

University of Manitoba

Indigenous Representation and Participation in Canadian Opera (1879-2017)

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[I always] view non-Métis works about Riel's life with a little bit of skepticism.

What's always missing is the Indigenous voice.

-Adam Gaudry¹

Indigenous characters are peppered throughout Canadian opera history, but between 1879 and 2022, several operas provide witness to distinct changes not only in how Indigenous characters are represented through compositional techniques, costuming, and character archetypes (or lack thereof), but also in the increasingly prominent participation of Indigenous peoples as performers and creators. This participation is evident in casting and increased stage time, as well as in the heritage of artistic teams, their incorporation of traditional languages, and the creation of collaborative processes that prioritize respect and care.

These changes were largely facilitated by an emphasis on authenticity, specificity, humanity, collaboration, and the prevalence of the Indigenous voice, moving from romanticized or negatively stereotyped characters to diverse characters of strength, joy, and love. By exploring issues of Indigenous representation and participation in older works such as *Canada's Welcome* (1879), *Le fétiche* (1912), *Tzinquaw* (1950), and *Louis Riel* (1967), and newer works such as *Giiwedini* (2010), *Missing* (2017), and finally *Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North* (2017), I will illustrate in more detail how we continue to move in a direction of fair, realistic, and appropriate representation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian opera that seeks to empower, rather than silence, Indigenous people of past, present and future.

1879 to 1967

¹ Simonot-Maiello, Colette. "'Decolonizing' Riel." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 73-82. muse.jhu.edu/article/719402.

Canada's Welcome was one of the earliest Canadian operas to incorporate Indigenous characters.² It was commissioned in 1879 for the Governor General, Princess Louise, and other royalty as they arrived in Canada from Britain.³ It was composed by Arthur A. Clappé with a libretto by Frederick Augustus Dixon. These were two men of French and English descent, and the opera was cast with people of only these heritages as well.⁴ The plot of *Canada's Welcome* symbolically follows the forming of the nation, with characters such as 'Indian Chief' who gives the land to the settlers, 'Winter' as the nation's primary season, 'Canada' that is represented by a young Indigenous woman, and other characters emulating the seven provinces of the time and their features.⁵

Canada's Welcome provides a clear example of the romantic, exoticized representations of Indigenous peoples often seen in 19th century opera.⁶ In Canada at the time, most white settlers would not have had personal contact with Indigenous folks peoples, and opinions on native peoples were purely imagination.⁷ The overly romanticized and unrealistic view of the Indigenous person is first shown by the character of "Indian Chief".⁸ He begins by standing silently on stage as an invisible chorus of Indigenous spirits sings about the beauty of the land in a consonantly harmonized, calm, and hopeful song that "awakens" a new era of the country as the native voices fade into the distance.⁹ When Indian Chief, dressed "in the full war dress of his tribe" sings, he speaks of the spiritual Manitou's wish for him to assimilate, and peacefully fades from the stage and figurative country forever.¹⁰

² Mary I. Ingraham, December 19, 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Another example of the romanticization of Indigenous characters in *Canada's Welcome* is the character of 'Canada' itself, which is represented by a young Indigenous woman (perhaps a princess) in regalia.¹¹ She sings about her beauty, Indigenous spirituality, and the land, stating, "I see my figure in each stream, and something tells me it *is* fair"¹². The character gently accepts assimilation and frolics offstage with a smile and "alluring sensuality" as the illustration of the new Canada.¹³ Later on, the characters of 'Canada' and 'Winter' are seen gleefully dancing around together, excited to start a new, supposedly peaceful and beautiful nation.¹⁴ The idealization and romanticization of the Indigenous characters in this opera is not only unrealistic but also harmful. It creates a narrative that Indigenous peoples are more storybook characters than real people by erasing their complexity, authenticity, human qualities and actual thoughts and feelings.

