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Dissonant Provocations: Louis Riel, Opera, Edward Said and Political Theory

The year is 1969. You are at home, somewhere in Canada. You and your family crowd around the television in the living room to watch the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Tonight, the CBC is presenting their adaptation of *Louis Riel*, an opera originally commissioned for the Canadian Centennial celebrations in 1967. You expect that the opera will be triumphant and self-congratulatory, like a national anthem stretched over two hours. What you and your family end up watching, however, is more complicated. In fact, on first reflection, there was hardly anything celebratory about the opera at all. The music was harsh, anxious, and largely unmelodic. The eponymous protagonist, Louis Riel – based on the historical figure – is a religiously inspired Indigenous resistance leader who is executed as a traitor by the Canadian state. The antagonist, John A. Macdonald, is a Machiavellian drunkard – and Canada’s first Prime Minister. The opera, its subject, and the context that it was created for all seem to coexist in an uneasy tension with each other and themselves, a strange dissonance that you feel has just been unloaded onto you. How do you make sense of these dissonant provocations? How do you interpret an opera like this, that seems to unsettle more than it settles?

Perhaps the solution is to resolve these dissonant relationships in your interpretation of the opera. The opera unsettles and provokes, so you respond by making “sense” of it. You have been presented with dissonance, so what would *consonance* look like? How can Riel and Canada be made to work together? Are they even compatible? Maybe Riel is representative of the plight

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of minorities in Canada: so long as Canada treats its *all* its citizens well and ensures equality, then we can see the opera's dissonances as stressing the importance of multicultural consonance. Or maybe Riel is the antithesis of Canada. As noble his intentions, Riel is a lost cause, a necessary sacrifice on the road to cross-continental nationhood. Riel's relationship with Canada may have been dissonant, but now, one hundred years later, we have peace, stability, and tranquility.

In this paper, however, I argue for a different interpretative approach to *Louis Riel*. Drawing from the work of Edward Said, I see *Louis Riel*'s dissonant provocations not as something to resolve but as something to sustain and emphasize. In doing so, I make the case for the analytical power of dissonance for political theorists. Although my initial object of analysis is an opera, *Louis Riel*'s political connections run deep. Indeed, Louis Riel, the historical figure, has been a constant touchstone in the Canadian political consciousness for the past 150 years. Any interpretation of the opera inevitably becomes an interpretation of Riel and Canada more broadly.

As I show, the opera's dissonances disclose Canada and Riel's dissonant political relationship. We, the audience, are left with these dissonances. As political theorists, rather than see these dissonances as something to resolve – as challenging us to find conceptual or normative compatibility between Riel and Canada – we should instead embrace and emphasize dissonances to see what they unsettle, perforate, and dispel. Resolving dissonance, by contrast, obscures more than it reveals. Dissonance may be uncomfortable and feel unacceptable, but this is precisely the point. The political world – especially in settler colonial and imperial contexts – is “untidy”, contradictory, and inexpressible in its totality.² As James Tully notes, “we are entangled in a more complex web of imperial relationships than the defenders and critics of

² Jeanne Morefield, “Said and Political Theory,” in *After Said*, ed. Bashir Abu-Manneh (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 112–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108554251.007>.

imperialism suggest.”³ We can either rely on the comfortable and palliating closure that resolving dissonance provides, or we can embrace dissonance to see the world as it is.

In what follows, I first draw on Edward Said’s understanding the world as an “atonal ensemble” to emphasize that settler ideas of political community – based on liberal-constitutionalism – are non-exhaustive of practices of political community on the lands claimed by Canada. Next, I briefly outline the life of Louis Riel and describe how he is a product of this “atonal ensemble”. Then, I outline the opera *Louis Riel* and show how it presents a version of the “atonal ensemble”. In doing so, the opera discloses and leaves the audience with the dissonant relationship between Louis Riel and Canada, in addition to being in a dissonant musical style, as well as in a dissonant relationship with its compositional context: the Canadian centennial. Most interpretations of the opera, I show, attempt to resolve these dissonances. Intriguingly, these interpretations match perfectly with interpretations of the relationship between Louis Riel and Canada more broadly. I argue that these interpretations, which resolve dissonance, obscure critical realities about settler colonial domination. In contrast, I offer an alternative interpretation of *Louis Riel* that *sustains* its dissonances. In doing so, I make the case for the elucidative power of dissonance for political theorists. I conclude by speculating on how this approach could be used more broadly.

North America as an Atonal Ensemble

Dissonance is a relationship. To have dissonance, you need to have more than one sound.

Importantly, the imperial and settler-colonial setting – which *Louis Riel* depicts and was composed within – provides the perfect conditions for dissonant relationships. In *Culture and*

³ James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 2, Ideas in Context 93–94 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 158.

Imperialism, Edward Said argues that the world shaped by imperialism must be understood as an “atonal ensemble.” “We must take into account,” he argues, “all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography.”⁴ Atonality is central to his understanding of complexity. It is apt, therefore, that Said characterizes the peoples of the world as “one vast whole whose exact contours are impossible for one person to grasp, but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel.”⁵

Said’s notion of the “atonal ensemble” can be scaled down to North American settler colonialism. Jodi Byrd, in *Transit of Empire*, uses the term *cacophony* to describe the “discordant and competing representations of diasporic arrivals and native lived experiences” in what is known as North America.⁶ Settlement and colonization is cacophony: a chaotic jumble of understandings and experience. While Byrd focuses on American settler colonialism, cacophony—as both a metaphor and a theoretical framework—is also ideal for understanding how the representations and lived experiences constitutive of Canadian settler colonial expansion and consolidation are rich, diverse, and discordant. Political life on the lands known as Canada ought to be understood as a shared, conflicting, and often contradictory relationship.⁷ Said’s call for an analysis of the world based on an “atonal ensemble”, therefore, is ideal for the cacophonous reality of North American settler colonialism.

Critically, settler political community is just one part of the atonal ensemble, *not* the entire thing. Settler political community – referred to as Canada – rests on a liberal-constitutional

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 318.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Convergences (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 587.

