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Repositioning the Missionary: Sara Riel, the Grey Nuns, and Aboriginal Women in Catholic Missions of the Northwest

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On 22 June 1871, *Le Métis*—a French-language newspaper based in St. Boniface, Manitoba, that expressed Métis viewpoints—reported that three Grey Nuns had arrived from Montreal in the company of Sister Charlebois, assistant superior-general. Only one of the sisters, the article continued, would accompany Charlebois to Île-à-la-Crosse, a mission in northern Saskatchewan for which Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin was recruiting missionaries: “Sister Riel, sister of Mr. Louis Riel, however, has been designated to accompany her. She is, believe us, the first missionary from the Métis Nation of Red River given to this Great Apostolic work, and one could not find a more dignified person. A kindly heart, keen intelligence, and inexhaustible charity distinguish this new missionary. Her departure is a sacrifice for her family and the entire population, but at the same time it is an honour and a blessing for us.” Two months later, en route to the mission, Riel wrote her mother, “I find myself more and more happy to have been chosen, me Sara Riel, as the first Métis missionary in the North.”

In the 1860s and 1870s, Sara Riel, like her famous brother Louis, was well known to the inhabitants of Red River. The settlement, founded at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers by the Earl of Selkirk in 1811, became a multiracial society composed largely of retired fur traders and their Aboriginal families—French-speaking, Roman Catholic Métis and English-speaking, Protestant “mixed-bloods” or Country-born. Born in 1848 to Jean-Louis and Julie (née Lagimodière) Riel, members of the Métis social and political elite, Sara Riel was educated at the Sisters of Charity’s (Grey Nuns’) boarding school in St. Boniface, entered the congregation’s noviciate in September 1865, and became the first Métis Grey
Nun from Red River in March 1868. Her life and career spanned an era when political, economic, and social power had yet to shift completely in favour of colonial institutions and culture and when fears of métissage had yet to overcome the colonial project. Proficient in English, French, Cree, and Michif, Riel was deemed ideally suited to teach in the congregation’s day and boarding schools at St. Norbert, St. Vital, Francis-Xavier, and Ile-à-la-Crosse and to serve as a cultural mediator between male missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Aboriginal women and between the Catholic hierarchy and Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) officials. Riel was a confidante of Alexandre-Antonin Taché, the bishop of St. Boniface, who was her spiritual advisor at Red River and fostered mixed-race nuns for a successful apostolate in the Northwest, and she corresponded with Joseph Dubuc, co-founder of Le Métis and member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, until her death from tuberculosis in 1883. Despite the importance that the Catholic hierarchy, the Métis community, and the Riel family attached to Sara Riel’s accomplishments—in his poem “Le vallon Marguerite Marie,” Louis Riel exclaimed, “You emulate God completely / My Grey Nun! / My missionary!”—her experiences have been overshadowed by those of her more famous brother and by the shifting preoccupations of historians.

My first encounter with Sara Riel occurred by accident while flipping through local histories of Saskatchewan homestead districts. Communities in which the Grey Nuns had been active as teachers and nurses often mentioned Sara Riel as one of the congregation’s more famous members. In the 1970s, during the first flush of the second-wave feminist movement and early forays into women’s history, Mary V. Jordan had sparked some interest in Sara Riel by publishing To Louis from Your Sister Who Loves You, Sara Riel. But the book, which focuses on Sara Riel’s letters to Louis, says little about Riel’s position as a nun and missionary and instead presents her as a pale imitation of the brother with whom, Jordan argues, she shared a mystical relationship: Sara became a nun only after Louis forsook the priesthood; she became a missionary only after Louis fled Red River during the Resistance. Political scientist Thomas Flanagan also uses aspects of Sara Riel’s life and letters to explore her brother’s motivations in Louis “David” Riel: Prophet of the New World. Flanagan likewise believes that the siblings shared a special relationship, but he argues that the strength of Sara’s faith and a near-death experience in 1872—which caused her to renounce the Riel name and take that of Marguerite-Marie of Alacoque, a seventeenth-century nun and apostle of devotion to the
Sacred Heart of Jesus— influenced Louis’s decision to forgo the priesthood, change his name to David, and try to establish himself as a New World prophet. Flanagan also speculates that Louis’s desire to reform the family by sanctifying incest, polygamy, and a married clergy as central components of his new religion might have reflected unvoiced sexual feelings between the siblings.8

The desire to use aspects of Sara Riel’s life to shed light on her brother—to treat her, as Carol Hielburn observes in her assessment of the state of biographical writing in the late 1980s, as a woman celebrated as an event in the life of a great man—has obscured rather than illuminated the siblings’ relationship and Sara Riel’s position in Native-newcomers relations.9 When contrasted with her brother’s life, Sara Riel’s experiences open a window to explore how gender shaped Métis men’s and women’s responses to Christianity and colonization.10 As a woman who lived at various cultural crossroads, or contact zones, during a pivotal period in Canadian history and self-identified as Aboriginal and as a true missionary, Sara Riel also unsettles neat cultural dichotomies—white settler versus Aboriginal, colonized versus colonizer, missionary versus missionized, male missionary versus female auxiliary—that colour the lens through which historians view the past, particularly as feminist historians have increasingly abandoned early efforts to explore the experience of women “in between,” such as Sylvia Van Kirk’s “Many Tender Ties,” to explore white, colonial representations of these women. Historian Joan Sangster asks whether the reluctance among white feminist historians to use the term experience precludes them from interpreting “historical sources across differences to effect an empathetic engagement with the past.”11

