

Singing For Frog Plain Representing Canadian/Metis Relations through Falcon's Songs

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Article abstract

Pierre Falcon is the earliest known Metis composer. Born in 1793 in Fort La Coude (Elbow Fort) in what is now west-central Manitoba, his adult life spanned the “Golden Years” (Shore 2001) of the western Metis nation. Known as the Bard of the Prairies, Falcon's songs drew on events of local importance during this period, providing a means to remember and share Metis history, and to solidify a sense of Metis nationalism. Beginning in the late-1800s historians, novelists, folklorists, journalists, and musicians began turning their attention to Falcon, resulting in a strikingly large number of popular and academic references to his life and songs. While these references are varied, together they tell a story about the relationship between Canada and the Metis Nation. On the one hand, references to Falcon often draw from, and in fact help create, images of the Imaginary Indian (Francis 1992). Yet on the other hand, many references to Falcon erase his Indigeneity, or blend his Metis identity seamlessly into a Franco-Manitoban, or western Canadian identity. These seemingly contradictory representations, as I will argue in this paper, ultimately point to the ambiguous positioning of Metis people as Indigenous peoples, and speak to an obsession with mixed-ness that denies the Metis their full and authentic Indigeneity.

SINGING FOR FROG PLAIN

Representing Canadian/Metis Relations through Falcon's Songs

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Pierre Falcon is the earliest known Metis songwriter. Born in 1793 in Fort La Coude (Elbow Fort) in what is now west-central Manitoba, his songs drew on events of local importance, in particular events that were significant to the Red River Metis Nation.¹ From his account of the Metis victory at Frog Plain/Seven Oaks in “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés,”² to his gentle mocking of Lord Selkirk and William McDougall in his songs titled “Li Lord Selkirk au Fort William” and “Lii tribulations d’un roi malheureux,”³ his compositions provided a means to remember and share

1. It has become somewhat of a necessity to define what is meant by the “Metis Nation.” Some wish to deny the existence of a Metis Nation altogether, preferring instead to refer to Metis people (i.e., people of mixed European-Indigenous ancestry). Others argue that the term is too closely tied to the Red River Metis (Plains Metis with ties to the Red River region of Manitoba), thus excluding historic mixed-blood communities in Eastern Canada. While I do not wish to deny the possibility that other Metis Nations emerged in the East (which is why I refer to the Red River Metis Nation), it is essential to maintain the use of nation because, without this qualifier, the term “Metis” loses much of its significance. Rather than simply referring to people of mixed ancestry, it acknowledges a group that understands itself both historically and currently as politically and culturally distinct; and that understands its relationship with the settler-state as a nation-to-nation relationship. Throughout this article, “Metis” is written without an acute accent (except when used with an accent in the original source) as a way to counter an overemphasis on French ancestry and lack of emphasis on the indigeneity of Metis people (see Macdougall, 2010: 260; see Andersen, 2014: 211 for a contrasting viewpoint).
2. This song is also known as “La chanson de la gournouillère/grenouillère,” or simply as “Falcon’s Song” (among several other names). The term ‘Bois-Brûlés’ refers to Metis people, and is generally considered an acceptable term, although it is not often used in contemporary times. It is used in this paper when referring to historical sources that used the term, and, of course, in the title of this song.
3. I am using the Michif names adopted in Chartrand (2009). “Li Lord Selkirk au Fort

western Metis history, and to solidify a sense of Metis nationalism. The popularity of his songs among Metis people is attested to by historian Joseph Tassé who, in 1882, noted that they were sung throughout the northwest, and by historian Margaret Complin who wrote that his earliest and most renowned song, “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés,” swept the Northwest “like prairie fire” (1938: 3). “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” is in fact considered by some to be the Metis national anthem (e.g., see Chartrand, 2009: 5).

Beginning in the late 1800s—in fact, beginning before his death in 1876—historians, novelists, folklorists, journalists, and musicians began turning their attention to Falcon, resulting in a strikingly large number of popular and academic references to his life and songs. While these references are varied, together they tell a story about the relationship between Canada and the Red River Metis Nation. On the one hand, references to Falcon often draw from, and in fact help create, images of the Imaginary Indian (Francis, 1992). On the other hand, many references to Falcon erase his Indigeneity, or blend his Metis identity seamlessly into a Franco-Manitoban, or Western Canadian identity. These seemingly contradictory representations, as I will argue in this paper, point to the ambiguous positioning of Metis people as Indigenous peoples (Chrétien, 2005: 106). Alternately expressed, these representations are examples of Metis being “misrecognized as a hybrid off-shoot of two races—‘Indian’ and ‘white’⁴—rather than as an Indigenous people” (Andersen, 2014: 6, emphasis removed); that is, they speak to an obsession with mixed-ness that denies the full and authentic Indigeneity of Metis people.

Metis as Imaginary Indians

The term “Imaginary Indian”⁵ was developed in the work of historian Daniel Francis, who in 1992 published a book titled *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Francis argued that representations of so-called ‘Indians’ have little to do with real, Indigenous

William” is also known as “The Dance of the Bois-Brûlés,” while “Lii tribulations d’un roi malheureux” has been presented in English as “Misfortunes of an Unlucky King.”