⁶ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, xiii.

⁷ Edward W. Said and David Barsamian, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1994); James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 1995.

foundation that necessitates citizenship and the bounded nation-state.⁸ This foundation is animated by a bundle of narratives, assumptions, and values. These are cultural products: they are not predicated on universal truths, but, like works of art, are of the world.⁹ They, to use Edward Said's words on canonical texts, are built on structures "of attitude and reference"¹⁰ that draw from the rich resources of human history. As such, when I use "Canada", it is non-exhaustive of the whole atonal ensemble; Canada – as a settler colonial political community – is just one part. There is much that lies outside the bounds of settler ideas of political community that is often ignored, suppressed, or warped in analyses of political practice.¹¹ Indigenous peoples have been constituting political community for thousands of years. The foundations of Indigenous political communities have been developed alongside and with the land, and many animate political systems that are based around radical interdependency, mutual aid, and non-hierarchical governance – political communities that do not depend on liberal notions of the state and citizenship.¹² Although suppressed by settler governance and academic analysis, Indigenous polities persist both in theory and practice.

⁸ Aaron Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism: Growing Political Community," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

⁹ Berger, 35–60.

¹⁰ Said, xxiii.

¹¹ Val Napoleon, "Gitksan Democracy: On Its Own Terms," in *Democratic Multiplicity: Perceiving, Enacting, and Integrating Democratic Diversity*, ed. James Tully et al. (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹² For instance, see Darcy Lindberg, "Nēhiyaw Âskiy Wiyasiwēwina: Plains Cree Earth Law and Constitutional/Ecological Reconciliation" (PhD Dissertation [unpublished], University of Victoria, 2020); Mills, "Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together," 2019; Morales, Sarah, "Snuw'uyulh: Fostering an Understanding of the Hul'qumi'num Legal Tradition" (PhD Dissertation [unpublished], University of Victoria, 2014).

Louis Riel: A Product of the Atonal Ensemble

Louis Riel is a complicated figure in North American settler-colonial history. In many ways, Riel is a product of cacophonous “atonal ensemble” that Said and Byrd identify. Born in 1844 in what is now Winnipeg, Manitoba, Louis Riel trained at a Catholic seminary in Montreal and would go on to become a leader of the Métis people. The Métis, descended from European fur traders and First Nations, are an Indigenous people. Métis is sometimes incorrectly used as a synonym for people with mixed ancestry, which ignores the fact that the Métis are a distinct people with a rich history and culture.¹³ Such flattening is important to keep in mind of the ways in which Canadians appropriate the idea of “mixed” ancestry.

Canadian provinces were united into the Dominion of Canada in 1867, and John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada, sought to expand Canadian dominion west of the Great Lakes. The Métis under the leadership of Riel, faced with Canadian encroachment, responded by forming a provisional government in 1869, leading to what is known as the “Red River Resistance.” Macdonald, after negotiating with the Métis provisional government and promising them a spot in confederation, dispatched a British imperial expedition to impose order. Riel, fearing being lynched by a Canadian mob, fled to the United States. In exile, Riel drew on extensive networks to get elected twice to the Canadian parliament as well as press his cause for Métis freedom. In 1885, Riel, persuaded by Canada’s immiseration of the Métis people, led an armed uprising against the state. This uprising was eventually crushed, and Riel was sentenced to death, enflaming divisions between Catholics, protestants, settlers, Indigenous peoples, French,

¹³ Adam Gaudry, “Fantasies of Sovereignty: Deconstructing British and Canadian Claims to Ownership of the Historic North-West,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 46, <https://doi.org/10.5749/natiindistudj.3.1.0046>.

and English. Macdonald, refusing to exonerate Riel, allegedly declared that, “[Riel] shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour.”

Riel does not easily fit in Canada’s national narrative. His tense relationship with Canada, combined with his “mixed” Métis heritage, make him, for many, a perfect allegory of Canada’s conflicting and contradictory traditions. To the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, Riel personifies “the dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament,” while for Brian Cherney, “he also represents certain aspects of the human condition which are timeless and universal.”¹⁴ It is tempting to view Riel as the ideal allegory for Canada. However, because Riel is a product of the “atonal ensemble” of settler colonialism more broadly, he is irreducible to Canada. His upbringing in an Indigenous political community, his resistance to Canadian settler colonial expansion, and his practice and articulation of Métis governance structures mean that settler or even liberal-constitutional practices of political community only capture one aspect of Riel’s worldview and politics.¹⁵

The Opera *Louis Riel* Presents the Atonal Ensemble

Almost one hundred years after the Red River Resistance, an opera about Louis Riel was commissioned to celebrate the centenary of Canadian confederation. In one sense, Riel is an odd choice: why would a traitor be the subject of Canada’s first national opera? But, as explored above, Riel has lingered in the Canadian political imagination. Seen this way, Riel makes for a compelling – if provocative – subject. The opera *Louis Riel* is symptomatic of Canadian’s inability to shake Riel from the national zeitgeist.

¹⁴ Brian Cherney, *Harry Somers* (Toronto [Ontario]: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 130.

¹⁵ M. Max Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise: Louis Riel and the Métis Nation That Canada Never Was, 1840-1875* (Montreal ; Kingston ; London ; Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).