The current emphasis on nation and race and the interpretive turn in Canadian women’s history, combined with a tendency among historians of Catholic missions to render women religious as witnesses and auxiliaries to evangelization rather than as missionaries in their own right, has likewise contributed to new gaps and silences in Aboriginal women’s and missionary history.12

Unlike most Aboriginal women who encountered missionaries in the nineteenth century, Sara Riel was a prolific writer, and her family’s prominence guaranteed that her letters would be preserved. Written primarily between the late 1860s and her death, her letters reveal the intensity of her faith and her commitment to Catholic missionary endeavours. When combined with the Grey Nuns’ correspondence, community histories, necrologies, chronicles, and circulaires mensuelles, her letters offer an
opportunity to circumvent the male missionary gaze to explore how women religious and Aboriginal women in similar circumstances navigated the hierarchies of difference that increasingly underpinned missionary and nation-building efforts in the Canadian Northwest.13

Sara Riel was not the only mixed-race woman to become a Grey Nun: beginning in 1845, a number of Country-born women at Red River took the veil, and these women occupied an important, liminal position in the Grey Nuns’ community, between Native and newcomer, and in the imperial and national mindset of members of the Catholic hierarchy who viewed the reformation of Aboriginal masculinity and femininity as a central component of their mission. In the 1840s, the bishop of St. Boniface, Joseph-Norbert Provencher, launched a two-pronged plan to extend and consolidate Catholic influence in the Northwest. The HBC had invited Wesleyan Methodist missionaries west in 1839, and Provencher believed the Company favoured his Protestant rivals. In response, he invited the missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a French order, to man and defer the cost of expansion. Pierre Aubert, a Frenchman, and Alexandre-Antonin Taché, a French Canadian, arrived at St. Boniface in August 1845.14

Provencher also began to search in earnest for a female congregation to establish a girls’ school in the colony. In 1824, he wrote his superiors in Quebec, “It would please me to have a well-established school before the Protestants. They are speaking of establishing one on a grand scale.”15 Although two Métis women, Angelique and Marguerite Nolin, opened a girls’ school five years later, the school closed within a few years.16 In 1841, Provencher again wrote to his superiors, but this time he emphasized that the presence of a Catholic sisterhood would quicken the progress of civilization at Red River: “Our inhabitants’ daughters do not need an advanced education. Rather, our principal goal will be to teach them to live well and to become good mothers. This process will raise the country’s civilization level in accordance with the times.”17 Two years later, Provencher approached the Grey Nuns in Montreal. Mother Forbes-McMullen chose four sisters for the endeavour, and to honour the congregation’s new status as missionaries, she had a habit of grey homespun, brown shawl, grey head covering, and green veil designed. The four sisters arrived at Red River in June 1844.18

When Taché took possession of the St. Boniface Episcopal See in 1858, the Catholic presence had expanded to four secular clergy and ten Oblate missionaries, and the Grey Nuns had opened schools at St. Boniface and St. Francis-Xavier. The hierarchy hung its aspirations for a successful
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apostolate on children of the Métis merchant-trader class who had been nurtured in the faith and a sedentary lifestyle. Both Jean-Louis and Julie Riel had contemplated a religious vocation prior to marriage. Born on 7 June 1817 at Île-à-la-Crosse to Jean-Baptiste Riel, a voyageur for the North West Company, and Marguerite Boucher, a French Canadian–Dene woman, Jean-Louis returned to Lower Canada with his family in 1822. At the age of twenty-one, he served one term out west with the Hudson’s Bay Company but decided to enter the Oblate order’s noviciate upon his return. For reasons unknown, his vocation lasted only a few months, and he returned in 1844 to Red River, where he hoped to become a schoolmaster. Unfortunately, his arrival coincided with that of the Grey Nuns, who took up teaching duties immediately.  

Jean-Louis’s wife-to-be, Julie Lagimodière, was born in 1822 to Jean-Baptise Lagimodière and Marie-Anne Gaboury, French Canadians who had settled in 1812 at Red River, where they became part of the merchant-trader class. The Lagimodières, like other French Canadian families, integrated with the majority Métis culture in the colony and passed its traditions on to their children. When a Winnipeg journalist interviewed Julie Riel in 1885, he described her as, and mistook her for, a Métisse.  

Highly devoted to the Roman Catholic Church, Julie, along with Bishop Provencher, hoped that she would join a sisterhood. Her parents, however, wanted her to accept Jean-Louis’s marriage proposal. She refused to do so until a vision—leaving church one day, an old man surrounded in flames cried down from the Heavens, “Disobedient child!”—convinced her to accede to her parents’ wishes. She married Louis Riel Sr. in January 1844.  

Nearly forty years later, Sara Riel wrote her mother, “It is on your lap that I learned to listen to the voice of God. It is you, beloved Mama, who has made me a Sister of Charity. Your motherly voice speaking to me of God made me a true religious and a better missionary.” Faith and the accoutrements of nineteenth-century Catholic devotionalism permeated Jean-Louis and Julie’s daily experiences and those of their seven living children. Religious icons and devotional aids—rosaries, crosses, portraits of the Virgin and Child, and images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—were scattered throughout their home at the forks of the Red and Seine rivers in St. Boniface and helped them to foster their own and their children’s faith and devotion. Although Jean-Louis entered into a number of unsuccessful business ventures that strained his family’s resources and increased its debts, the Riel family retained its place among the merchant-trader class. Average reading and writing skills, abstinence from excessive drinking
and socializing, a sedentary lifestyle, and a desire to see their children educated formally by the Catholic clergy distinguished the Riel family from members of the Métis hunting class at St. Francis-Xavier and Pembina.  