Canada's Welcome was created by colonizers for colonizers, and the opera reflected this. In addition to the characters, the work also heavily romanticized colonization itself.¹⁵ The Indigenous characters state that they approve of assimilation, even though it was a violent and painful process for many that required the loss of culture, language, land, and their entire way of life. Examples of this include 'Indian Chief's lyrics about his acceptance of assimilation that state as the musical key turns major, "the Manitou has spoken. Woods and lakes, farewell!" and "the white man comes, the red man fades from the land".¹⁶ These positive lyrics show how the Chief seems to submit to cultural genocide passively and without a second thought.¹⁷ This endorsement, and the fact that the Manitou (or Creator) himself instructs him to assimilate as if it is "God's will" very clearly paints colonization in a positive light.¹⁸ The stereotypical Indigenous aspects of the music (drum-like

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

bass, minor and pentatonic tonality, relaxed and spoken singing style) give way to functional bass, a major key and clear aria singing.¹⁹ This, as Ingraham states, signifies “the native giving way to the civilized”, as ‘Indian Chief’ gladly ushers in the colonizers’ way of life.²⁰

The ‘Canada’ character also romanticizes colonization through her lyrics. As mentioned above, she sings of how colonization is “fair” and just, and gleefully accepts the losses resulting from assimilation.²¹ This declamation of acceptance is set to the European musical form of a Romanza, and as Ingraham states, “without even the passing markers of ethnicity heard in the ‘Indian Chief’s music”, thus deeming Indigeneity as unworthy of inclusion in the formation of the new country, and safely situating it within a colonizer lens.²² Instead of settler characters speaking about colonization positively, Indigenous peoples’ themselves approve of their complete loss of rights. This unmistakably excuses cultural genocide and erases the harms and traumas it has caused.

In 1912, more than 30 years after *Canada’s Welcome*, *Le fétiche* was created by Joseph Vézina, Alex Villandray and Louis Fleur.²³ Like *Canada’s Welcome*, this work was created and performed entirely by people of English and French descent, many of whom were in redface.²⁴ The story follows the historical events of ~~1701~~ land and hunting disputes between the Iroquois tribe and people of New France in 1701.²⁵

Instead of romanticising Indigenous characters, *Le fétiche* perpetuates negative stereotypes about them. By 1912, when this opera was written, the Canadian government had pushed harder for assimilation by banning Indigenous cultural celebrations and rituals, including all Potlatch and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

tribal dances, as well as any public festivals and the wearing of regalia.²⁶ Because Indigenous peoples had been villainized by the government, most non-Indigenous people had negative views of Indigenous peoples. The general population assumed that Indigenous peoples were vengeful, bloodthirsty savages that enjoyed violent activities such as torture, kidnapping, massacres, scalping and sexual promiscuity, and this was reflected in the rampant negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in *Le fétiche*.²⁷ The drama of the opera centres around the Iroquois kidnapping and fetishizing the French governor's daughter Gaetane.²⁸ This savagery is further reinforced when the French warn each other to protect their women and children "against the hatchet and the Indian club"; when they tell what is supposedly an Iroquois legend of kidnapping a white woman, beheading her, and using her head as a totem to appeal to the Manitou; and a Scalping Song in which the Iroquois are seen ecstatically celebrating their hunt by mimicking the terrifying scalping action and using standard Indigenous vocable singing and drums.²⁹ There is no question that the Indigenous peoples in this work were meant to be depicted as aggressive, cruel warriors that show no pity or mercy, further perpetuating harmful stereotypes of Indigenous peoples that existed in Canada at this time.

While these stereotypes marked a step backward in Indigenous representation, *Le fétiche* did provide equivalent stage time and character development for French and Indigenous characters.³⁰ The acts are split evenly between the French camp and the Iroquois camp, and there are similar numbers of Indigenous and French principal characters. Both the Indigenous and French characters are fully fleshed out with both positive and negative traits, there are parallel characters between the French and Iroquois communities to show that the groups are more similar

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

than assumed. Also, the composers establish musical themes for both the Iroquois and French people beyond the usual stereotypical sounds meant to musically represent Indigenous peoples.³¹ Emphasizing the humanity of Indigenous characters in *Le fétiche* created feelings of empathy from the audience. As Ingraham states, “the capacity for both fairness and aggression that they are presented as sharing with the colonizers, ensured resonance within a contemporary society that French Canadians no longer uncontestedly ruled”.³²

