

2020

Review Essay: Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific by Robert Foxcurran, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette

David Vermette

Researcher and Author, dgvermette@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance>

Recommended Citation

Vermette, David (2020) "Review Essay: Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific by Robert Foxcurran, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/19>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Résonance* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Review Essay: Foxcurran, Robert, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette. *Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific*. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2016. 448 pages, paper, \$34.95. ISBN: 9781771860819

Americans who study but one history—their own—do not know enough of the services rendered to their country by Canadians. In fact, nearly all the large cities of the Western States have been established by Canadians. Consult the historical societies of Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and you will learn to respect and admire the French Canadian element.

From Langlade, the father of Wisconsin; Juneau, the founder of Milwaukee; Joseph Robidon, the founder of St. Joe Mission; Vital Guerin, the founder of St. Paul, Minn.; Menard, first lieutenant governor of Illinois; to Jean Louis Légaré, the trader, who has persuaded Sitting Bull to surrender to the United States authorities—the list is long of the Canadians who have rendered famous the name of our national element.
-- Ferdinand Gagnon, October 1881¹

The march of English-speaking settlers from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific is still the dominant narrative in the history of the western United States. Foxcurran, Bouchard, and Malette, the trio of authors of *Songs Upon The Rivers*, present an alternate history of this storied region. Theirs is the history of the French-speaking communities that spanned the vast country from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Northwest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this epoch, the authors show, francophone peoples in North America established a subculture tied to the fur trade, in a milieu formed by a *métissage* between French-Canadian and indigenous peoples. A network spread along the waterways of North America from east to west appearing, here and there, across a large portion of the continent. French was the lingua franca of what became the US Midwest and it remained so into the nineteenth century. Decade by decade, as the US expanded westward, it absorbed and slowly anglicized the region.

Foxcurran, Bouchard, and Malette show that the fur trade served as an unwitting advance-guard for later North American colonial projects. They argue that the *Canadiens* working beside people who were of mixed “French-Indian” heritage (to use a term employed in the US), continued to be the most significant agents in this trade, even as it came to be controlled by British and American managers. The authors also imply the existence of a self-conscious *Canadien* identity, both French-speaking and Catholic, untethered from France by the end of the eighteenth century. The notion of *métissage*—which translates literally in English as “mixing,” or “miscegenation,” but which has taken on its own meaning across linguistic

¹ From the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor’s *Thirteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1882), 22f.

boundaries—was bound up with this identity, especially in the eyes of the *Canadiens'* anglophone neighbors.

The companies that dominated the fur trade by the early nineteenth century—the Hudson Bay Company, the Northwesters, and John Jacob Astor's enterprises—were not engaged in settler agriculture on any meaningful scale. In fact, the Hudson Bay Company discouraged settlement in the West. However, some of their ex-employees did settle in places such as French Prairie, Oregon, where *Canadien* men married women from among the local tribes (my ancestor's brother Hyacinthe Lavigueur was one of them). This period would see French-speaking factors in the fur trade eventually pushed aside, as the fur trade waned, while land was seized from indigenous peoples, who were dispossessed or deported.

One of the most striking portions of the book describes how indigenous peoples were removed from the Great Lakes region. The authors recount, step-by-step, how these nations were dispossessed by the US government: which treaties were signed and when; how the federal government unilaterally altered the terms of these treaties; and the mechanisms by which governments used land tenure systems to seize territory. It is an object lesson in the tactics of settler colonialism. The Andrew Jackson Administration, and later Jacksonians, are implicated most heavily in these crimes of fraud, corruption, and violence.

The authors go on to point out that in the US of the early twentieth century, race categorizers refused to recognize "mixed-race" people they called "French-Indians" as a distinct identity, tending to force them into other categories (357, 378). In this period, when eugenics theories were in vogue, US racial taxonomists had categories like "mulatto" to describe some "mixed-race" people. But it better served institutionalized racism in the case of the "French-Indians" to make a hard distinction between one "race" and another, meaning that people tended to be classified officially as either "white" or as "Indian." For US authorities, the "French-Indians" were a Canadian phenomenon; it became dangerous to identify as Métis or *Bois-brûlé* in the US in situations where officialdom tended to recognize only binary racial categories. The risks of doing so included deportation (378).

Songs points out that, still later, US collective memory papered over the *Canadien* and "French-Indian" era of the West, lionizing anglophone Western heroes like Jim Bridger and Kit Carson who were more appropriate to the ideology of Manifest Destiny. A new narrative, dominant in twentieth-century US popular culture, depicted hardy Anglo-Protestant settlers who entered a supposedly empty quarter where no "white man" had walked, and "tamed" a "wild west." In reality, descendants of the French and Spanish, as well as of the British and the

Russians, populated strategic locations throughout the North American West, preceding or paralleling the US drive to the Pacific.