Opera has traditionally been celebratory and community consolidating.¹⁶ *Louis Riel*, however, takes a different approach. Indeed, Michael Shapiro notes *Louis Riel* as a “notable exception” to the rule of operas supporting, rather than questioning, state nation building.¹⁷ The opera’s plot, taken alone, is relatively straightforward. It covers the main events of the Red River Resistance, Riel’s exile, and his return, defeat, trial, and execution. Riel is the opera’s romanticized hero, caught between his agency as leader of the Metis and the onslaught of Anglo-settler Canada. Beyond this, however, *Louis Riel* is anything but conventional. The opera’s libretto, written by Mavor Moore, is in English, French, Cree, and Latin. John A. Macdonald – Canada’s first prime minister – is a Machiavellian drunkard, while Anglo-protestant settlers are a gullible mob. The opera’s music, composed by Canada’s leading composer Harry Somers, is a work of “radical modernism.”¹⁸ It is largely atonal, experimental, and non-melodic. The opera’s atonal music reflects the discordant diversity of its subject matter – Somers has claimed that it is a “multi-level work”.¹⁹ There are a variety of singing types (from practically spoken word to full melodic aria), and different styles of music overlap and contradict with one another. The main style is Somers’s signature “strongly dissonant” atonality, but this is layered with “electronically produced sounds; folk material; and straight diatonic writing.”²⁰

There are few toe-tapping melodies or memorable arias in *Louis Riel*. Indeed, the one catchy folk-melody in the opera conveys the deceptive influence of nativist rhetoric. Following Riel’s execution of Thomas Scott, cynical demagogues whip Canadian Anglo-Protestants up into a jingoistic frenzy, causing the mob to break out in a rendition of “We’ll Hang Him Up the

¹⁶ Michael J. Shapiro, *Methods and Nations: Cultural Governance and the Indigenous Subject*, Global Horizons (New York: Routledge, 2004), 73.

¹⁷ Shapiro, 75.

¹⁸ Lee, “Radical Modernism, Operatic Failure, and Louis Riel ’s Challenge to Reconciliation,” 25.

¹⁹ Cherney, *Harry Somers*, 133.

²⁰ Cherney, 133.

River”, calling for Riel’s lynching. *Louis Riel*, rather than provide an easily digestible national narrative, presents the messy – and often discordant – diversity on the lands known as Canada.²¹

The opera’s multi-lingual singing, combined with this multiplicity of competing styles and themes, lead to a work that is unique, compelling, and provocative. This all makes for an opera that is thematically faithful to the “atonal ensemble” of Canadian settler colonialism. “The musical and operatic challenges in *Louis Riel*,” Lee writes, “are marks of an authenticity, of the refusal to state a form that feigns an audience-pleasing resolution of historical issues that remain unresolved. If the opera were less difficult, less aesthetically riven, it would be, arguably, less true.”²² *Louis Riel*, therefore, is accurate because it is atonal. The opera not only presents the atonal ensemble in its subject matter and staging, but it gives the “the complexities and difficulties”²³ of settler colonial cacophony a music form as an *actual* atonal ensemble. Critically, as explained above, the atonal ensemble is more than just Canada and settler colonial political community. Accordingly, in presenting the atonal ensemble, *Louis Riel* is presenting the audience with *more* than Canada. By choosing *Louis Riel* as a subject and by presenting its atonality accurately, the opera *Louis Riel* is not just a Canadian opera or an opera about Canada. It is, like its protagonist, to use Said’s words, “in history, the world, the crowd and the storm.”²⁴ *Louis Riel*, the opera, “is not just about the mixture; it is that mixture itself.”²⁵

With this all said, *Louis Riel* is far from flawless. Although it presents the atonal ensemble, no Indigenous people were adequately consulted in its production and composition. It is painfully clear in certain parts of the opera that two white settlers – Mavor Moore and Harry

²¹ Caryl Clark et al., “Editors’ Introduction: Hearing Riel,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 1–9.

²² Lee, “Radical Modernism, Operatic Failure, and *Louis Riel*’s Challenge to Reconciliation,” 26.

²³ Edward W. Said and David Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2003), 190–91.

²⁴ Edward W. Said, “‘The Satanic Verses’ and Democratic Freedoms,” *The Black Scholar* 20, no. 2 (April 1989): 17.

²⁵ Said, 18.

Somers – created this opera in the 1960s. Indigenous people are often stereotyped, and characters toss around racist slurs casually.²⁶ In making an argument for the potential that this opera holds for theorists and dissonance, I am not claiming that the opera is above criticism. Far from it. Indeed, while *Louis Riel* compellingly presents one perspective of the atonal ensemble, it is just that: one perspective. In taking up *Louis Riel*, therefore, we can also identify any “suppressions and elisions” of parts of the atonal ensemble.²⁷ Thus, in taking up *Louis Riel* as a provocative, yet flawed work, we do not have to remain bound by its lacunae. Instead, we can use them to see what is left out and foreclosed not just by interpretations of the opera, but by the opera itself. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am interested in what *Louis Riel* contains, not what has been left out.

The Dissonance between Riel and Canada

The relationship between Riel and Canada, both in the opera and in history, is dissonant. Dissonance, in music, is “an aural quality arising from a combination of tones that seem unstable and in need of resolution.”²⁸ It creates a feeling of discomfort or tension. As such, dissonance often carries connotations of disharmony, strife, conflict, and dissidence. Consonance is the opposite of dissonance, and is often associated with harmony, order, and peace. Music that is mostly consonant makes for easier listening than music that leans into dissonance. In traditional (western) tonal music, dissonance is often used to build tension before it is resolved into consonance. Doing so means that when a composition reaches harmonic resolution, it is more

²⁶ For further detail see Jean Teillet, “The Sermon from the Mount: The Messages in the Canadian Opera Company’s Remount of the Riel Opera,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 29–36; Colette Simonot-Maiello, “‘Decolonizing’ Riel,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 73–82, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.4.09>.

²⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 149.

²⁸ Lee, “Radical Modernism, Operatic Failure, and Louis Riel ’s Challenge to Reconciliation.”

satisfying and relieving, like “returning home.” Thus, sustained dissonance can feel almost unacceptable: that there is something out of place that must be put back in its spot.²⁹ Importantly, interpretation of dissonance is objective: what is considered dissonant to one person or culture may not be to another. The idea that dissonance is unacceptable or in need of resolution is just one interpretation that is often assumed to be universal.

Atonal music, as a recognized artform, emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction to traditional tonality and its use of dissonance. Dissonance, in atonal music, is not something to resolve back into consonance but is often sustained and left unresolved. The opera *Louis Riel*, as explored above, is atonal. There is no overarching tonal center or coherent key within which the music fits. Dissonance is not antinomic confrontation – notes do not have to be fundamentally opposed to one another to make a dissonant sound when played simultaneously. Indeed, there is something *consonant* about perfect opposites. Simple binaries and opposition works with a tonal center or key because there is a clear idea of what is an “insider” and “outsider”, what is within the framework or without.