4. In this paper, the term ‘Indian’ is used only to refer to the Imaginary Indian, not to actual Indigenous peoples. The term ‘white’ is used to emphasize both the historical and contemporary power relationship that has shaped interactions between Indigenous peoples and settlers with European ancestry.
5. The earliest reference to the “Imaginary Indian” that I was able to find dates back to 1972 in a journal article titled “The Imaginary Indian in Europe” by Ruthven Todd.

nations. According to Francis, white Canadians “formed their impressions of the Indian without much reference to actual Native people, and especially without hearing what Native people might have to say about their own situation” (2011: 122). As a result, the Indian is an “invention of the European” (Francis, 2011: 20); and what began as a mistake—a misnomer—became an image that reflected—and continues to reflect—the fantasies of white settlers⁶ (ibid.: 24). While Francis’s book is the most comprehensive analysis of this issue in the Canadian context, the concept of the Imaginary Indian is also addressed in the work of Tsimshian/Haida art historian Marcia Crosby (2002); in the work of historian Robert Berkhofer whose book *The White Man’s Indian* (1979) addresses the Imaginary Indian in the American context; and indirectly in the work of Plains Cree Metis author Emma LaRocque, whose discussion of the civ/sav dichotomy (whereby so-called civilized characteristics are contrasted with opposing or inverse savage characteristics) illustrates how the Imaginary Indian benefits settlers (2010: 41-58).

Falcon and the Imaginary Indian

Pierre Falcon’s life and music have inspired articles and performances by an array of authors and musicians. In fact, there are more than seventy available sources that reference Falcon in some way, quite a large number given that facts about his life—or at least credible facts about his life—are few and far between.⁷ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a number of these sources are from the realm of fiction. These works of fiction include Louis Ritchotte’s biographical history novel about Falcon titled *Pierriche* (2009); a reference to one of Falcon’s songs and to Falcon himself in H. Emile Chevalier’s novel *Peaux-rouge et Peaux-blanches* (1864); an adaptation of Falcon’s “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” in James Reaney’s collection of poetry (1975); Agnes Laut’s character Pierre “the rhymester” in her novel *Lords of the North* (1900); and Rudy Wiebe’s use of Falcon as narrator

6. The term ‘settler’ is used to refer to all non-Indigenous people who now live on Turtle Island (North America). Although it is a somewhat problematic term because it suggests that there was not a settled presence on the land prior to early European immigration (i.e., that Indigenous peoples merely roamed the land) (see LaRocque 2010: 7-8 for further discussion), and because it homogenizes an increasingly heterogeneous group (although certainly the same could be said about the term ‘Indigenous’), it nonetheless describes a relationship that is quite clearly present in Canada and North America more broadly (Francis, 1992: 9), that is, a relationship to which ‘Indigenous’ is a counterpart.

7. For example, authors debate whether he could read or write, and whether his mother was Cree or an Indigenous woman from the Missouri region.

in his novel *The Scorched Wood People* (1977). While these fictional accounts contain elements of truth—they are, after all, written about a historical figure—one of these accounts, Laut's *Lords of the North*, has, quite problematically, informed later (pseudo) academic sources (most notably MacLeod 1959 and Chartrand 2009) blurring the line between fact and fiction.⁸ As argued below, this overlap between fact and fiction points to a flagrant disregard for Pierre Falcon as a real, Metis person (given that fiction seems to have been a good enough source for a factual account of his life and music) in favour of a version of Falcon that serves the particular vision white settlers had, and have, for Canada.

Lords of the North tells the story of a man named Rufus Gillespie who travels to the Northwest with a group of Northwest Company fur traders in search of a white woman and her child, stolen away by an Indian. Rufus eventually takes part in a buffalo hunt, where he is introduced to Pierre, a character who is described as a half-breed⁹ rhymester (1900: 115). The premise of the story (based on the widely popular captivity narrative [see Carter, 1997]) is obviously problematic, as is the novel's explicitly dehumanizing, stereotyped, and racist language and imagery. This language and imagery is nonetheless strikingly similar to the language and imagery used by historians, folklorists, and collectors to describe Falcon and the Metis more broadly. These similarities point to the extent to which the Imaginary Indian/Metis has shaped academic representations of Falcon. That is, romanticized or stereotyped images of Falcon and the Metis were so normalized that they infected non-fictional accounts. As an example, the following description of "Pierre" is excerpted from Laut's novel:

In Grant's company came Pierre, the rhymester, bubbling over with jingling minstrelsy, that was the delight of every half-breed camp on the plains. Bareheaded, with a red handkerchief banding back his lank hair, and clad in fringed buckskin from the bright neck-cloth to the beaded moccasins, he was as wild a figure as any one of the savage rabble. Yet this was the poet of the plain-rangers, who caught the song of the bird, the burr of cataract through the rocks, the throb of stampeding buffalo, the moan of the wind across the prairie, and tuned his rude minstrelsy to wild nature's fugitive music. (Laut, 1900: 115)

8. Other examples of the blurred line between fact and fiction include the racist descriptions of Falcon and Metis people more generally found in MacLeod (1956, 1959) and Cass-Beggs (1967).
9. The term 'half-breed' is a historical term that was applied to people of mixed First Nations and European, usually Anglo, ancestry. Now generally considered pejorative (although some are reclaiming it), I use the term in this paper only when referring to or quoting sources that adopt the term.