Several decades later, *Tzinquaw* (1950) seemed to mark the beginning of a new era of Indigenous opera that finally featured the Indigenous voice in the creation process.³³ The work was created by Frank Morrison in collaboration with Able Joe and other members of the Cowichan nation of Vancouver Island, British Columbia.³⁴ The opera was an almost decade-long project between the two, after Joe approached Morrison for help in preserving his peoples’ traditional songs.³⁵

The creation of *Tzinquaw* involved collaboration with the community that it represented every step of the way, and all songs used were given to Morrison with specific permission from the family to which it belonged.³⁶ The Indigenous voice was represented (or demonstrated) as powerful, and the opera was performed by a full cast of members of the Cowichan nation.³⁷ It was composed “using the traditional culture of the Cowichan people”, meaning that most, if not all, of the vocal melodies had been passed down through generations of oral tradition in the Cowichan community.³⁸ The story recounts the Quw’utsun legend of the Thunderbird, who saves the Cowichan people from starvation by defeating Quannis the killer-whale, and the production

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, 2011.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

included several traditional rituals such as a burial ceremony and traditional dances like the Visitors' Dance, Paddle Dance, Rabbit Dance and Stick Game.³⁹ It was intensely meaningful to the Cowichan community that some of their most powerful stories and sounds were being promoted, preserved and shared with a wider audience.

The opera was not without representational issue, since the composer was a white man, there were problems of his Anglicizing of the Cowichan melodies to fit into Western music forms and harmonies, adding Gilbert & Sullivan-esque text that didn't fit, including Westernized stage directions instead of traditional Cowichan movements, etc. However, the opera *Tzinquaw* was a notable step forward in terms of Indigenous representation in opera, and it showed how much Indigenous peoples' input in their own storytelling improves the end result. Mamie Moloney, a Vancouver Sun columnist, stated that the work presented audiences "not with the stock 'Hollywood Indian' but rather with 'the Indian of history, of a culture and tradition, of a dignity and pride that fills his fellow Canadians with admiration and love' ".⁴⁰ Through the increase of Indigenous peoples' voice in telling their story, they garnered sympathy and respect from those that had previously thought negatively towards them.

Tzinquaw was revolutionary for its time not only because it was created in part by Indigenous peoples, but also because it was one of the first examples of an Indigenous language being used in an opera in Canada.⁴¹ There were many excerpts of Cowichan text used in the opera, and this specificity and authenticity was not lost on the listeners. Alison Greene states, "*Tzinquaw* [wasn't] like anything else... The admirers of *Tzinquaw* were so excited by the fact that this opera was based on native culture and performed so well, to their great surprise, by native

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mary Ingraham, Roy Moodley, and Joseph So, *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance* (Routledge, 2015).

⁴¹ Ibid.

performers... The Cowichan people were lauded for having ‘established themselves as professional entertainers thus achieving a new civilized distinction for their ancient race’ “. ⁴²

Next, Canada saw the opera *Louis Riel* performed in 1967 for the centennial celebration of Canada’s confederation. ⁴³ It had been commissioned by the Floyd S. Chalmers Foundation for the celebration and was produced by the Canadian Opera Company with financial assistance from the federal government. ⁴⁴ This work was not just an opera, but was a musical monument and symbolic representation of Canada as a whole. Louis Riel was attractive as a historical figure for the centennial because he was seen as a quintessential Canadian- not fully European, but not really “Indian” either. In terms of the creative team and the actual hand of Indigenous peoples in creating it, *Louis Riel* was surprisingly a step backwards from what we had seen in 1950 with *Tzinquaw*. The opera, which was composed by Harry Somers with a libretto by Mavor Moore, was created and performed solely by white, English Canadian people. ⁴⁵ Both Somers and Moore were part of the settler elite of the time and were now controlling and co-op the narratives of the Métis people. ⁴⁶ It is ironic that in this case, the Métis people were excluded from telling arguably their most iconic story. In the words of Paula Danckert, “Together, and with a handful of other white, primarily anglophone men, Moore and Somers were charting the topology of Canadian culture – literally and figuratively, they were writing the book. Making a historiography of Louis Riel in the form of an opera for the intended purpose of the centennial year celebrations was securing content”. ⁴⁷ By co-opting Métis identity as Canadian for the centennial, the artistic team managed

⁴² Karantonis, Pamela, and Dylan Robinson. “Opera Indigene: Re/Presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures,” 2011.