Louis Riel's own score is in a dissonant relationship with itself. This is largely because the score is atonal. The notes, melodies, and differing styles used in *Louis Riel*'s score are often in a dissonant relationship with each other because there is no overarching structure that can be deferred to. There is no clear “home” in which dissonance can be ultimately resolved. As a result, *Louis Riel* does not exactly make for a comfortable or celebratory listen. Although the opera received favourable reviews from critics, its general audience receptions reflected its difficult

²⁹ Note the parallels here to Said's idea of himself as “out of place”. See Edward W Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). For the idea that dissonance is unacceptable, see Lee, ‘Radical Modernism, Operatic Failure, and Louis Riel's Challenge to Reconciliation’.

and unsettling nature. Robin Elliot describes the reaction to the televised staging of the opera by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation:

The show received the lowest audience enjoyment rating of any CBC show that season. Outside of Toronto, enthusiasm for the broadcast seems to have been minimal. A review in the Edmonton Journal stated: “Louis Riel should never have been made into an opera... the music is irritating, distracting, unsuitable and un-melodic” (Harvey 64). The CBC logged phone calls from some 150 viewers, 130 of whom offered unfavourable comments such as “I’ll be glad when this trash is over,” “Can’t understand a word they’re singing,” and “I want English on an English station.” There had been plans to broadcast the opera on CBC Television’s French network in the spring of 1970, but it seems that did not happen, perhaps due to the negative response to the broadcast on the CBC Television’s English network.³⁰

Additionally, *Louis Riel*’s dissonance is more than just an accurate depiction – it is an unsettling provocation *because* it faithfully depicts the dissonance of its subject matter. It was not that Louis Riel was simply part of the atonal ensemble and irreducible to Canada. He also directly challenged the project of Canadian confederation. Riel resisted Canadian settler state consolidation while also providing alternative visions of a Canadian confederal relationship, in addition to serving as an elected member of Canadian parliament.³¹ Canada, meanwhile, negotiated with Riel and eventually gave him conditional amnesty but also failed to live up to its treaty obligations, worked to keep Riel in exile, and eventually tried and executed him for High Treason. Riel and Canada’s relationship, therefore, was dissonant. The opera *Louis Riel*, while problematic in some aspects of its depiction, does not shy away from its presentation of this dissonance. In presenting the atonal ensemble, the opera also presents the particular political dynamics *within* that ensemble.

Furthermore, the opera has a dissonant relationship to its own context (the Canadian centennial). *Louis Riel*’s “linguistic and musical cacophonies,” Shapiro writes, “destabilize the

³⁰ Robin Elliott, “The Genesis and First Production of Louis Riel,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 16–17.

³¹ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*.

Euro-oriented consensual national narrative.³² For an event that was for, in principle, *celebrating* Canada, *Louis Riel*, in presenting the atonal ensemble, interestingly gives Canada an accompanying, rather than leading, role. While opera is a European artform – biasing it towards a Eurocentric presentation³³ – *Louis Riel* unsettles what is even expected from opera. Viewers who go in expecting a traditionally “European” opera will not receive that from *Louis Riel*.

Interpreting *Louis Riel*: Resolving Dissonance

The opera *Louis Riel* disrupts, questions, and unsettles far more than it resolves. Its radical modernism presents the audience with dissonant relationships – in its music, in its subject, and to its own context – and does not resolve them. How do you interpret an opera like this? How do you make sense of it, how to do tell what is it trying to say? Sherry Lee, in her article on *Louis Riel*'s radical modernism, claims that the opera, “in leaving its dissonances unresolved... instead challenges and provokes us to reconcile them.”³⁴ And indeed, for most interpretations of the opera, *Louis Riel*'s dissonant relationships are seen as provocations to resolve. Most interpretations of the opera attempt to resolve its dissonances in two ways: either that *Louis Riel* represents the inevitable tragedy of Indigenous genocide at the heart of Canadian confederation, or that *Louis Riel* shows that the “true” Canada is embodied by Riel's struggle for multicultural accommodation.

Since at least the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, Indigenous people have been viewed as peoples doomed to face extinction at the hand of the expanding settler-state.³⁵ For some, this

³² Shapiro, *Methods and Nations*, 75.

³³ Teillet, “The Sermon from the Mount: The Messages in the Canadian Opera Company's Remount of the Riel Opera.”

³⁴ Lee, “Radical Modernism, Operatic Failure, and Louis Riel's Challenge to Reconciliation,” 27.

³⁵ Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938735>.

destiny was cause for celebration, for others, it was a tragedy. What links these visions, however, is their understanding that for the modern state to flourish, Indigenous peoples must wither away: the march of “progress” is zero-sum, those who stand in its way either join it or are crushed. This understanding of settler colonial state formation and Indigenous agency is deeply flawed on a number of counts, but it has been persuasive for many.³⁶ Indeed, *Louis Riel* can easily be interpreted as staging this view of progress as a tragedy. Riel is the tragic romantic protagonist while John A. Macdonald is his scheming drunkard rival. Both are consumed by their political visions, setting up a zero-sum fight out from which Macdonald achieves victory tainted by domination. Critically, the opera is bookended by two executions: one of the Orangeman Thomas Scott by Riel’s provisional government, and the other of Riel by Macdonald’s government. In both scenes, Riel and Macdonald use the same justification: “I cannot let one foolish man / stand in the way of a whole nation!”³⁷ Thus, in this interpretation, *Louis Riel*’s dissonance is a tragedy; only one side can come out victorious, but no one really wins in the end. Each side is incommensurable to the other—Riel and Macdonald cannot afford to leave room for their significantly different “other.” The opera’s atonal and dissonant music is there to emphasize the antinomic struggle between Indigenous and settler political communities, domination and resistance, progress and tradition. In the end, only one side can emerge from the conflagration.

