizens are still preoccupied by his life, erecting statues in his honour and establishing acts such as the 1995 bill C-288, which was an "act to revoke the conviction of Louis David Riel" (Braz 193). For Bouvier, these aspects of history and Riel's possible exoneration are not as important as the real experience of her Métis

culture, both past and present. Retrying Riel is not what Canadian citizens should be focusing on when contemplating Métis history, but rather they should be discovering the parts of Métis culture that are still alive.

Bouvier's contrast between the male patriarchal figure of Louis Riel, symbolizing the contested nature of history, and the female ancestors who are linked closely with the Métis culture referenced at the end of the poem, suggests an interesting insight into the female/male dichotomy in both Bouvier and her readers' personal history and personal identity. The line "Riel is dead! and I am alive!" (11) illustrates Bouvier's need as a female poet to have a voice so that she can establish her own history and culture and in turn her own identity. The struggle with voicelessness is confronted in the poem when she states, "I sit there mute and voiceless" (12), and it is through her poetry that she is able to confront the male figure of Riel, and in doing so she asserts her selfhood as an Aboriginal woman and focuses on the importance of her female ancestors in the definition of her personal identity.

The struggle to break free from the constraints of Western patriarchy is a theme explored by many female authors; however, it is crucial to recognize that that struggle is not identical for all women writers and can vary depending upon race, class, and sexuality. Julia Emberley explores feminist criticism and decolonization through the eyes of Aboriginal women in her book *Threshold of Difference*. For Emberley there is a difference between a decolonizing Anglo-American feminism and that of Aboriginal women who must confront the existence of an "imperial feminism": "Native women's writings demonstrate that how female genders are made differs considerably in a society...where exchanges between men and women can be characterized as a form of

balanced reciprocity, as compared to a capitalist society in which the exchange of women dominates the very constitution of its social relations" (Emberley xv). That is not to say, however, that the aims of Anglo-American feminism are not similar in theory to those of feminist Aboriginal women, for both focus on the engendering of girls and women and the patriarchal constraints imposed on them and on which dominant Canadian beliefs and culture are based. In the late 1900s, Aboriginal women were, just like non-Aboriginal women, governed by the Euro-Canadian patriarchal system, which controlled their basic rights, such as those associated with marriage and reproduction, and yet Aboriginal women have struggled with a more diverse selection of patriarchal dominance inflicted upon them by the Canadian government. Emberley writes, "the Canadian government granted Native women equality within its own structure, a structure of internal colonialism, while leaving financial and land-based problems...to be coped with by the bands" (90). Though Anglo-American feminism has focused on and achieved a move toward more equality between the genders for non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens, Aboriginal women and Aboriginal feminist theory is focused less on specifically gender-oriented issues and more on the struggle for basic citizen rights and survival.

This distinction between feminist theories is important in understanding Bouvier's division between the male and female figures in her poem. She is less concerned with the gender-oriented struggles of Anglo-American feminism and is rather attempting to emphasize the power that women in the past have held within the Métis community and culture. Owing to the fact that history is controlled by the patriarchy, most everything remembered revolves around the male figures in the past, such as Louis Riel or his general Gabrielle Dumont. However, in the final lines of her poem,

when I remember – I remember
my mother – her hands tender, to touch
my grandmother – her eyes, blue, the sky
my great grandmother – a story, a star gazer
who could read plants, animals and the sky (20-24)

Bouvier is bringing not only intimate details about her female ancestors into her own personal identity, but she is emphasizing aspects of her culture, such as reading plants, animals and the sky, which are so often ignored in the male-dominated history of the Métis people. Even male Métis authors are missing crucial parts of the female perspective in their writings and imposing a masculine bias on all of history since, as Maria Campbell states, "men are not prepared to be vulnerable in their writing. Part of it is the kind of oppression that we've been under" (qtd. in Lutz 48). The feminist perspective in Aboriginal literature showcases the struggles that Aboriginal women have had to endure and the oppression they have suffered at the hands of both the patriarchal system of Canada and at the hands of the men in their own communities. Bouvier does not dismiss Louis Riel as an important figure of the past, for that would simply be unwarranted, but she is emphasizing the often ignored feminine aspects of her culture that are not evident in history books.

The controversy of history is explored thoroughly throughout her poem, but when she claims that she is alive in the present, she is not only bringing the feminine aspects of the past to the forefront, but also the importance of Aboriginal feminism in today's Métis culture. Lindsay Knight addresses this idea of the value of present feminist Métis culture when she writes, "to counteract the impact of colonialism and combat oppression, native

women can create a deeper understanding, hone our skills for survival, and once again build strong nations by sharing our stories that reflect our culture and current realities" (34). Bouvier is doing precisely this through her books of poetry and specifically in the final stanza of her poem "Riel is dead, and I am alive." She is both a champion of aboriginal education and a female native poet and is exactly the type of woman, an empowered female native educator, to whom Priscilla Settee is referring when she writes that, "women believe that education should reflect the needs of the community, preserving culture and helping young people adapt to the challenges in their lives" ("Delores's 50th" 96). By concentrating on the female influences in her culture and drawing our attention away from the most controversial male figure of Métis history, Bouvier is maintaining her culture at the same time as educating all Canadian citizens about Métis identity.