When Sara Riel began school, the Catholic hierarchy was in the process of developing an educational system that would reflect and enhance hierarchies of difference emerging in the Northwest. In 1853, Louis began his schooling at the Grey Nuns’ day school. Bishop Taché, however, was displeased with the arrangement. In 1851 he had written to Bishop Bourget in Montreal, “The education of boys has been badly neglected among our Catholics at Red River . . . The Metis do not like to be governed by women, and this probably explains why their children do not go to school.” The Christian Brothers, an order dedicated to teaching young men, arrived in December 1854, and Louis transferred to their school. Under the brothers’ tutelage, Louis received the foundations of a classical education, and Taché hoped their curriculum and example would encourage Aboriginal and mixed-race men to pursue the priesthood.

Although an Indigenous priesthood remained but a dream, Taché’s desire to foster mixed-raced nuns for a successful apostolate came to fruition. The Grey Nuns were primarily to prepare Aboriginal girls for their future role as wives and mothers to Catholic families. In July 1844, the congregation took over the school that had been started by the Nolin sisters. By 1851, Sister St. Joseph was teaching fifty students of diverse backgrounds—Métis, Country-born, Saulteaux, and Sioux—in a day school. Two years later, Sisters Curran and Pépin opened a boarding school. In 1859, Taché wrote, “It would be hard to exaggerate the work being done by this community of Grey Nuns. They have a boarding school for young ladies who receive an education quite the equal of that given to middle-class girls in the most advanced countries.” Both Provencher and Taché hoped the boarding school’s pious and strict atmosphere would foster vocations among mixed-blood women. The emphasis on piety and discipline was by design. Father Georges Belcourt had started, in 1857, to train young Métis women for a congregation that would teach the children of hunters at Pembina and St. Joseph. The order was disbanded within three years, however, when Belcourt was accused of sexual misconduct.

The Grey Nuns were impervious to accusations of sexual impropriety, and they shared the hierarchy’s belief that the Métis could be uplifted through education. Joseph Royal, superintendent of education, visited their convent school in 1871, and his report took pride of place in their chronicles: “The [students] are a testimony to their teacher who devotes herself
not only to teaching them to read and to write, but also to show them modesty; virtues that are so precious and natural in Christian women.”30 That same year, Sister Charlebois commented that the mission at St. Francis Xavier, “although but six leagues distant from Saint Boniface, is nevertheless no further advanced in civilization than are our far-off missions of Saint Albert and Île-à-la-Crosse. . . . The Natives, like those of the missions just mentioned, spend the greater part of the year on the prairie hunting buffalo, and accompanied by their children.” Charlebois believed that if the congregation had more money, “numbers of children, in the absence of their parents, might be cared for; they would gladly take the entire charge of these little ones, and by this means civilize and instruct them.”31

Sara Riel attended St. Boniface Pensionnat from 1858 to 1866. In 1862 Father Ritchot, curé of St. Norbert, conducted the annual public examination and noted that the sisters taught approximately twenty charges French, English, history, mathematics, painting, and music. Riel also learned to spin, knit, sew, and embroider, to perform all the duties required to maintain a household and demonstrate domestic economy. Ritchot believed the orderliness and cleanliness of Métis households run by former students was a testimony to the Grey Nuns’ effectiveness.32 Riel’s notebooks also reveal the curriculum’s intensely religious nature. Riel spent hours copying and memorizing sermons, translation exercises, stories, and geography and history lessons with overt religious themes. Like most nineteenth-century teaching orders, the Grey Nuns regarded their students’ piety, modesty, and artistic skills as being more practical and pleasing to God than academic achievement. And the convent school reflected and followed the rhythms of the sisters’ daily existence. Girls were kept isolated, they adhered to a strict code of dress, and the sisters, much like their own superiors, surveyed their behaviour as they attended to daily prayer, mass, evening chapel, sacraments, and penance in a closed environment embellished with crucifixes, statues, and paintings of saints and biblical scenes. May devotions to the Virgin Mary involved colourful pageants, devotions, and numerous prayers, and the first Friday of each month and the entire month of June were devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.33

The Grey Nuns augmented the lessons in Catholic womanhood that Sara Riel had learned at her mother’s knee. Sermons on the Holy Family portrayed Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as the perfect European, Catholic family. (The lack of daughter within the trinity tells its own story.) Joseph, the paterfamilias, was the ideal father and breadwinner who laboured as a carpenter to provide Mary and the infant Jesus with life’s necessities.34 Mary
was the ideal woman. A sermon dictated to Sara Riel titled “La Sainte Famille” stressed Mary’s domesticity and virtue. Chaste, modest, wise, delicate, and young, “Mary was Jesus’s mother and she fulfilled her roles as Saint Joseph’s wife to the best of her abilities. She placed Joseph before her own desires, and she did nothing to displease him.” Following Pope Pius IX’s proclamation of her Immaculate Conception in 1854, veneration of Mary, as the role model for pious and submissive womanhood, underscored the Catholic devotional revolution of the nineteenth century.