Laut continues by describing an interaction between the novel's main character (Rufus) and Pierre, writing: "Once I asked Pierre how he acquired his art of verse-making. With a laugh of scorn, he demanded if the wind and the waterfalls and the birds learned music from beardless boys and draggled-coated dominies with armfuls of books" (1900: 115).

Laut paints a picture of a Metis character living unschooled in a wild, romantic 'natural' setting, themes that are picked up in supposedly factual accounts of Falcon's life. Scholar Louis-Arthur Prud'homme's article on French literature from the Northwest, for example, vamps on both these themes: "Quand on est trappeur on attrape la rime comme on peut; et quand on court la prairie, on ne s'amuse pas à mesurer les pieds d'un vers" (1915: 258). While Prud'homme's description emphasizes lack of schooling, and a haphazard approach to songwriting (or perhaps, to take a more positive spin, an approach based on 'catching' inspiration as it comes rather than on active participation in the creative process), historian Margaret Complin's introduction to her article printed in the *Winnipeg Tribune* highlights the free and wild past of Falcon's people:

This is the story of Pierre Falcon...and of the long ago when Indian, Metis, and buffalo innumerable roamed the wind-swept, unfenced prairies of the Northwest...Throughout the years to come [the Metis] remained a fearless excitable race in whose veins was the love of their native land, of the white strangers who came to rob them of their country. (Complin, 1938: 3)

Complin ends her article with an odd twist that brings the supposedly academic article into the realm of fiction, leaving readers with the following image:

Falcon died in 1876, Marie [his wife, sister to the famous Cuthbert Grant] a year later, and the lapse of 60 years has made it difficult to verify the few traditions which linger round their memory. Yet I have frequently been impressed by the evident wish of the old Metis to tell the truth about their forbears, and as I write these words there comes to me the picture of an old man born on the plains more than 90 years ago. He had answered my questions and was sitting absent-mindedly cutting flakes of tobacco for his pipe, living again in the long-dead past of which he had been talking. When he remembered my presence he turned and said: Woman, you can write of what I told you, for what I have said is the truth." (Complin, 1938: 3)

Since there is no indication of who the old man might be (is he someone she interviewed, a composite of people she interviewed, or merely someone

she conjures up in her imagination), the reader is left with a fanciful image that invites readers to blur the line between fact and fiction.

Nearly thirty years after Complin published her article, folksong collector and vocalist Barbara Cass-Beggs published a collection of Metis folk songs from Saskatchewan that built on this tradition of blending fact and fiction. In her rather laughable introduction, Cass-Beggs pays a curious compliment to Metis people: "...as [the Metis] tended to choose the most beautiful and intelligent Indian women a fine new race of people developed; living in harmony with both Indians and traders..." (Cass-Beggs 1967: 5). She then provides a description of the Metis that recalls Laut's fictional account of the 'plain-rangers': "Physically the Métis were stalwart, muscular, and active, equally at home with horses, guns, paddles, fishing or the pursuit of the buffalo. Emotionally they were excitable, imaginative and ambitious; passionate, restless, easily amused and generally devout" (Cass-Beggs 1967: 5). This description is similar to Margaret MacLeod's portrayal of Falcon as a "wiry, fiery little man, agile and quick of movement" (1959: 1), which in turn recalls Laut's description of "Pierre" who "bubbl[ed] over with jingling minstrelsy" (1900: 115). This largeness of personality is also echoed in the somewhat more recent words of Grant MacEwan, who stated in his biography of Falcon that "...when [Falcon] laughed, he could be heard across the broad valley of the Assiniboine" (1981: 25). While the latter is clearly hyperbole, all of these descriptions ring of poetic license rather than established truth.

The most profound example of the license taken in accounts of Falcon's life and music is found, however, in the treatment of a song titled "The Buffalo Hunt." This song was first published in Laut's novel *Lords of the North*, where Pierre the rhymester is described "chanting" a song (titled "The Buffalo Hunt") about the "glorious deeds" of the Bois-Brûlés hunters (1900: 120). Laut includes the lyrics to this very ornate and fanciful song—lyrics that she penned herself—as part of the novel's narrative (see lyrics in appendix one). Fifty-nine years after Laut published her novel, historian Margaret MacLeod included "The Buffalo Hunt," now explicitly attributed to Pierre Falcon, in her collection of songs titled *Songs of Old Manitoba* (1959). The lyrics, taken word for word from Laut's novel, are set to the song "Cécilia" by Jean Klinck. No explanation is given for why this particular melody was chosen. Although MacLeod acknowledges the original (fictional) source, she justifies her inclusion stating that there is "strong reason to believe" that Laut got Falcon's original French song from an "old Métis" (MacLeod 1960: 19). She notes that people in Saint

François Xavier—where Falcon spent his later years—recalled that Falcon had a song about the buffalo hunt, and also notes that Quebecois scholar Martial Allard, whom she refers to as an authority on Falcon, considered it sufficiently like Falcon’s work to be his composition.¹⁰ The song, with lyrics and melody written by non-Metis people, had moved from fiction to fact.