⁴³ Danckert, Paula. "Louis Riel: History, Theatre, and a National Narrative – An Evolving . . . Story." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 39-50. muse.jhu.edu/article/719399.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

to score federal funding. This shallow inspiration for creating this work was reflected in how little the artistic team cared about the larger responsibility of taking on such a work.

The 1967 *Louis Riel* opera was not created in collaboration with Indigenous peoples at all, and this was seen in its many problems of Indigenous representation. The first was a matter of appropriating Indigenous materials from other communities without their permission.⁴⁸ What started as Somers' attempt to add a bit of Indigeneity 'spice' ended up being a controversy big enough to get the opera unofficially blacklisted. Dr. Colette Simonot-Maiello states that the biggest problem was:

The aria "Kuyas," which is set to a Cree text, [is] based on a Nisga'a mourning song... As Sir Ernest MacMillan explained in 1969, "Harry Somers in *Riel* made effective use of a Barbeau west coast Indian song . . . set to Cree words and 'transplanted' to Montana. This original song . . . was a lament for a chief . . . not a lullaby as in the opera." The incorporation of this musical material – meant to be sung only when a Nisga'a community member or chief dies – into an opera without permission from the family who holds the hereditary rights to sing it is culturally inappropriate, to say the least... But using a Nisga'a lament to act as a stand-in for a Métis lullaby is problematic in another way; it assumes a pan-Indigeneity that ignores the specificity of both the Nisga'a culture from which the music material was appropriated and the Métis culture it was meant to represent.⁴⁹

This was not the only example of Indigenous appropriation in *Louis Riel*.⁵⁰ Another song, titled "The Buffalo Hunt" was claimed by Somers to be a Métis folk song, when in fact it originates from a novel, *Lords of the North*, written by Ontario author Agnes Laut.⁵¹ It was later set to the tune of "Cecilia", which was a composition by the Canadian composer Jean Klinck.⁵² Thus, one of the only two supposedly Métis songs in an entirely Métis opera wasn't actually Métis at all.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Simonot-Maiello, Colette. "'Decolonizing' Riel." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2018): 73-82. muse.jhu.edu/article/719402.

⁵⁰ Monique Giroux, "The Goddamn [Opera] Is Dead!," CNQ, February 1, 2018, <http://notesandqueries.ca/essays/the-goddamn-opera-is-dead/>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

The other problem with Indigenous representation in *Louis Riel* was how negatively it depicted Louis Riel as a person.⁵⁴ A passionate leader and emblematic figure of a very proud people, Riel was shown to be a raving religious lunatic, among other problematic stereotypes.⁵⁵

Jean Teillet states:

There was nothing the Riels or the Métis could do except cringe at the message conveyed by the staging of the opera and its content, which stumbled from beginning to end over its crude portrayal of Riel, the colonial bias, and the offensive stereotypes. Riel is portrayed as an insane, francophone, megalomaniac mystic... Chief Pound-maker is a noble savage. The priests are moral compasses. The Métis women are cardboard cutouts of mother, wife, and sister. The Indian men are silent drunks, and the Indian women are prostitutes.⁵⁶

As Teillet states, “Despite its name, the opera is not really about Louis Riel. It is about how Canada justifies and exonerates itself for its past deeds”.⁵⁷ The *Louis Riel* opera crassly silenced the very Métis people it was meant to empower, stole sacred music from Indigenous communities, and painted the Métis revolutionary in a negative light that produced apathy and disdain for the iconic figure.⁵⁸

1967 Onward

Over the last 150 years of opera history in Canada, audience members, performers and creative teams alike have become more aware of the issues mentioned above. Opera creators are now emphasizing respect, collaborating with the Indigenous community whose story is being told, and keeping the Indigenous perspective and voice at the forefront of the operas they are creating. All representative works to be discussed further in this paper were either composed or written by someone Indigenous, and all Indigenous characters are played by Indigenous performers.