This interpretation of *Louis Riel* as depicting dissonance as tragedy seems odd for an opera commissioned for Canada’s centenary celebrations. Sarah Koval and Taryn Dubois call the opera “decidedly un-celebratory” and contend that it vilifies the Canadian government.³⁸ It is

³⁶ *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

³⁷ Mavor Moore and Harry Somers, *Louis Riel: Music Drama in 3 Acts*, 1969.

³⁸ Sarah Koval and Taryn Dubois, “Can Opera Listen? Canada’s (Sesqui) Centennial Opera, *Louis Riel*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 60, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.4.08>.

true that a triumphant or self-aggrandizing narrative would be a more obvious choice for a national opera. Understanding dissonance to be a tragedy of incompatibility between peoples, however, does subtle work in *palliating* Canadian national sentiments. It shows that Canada's actions, while regrettable, were ultimately necessary if Canada was to make progress on its route to continental statehood and civilization. The opera's dissonance is there to impress on the audience that it is impossible to live in dissonance: order and harmony, ultimately, need to prevail if we are to live well together. Jean Tiellet, for this reason, dubs *Louis Riel* a "sermon on the mount": it is a self-soothing story of how "Canada executed Riel, justified the necessity of its action, and exonerated itself.³⁹ Better that John A. Macdonald, a cynical drunkard, did the dirty work. "Now that the hard work is over," the opera seems to say, "we can, almost a hundred years later, live in harmony as a nation." This interpretation is horrifying. But if we see *Louis Riel* as challenging us to resolve its dissonances, this is one compelling way to do so.

However, just because *Louis Riel* portrays Riel as the tragic hero and Macdonald as the villain does not necessarily mean that the opera does not celebrate Canada. With 82 years between the execution of Riel in 1885 and the premiere of the opera in 1967 (132 when the opera was restaged for the sesquicentenary in 2017), the second interpretation that resolves the opera's dissonance applauds a contrasting multicultural nationalism that Canada now embraces.

While the opera *Louis Riel* is critical of Macdonald's particular style of nationalism, it can be seen as celebrating an alternative national "métissage."⁴⁰ Riel, in this interpretation, is the

³⁹ Tiellet, "The Sermon from the Mount: The Messages in the Canadian Opera Company's Remount of the Riel Opera," 37.

⁴⁰ "Métis" here is seen as a simple mixture of races and cultures, rather than a nation with political implications. "Métissage" is used to describe Canada as a mixed and multicultural place, effectively erasing Métis as an independent people. See Simonot-Maiello, "'Decolonizing' Riel," 75; "The Métis-Ization of Canada: The Process of Claiming Louis Riel, Métissage, and the Métis People as Canada's Mythical Origin," *Aboriginal Policy Studies (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada)* 2, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v2i2.17889>.

“quintessential Canadian hero”⁴¹ because, as Métis, he physically embodies both settler and Indigenous filiations, as well as politically the best of Indigenous and settler societies. Riel, embodying “the dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament,”⁴² is domesticized by Canada. Peter Hinton, who directed the restaging of *Louis Riel* for the sesquicentenary in 2017, wrote that, “While never premier, Riel was president of the Legislative Assembly of Assiniboia, and he laid the groundwork for Manitoba to enter Confederation. It was a small gesture, with enormous impact – long overdue and of our time. This realignment of our history is what our production of *Louis Riel* hopes to address.”⁴³ Riel himself may have lived a tragic life, but, portrayed in a Canadian national opera, he is able to live on in the minds and aspirations of all Canadians committed to multicultural accommodation. The 1969 CBC television broadcast of *Louis Riel* began and ended with a quote from then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau: “A democracy is judged by the way that a majority treats a minority.” A cornerstone of Trudeau’s liberal worldview, he originally made this statement in 1968 in Regina while invoking Riel. “Louis Riel’s battle is not yet won,” he added.⁴⁴ In this interpretation, Canada is still criticized. Macdonald is still the villain, while Riel is the misunderstood hero. Dissonance, however, is resolved by bringing Riel fully *into* settler political community. Riel is turned into a champion for minority rights *within* Canadian political community. In this interpretation, the opera owns up to Canada’s mistakes, but, in the past century Canada has learned from these mistakes – or at the very least can *now* learn from them. *Louis Riel* is, therefore, a story of “roots”, of settler colonial legitimacy. Riel is brought “home”. He did not resist Canada because he disagreed with the idea

⁴¹ Simonot-Maiello, “‘Decolonizing’ Riel,” 74.

⁴² Cherney, *Harry Somers*, 130.

⁴³ Peter Hinton, “Director’s Notes.,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 37.

⁴⁴ Association of Métis and Non-status Indians of Saskatchewan, ed., *Louis Riel: Justice Must Be Done* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Press, 1979), IV; “Louis Riel” (CBC TV, 1969).

of Canada as a political community, but because he was mistreated *by* Canada. Riel, as Hinton notes, set the groundwork for the Canada that we all enjoy today. This, therefore, is reason to see *Louis Riel* as celebrating Riel and the Canada he helped to create.

Interpreting Canada and Louis Riel: Resolving Historical Dissonance

The two interpretations of the opera *Louis Riel* explored above bare a stunning similarity to dominant interpretations of Louis Riel the historical figure in the Canadian political consciousness. This is to be expected. After all, *Louis Riel* was commissioned for a Canadian national celebration. The opera is bound to reflect what Canadians think of Louis Riel. But in investigating the similarity of interpretations between *Riel* and Riel, we can understand that most interpretations of Louis Riel's relationship to Canada resolve, rather than sustain, dissonances. In doing so, these interpretations cut themselves off from the elucidative potential of the atonal ensemble. In the pursuit of analytical clarity and resolution, these theorists remain unaware of the power of dissonance to productively unsettle and illuminate.