“The Buffalo Hunt” was most recently included in Paul Chartrand’s book titled *Pierriche Falcon: The Michif Rhymester* (2009), published by the Gabriel Dumont Institute with support from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Chartrand notes that MacLeod published verses taken from a book by Agnes Laut, and in his discussion of the tune admits that while the first part is “quite inspirational à la Falcon” the remainder (in particular, Laut’s use of the pejorative terms ‘squaw’ and ‘braves’) does not reflect Falcon’s work (2009: 8-9). Even though he raises this misgiving, Chartrand includes the lyrics in his book (taken word for word from Laut/MacLeod with the exception of the words ‘squaw’ and ‘braves’ which he changes to women and warriors); the song is, furthermore, included on the CD that accompanies the book, using the melody adopted by MacLeod, and performed by Metis singer Krystle Pederson with accompaniment by fiddler John Arcand. While Metis people certainly have the right to adopt tunes written by non-Metis people, the inclusion of “The Buffalo Hunt” in Chartrand’s collection (and other collections) and its attribution to Falcon is problematic even when accompanied by disclaimers noting that there is no known original (as Chartrand indicates) and that it was taken from Laut’s novel and translated into her ornate English (see MacLeod, 1959: 19). Fiction has served as a good enough source for facts about Falcon’s life, and the fiction of this attribution is being forgotten.

Although it should already be obvious that this relatively easy movement from fiction to fact is problematic, it becomes even more troubling when Laut’s version of “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés,” also included in *Lords of the North*, is considered side by side with more reliable versions of the chanson. Laut introduces “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” with a description of the battle that inspired it—a battle between Metis and English/Anglo fur traders that took place in 1816—in present-day Winnipeg. As part of her horrifyingly racist description of the battle’s aftermath, and as a way to contextualize the song, Laut writes:

10. Information found in the MacLeod papers available at the Manitoba Archives indicate that MacLeod was in contact with Allard for a number of years as she was preparing her song collection.

Decked out in red-stained trophies with scalps dangling from their waists, the natives darted about like blood-whetted beasts; and the half-breeds were little better, except that they thirsted more for booty than life. There was loud vaunting over the triumph, the ignorant rabble imagining their warriors heroes of a great battle, instead of the murderous plunderers they were. Pierre, the rhymester, according to his wont, broke out in jubilant celebration of the half-breeds' feat. (Laut, 1900: 171)

Laut then prints a highly romanticized translation of "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés," a translation that she completed with a great deal of poetic license (see lyrics in appendices two and three). Of particular note is the image of the wild, gleeful, blood-thirsty Metis and the close connection made between the Metis who fought in the battle and the wild animals feasting on the remains of the dead English soldiers. (The most relevant passages are bolded in the appendix, and include phrases such as "a fighting race" and "Plain rangers ride fourth to slay, to slay!")

More reliable sources provide a striking contrast to Laut's version of the song. Margaret Complin's version (a version that is very similar to those found in all sources other than Laut's novel) provides, for example, a straightforward account of the Battle of Frog Plain from a Metis perspective (see lyrics in appendix two). The lyrics provided in Complin blame the Battle on the English ("Voilà l'Anglais qui vient nous attaquer!"), who were there to pillage their country ("Qui sont ici pour piller notre pays") and who fired the first shot ("Le Gouverneur qui était enrage/Il dit à ses soldats: 'Tirez!']"). Although the song ends with Metis celebration ("Les Bois-Brûlé lachaient des cris de joie!"), the lyrics make it clear that the Metis tried to avoid the battle by sending an ambassador, and that they acted like honourable men ("J'avons agi comme des gens d'honneur")—ideas that are hidden in Laut's romanticized version. If Laut took such liberties with "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés," she likely did the same with "The Buffalo Hunt." Furthermore, given that there is no known French or Michif version of "The Buffalo Hunt," it is entirely possible that it was written without reference to an original song composed by Falcon, or with just a general knowledge that Falcon had written a song on the topic of a buffalo hunt instead of with reference to an actual song that Laut had heard sung by a Metis singer.

The inclusion of "The Buffalo Hunt" in collections of Falcon's songs is an example of the process through which writers have created and sustained the Imaginary Indian. Instead of relying on Metis people as the source for Metis songs, MacLeod relied on an impression of the Metis and of Falcon

that had formed collectively in the settler consciousness and that had been expressed in Laut's novel—a novel that borrows from the large “register of images” (Andersen, 2014: 33) that constitutes the Imaginary Indian. As letters in the MacLeod collection at the Manitoba Archives reveal, MacLeod felt very strongly that Canada needed to have a song of the buffalo hunt, a feeling she expressed in a letter to her publisher: “Canada has no song of the Buffalo Hunt, which seems a great lack. For this reason, I would like to abridge and revise a song of the buffalo hunt which is sung by Pierre Falcon in Agnes Laut’s ‘Lords of the North’” (MacLeod Papers, letter to Lorne Pierce, August 5, 1957). Although MacLeod sought out other possible buffalo songs¹¹ and then revised Laut’s version, these songs and revision were rejected in favour of publishing Laut’s version almost word for word.¹² Ultimately, MacLeod and her publisher (and others in the years that followed) were more interested in publishing songs that fit their imagined image of Manitoba—songs that reflected the romantic past that settlers envisioned—than in ensuring that their representations referenced the real Pierre Falcon. Fictional accounts of Falcon were accepted, and continue to be accepted, as good enough sources for factual articles; and in this way, the Imaginary Indian has taken precedence over the real Pierre Falcon.