The Grey Nuns used more subtle means to promote adherence to European gender roles among their students. They encouraged girls to look to Taché and his mother, Henriette, as father and mother figures. The congregation shared a particularly close relationship with the latter, who lived in Boucherville, Quebec. In 1861, Henriette Taché wrote to Sister LaFrance, then superior of the Grey Nuns in St. Boniface, to thank her for a letter, “Thank your students for me, my small girls, and assure them of my sincere friendship.” Two years later, Sara Riel wrote to Henriette Taché on behalf of the boarding school students to express their love for Henriette and admiration for her son, who was like a father to them. In a letter to a friend, Riel again expressed her esteem for the bishop and noted the happiness he fostered among her companions: “Monsignor, who deigned to honor our modest exams with his presence, addressed us with a few words of encouragement that filled us with joy. We were happy to hear our first Pastor’s voice encouraging us in the practice of goodness and the love of virtue. His Grace extolled the advantages of a Christian education. I realize I am happy to have spent the best years of my life in a house of education, living under the same roof as God.”

Riel’s education presented her with the ultimate paradox: the Grey Nuns prepared her for marriage and motherhood, but their curriculum and example presented a competing vision of chaste, unmarried womanhood. The Grey Nuns encouraged students to venerate Mary, who was also the ideal virgin, and Riel’s notebooks are peppered with biographies of female saints—Catherine of Sienna, Theresa of Avila, Margaret Mary Alacoque—who shared common traits: wealth, beauty, social status, and chastity. The sisters also emphasized veneration of their foundress, Mother d’Youville; faith in Divine Providence; and dedication to the Folly of the Cross, a devotion that entailed imitating Christ’s sufferings. Mother d’Youville had introduced daily litanies to Divine Providence in 1770, which reinforced the sisters’ belief that Providence was their only salvation, hope, and refuge: it gave courage to the weak, guided pilgrims, and
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consoled exiles. In contrast, motherhood and homemaking must have seemed less than heroic. The Grey Nuns’ curriculum supported Canon 10 of the Council of Trent’s twenty-fourth session: “Virginity and celibacy are better and more blessed than the bond of matrimony.”

Riel entered the congregation’s noviciate in September 1865 and became a professed nun within three years. Louis had returned to Red River from Quebec to take up his responsibilities as paterfamilias to the Riel family following his father’s death, and the family’s financial situation had worsened. Draught and famine plagued Red River in 1865, and the Riels had planted no crops for two years. They possessed only a few head of livestock and had difficulty procuring bread. The younger siblings withdrew from school to take up work. In 1868, for instance, Marie Riel began to teach elementary school at the Grey Nuns’ St. Charles convent.

Although Sara Riel’s decision to take the veil could have been a strategy to alleviate her family’s financial situation, her letters suggest that faith, the Grey Nuns’ curriculum, and Taché’s encouragement fuelled her choice. Riel was the only Métis woman who became a Grey Nun prior to the Resistance, but a number of Country-born women preceded her and likely served as role models. In A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Red River Resistance, 1869–70, historian Frits Pannekoek argues that the Grey Nuns enhanced ethnosectarian divisions by catering to the Country-born population and failing to establish intimate relations with their Métis charges to reconcile them to the establishment. The Grey Nuns, he argues, regarded the Métis with disdain and segregated their children in day schools so they could focus their attention on their principal charges, children of Catholic mixed-race families who attended the boarding school. Neither Provencher nor the Grey Nuns, according to Pannekoek, were eager to foster vocations among Métis women; consequently, only girls of the best Country-born families, those who were more European than Aboriginal, took the veil. Pannekoek concludes that the Grey Nuns, like the Oblates, had little use for the secular clergy and their principal charges, the Métis hunting class at Pembina and St. Francis-Xavier.

The hierarchy did in fact encourage the Grey Nuns to open their boarding school to attract the patronage of prominent Country-born families. But financial considerations and sectarian rivalries played a role. The Grey Nuns received no financial assistance from the Montreal motherhouse and relied on the male clergy at Red River for food, clothing, and shelter. In 1848, Taché wrote Bishop Bourget, “If the sisters could conduct an English school they would probably attract more bourgeois children . . . With
these schools they could survive. The day or regular schools give them less than nothing.”46 Taché then dedicated himself to acquiring the services of an English-speaking nun from the Grey Nuns’ Ottawa community to round out the boarding school’s curriculum and attract the attention of respected officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Taché feared the officers would send their daughters to Protestant schools.47 The Grey Nuns embraced the Oblate’s spirit of sectarian rivalry and recorded their joy at receiving daughters of well-situated Company bourgeois, such as the Rowand sisters, as students.48

The Grey Nuns moulded their curriculum to suit Catholic, Country-born students, but they also fostered close ties with Métis children, whom they viewed as the principal recipients of their mission. Individual Grey Nuns adopted a paternalistic attitude toward the Métis, but their Country-born charges experienced the same. When Marguerite Connolly, a Country-born woman, became the community’s first novice in 1845, Mother Valade wrote to Mother McMullen in Montreal: “Although she means well I assure you that it is necessary for us to be patient and constant. It is no small thing to mould persons who have no idea of constraint, obedience, or the other virtues indispensable to the religious life, into nuns.”49 In earlier letters, Valade expressed the hope that the strict, “civilized” atmosphere of the boarding school would promote vocations among Aboriginal women, and she herself had been chosen to co-found the Red River mission because she was one-quarter Aboriginal.50 The Riel family and other Métis mourned her death in 1861. Sara wrote to Louis, “Today, we can see her no more, the one who gave you the Christian education you now have.”51

Provencher and Taché hoped the Grey Nuns would provide their students with an elevated education, yet many of the sisters had humble backgrounds. When Riel spoke her perpetual vows on 6 March 1868, she joined a diverse community of women who shared only their faith. In 1869, the Red River community comprised twenty-six sisters. The majority had emigrated from Quebec, but four were English Canadian and four were mixed-race. Some were connected to prominent Quebec families; others were the daughters of farmers or the working class.52 And their pensionnat catered to a diverse group of young women and girls. On 9 August 1877, Marie-Josephine Nebraska, a Sioux student who became a Grey Nun a few years later, read a welcoming address to the governor general of Canada and his wife: “Your Excellencies have before you a unique assembly of young girls. I, who have the honour to address you in the name of my companions, am of the Sioux nation. On my right you have a Saulteaux.
on my left a Maskegon . . . Members from eight other nations share our
good fortune, and you see in this haven of peace and charity children from
eleven different nationalities.”