Since the authors claim to present a “buried” history, they frequently turn to forgotten accounts by nineteenth-century eyewitnesses. They mine, for example, the travel memoirs of fur traders and military men, and little-known writings of contemporary European observers, including de Tocqueville, to discover the *Canadien* and “French-Indian” substrate beneath the received anglo-centric historical narrative.

The book has its flaws. An occasionally meandering style circumscribes various points rather than just getting to them. The structure of the book is sometimes opaque, too, moving back and forth between one time period and another. It would have been clearer to proceed chronologically, starting with events in the fur trade in the East, and then proceeding westward to the Great Lakes, Upper Louisiana, and the Northwest. While the book’s numerous period graphics are fascinating, more straightforward and contemporary maps of the territories under discussion would have helped readers navigate the territories the authors discuss.

Though the structural shortcomings in the book are most likely due to authorship by committee, the trio of authors succeed in finding a unified voice. Knowing that one of the authors has a background in anthropology and another in law, it is an even greater surprise that the book is largely jargon-free.



There is no avoiding that at least one of these authors has been embroiled in recent Canadian controversies over the definition of the term “Métis” and the contention, advocated in this book and elsewhere, that this term is applicable to people in eastern Canada as well as in the Prairie West. The alleged hazard arises when people who may have had an indigenous ancestor many generations ago—as far back as the seventeenth century—claim a Métis identity even if their ancestors had been white-identified for generations. Some observers claim that the number of self-identified Métis has increased dramatically in recent years, but the numbers are hotly disputed.² They argue that such claims to Métis identity are opportunistic. The Canadian Constitution of 1982 defines the Métis as indigenous people, and critics claim that allegedly faux-Métis are asserting rights and privileges attached to being an indigenous North American under Canadian law. In this argument, the claims of eastern Métis are said to be a theft of

² Darryl R. J. Leroux and Adam Gaudry, “Becoming Indigenous: The Rise of Eastern Métis in Canada,” *The Conversation*, October 25, 2017 (<http://theconversation.com/becoming-indigenous-the-rise-of-eastern-metis-in-canada-80794>).

identity, which is grounded in the historic experience of the Prairie West and tied to that geographic region. This view emphasizes that “Métis” does not designate any person with mixed ancestry, but a member of a nation with a specific historical and territorial nexus.³

This controversy touches upon delicate questions of cultural and tribal identity, as well as issues in Canadian constitutional law, beyond the ken of this reviewer. But this controversy is central to *Songs* and its interdisciplinary team of authors. The evidence they present shows that terms such as *métis*, *métif*, *bois-brûlé*, “half-breed” and “French-Indian” were in use on the continent by different people to describe individuals before any of them were used to identify a specific group, namely the historic Métis nation in the Prairies.

But were such terms ethnonyms, or merely descriptors for an individual? The authors cite fur-company clerk Gabriel Franchère who, in the early nineteenth century, described a certain François Landry as “*un métif*.” Was this designating him as a member of a nationality or culture, or is it a descriptor intended to indicate something about Landry as an individual? As the authors acknowledge, in the case of Landry, the term “*métif*” indicated “a person of mixed ancestry (or heritage).” Such cases raise the question of how a signifier of race or heritage came to designate a nation.

In this book, the authors have not yet made a case for a more expansive definition of Métis sufficient to silence their opponents, although they have laid important, intellectual groundwork. They suggest that there was a *Canadien* and “French-Indian” fur-trade culture that seeded itself throughout the continent, having perhaps its largest harvest along the Red River, but present elsewhere in different forms. They argue that those who have preserved a culture tied to the trans-continental phenomenon of the fur trade may lay claim to the term *Métis*, no matter where in North America they reside. Two of the authors have inaugurated other ambitious publishing projects which they claim will make their case definitively. May the evidence they present be judged on its merits.

However, an outside perspective might perceive more than one irony in this controversy. As this trio of authors supports, the belief that *Canadiens* were “mixed-race” was quite common in the US, especially in New England, dating back at least to the eighteenth century; New Englanders tended to view *Canadiens* as “half Savage” (108). In the eyes of many English-speaking observers, the category “*Canadien*” or “French-Canadian” contained the notion of *mixedness*, of *métissage* (194-95, 244). One of the pretexts used to “other” the French-Canadian immigrants to the northeastern US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the

³ For this debate see Leroux and Gaudry and also Leroux’s website <http://www.raceshifting.com/>.

belief that they were “half-breeds.” Eugenics proponents, with great influence in legislatures and in academia, viewed the *Canadiens* in New England as an inferior people in part because they were said to have a large admixture of that mythical stuff: Indian blood (Vermette, 250-256).