Erasing Metis Indigeneity

Metis people have, then, been constructed as Indians. Yet they have also been denied their Indigeneity. Metis ethnomusicologist Annette Chrétien argues that this erasure has been accomplished by representing Metis people as French Canadian, or simply as Canadian (Chrétien, 2005: 129-135). F.A.H. Larue,¹³ for example, published “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” as part of a collection of voyageur songs (1863).¹⁴ Larue’s only reference to Falcon’s Indigeneity was by way of noting that one of Falcon’s songs was about a battle fought by “les Bois-Brûlés” (1863: 368). Joseph Tassé (1878) similarly links the song to voyageurs, noting that previously published versions had

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11. The MacLeod collection at the Manitoba Archives also includes notation and lyrics for a buffalo hunt song with music by James Gowler as well as for a buffalo hunt song with music by J.P. Barratt.
 12. In one instance, ‘squaws’ is replaced with wives.
 13. Francois-Alexandre-Hubert Larue was a medical doctor who published on a variety of subjects not limited to medicine.
 14. The article was, more broadly, about popular and historical songs of Canada. However, Falcon’s song is included as part of a section titled “Chansons de voyageurs” (863).

not been collected as sung by the voyageurs (1878: 346-348), suggesting, in effect, that these versions were thus not authentic. In fact, Tassé makes this claim even though he notes that Hargrave's version had been collected "sous la dictée même de Falcon" (1878: 348).¹⁵ Like Larue, Tassé does not refer to Falcon as Metis, although he does indicate that Falcon wanted to join the French Metis when they gathered in Saint Norbert in the late 1860s under the leadership of Louis Riel (1878: 350). Following in the tradition of Larue and Tassé, folklorist and collector Marius Barbeau published "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés" in 1942 as part of a short article on voyageur songs. Barbeau noted that Falcon was a *bois-brûlé*, but his article ends by focusing on his consultant, a Quebecer who had learned Falcon's song from the daughter of a fur trader.

Instead of tying the song to French Canadian voyageurs, other authors connect Falcon's work to Quebecois and Franco-Manitoban identities. Louis-Arthur Prud'Homme,¹⁶ for example, referenced Falcon's work in 1915 in an article on Franco-Manitoban literature, noting that this literature—Falcon's songs included—solicits sentiments of pride and gratitude among French Manitobans even if it is relatively lacking when compared to Quebec's literature (1915: 248). More recently, Tatiana Arcand, a scholar whose work focuses on French literature, expressed a similar sentiment, noting that Falcon's songs mark an important step in the oral literature of Western Canada, and that as such they are part of the heritage of French Canadians just as much as (what she calls) "la chanson folklorique ou le conte" (1990: 143).¹⁷ Franco-Manitoban writer J. R. Léveillé takes this idea

15. Hargrave, however, is somewhat ambiguous about this detail, stating that he was "fortunate enough to secure from the lips of its author a metrical account of this battle" (1871: 75). Does this mean that he published the version that Falcon sang for him? Did it undergo melodic or lyrical changes? And did Hargrave speak French well enough to accurately transcribe the song?
16. Louis-Arthur Prud'homme was born and educated in Quebec. He became a lawyer in 1877, and moved to Manitoba in 1880. He wrote a large number of historical articles that were published in journals.
17. Morcos similarly writes that Falcon's "chansons de circonstance" mark an important step in the oral literature of the West and that they are an important part of "l'héritage des Canadiens français" (1998: 93-94). The absorption of Metis identity into a Franco-Manitoban identity is augmented through performances in Manitoba such as that organized in 1977 by students taking a course on French Canadian literature under the course directorship of Annette Saint-Pierre at College Saint-Boniface (a performance that included "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés"), as well as a historical drama put on by Marcien Ferland with support of the Festival du Voyageur and the Franco-Manitoban Cultural Centre, titled *Le Voyageur*; it featured Pierre Falcon as one of the characters interpreting his own songs.

further in his book focused on Franco-Manitoban poetry (1990), stating that the Metis struggled because they were trying to establish a *French* country in the Red River, and that the political troubles expressed in “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” were like those faced by Quebecers during Quebec’s early years—troubles that were captured in Quebecois patriotic poetry. Léveillé furthermore argues that the engagement with historical events (as expressed in Falcon’s song) is characteristic of Franco-Manitoban poetry and that Franco-Manitobans are still fighting for their rights (1990: 21). Léveillé thus makes a swift and seamless move from Metis to Franco-Manitoban, blurring any distinctions between the two.

There is, however, an example that stands at some distance from those just noted: that of Marcien Ferland who published a version of “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” in 1979. Although Ferland’s discussion and transcription of the song is included in a collection of Franco-Manitoban songs, he clearly identifies it as Metis, stating that the dialect distinguishes it from both French and Quebecois songs. The version that he published is particularly interesting because he used a new source for the melody—a living Metis consultant—and made a careful attempt to transcribe the song as it was sung to him; the result is a song sung in a local dialect to a melody with an irregular formal structure (Figure 1).