Like in the first interpretation of the opera, Louis Riel has been seen as the antithesis to Canadian political consolidation and nation-statehood. The main proponent of this view – who is also a major Riel scholar – is Thomas Flanagan.⁴⁵ Flanagan contends that Riel's resistance was the last gasp of an outdated and unrealistic opposition to colonial progress. Like Wovoka's Ghost Dance in the United States, Riel's rebellion was a religiously justified millenarian uprising. Riel was its charismatic – but mentally troubled – prophet-leader. In a similarly antinomic understanding to Flanagan – but from the opposite perspective – many interpret Riel as leading a brave armed uprising against colonial tyranny: he was a freedom fighter who rejected the idea of

⁴⁵ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*.

Canada wholeheartedly.⁴⁶ Kevin Bruyneel, in identifying this trend, argues that Riel has become the “homo sacer” of the Canadian political consciousness. “Riel,” Bruyneel writes, “is perpetually exiled, executed and exalted in ways that serve to mark out the boundaries of Canadian sovereignty and peoplehood but which exposes the violent essence of these boundaries.”⁴⁷ Bruyneel, in exposing the violent limitations of Canadian political imaginary, emphasizes the usefulness of Riel in solving a particular problem of violent exception.⁴⁸ Riel’s death, as Tiellet argues, is used to “exonerate” Canada’s continued political violence over Indigenous lands and bodies.⁴⁹ The Indigenous folk singer Willie Dunn, at the close of his song “Louis Riel” compares Riel to Jesus Christ, another man “working for the people, against oppression.” Riel died for Canada’s sins.

Inversely, like in the second interpretation of the opera, Riel is perceived as a champion of multicultural rights, a symbol of the accepting people that Canadians really are. “Today,” Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Louis Riel Day in 2020, “I encourage all Canadians to recognize Louis Riel’s contributions to the development of Canada and the role that the Métis Nation has played, and continues to play, in building a fairer and more inclusive country.”⁵⁰ Riel’s resistance, rather than Macdonald’s chauvinism, is the *real* Canada. Riel, Justin Trudeau declared, “paved the way for the Canada we know today.”⁵¹ Similarly, John Ralston Saul, in *A Fair Country, Telling Truths About Canada*, argues that Canada is a “Métis civilization.”

⁴⁶ Kevin Bruyneel, “Exiled, Executed, Exalted: Louis Riel, *Homo Sacer* and the Production of Canadian Sovereignty,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (September 2010): 711–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423910000612>.

⁴⁷ Bruyneel, 712–13.

⁴⁸ Michael Witgen makes a similar argument in the conclusion of *An Infinity of Nations*.

⁴⁹ Tiellet, “The Sermon from the Mount: The Messages in the Canadian Opera Company’s Remount of the Riel Opera.”

⁵⁰ “Statement by the Prime Minister on Louis Riel Day,” Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, November 16, 2020, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2020/11/16/statement-prime-minister-louis-riel-day>.

⁵¹ “Statement by the Prime Minister on Louis Riel Day.”

Indigeneity, Saul claims, is one of the main pillars of who “we” are as a country, that how we constitute ourselves as a political community is “deeply Aboriginal.”⁵² As such, Macdonald’s execution of Riel in 1885 was the “lowest moment in our history” because the prime minister turned his back on Canada’s true identity and affiliated himself with foreign British imperialism.⁵³ What makes Canada “Canada” is its minorities just as much as its majorities. Thus, it is liberal multicultural progress—a careful balance between political freedoms and limits—that leads to a proper recognition of who “we” are as a nation. In this interpretation, Canada can have its cake and eat it too: Macdonald’s actions were regrettable, and it is a shame that Riel ended his life as an enemy of the state, but Canada learned from its mistakes and Canada now sees Riel’s struggle not as a threat to be contained but as a cause to be carefully cultivated and championed. The settler colonial state must learn from Riel’s resistance and accommodate his worldview – only insofar as it does not threaten colonial sovereignty.

Resolving the dissonances between Riel and Canada obfuscates some of the more difficult – but essential – realities of Canadian settler-colonialism. The view of Riel as embodying Canada’s multicultural roots reproduces, rather than deconstructs, settler colonialism. In a process that Aaron Mills refers to as “constitutional capture,” when Indigenous political communities are made “cognizable” to settler governments, they are co-opted.⁵⁴ Because such comprehension occurs on very uneven terrain, it becomes a form of “interactive hegemon-subaltern rule.”⁵⁵ As the hegemonic political order, colonial constitutionalism rises above culture and becomes the

⁵² John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), 14.

⁵³ Saul, 29.

⁵⁴ Mills, “Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together,” 47.

⁵⁵ James Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 109.

bounds of political possibility itself.⁵⁶ Likewise, we can *analytically* capture Indigenous political community, collapsing it into our understanding of settler political community. “To view the world from the perspective of the dominant extractive system,” James Tully writes, “is to be one-eyed, to lose our depth of vision.”⁵⁷ When we attempt to conceptually graft Riel onto Canadian political community, we lose sight of the ways in which Riel was *beyond* settler political community. In doing so, we obfuscate provocations that are incompatible with familiar notions of citizenship and the state. Settler colonialism is not a problem of the denial of the reality of self, as John Ralston Saul claims, but rather the perpetuation of domination and the perpetuation of one type of political community at the expense of others. “Saul’s attempt to recognize Canada’s aboriginal roots,” M. Max Hamon argues, dismisses “the marginalization of people by centuries of exploitation and dispossession.”⁵⁸ As long as political community is constituted on the exploitation of Indigenous lands and bodies, Canada is not a Métis-civilization, no matter how much soul-searching or recognizing we do. To say that Canada is a “Métis-civilization” is the kind of flattened narrative of “who we are” that Said warned against. The consonance it establishes comforts, rather than disrupts or unsettles, assumed foundations of political community.⁵⁹ Inversely, characterizing Riel as a figure of resistance opposed wholesale to Canadian nation building misses important constructive dimensions of Riel’s politics and obscures his engagement with Canadian politics of confederation.⁶⁰ Rather than just oppose Canada, Riel challenged Canada on its very political foundations. By refusing to resolve dissonance, we can focus more on the insight that these challenges provide.

⁵⁶ Benjamin L. Berger, *Law’s Religion: Religious Difference and the Claims of Constitutionalism* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 12.