The mixed-race women who attended the boarding school and took the
veil were equally diverse. Marguerite Connolly, who was the daughter of
Chief Factor William Connolly and a Cree woman, Miyo-Nipiy, was also
Mother d’Youville’s grandniece and sister to Amelia Douglas. During
her youth, she spent time in Montreal, where she studied with the Sisters
of the Congregation of Notre Dame. She returned to the West with her
mother in 1840. (Her father had turned away her mother and married
Julia Woolrich in 1832.) At Norway House, Marguerite learned that there
was a Catholic bishop at Red River and convinced her mother to make
St. Boniface their final destination. Miyo-Nipiy lived with the Grey Nuns
while Marguerite attended the boarding school. Two Métis women, Sis-
ters Marion and Gladu, joined Connolly in the noviciate but withdrew
before speaking final vows. It was not until 1862 that another mixed-race
woman, Marie-Jane McDougall, became a postulant. Born at Little Slave
Lake in 1844 to a Protestant Scots and a Salish woman, McDougall grew
up in the Grey Nuns’ care. Father Thibault “brought her” to the nuns in
1853, and she spoke perpetual vows in May 1865. Four months later, Ann-
ie Goulet entered the order. Goulet’s father, Alexiz Goulet, had been one
of the first Upper Canadians to settle at Red River; her mother, Josephte
Severette, was Scots and Aboriginal. She attended the boarding school at
the request of Bishop Taché and became a novitiate in 1862.

Mixed-race nuns stirred up some controversy and resistance among
the Grey Nuns. In 1862, Taché learned that some of the nuns were con-
temptuous of Métis novitiates. When he chastised one of the sisters for
remarks she had made, she asserted in her own defence that she had only
expressed the belief that “Canadian” nuns would be preferable because
they had more perseverance. Taché brought the issue to the attention of
the superior-general, Sister Slocombe, in Montreal; he claimed that the
nuns had made remarks that alienated Métis women and deterred them
from becoming nuns. Taché took action and personally conferred the veil
on Goulet and McDougall when they became postulants. The ceremony,
which was open to the public in the Grey Nuns’ chapel, did not have Slo-
combe’s approval. Slocombe later wrote Taché that she had not intended
to delay the novices’ admission: the sisters at St. Boniface simply felt that
mixed-race candidates should be put to the test because experience had
shown that they were fickle.
Mixed-race nuns left behind few written sources to explore why they became nuns or how they were treated, but Sara Riel’s letters to friends and loved ones emphasize her faith and strong, intimate ties with other nuns and the clergy, regardless of their race. For Riel, a religious vocation was a calling from God that entailed personal sacrifice. Following her final vows, she wrote Slocombe to explain how she had felt upon receiving Mother Valade’s cross: “This cross, which this good Mother made me kiss so often during the last days of her sickness, revived my shattered courage. . . . I tell myself: the ties that unite me to the heart of our beloved Mistress are the same that tie my heart to God. I want to follow in her footsteps, to renounce myself and live only for God.”

Two years later, she wrote to Louis, who had fled to the United States in the aftermath of the Resistance: “What a retreat does for the heart! . . . Is it not uplifting when, in the silence and during meditation, we hear all around us this voice that alone can charm us? . . . We must love and serve the Lord with joy. We must find in religion the balm of our sorrow.”

Although Sara Riel expressed her religious vocation in terms of her faith, and although a few individual nuns expressed doubt regarding the fortitude and dedication of mixed-race nuns, Sisters Connolly, McDougall, Goulet, and Riel pursued distinguished careers. Unlike Provencher, who felt that there was little hope that mixed-race nuns would rise to the first ranks of the hierarchy, Taché, as early as 1845, singled out their linguistic abilities as an asset: “[The Grey Nuns] have five postulants: two came with us and three are Natives of the country. These three small métisses are charming children whose knowledge of Indian languages will allow them to render us essential services in the future.”

Sister Laurent, who arrived at St. Boniface in 1850, said the following of job appointments within the congregation: “Each of us was appointed to do that which she was best suited for.” Mixed-race nuns demonstrated a marked aptitude for teaching and administration. Connolly took up a teaching position before she spoke her final vows, whereupon she began teaching catechism at the Saulteaux lodges near Red River. She successfully converted a number of Aboriginal girls and encouraged Saulteaux students to sing hymns in their own language. In 1874, she became matron of the boarding school students in St. Boniface and, in 1890, she was appointed superior of the St. Boniface community. She later travelled to and taught at the congregation’s schools at St. Anne des Chienes and in the Qu’Appelle Valley.

Marie-Jane McDougall likewise began her career teaching at the St.
Norbert convent school. In 1869, she co-founded St. Mary’s School in Fort Garry, which offered girls an English-speaking education designed to counteract Protestant influence. Prior to her death in 1896, McDougall took charge of St. Boniface’s Provencher Academy. And Annie Goulet’s career followed a similar trajectory. Following her perpetual vows, she taught at the parish school in St. Vital, and she too taught at the Oblate’s residential school in the Qu’Appelle Valley, where her knowledge of Saulteaux and Cree proved indispensable.