Singing this version of “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” requires singing a different succession of phrases for each verse (see Ferland 1979: 206-207 for the additional verses).¹⁸ In other words, the structure of the first verse is ABCDEFG, while the second and third verses are ABCDG and ABABBCDEG respectively. In this way, the structure of the version included in Ferland’s collection is flexible, changing as needed to suit the lyrics.

While the commentary that accompanies Ferland’s transcription highlights the song’s linguistic and musical métissage, scholar Jacques Julien (who wrote two rather extensive articles on representations of Falcon), takes issue with these aspects of the transcription. In fact, Julien dismisses Ferland’s transcription as so corrupt (i.e., “corrompues”) that it is almost impossible to sing (1996: 63). (In the original French, Julien writes that the song is “tellement corrompues que le chant en est presque impossible” [1996: 63]). Julien is particularly critical of Ferland’s version because it differs so drastically from a version of “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” published by Margaret Complin in 1939 (Figure 2).

18. The song structure of each verse is: ABCDEFG, ABCDG, ABABBCDEG, ABCD1G, ABABBCDEG, ABCDEG, and ABAB.

A Vou-lez vous m'é - cou-ter chan-ter? C'est un chan-son de dé-ve ri-

B

C té. C'é-tait le dix-neuf de jan dar-nier, Les caups l'ont ar - ri -

D

E

F vé En mil huit cent seiz'. La band' des Bois -brû-lés il' ont ar__ ri - vé

G

Comm' des bra - vés guer - riers.

C¹

Trois pri - son-niers

D¹

Voi-là l'An-glais qui l'est i - ci

Figure 1¹⁹

Voulez vous é - cou-ter chan-ter Un chan-son de vé - ri

té? L'dix - neuf de Juin la band' des Bois - Brû -

lés sont ar - ri - vés__ Comm' des bra-ves guer riers!__

Figure 2.

19. This musical example and the next (Figure 2) have been recopied for clarity. However, they are notated exactly as found in the original transcriptions.

Julien reminds readers that Complin's version, which was sung by Falcon's descendants,²⁰ is simple and compact (making no reference to the measures that have extra beats),²¹ especially in contrast to what he considers Ferland's complicated version. In this way, Julien dismisses Ferland's version as inaccurate and unsingable, and, in the process, dismisses a representation of Falcon's song that highlights its uniquely Metis characteristics, in particular its distinctive dialect and asymmetrical phrases.

While Complin's version is simple and certainly is an important version given that it was sung by Falcon's relatives, two issues call it into question. First, the tune was not transcribed by Complin, but by a local priest, Pierre Picton, who had agreed to help Complin find the original melody.²² However, the version that Complin published and attributed to Falcon's descendants is notably different from the version attributed to Falcon's descendants found in Pierre Picton's original transcriptions; there is no way of knowing why or when the changes to the original transcription were made. Second, a letter available in the Centre du Patrimoine archives in St. Boniface raises questions about Picton's neutrality. This letter was written by Falcon's descendants in response to Complin's original article on "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés," an article that included a transcription of the song as sung by a man named Joseph Vandal (Complin, 1938). Falcon's descendants demanded to know why Complin had used Vandal's version instead of the version that they had sung. In Picton's rather angry response, he defends his work and then asks: What good would it serve to do so much research on the history of your ancestors, if you deny that which gave them their glory: the French language and [French] blood and the Catholic faith.²³ Whether Picton's belief did indeed shape his transcriptions cannot be known for certain; yet, it is clear that Picton valued Metis people

20. The descendants Complin lists are his grandson François Xavier Falcon, granddaughters Mme Mainville and Mme Emile Daneault, and grandniece Mme Pelland.

21. It should be noted, however, that Complin also does not mention the asymmetry of the version she published. It's not clear if these were mistakes in transcription or an intentional and accurate reflection of how Falcon's descendants sang the song.

22. Picton in fact transcribed numerous versions of the song, all available on the St. Boniface Centre du Patrimoine's website (<http://shsb.mb.ca/en>), with the originals available in the archives. Complin notes that Picton was a "highly-trained musician" (1939: 55) and thus considers his transcriptions reliable.

23. Picton wrote in the original French letter, "Et à quoi servirait faire tant de recherches pour faire connaître l'histoire de vos ancêtres, si vous devez renier ce qui a fait leur gloire: la langue et le sang français, et la foi catholique."

for their French, not their Indigenous ancestry.

It is possible, however, that “La chanson des Bois-Brûlés” was composed as a French tune, in the style of the voyageurs. Pierre Falcon in fact spent ten years in Quebec (between the ages of five and fifteen), an experience that likely shaped his music. But even if his original composition was more Quebecois than Metis (and this is a big ‘if’ especially since it was composed eight years after his return to Red River), changes in the words and music would have been inevitable in the years since its composition, given that it became an important part of Metis folk repertoire which was an oral tradition. That is, regardless of its original structure and original words, it became a truly Metis tune through its widespread adoption by Metis people throughout the Northwest. It is thus important not to dismiss versions such as Ferland’s, a version that undoubtedly reflects the life of the Metis consultant who shared it with Ferland, and the distinct aspects of his consultant’s community. The key issue, then, is not which version is the original, or which is the most authentic;²⁴ the issue is that representations have erased or otherwise diminished the Metis-ness of Falcon’s songs, whether by including them in French Canadian repertoire; tying them to Quebec instead of to a distinct Metis history and culture; using them to tell the story of Franco-Manitobans or to solidify Franco-Manitoban identity; or by dismissing Metis elements as inauthentic. In doing so, representations of Falcon and his songs have erased an important part of Metis culture.