Because of the incredibly controversial nature of history, Bouvier seems to be attempting to look at the past in a way that is unlike the perspectives of "cultural imperialists" (14) who are the source of "the truth unravelling" (13) which she references in the middle of her poem. History is so often the cause of arguments and strife amongst the people who share it, since in shared histories, as Homi Bhabha states "the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable" (qtd. in Osborne 321). Bouvier's poem seems to recognize this conflict in history but presents an alternative and more hopeful and even therapeutic approach to understanding Métis and non-Aboriginal peoples' shared history. Ronald Niezen explores this idea of a "therapeutic history" in his book *The Rediscovered Self*, in which he examines the idea of

attaining a more effective individual and cultural-identity by revisiting the past and understanding the idea of self-definition, a very important part of Métis culture in particular. Describing his theory regarding history, Niezen states that a "main criterion for determining the truth is the subjective experience of group affirmation...it thus emphasizes those aspects of the past that are emotionally positive, such as social peace, egalitarianism, spiritual enlightenment, and harmony with nature" (150). By ending her poem with a reference to her great-grandmother's connection with nature and by depicting her as someone "who could read plants, animals and the sky" (24), Bouvier is using Niezen's idea of therapeutic history, in that she is returning to the positive and important aspects of her culture and refusing to get distracted by the tense "sterile talk" (5) of historical debate. As an adamant believer in the education of more than just 'factual' history for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, Bouvier pushes for greater understanding and a more cohesive and collective identity where the positive aspects of history can dominate. Advocating that both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals explore history therapeutically, Bouvier is offering her readers a chance to encounter the positive aspects of her own history. Because therapeutic history has the "potential to change for the better the way members of an intellectual community *feel* about themselves...though presented as truth about the past and the essence of one's being, the self-representations of therapeutic history are actually part of a creative process of becoming" (Niezen 168). For Bouvier, an educator who teaches and writes for both aboriginals and non-aboriginals, this education of all Canadian citizens is imperative in moving forward as a united country with a wide, varied, and complex culture. In her essay "I don't see that we have too many options" Bouvier addresses the struggle between

cultures within the current educational system when she writes, "the tension manifests itself as a choice between Aboriginal content and Canadian content, as if the two are mutually exclusive" (43). In a country as complex as Canada, history cannot be seen in terms of right and wrong, fact and fiction, as these might be seen through the many representations of the controversial Riel. Instead, if we are ever to achieve a reconcilable future, we as a country must utilize the notion of therapeutic history and recognize the connectedness of our history as an entire nation as well as acknowledge that the purpose of history is to not only report facts from the past but to create a healthier collective future for all Canadians. As Patricia Settee, an aboriginal educator, states, "I believe in action education and education for social change...students must learn to be so much more of the solution...I want my students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to understand their roles and the challenges of becoming social change agents" ("The status quo is not an option" 117). It is absolutely essential that all citizens of Canada become educated and aware of the biases of history and the power of past and present cultures in order to better comprehend their own personal identities and the identity of Canada as a nation.

Rita Bouvier's poem, though directly referencing the historical figure of the Métis leader Louis Riel, is attempting to move away from Canada's obsession with patriarchal, colonial history and its masculine mascots, such as Riel. Educating oneself about, and attempting to understand, history is not an entirely detrimental task as long as one recognizes the biases surrounding history and acknowledges that important aspects are so often ignored. Bouvier's poem seems to be asserting that debating Métis history is only useful when it is coupled with the cultural and personal identities of Métis people as well as with some recognition that these aspects of the past influence present-day society.

However, she also draws our attention to the greater question of academic discourse and its usefulness in today's understanding of Métis culture. The poem itself seems to be set at an academic conference at which the significance of Louis Riel is being debated amongst academics and historians, who may or may not have any personal connection to the Métis culture. Bouvier, described as sitting silent at such a conference, refers to the possible destructiveness of such academic discourse in the lines, "this time the gatling gun/ is academic discourse" (15-16), where she dramatically emphasizes its potentiality for disaster by associating it with the 19th century war symbol of the Gatling gun. For the Métis people during the North-West Rebellion, the Gatling gun held specific significance since it was originally rather ineffective, for very few men could handle it, but once American Lieutenant Arthur Howard, who was dubbed "friend of the gun," joined the fight against the Métis, it became a symbol of massive destruction. According to historian Joseph Howard, Lieutenant Howard "traveled...into a foreign country to kill men against whom he had no feeling whatever...his interest in the mass murder of Métis was wholly scientific, cold as mercury in a tube. Batoche was to be his laboratory" (452). The Gatling gun and Lieutenant Howard played a crucial role in the Battle of Batoche during which Riel surrendered and the rebellion was ended. Bouvier evokes such a destructive, colonial, historical weapon as the symbol of the damage that academic discourse and argument can have on a culture so vulnerable and unique as the Métis.

The poem "Riel is dead, and I am alive" questions many things in its six short stanzas, and it leaves the reader reflecting on Canadian colonial history and Canadian Métis history. Bouvier stresses the unknowability of a singular history and tries to connect the Native and non-Native viewpoints about the past to bring forth a more

collective Canadian identity, which, rather than engaging in a debate about itself, preserves past and present culture on a more personal level than is available simply through the use of debatable facts.

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