⁵⁴ Teillet, Jean. "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. muse.jhu.edu/article/719397.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

One of the early examples of more appropriate Indigenous representation in opera is that in *Giiwedin* (2010). The opera, which was fully co-composed by Spy Denommé-Welch (Algonquin-Anishinaabe) and Catherine Magowan (Jewish-Hungarian), follows the story of a 150-year old Anishinaabe woman named Noodin-Kwe and her fight to protect her ancestral territory from destruction by the Canadian government's railway construction.⁵⁹ Denommé-Welch was sharing a powerful story about his own people and their fight to keep their sacred lands. Denommé-Welch discusses the many ways in which he attempted to decolonize the creation of *Giiwedin*. The primary way he did this was by turning to tradition and basing his creative process on "The Seven Teachings, which are: Respect, Honour, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, Strength and Love".⁶⁰ The teachings of Respect and Honour created an emphasis on collaboration, reciprocity, and renegotiation with Indigenous communities every step of the way.⁶¹ Composing with Magowan was a highly collaborative process, with each of them either composing fully together, or composing pieces and rigorously editing and recomposing them together.⁶² This ensured that Denommé-Welch's Indigenous voice was always being heard and considered. If they reached out to traditional knowledge keepers, this was always kind and respectful, and the elders always received something in return.⁶³ Also, if there were any requests on behalf of the knowledge keepers in terms of treatment, they respected those requests. Denommé-Welch commented that the teachings of Respect and Honour, "helped establish an environment that values all cultures, music, art and aesthetics so that they may be interacted with and/or used in an honourable way during the development of the creative project".⁶⁴ The compositional style was not simply Western with

⁵⁹ Denomme-Welch, Spy. "Anishinaabe-Nagamon: Decolonizing Historical Ruptures and Healing Dissonant Sounds in the Opera 'Giiwedin'." Accessed May 3, 2022, https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/002/NR80519.PDF?is_thesis=1&oclc_number=890511556.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

various “Indian-isms”, but was fully Baroque with traditional Anishinaabe melodies, including instruments such as violin, cello, harpsichord, lute, rattle and drum.⁶⁵ It featured languages including English, French, and Anishinaabemowin, and due process was taken for cast members to achieve full understanding of the Indigenous language.⁶⁶

Considering the teachings of Wisdom and Strength created an emphasis on tradition while composing the opera.⁶⁷ Denommé-Welch addressed how in the face of forced assimilation, art and creation provided a way to stay connected and affirmed within Indigenous culture when that was otherwise impossible.⁶⁸ Traditional music-making in this work included passing down knowledge through oral tradition, as it is commonly done in Denommé-Welch’s community.⁶⁹ To do this, much of the music and story was taught to the performers by ear, and steps were taken for the creative team to receive knowledge from elders about their similar experiences to those in the story.⁷⁰ Commitment to maintaining tradition and respecting the wisdom of the elders played a large part in how Indigenous communities themselves reacted to this work, undoubtedly making it a much more positive representation and experience for those that were seeing their story told.

The teaching of Love influenced the desires in which the opera was created. Whereas many of the operas discussed above were created for a specific Canadian or British celebration (or simply because it was a tokenistic way to get government funding), *Giiwedīn* was created by Denommé-Welch’s interest in his family history. He states in his doctoral thesis:

The story is linked to the historical research that I had been doing about my family and Timiskaming (on the Ontario side). I grew up with oral knowledge about my ancestors and the Timiskaming region. As an adult, I began to piece together this history, and... found letters written by a great ancestor who was challenging the government at the turn [of] the century over the lands that were being seized without any form of fair treaty or

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

compensation, negotiation or exchange. The lands were simply being taken away, cleared and settled without regard for local Indigenous communities and families who were living in the area over thousands of years. So, I wanted to develop a story about Timiskaming and the surrounding areas.