As suggested by Falcon’s sojourn in Quebec, there is some overlap between French Canadian and Metis culture, and the desire among Francophones (and even among Canadians more generally) to claim Falcon might be seen as a point of pride for some Metis people since this claiming suggests that Francophones hold Falcon in high regard. While these points are noteworthy, the problems raised here relate to how Falcon’s life and music are used selectively by settlers for specific purposes, whether to romanticize the past (as suggested in the previous section), or to bolster Francophone cultural difference. When Falcon’s music is represented with no or little reference to its Metis elements or without reference to their broader Metis context, his Metis identity—his identity as a citizen of a unique, *Indigenous* nation—becomes hidden under the veneer of French culture. Falcon’s music thus serves to benefit Franco-Manitobans,

24. Although this information would be of general interest, it is now impossible to uncover the original version of Falcon’s song given that the accuracy of the Picton/Complin transcriptions is questionable. That is to say, all direct links to Falcon have now been lost.

establishing their unique cultural legacy, and not Metis people, for if Metis people are subsumed as part of, or a subset of, French Canadian culture, their rights as Indigenous peoples (distinct from settlers) are effectively denied. While elements of French and Metis cultures are shared, positioning Metis music as French without also demonstrating how the songs are uniquely Metis and thus distinct from French Canadian music effectively denies the Indigeneity of the songs and of the people who wrote and passed on the songs.

Conclusion

Falcon's songs ultimately provide a compelling glimpse into representations of Metis people. Agnes Laut's "The Buffalo Hunt" is an example of one of the ways that fictional accounts of Indians (i.e., Imaginary Indians) have informed supposedly factual articles about Falcon and his music. Although the only known primary source of "The Buffalo Hunt" is found in a novel that is steeped in racist imagery, written by an author who took considerable liberties in her re-printing of "La chanson des Bois-Brûlés," this version of "The Buffalo Hunt" is now accepted as part of Falcon's repertoire. In this movement from fiction to fact, Laut's character "Pierre" took precedence over the real Pierre Falcon. At the same time, Falcon has often been subsumed into a Franco-Manitoban, or French Canadian identity. By including Falcon's songs in collections of voyageur songs; by building strong connections between Falcon and Quebecois history and poetry (and not between Falcon and Metis or broader Indigenous history and poetry); and by using Falcon's songs to solidify a Franco-Manitoban identity, Falcon's identity as Indigenous is erased; he becomes, in these representations, French. These rather contradictory representations of Falcon ultimately tell of the uneasy positioning of Metis people. Rather than understand Metis people as a fully Indigenous people, representations by settlers speak to an obsession with biology and hybridity (Andersen 2014: 11), and to settlers' inability to think outside of the "binaries of 'white' and 'Indian'" (36). As Andersen notes, this is deeply troubling for the Metis Nation because, when classified as hybrid, Metis are "den[ie]d that which [they] seek most, an acknowledgement of [their] political legitimacy and authenticity as an Indigenous *people*" (38). The representations of Falcon discussed above, then, are deeply problematic, reflecting and reinforcing an image of the Metis people that was born in the imagination of settlers; and actively denying Falcon his full and authentic Indigeneity.

Appendix One

The Buffalo Hunt

By Agnes Laut (1900), reprinted in MacLeod (1959), Davis (1976), and Chartrand (2009)²⁵

Now list to the song of the buffalo hunt/Which I, Pierre, the rhymester,
chant of the brave!/We are Bois-Brulés, Freeman of the plains/We choose
our chief! We are no man's slave!

Up, riders, up, ere the early mist/Ascends to salute the rising sun!/Up,
rangers, up, ere the buffalo herds/Sniff morning air for the hunter's gun!

They lie in their lairs of dank spear-grass/Down in the gorge, where the
prairie dips/We've followed their tracks through the sucking ooze/Where
our bronchos sank to their steaming hips.

We've followed their tracks from the rolling plain/Through slime-green
sloughs to a sedgy ravine/Where the cat-tail spikes of the marsh-grown
flags/Stand half as high as the billowy green.

The spear-grass touched our saddle-bows/The blade-points pricked to
the broncho's neck/But we followed the tracks like hounds on scent/Till
our horses reared with a sudden check.

The scouts dart back with a shout, "They are found!"/Great fur-maned
heads are thrust through reeds/A forest of horns, a crunching of stems/
Reined sheer on their haunches are terrified steeds!

Get you gone to the squaws at the tents, old men/The cart-lines safely
encircle the camp!/Now, braves of the plain, brace your saddle-girths!/Quick!
Load guns, for our horses champ!

A tossing of horns, a pawing of hoofs/But the hunters utter never a
word/As the stealthy panther creeps on his prey/So move we in silence
against the herd.

With arrows ready and triggers cocked/We round them nearer the valley
bank/They pause in defiance, then start with alarm/At the ominous
sound of a gun-barrel's clank.