Sara Riel’s facility for languages rendered her eminently qualified to teach at the Grey Nun’s St. Norbert convent, which had been founded in 1859 and boarded fifteen students. In addition to teaching approximately sixty day-school students, Riel, whose musical talents had become evident as a student, was also placed in charge of teaching the students to chant. In 1869, however, Riel’s superiors, who feared for her safety as the events of the Resistance began to unfold, recalled her to St. Boniface, where she took charge of the sacristan and taught classes in the day school. Before she left for Île-à-la-Crosse, Riel also spent brief periods of time teaching at St. Vital and St. Francis-Xavier. Father Laflèche had asked the Grey Nuns to establish a school at the latter in 1850 because he feared competition from Protestant missionaries. The school catered to Saulteaux and Cree children who, according to the missionaries, were eager to see and listen to the “prayer women.”

Although a few sisters expressed reservations about mixed-race nuns, the latter achieved positions of greater prestige than some of their French Canadian counterparts. Sister Laurent, for instance, did the community’s laundry, and Sister Withman, who was Mother Valade’s cousin, was placed in charge of sewing the clergy’s cassocks and the sisters’ habits. The congregation’s chronicler suggested that Riel had been upset when she returned to St. Boniface during the Resistance and learned she was to perform manual labour: “Sara Riel arrived here on the third of December suffering horribly. One supposes that she was upset because she had to do the housework.” The chronicler’s comment betrayed a certain contempt, and perhaps jealousy, that contrasted with Riel’s own recollection of events: “As I told you in my last letter, the annual autumn changes took place today on the 20th. My mission to St. Norbert is over. The orders place me in the day school. I must also mend and wash the community’s linen—a job that occupies me continuously without fatiguing me at all.”

The Grey Nuns generally sympathized with the Métis cause, even though as women religious they were to refrain from overt displays of
sympathy. During the 1885 Rebellion, in which Louis Riel again played a prominent role, Mother Deschamps, superior-general of the Grey Nuns, advised sisters in the Northwest: “We must not mix up in questions of justice, of civil right and wrong. Our hearts as Sisters of Charity must be inclined to relieve whatever suffering we come across and, if we have any preference or choice of whom to serve, we must be open to the most unfortunate, the ones least favoured.” During the Resistance, the Grey Nuns privately expressed support for the Métis. In September 1868, Sara wrote Louis from St. Norbert and passed on her superior’s best wishes and those of Sister Laurent, O’Brien, and Connolly, who hoped for the “perfect accomplishment of all your wishes.” As the political situation worsened, expressions of sympathy became more frequent and more public. Sister Curran, secretary to Taché, wrote the motherhouse, “Louis Riel has been chosen by God to save this country.” In October 1869, the Grey Nuns at St. Norbert (where Sara Riel was teaching), St. Vital, St. Francis-Xavier, and St. Boniface had their students pray and sing around the clock for a Métis triumph. After Louis fled south, Sara wrote, “Truthfully, I believe it would be an insult to God if I doubted for only one second the complete success of our cause . . . Remember last winter when everything seemed over: it was God’s will that you should be overthrown in order to better your success.”

The Resistance had a profound, often tragic impact on mixed-race Grey Nuns. In September 1870, two members of the Ontario Rifles and a civilian chased Elzéar Goulet, Sister Goulet’s brother and a member of the court martial that had tried Thomas Scott, to Red River, where they allegedly stoned him to death. Sara Riel travelled to St. Vital to comfort Goulet, “I met my Sister Goulet at St. Vital School. I cried with her when she told me how they had judged you, my brother. She wept while reading your letter.” Taché and the Grey Nuns later used Riel’s and Goulet’s personal connections to ease the conciliation process following the Resistance. On 25 November 1870, two months after the new lieutenant-governor of Manitoba, Sir Adams George Archibald, had arrived at Red River and Goulet’s body had been found on the banks of the river, Archibald, his daughter, and his private secretary visited the Grey Nuns. Sisters Riel and Goulet attended, and of the twenty-two nuns who assembled for the event, only the mother superior, Sara Riel, and Sister Curran spoke to the guests.

Six months later, Sara Riel volunteered to dedicate herself to the Oblate mission at Île-à-la-Crosse. Her decision came at a time when a great deal of hostility was directed against the Riel family. Immediately following
the Resistance, Euro-Canadian settlers and General Wolseley’s soldiers sought retribution for Thomas Scott’s death. A mob surrounded Julie Riel’s house and threatened her and her children to obtain information about Louis’s whereabouts and activities. Julie withdrew her youngest girls, Octavie, Eulalie, and Henriette, from school. When Taché suggested that they return to school in September 1870, Julie did not insist that they do so because the political situation remained volatile.76 The Grey Nuns’ records also suggest that Sara Riel’s decision was sudden. Sister Charlebois advised her superior at Montreal that she had replaced Sister Boire with Sister Riel because the latter risked losing her faith if she remained at Red River.77

Yet Riel’s motives were more complex, and her letters reveal that her desire to become a missionary was far from new. She first referred to becoming a missionary after her brother fled from Red River, when she promised to protect him in the “Wound of His Sacred Heart . . . to love and pray, these are the arms with which we must fight to vanquish the conqueror.”78 Two months later, Sara cryptically suggested that she too would like to reap the benefits of exile.79 She admitted to Louis that although she had wished for death throughout 1870, by the new year her feelings had changed: “There is a wish in my heart that naturally would be yours too . . . which catches me unawares a thousands times—to ask God for something that I leave you to guess . . . Time will tell whether my most intimate prayer for the past eight years shall at last be answered.”80 The Grey Nuns believed and taught their students and postulants that suffering and sacrifice would guarantee salvation; drawing inspiration from Christ, they exalted the life of a missionary, or exile, as the ultimate sacrifice.81 Riel herself likened Grey Nun missionaries to Christians of the Early Church who had lived together as one family united by a common goal.82