⁵⁷ Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” 112.

⁵⁸ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*, xi.

⁵⁹ Said and Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance*, 188–91.

⁶⁰ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*.

An Alternative Approach: Sustaining and Emphasizing Dissonance

The opera's dissonance certainly challenges its listeners – both in its musical and thematic complexity – but why see these dissonances as in need of reconciliation? Dissonance is uncomfortable, so it is understandable to see it as a problem in need of a solution. But is discomfort necessarily a problem? What if, instead, we see dissonance as something that does not need to be resolved in our analysis of the opera, but that *dissonance itself* can be the source of our understanding?

Said's writing on culturally dissonant art can help us to understand what it means to embrace dissonance. In *On Late Style*, a collection of posthumously published essays, Said explores artists—such as authors, composers, poets, and performers—who late in their careers created works that exhibit a creative unsettlement, a “nonharmonious, nonserene [sic] tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against.”⁶¹ For Said, human life is assumed to have a “timeliness”; certain behaviour or comportment is suitable for some ages and not others. Artists who are near the end of their life are often perceived as searching for closure, resolution, or reconciliation. Said, however, is interested in artists who subvert this expectation and embrace “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction.”⁶² For instance, Beethoven's late masterpiece *Missa Solemnis* “abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it.”⁶³ For Said—as well as for Adorno, one of Said's key influences— “Beethoven's late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis ... they can not be reconciled or

⁶¹ Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 7, emphasis added.

⁶² Said, 7.

⁶³ Said, *On Late Style*, 127.

resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are *constitutive*.”⁶⁴ Key here is that late style is a difficult jumble of “sustained tension” between ideas and fragments.⁶⁵

Critically, Said is interested in late style because late works have a *dissonant* relationship with the context in which they were created. “Late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present,”⁶⁶ challenging and unsettling comfortable traditions and assumptions. The artist who works in late style is in a “self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable.”⁶⁷ Exile was central to how Said thought about his life and his work. He adopted exile as an analytical tool to – like late style – unsettle and disrupt. As Jeanne Morefield contends, a “politics of exile” offers a remarkable “clarity of insight” because it about questioning the very foundations upon which much political thinking occurs – an exilic thinker probes the “affiliative connections that structure” the political present.⁶⁸ Said saw this dissonance not as incompatibilities or disconnections in ideas to take up and resolve, but rather as what makes the work illuminative. “What makes music interesting,” Said noted in an interview, “is the balance between dissonance and consonance, with the weight of a piece really based in dissonance and discord, rather than the other way around.”⁶⁹ This attitude to dissonance extended to the way that Said saw the world more generally, what Morefield calls the “unsettling tension between dreams.” As Morefield writes,

[Edward] Said lived in, worked in, fought in, laughed in, wrote in, was mad as hell in the unsettling tension between dreams, between longing for home and loss of home, between community and intellectual solitude, between difference and human comity, between multiplicity and universality, between imperial violence and imperial connection, between discipline and resistance, between the victims

⁶⁴ Said, 12.

⁶⁵ Said, 16–17.

⁶⁶ Said, 7.

⁶⁷ Said, 16.

⁶⁸ Morefield, Jeanne, “For a Politics of Exile: Criticism in an Era of Global Liberal Decline,” in *Democratic Multiplicity: Perceiving, Enacting, and Integrating Democratic Diversity*, ed. James Tully et al. (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 122–23.

⁶⁹ Said and Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance*, 191.

and the victims' victims. *Said never resolved these tensions*. He simply painted richer, more complicated portraits of the whole while simultaneously looking loss in the face and demanding a better world.⁷⁰

Edward Said was not interested in reconciling dissonant relationships in his understanding of the world. Instead, he was interested in dissonance for what it unsettled, surpassed, and disclosed. Late style, for Said, has “no redemptive message or reconciliation at all”,⁷¹ so why should the audience be expected to find one? Jeanne Morefield contends that Said’s exilic critique is valuable precisely because of its constant disruption of a settled “we” or a firm foundation from which to theorize.⁷²

We ought to take a Saidian approach when taking up the *Louis Riel*’s dissonances, as well as the historical dissonance between Louis Riel and Canada. *Louis Riel* was created for a nationalist, settler colonial celebration. Perhaps Harry Somers and Mavor Moore did not intend for the opera to be so politically dissonant. However, in presenting the atonal ensemble and Riel and Canada’s relationship, the opera presents its audience with dissonant provocations. Leaving those dissonances unreconciled despite the opera’s context only strengthens its disruptive power as it refuses to be confined by Canada’s national – and settler colonial – ambitions. Likewise, if we refuse to resolve Louis Riel’s dissonant legacy with Canada but hold these tensions together, we gain a “productively unproductive” way to understand Canada and the lands that it occupies. As Said emphasizes, late style is not merely about negation or disruption. There is also a “*constructive*” element to late style.⁷³ Adorno used a philosophy of dissonance for “thinking about the interrelations between aesthetics and politics.”⁷⁴ This philosophy, Asaf Angermann

⁷⁰ Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory*, Modernity and Political Thought (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 206. Emphasis added.

⁷¹ Said, *On Late Style*, 160.

⁷² Morefield, Jeanne, “For a Politics of Exile: Criticism in an Era of Global Liberal Decline.”

⁷³ Said, *On Late Style*, 18–19.

⁷⁴ Asaf Angermann, “Dissonance and Dissidence: Aesthetic and Political Counterpoints in Adorno,” *The Germanic Review* 90, no. 4 (2015): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2015.1095615>.

argues, enables us to uncover “currently possible counterpoints”: a way of thinking that sees a path forward in maintaining, rather than resolving, the transgressive elements of late style.⁷⁵ Late style is embedded in context but, in disrupting that context, it speaks beyond it, pointing to possibilities foreclosed by certain discourses.