A wave from our captain, out bursts a wild shout/A crash of shots from

25. MacLeod changes the second reference from 'squaws' to wives, as does Davis. Chartrand changed the pejorative terms 'squaws' and 'braves' to women and warriors.

our breaking ranks/And the herd stampedes with a thunderous boom/
While we drive our spurs into quivering flanks.

The arrows hiss like a shower of snakes/The bullets puff in a smoky
gust/Out fly loose reins from the bronchos' bits/And hunters ride on in
a whirl of dust.

The bellowing bulls rush blind with fear/Through river and marsh, while
the trampled dead/Soon bridge safe ford for the plunging herd/Earth
rocks like a sea 'neath the mighty tread.

A rip of the sharp-curved sickle-horns/A hunter falls to the blood-soaked
ground!/He is gored and tossed and trampled down/On dashes the furious
beast with a bound.

When over sky-line hulks the last great form/And the rumbling thunder
of their hoofs' beat, beat/Dies like an echo in distant hills/Back ride the
hunters chanting their feat.

Now, old men and squaws, come you out with the carts!/There's meat
against hunger and fur against cold!/Gather full store for the pemmican
bags/Garner the booty of warriors bold.

So list ye the song of the Bois-Brulés/Of their glorious deeds in the
days of old/And this is the tale of the buffalo hunt/Which I, Pierre, the
rhymester, have proudly told.

Appendix Two

La chanson des Bois-Brûlés

Agnes Laut version (1900)

Ho-ho! List you now to a tale of truth/Which I, Pierre, the rhymester,
proudly sing/Of the Bois-Brûlés, whose deeds dismay/The hearts of the
soldiers serving the king!

Swift o'er the plain rode our warriors brave/To meet the gay voyageurs
come from the sea/Out came the bold band that had pillaged our land/
And we taught them the plain is the home of the free.

We were passing along to the landing-place/Three hostile whites we
bound on the trail/The enemy came with a shout of acclaim/We flung
back their taunts with the **shriek of a gale**.

"They have come to attack us," our people cry/Our cohorts spread out
in a crescent horn/Their path we bar in a steel scimitar/And their empty
threats we flout with scorn.

They halt in the face of a dauntless foe/They spit out their venom of
baffled rage!/Honor, our breath to the very death!/So we proffer them
peace, or a battle-gage.

The governor shouts to his soldiers, "Draw!"/'Tis the enemy strikes the
first, fateful blow!/Our men break from line, for the battle-line/**Of a
fighting race** has a fiery glow.

The governor thought himself mighty in power/The shock of his
strength—Ha ha!—should be known/From the land of the sea to the
prairie free/And all free men should be overthrown!

**But naked and dead on the plain lies he/Where the carrion hawk,
and the sly coyote/Greedily feast** on the great and the least/Without
respect for a lord of note.

The governor thought himself might in power/The thought to enslave the
Bois-Brûlés/"**Ha-ha,**" **laughed the hawk**. Ho-ho! Let him mock/"**Plain
rangers ride forth to slay, to slay!"**

Whose cry outpierces the night-bird's note?/Whose voice mourns sadly
through sighing trees?/What spirits wail to the prairie gale?/Who tells
his woes to the evening breeze?

Ha-ha! We know, though we tell it not/We fought with them till none
remained/**The coyote knew, and his hungry crew/Licked clean the**
grass where the turf was stained.

Ho-ho! List you all to my tale of truth/"Tis I, Pierre, the rhymester, this
glory tell/**Of freedom saved and brave hands laved/In the blood of**
tyrants who fought and fell!

Appendix Three

La chanson des Bois-Brûlés

Complin/Picton version (1938)

Voulez-vous écouter chanter/Une chanson de vérité?/Le dix-neuf de juin la bande des Bois-Brûlés/Sont arrivé comme des brave guerriers.

En arrivant à la Grenouillère/Nous avons pris trois prisonniers/Trois prisonniers des Arkansy/**Qui sont ici pour piller notre pays.**

Étant sur la point de débarquer/Deux de nos gens se sont mis a crier/Deux de nos gens se sont mis a crier/**Voilà l'Anglais qui vient nous attaquer!**

Tout aussitôt nous avons deviré/Nous avons été les rencontrer/J'avons cerné la bande des grenadiers/(Ils) sont immobiles, ils sont demontés.

J'avons agi comme des gens d'honneur/J'avons envoyé un ambassadeur:
« Le Gouverneur, voulez-vous arrêter/Un petit moment, nous voulons vous parler? »

Le Gouverneur qui était enragé/Il dit a ses soldats : « Tirez! »/Le premier coup, c'est l'anglais qu'a tiré; /L'ambassadeur a manqué de tuer.

Le Gouverneur qui se croit empereur/Il veut agir avec rigueur/Le Gouverneur qui se croit empereur/**À son malheur, agit trop de rigueur.**

Ayant vu passer tous ces Bois-Brûlés/Il a parti pour les épouvanter/Etant parti pour les épouvanter/**Il s'est trompé, il s'est fait tuer.**

Il s'est trompé, il s'est fait tuer/Un' quantité des ses grenadiers/J'avons tué presque tout 'son armée/Rien que quatre ou cinq ca l'ont pu se sauver.

Si vous aviez vu tous ces Anglais/Tous ces Bois-Brûlés après/De butte en butte, les Anglais culbutaient/Les Bois-Brûlé lachaient des cris de joie!

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