Riel’s entourage left St. Boniface on 19 June 1871 by Red River cart and reached Île-à-la-Crosse one month later. On departure day, the Grey Nuns gathered at St. Boniface to bid farewell. Sister McDougall accompanied the party to St. Francis-Xavier, and Sara Riel’s cousin, Josette Lagimodière, signed a four-year contract to serve as one of two filles engagées (hired girls). When the party arrived at Île-à-la-Crosse, known originally as Sa Key Ta Waow, they discovered a well-established mission situated at a traditional rendezvous site for nearly two thousand Dene and Cree. A Hudson’s Bay Company post, which served as the winter residence for the bourgeois of the English River district, sat on the west shore of Lac Île-à-la-Crosse and was surrounded by buildings that housed the Company’s thirty servants,
who were largely Métis. The Catholic mission stood on a point alongside
the lake and one mile to the south of the post. It was home to three Ob-
late priests; four Grey Nuns (the congregation had established a hospital
and boarding school, École de Ste. Famille, in 1860); approximately eight
hundred Cree, Dene, and Métis converts and non-Christians; and serv-
ants in the employ of the missionaries. The four Grey Nuns—Agnès,
Pépin, Dandurand, and Riel—were responsible for the care of two male
and three female orphans and ten male and eighteen female boarding
school students.83

Aside from biannual missions and itinerant preaching journeys, mis-
sion work was confined to the Grey Nuns’ labour and the performance of
regular Catholic services for servants of the Company and converts, most
of whom spoke only Aboriginal languages. As at Red River, the Oblates
envisioned the Grey Nuns as agents of civilization to northern Aboriginal
women, particularly Dene women, whom they, like many European ob-
servers, viewed as beaten beasts of burden.84 Considering that the Oblate’s
superior in France frowned upon the Grey Nuns’ presence at northern mis-
sions, Oblate priests likely manipulated representations of Dene women
to justify the Grey Nuns’ presence. In 1872, Bishop Vital Grandin sent a
memo to all Oblate priests in the Northwest that outlined the congrega-
tion’s role: “The Sisters of Charity have a special mission, a mission that
we as men cannot fulfill by ourselves . . . Who is it then, that gives to the
[Aboriginal] woman what she needs to be a wife, a Christian mother, an
angel of peace in the family? It is the Sister of Charity’s most important
duty.”85 Grandin referred to constraints placed upon the Oblate mission-
ary by the order’s rules and regulations, which limited interactions with
Aboriginal women. Aside from the elderly, priests were to refrain from all
contact with the female sex—including students and Grey Nuns. When
obliged to speak with women, priests were to converse where they could
be seen but not heard, particularly if they discussed a private affair, such
as a confession.86 Sister Charlebois likewise felt it expedient to provide the
Grey Nuns with rules to limit their interactions with men: “The Sisters
will not go alone to the confessor to deal with affairs of their conscience
except during Confession; in all other circumstances, they will always be
accompanied by another Sister or by a mature child.”87

Sara Riel’s status as a Métisse and her linguistic talents meant that
she was welcomed by the Grey Nuns with open arms. In January 1872,
she wrote her mother, “I am beginning to believe that our Sisters spoil
me—they are very good for me: I am their small, beloved sister.”88 Riel
became Sister Pépin’s assistant in the school. Pépin had founded and taught in the boarding school at Red River, but she experienced difficulties teaching at the mission. Ignorant of Aboriginal languages, she experimented with new methods to teach Métis children who knew no European languages. Conditions in the convent and school were also inhospitable but improved during Riel’s tenure. The mission was besieged by long, incessantly cold winters, short hot summers, and frequent floods and food shortages. In 1874, the lake produced few fish; unable to feed their students, the Grey Nuns asked parents to temporarily take back their children. Because of spatial constraints, Pépin, who was also matron of the boarders, slept on a pallet in the classroom while her female charges slept on the floor. Male students remained in Riel and Pépin’s care from 9 am to 8 pm, when they returned to the Oblate’s residence.

The Grey Nuns’ moved into a new convent in August 1874. It housed new personnel (the previous year Sisters Senay and Langelier and a fille donnée (a regular sister with limited privileges), Angelique Jettée, had joined the congregation and Pépin had returned to Red River) and provided separate rooms for two female Dene Elders, filles engagées and données, orphans, and boarders. The Oblates moved into the Grey Nuns’ old convent, and the priests’ residence became the schoolhouse, where Sisters Langelier and Riel taught thirty-two students, twenty-two of whom were girls and all were boarders. Although she lacked textbooks, Riel established an English class. Prosper Légéard, the Oblate superior at Île-à-la-Crosse until his death in 1879, advised his superior that this service became possible only with Riel’s arrival, and he believed the class would enhance the mission’s position vis-à-vis the government and the HBC. However, Riel not only had to convince the Métis of the importance of English-language instruction but also of Western-style education in general: “Here in the North our people, the Métis, do not appreciate the benefits of instruction . . . We are required to fight against the indifference and caprice of children as well as against the weakness of their parents.”