Denommé-Welch's desire to create an Indigenous opera was borne out of his love for his family, culture, community, and identity. He was able to explore through the creation of this opera his own family history, and the difficult historical experience that was shared by many Indigenous Canadians of this time.⁷¹ This resulted in an incredibly powerful work that showed Indigenous Canadian peoples (and specifically, Indigenous women) as strong, resilient, and passionate heroes.

Finally, the teachings of Courage and Honesty inspired Denommé-Welch create authentic characters by avoiding common operatic and Indigenous archetypes.⁷² Denommé-Welch felt that the exoticism and cultural stereotypes of past works were incorrect and harmful to racialized people, and he wanted to challenge these stereotypes by presenting Indigenous characters in a more positive, realistic, and human light.⁷³ Also, the stock operatic archetypes often reinforced gender roles and heteronormativity, with the handsome hero tenor, soprano love interest, and other voice types as side roles being the norm. Denommé-Welch specifically reversed these roles in *Giiwedin*, featuring a mezzo-soprano heroine.⁷⁴

The theme of dismantling the patriarchy along with colonialism is one that has increased in frequency, which we see in the opera *Missing* (2017). This opera, with a libretto by Métis playwright Marie Clements and composed by Brian Current, is based on British Columbia's missing and murdered Indigenous women, of which there are an unprecedented number in the area of Highway 16, also known as the 'Highway of Tears'.⁷⁵ The story follows white girl 'Ava', who is

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Melissa Poll, "Towards an Eighth Fire Approach: Developing Modes of Indigenous-Settler Performance-Making on Turtle Island," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31, no. 4 (February 2021): pp. 390-408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2021.1969556>.

in a car accident on the Highway and finds the body of a deceased Gitksan woman referred to as ‘Native Girl’.⁷⁶ The young women form a connection, with ‘Native Girl’s spirit accompanying ‘Ava’ through the life she will never have.⁷⁷ The original cast consisted of Indigenous artists of Métis, Kwagiulth/Stó:lō, Coast Salish, and Moosomin heritage, and three settler performers as white characters.⁷⁸

This work was ground-breaking in many ways. A story centred around the current cultural genocide that has yet to be properly addressed is one seldom told. The opera features not only an Indigenous perspective, but an Indigenous female perspective both through the authorship of the libretto, the characters, and the storyline. The story is one of difficult truth and pain, the unnatural nature of violence, the sanctity of women, newfound empathy and growth on behalf of the colonizer, healing, and the long-awaited sounding of the Indigenous female voice. This opera has been very successful in raising awareness for the MMIWG crisis, and audience members are faced with intense anger and guilt by being faced with this subject matter. The characters are well-rounded and admirable, and there are racist white characters that highlight the humanity of the Indigenous characters and the still-present hatred that motivates these killings.⁷⁹ The intermingling of settings between the physical and spiritual worlds reflect Indigenous storytelling, and the parallels drawn between ‘Ava’ and ‘Native Girl’ illustrate that regardless of race, this violence negatively impacts everyone.⁸⁰

Like most works discussed so far, this opera does not come without issue. One of the representational problems is that the female Indigenous characters of ‘Native Girl’ and ‘Native Mother’ do not have names, while all the white and Indigenous male characters do. This was

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

supposedly done to reflect the erasure and silencing of native women's voices and perspectives through the ages, specifically in reference to the removal of women's first names in historical documents, often simply being named "Mary Indian", "Cree Woman", etc.⁸¹ While understanding the intention, many feel that this further silences these women's voices, and all characters should be given equal status.⁸² Also, this work begs the question of whether every Indigenous story has to be about their pain, suffering, and struggles. An audience member of the 1967 *Louis Riel* production remarked that Métis life "wasn't all just doom and gloom... There was lots of happiness... and dancing and jigging and... people bringing out the guitars, or the violins. There was a lot of happiness happening, and... the camaraderie of... sitting and playing cards, and just all that type of stuff... [Opera's depiction of Métis life] seems like a very sad existence, when I know that there was a lot of happiness and a lot of wonderful things going on".⁸³ This poignant comment echoes common opinions today that Indigenous trauma isn't the only content worthy of sharing. While it is important to raise awareness of these issues in a powerful art form such as opera, that is not all it has to be. The narrative ~~now~~ can shift from "doom and gloom" to include Indigenous culture, love, and joy in a way that shows Indigenous peoples having diverse human experiences, rather than strictly fulfilling the role of reliving trauma and pain for the sake of educating the colonizer.