And indeed, this idea of transgression resonates remarkably well with recent biographical work done on Riel. H. Max Hamon, in his biography of Riel, attempts to break the Métis leader out of the Canadian palliative and antinomic narratives that he has been confined within. It is a misunderstanding of Riel’s life and work, Hamon argues, to see him as a rebel, resistance leader, or symbol of Canadian multiculturalism. Rather, Riel’s life can be seen as “an allegory for the *tensions* that make up the broader issues of nineteenth-century North America.”⁷⁶ Critically, this is not the “dissonance at the heart of the Canadian condition.” This goes beyond what the settler state was and currently is. At the close of the nineteenth century, as settler colonial state consolidation loomed on the horizon, Riel did not seek to completely stop the expansion of the Canadian state, nor did he seek to negotiate a spot for himself and his people within it. Instead, he represented an understanding of political community that challenged Canada’s conception of itself. By “respond[ing] creatively to the discourses that attempted to define and limit individual agency,” Riel, engaged with Canadian state building to illuminate—and push beyond—its limits.⁷⁷ Importantly, this view gives Riel agency not as a rebel but as a political actor who creatively navigated the larger atonal ensemble in which the settler colonial state was only one part.

⁷⁵ Angermann, “Dissonance and Dissidence: Aesthetic and Political Counterpoints in Adorno.”

⁷⁶ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*, 6. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Hamon, 19.

The dissonance of the opera *Louis Riel* represents the messy, often illogical, and contradictory practices of political possibility in the atonal ensemble of imperialism. Riel was not necessarily a hero or the “prophet of the new world.”⁷⁸ The relationship between him and Canada, however, creates a dissonance that we can learn from to disrupt, rather than consolidate, the boundaries of colonial rule. Colleen Renihan argues that *Louis Riel* “haunts” its audience.⁷⁹ Its dissonances remind the listener of what has been lost, what Canada never was, but what it still could be.⁸⁰ Accordingly, for Hutchings, dissonance can be used to question the very notion of what living together entails.⁸¹ By identifying the opera’s dissonances and *refusing* to resolve them, we can then turn our attention to what political possibilities these dissonances reveal.

In Canada, where colonial domination and the vestiges of the British Empire continue to shape the face of Indigenous-settler relations, Canadian governments now espouse the terms “reconciliation”, “nation to nation relationship”, and “land back.”⁸² While this turn may be cause for celebration and may appear to be the path to emancipatory coexistence, Said’s words ought to give us pause. Rather than commend those in power for embracing terms that suggest

⁷⁸ Thomas Flanagan, *Louis “David” Riel: Prophet of the New World*, Rev. ed (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ Colleen Renihan, “Haunting Riel,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 54.

⁸⁰ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*.

⁸¹ Kimberly Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2019): 121–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679419000169>.

⁸² For example, see Alex Ballingall, “This Federal Minister Says It’s Time to Give Land Back to Indigenous Peoples. What Could That Look Like?,” *Toronto Star*, December 5, 2021, sec. Federal Politics, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2021/12/05/this-federal-minister-says-its-time-to-give-land-back-to-indigenous-peoples-what-could-that-look-like.html>; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, “Statement from Minister Marc Miller on the Work Completed by Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada over the Summer,” statements, Government of Canada, September 21, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/crown-indigenous-relations-northern-affairs/news/2022/09/statement-from-minister-marc-miller-on-the-work-completed-by-crown-indigenous-relations-and-northern-affairs-canada-over-the-summer.html>; Fraser Needham, “Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Admits Reconciliation Is Moving Slowly,” *APTN News*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/prime-minister-trudeau-admits-road-to-reconciliation-is-moving-slowly/>; “Trudeau Commits to ‘nation-to-Nation Relationship’ with First Nations,” *Toronto Star*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/12/08/trudeau-commits-to-nation-to-nation-relationship-with-first-nations.html>; “Statement by the Prime Minister on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation,” Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, September 30, 2022, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2022/09/30/statement-prime-minister-national-day-truth-and-reconciliation>.

transformation, we should—in taking Said’s advice—interrogate power, illuminate the complexities and tensions that remain below the surface to reveal domination in all its forms,⁸³ and refuse to accept palliative liberatory narratives.

Approaches that necessitate closing the bounds of political community foreclose some of the more exciting experiments of political community-making. As such, we can see how Canada, in responding to Riel’s actions, chose to resolve, rather than engage in, his dissonance. The bounds of colonial political community were bolstered in the face of such a threat. “It was not Riel who refused or was unwilling to accept a new modernity,” Hamon writes, “it was a colonial world which was unable to accept Indigenous world views.”⁸⁴ When colonial political community captures, or is separated from, Indigenous conceptions of political community, we are prevented from understanding the *ongoing* transformative elements that late style can provide.⁸⁵ “We have not yet produced,” Said laments in the essay “Representing the Colonized”, “an effective national style that is premised on something more equitable and noncoercive than a theory of fateful superiority, which to some degree all cultural ideologies emphasize.”⁸⁶ By embracing dissonance, we can identify, question, and ultimately look beyond that national style to more liberatory and promising forms of political possibility made to the measure of the atonal ensemble.

Sustaining dissonance need not stop at understanding settler colonialism. What other dissonances confront us daily? What contradictions, tensions, unreconciled fragments seem to demand that we resolve them? The intertwined and cumulative crises facing the globe: economic

⁸³ Edward W. Said and Gauri Viswanathan, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 187–88.

⁸⁴ Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise*, 269.

⁸⁵ Hamon, 269.

⁸⁶ Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, *Convergences* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 304.

precarity, settler colonialism, ecological devastation, and political backlash, all dissonantly connect with the hegemony of states and liberal political community. In “For a Politics of Exile,” Morefield contends that Said’s approach is precisely what the present moment of crisis requires.⁸⁷ I agree. The “atonal ensemble”, as Said understood it, encompasses the world. Embracing, and not resolving, dissonance, therefore, is an ideal way to understand human interconnectedness more broadly. The global history of imperialism and settler colonialism is marked by dissonance. The dissonances that *Louis Riel* presents us with, therefore, is not an anomaly. They are indicative of the larger, global, dissonant struggle of imaging and enacting political community.

⁸⁷ Morefield, Jeanne, “For a Politics of Exile: Criticism in an Era of Global Liberal Decline.”

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