One such proponent, arch-eugenicist Madison Grant, reinforces binary racial categories, classifying as “Indians” all people whose ancestors included both European and indigenous North American “blood.” In his *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916, rev. ed. 1921) Grant wrote, “In the Catholic colonies...of New France and New Spain, if the half-breed were a good Catholic he was regarded as a Frenchman or a Spaniard, as the case might be. This fact alone gives the clew [sic] to many of our Colonial wars where the Indians, other than the Iroquois, were persuaded to join the French against the Americans by *half-breeds who considered themselves Frenchmen*” (85).⁴ However, for eugenic purposes, wrote Grant, “The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian” (Spiro, 152).

Repeated and vehement denials of a *métissage* between *Canadiens* and indigenous North Americans, from those of the ultra “race” conscious Dillingham Immigration Commission in the US, to Québec’s Canon Lionel Groulx, suggest that this belief—true or false—was widespread and persistent in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. Once denigrated by bigoted white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as “half-breeds,” the French-Canadian descendant today who points to a distant First Nations ancestor launches into the turbulent waters of current controversies around race and identity.

A further irony is that, to the outsider, both parties in these ongoing debates over the definition of “Métis” appear to be motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of indigenous peoples. They disagree on semantics and on matters of historical fact. For the latter, one can only turn to the evidence.



Our current political moment seems to demand sharp, binary distinctions, and in North America today, “race” trumps all others. Glaring, systemic racial injustices continent-wide have produced this result. But in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, language and religion also created sharp cultural and social fault lines. In the late nineteenth century, solidarity among French-speaking, North American Catholics crossed some boundaries of perceived race. The Franco-American Catholics in New England who petitioned the US Secretary of State to intervene on behalf of Métis leader Louis Riel, before his execution, felt that Riel’s people in the

⁴ Emphasis added.

Northwest were kin, part of a greater French North American whole (*French North America*). They thought, rightly or wrongly, that the French-speaking people of Manitoba were family, by virtue of a commonality of language and religion. These characteristics—language and religion—were primary for them, and sufficient to claim a bond of kinship.

When we frame the past, we are always doing so in the present—in *our* present. We are tempted to read history teleologically, as if the self-understandings of people in the past were the evolutionary record of our present; we project into the past how we understand ourselves in the present. But many of our ancestors very likely thought of *themselves* as the culmination of history. And they may have construed their history in ways in which we would not approve, in ways we would consider problematic. They may have described themselves with terms that meant something different in their day; or they may have used more than one term that they thought were synonymous but that we do not. The research of Foxcurran and associates suggests that our nineteenth-century forebears lived in a complex world of identity, one that does not fit neatly within our taxonomies, a world in which language and religion formed boundary lines almost as fixed and seemingly unbridgeable as the racial boundaries of today.

A history that meets exigent political needs—a usable past—is often constrained to brutally simple dichotomies, forced to clean-up messy truths, and to portray the past in terms that do not suit it.⁵ But the past surprises us. It is rarely what we expect it to be. Even when we get to know them, it is difficult to get our ancestors to behave themselves and accommodate the boxes we make for them.

What's most valuable in *Songs* is not necessarily the stand it takes for or against the usage of a particular term, but rather its courage in complexifying history, in engaging with a buried chapter, and in drawing our attention to important questions of race, language, and identity in North America.

-David Vermette

⁵ The phrase “usable past” is from Candace Savage’s *Strangers in the House* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2019), 69.

Works Cited

- Grant, Madison. *The Passing of The Great Race*, Rev. ed. New York: Scribner's, 1921.
- Leroux, Darryl. *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019.
- Leroux, Darryl R. J. and Adam Gaudry. "Becoming Indigenous: The Rise of Eastern Métis in Canada," *The Conversation*, October 25, 2017. <http://theconversation.com/becoming-indigenous-the-rise-of-eastern-metis-in-canada-80794>.
- Spiro, Jonathan. *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2009.
- Vermette, David. *A Distinct Alien Race*. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2018.
- Vermette, David. "Louis Riel: A Franco-American?" *French North America*, April 15, 2016. <https://frenchnorthamerica.blogspot.com/2016/04/louis-riel-franco-american.html>.