A new opera that I feel is an example of what Indigenous opera should be moving towards, is *Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North* (2017) by Métis poet Suzanne Steele and composer Neil Weisensel. The opera centres around the women that surrounded the iconic figure and their positive impact on the founding of Manitoba, as well as the diversity of Riel's experiences in his

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Monique Giroux, "The Goddamn [Opera] Is Dead!," CNQ, February 1, 2018, <http://notesandqueries.ca/essays/the-goddamn-opera-is-dead/>.

fight for Indigenous rights and freedoms.⁸⁴ According to the creators of the opera, the work “focuses on the beauty and love of the homeland of its people, the heart of the north... through community engagement and performances, the Métis peoples’ past, present and future are reimagined in this 21st century work dedicated to reconciliation and truth, as the artists seek to honour all sides of the ancestral blanket”.⁸⁵ The opera features many diverse scenes, including the Creation story, a bidding war and drinking contest between men (featuring the fun lyrics, “Be prepared to kiss our ass! ... Riel, let loose for a change! Live life, have a pipe!”), women beading and cooking traditional dishes, the intimate relationship between Riel and his lover Josette and her desire to escape to America with him, the beauty of Canadian nature, a buffalo hunt and subsequent celebration with men, women and children alike fiddling and jigging, traditional medicines, and overall, the inseparable bonds of Métis community and kin.⁸⁶ This joy is wonderful to see on stage, and creates a sense of pride within the Manitoba Métis community that is unprecedented in terms of Canadian opera.

Several other features make *Li Keur* a great example of positive Indigenous representation. It features languages of English, French, Saulteaux, French Michif, and Heritage (or Cree) Michif, as well as many Métis folk song melodies that are cited in the score, such as Drops of Brandy, La Métisse, Buffalo Hunters’ Chorus, Turkey in the Straw, and the Red River Jig.⁸⁷ It has characters of diverse ages, economic backgrounds and sexualities, with two-spirit character, ‘Black Goose’, playing a central role in narration.⁸⁸ The local Métis community has been very involved with the production—*Li Keur* features a full cast and creative team (other than composer Weisensel) of Indigenous, and mostly Métis, people. Actors can wear traditional regalia but it is not required, as

⁸⁴“About the Project,” Riel Heart Of The North, February 15, 2021, <https://www.rielheartofthenorth.com/about/>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Neil Weisensel and Suzanne Steele, *Li Keur: Riel's Heart of the North* Print Score, 2022.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

the Métisness of the characters is reflected more in their identity than their appearance. The compositions, while composed by a white man, take a backseat to the traditional Métis folk songs, creating a distinct compositional style of easily singable melodies that make this work accessible to community members who want to participate. The compositions are not imbued with false aural markers of Indigeneity such as vocables, chanting, drumming, etc., but are instead meant to reflect the inspirations of the fiddle, guitar, and jig common in Métis songs. The work is authentic, specific, and a true delight to participate in and behold.

Throughout the course of Canadian operatic history, there have been many works featuring Indigenous characters, many of which have problems with fair, positive, and accurate representations of Indigenous communities. By comparing works spanning from 1879-2017, we can clearly see how the centering of the Indigenous voice, as well as emphasis on fair collaboration, authenticity, and diversity of experience, has created distinct improvements in Indigenous operas' compositional techniques, costume, character archetypes or lack thereof, languages used, casting, heritage of artistic teams, permissions sought and collaboration processes. Through this paper, we have seen Indigenous representation range from romanticised tokenism and fetishized, vulgar stereotypes to the rich tapestry of diverse Indigenous struggles, experiences, and joy that we see in modern Indigenous opera. As Indigenous people, we must create our own narrative and share our own stories. Witnessing the strengthening of the Indigenous artistic voice gives me hope that we have learned from these past mistakes, and continue to move forward to empower the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island through the powerful art form of opera.

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