The Oblates tried to overcome what they perceived as Métis indifference by hosting external exams attended by high-ranking HBC officials. Légéard believed that important officials who could speak French impressed the Métis. In 1876, Riel hosted an exam attended by Chief Factor William McMurray and reported that “everyone had been enchanted because our children bore little resemblance to Indians.” The following year, Légéard reported that the strategy had succeeded: the Company’s bourgeois and his family had attended and, for the first time, students had
demonstrated their French and English skills, terminating the exam with a rendition of “God Save the Queen.” More than forty boarders planned to attend the Grey Nuns’ school in the upcoming term, not including those children whom the nuns turned away.\textsuperscript{94}

Riel’s English class, along with her annual goodwill trips to the HBC post, resulted in closer ties between the Company and the mission and gifts of tea, sugar, bread, and meat for the Grey Nuns, but it did not win over the entire Métis population.\textsuperscript{95} In 1875, Riel wrote to Taché to inform him that Métis HBC servants were enraged with her and threatened to withdraw their children from school because she had “forced” their children to speak English. Riel’s superiors deemed it expedient to eliminate English from their curriculum until Bishop Grandin visited the mission.\textsuperscript{96} Riel’s English class heightened pre-existing tensions between the HBC and local Métis. When the Company ceased to provide Aboriginal hunters with credit in 1872, Légéard remarked that Catholic Métis would likely continue to leave the mission because of ill treatment. Tensions still existed in 1879, when Riel reported to Taché that the new bourgeois, Ewen M. McDonald, who was a Protestant, had expressed his hostility toward Catholicism by making Catholic Métis work on holy days.\textsuperscript{97}

Despite these setbacks, Riel witnessed and served the expansion of the Grey Nuns mission in the years prior to her death. By 1880, the congregation’s establishment comprised six sisters, three filles données, three Elders, five male and thirteen female orphans, and two foundlings. The boarding school population, however, remained small at seven male and fifteen female students. Riel did report, though, that she taught fifty-four students, the majority of whom were likely day students. That same year, the Oblates built a new school for the Grey Nuns. Laurent Le Goff, the new Oblate superior, ridiculed its size. At eighty by thirty feet, the polytechnical school also earned the derision of locals, who, le Goff reported, referred to it as a bêtise (folly) rather than a bâtisse (building).\textsuperscript{98}

Despite their expansion, the Grey Nuns were desperate for funds. Riel wrote frequent letters asking for donations and even asked her aunts and uncles at Red River if they could spare vegetables and grains in 1880. Two years later, Charlebois petitioned Prime Minister Macdonald for financial aid for the northern missions—despite the fact that they fell outside of the government’s treaty obligations—and Chiefs Samuel Egan and Michael Deneyon petitioned the lieutenant-governor of Manitoba on the nuns’ behalf: “We who live here [at Île-à-la-Crosse] find it harder than those living elsewhere. At present the Sisters of Charity take care of the unfortunates,
but they are without money, therefore, our Grand Chief, if you will give them money we will be thankful.”

The so-called unfortunates were orphans, and perhaps boarders, that the Grey Nuns housed and fed. The origins and identity of the former are unclear. In 1873, the community received a twelve-year-old Cree girl whose mother had feared she was dying and promised to give her eldest daughter to the Church if she recovered. In 1874, Riel wrote Louis that the Grey Nuns had three female orphans in their care. Two were actually Dene Elders, and the third was the daughter of a Métis man, Baptiste Sergeant, who had remarried and returned to Red River. Riel reported that the younger of the two Elders had never married because she was half-blind and mentally unwell; the other, who was “second only to Eve in age,” had been left naked on the shore by her children. Riel disclosed that Sergeant’s first wife had given birth to four girls, all of whom were deaf-mutes. Two of the girls had rejoined their mother; the other two, according to Riel, had lived miserable lives. She informed Louis that she planned to search for one of the latter.

As at Red River, Catholic missionaries absorbed the knowledge and talents of Aboriginal women into their mission. Marie-Rose Piwapiskus, who was daughter-in-law to Oppikakiw, a well-known storyteller, had lost her husband and never remarried at her mother’s request. Légéard convinced her to teach catechism and the writing of Cree syllabics at the nuns’ school. Isabelle Bekatta, a Dene orphan raised by the Grey Nuns, also taught at their school, and Father Le Goff relied on the knowledge of a Dene Elder known only as “Catherine” to write his Dene grammar. And at Canoe Lake, a mission near Île-à-la-Crosse initiated by a number of Cree families, a Cree widow taught the mission’s children catechism, religion, reading, and writing. Toward the end of her life, Riel formally established a lay organization, Notre Dame des Victoires, to draw students and older Aboriginal women to the Church.

Sara Riel died of complications from tuberculosis in 1883 and her gravesite, which rests on a sandy hill overlooking Lac Île-à-la-Crosse, remains a tourist attraction in the small northern community. In the absence of historical accounts that situate her life in the broader context of Métis and missionary history, she, much like her brother, has become the subject of speculation and invention. Among Elders at Île-à-la-Crosse, for instance, rumours continue to circulate that her death at the age of thirty-five was caused by a push down a set of stairs. However, even when her experiences are placed in such a context, she and other mixed-race nuns like her...
remain a bit of a mystery clouded by contradictions. Both Métis society, as it had developed by the mid-nineteenth century, and the Catholic Church structurally and symbolically institutionalized men’s authority; however, as was the case for other Aboriginal women such as Kateri Tekakwitha, “Mohawk saint,” and the thousands of women who became women religious or Protestant missionaries in the late nineteenth century, mixed-race women could turn Christianity and missionization attempts to their advantage to pursue distinguished careers at a time when their pivotal fur trade role as women “in between” was coming to an end. Yet a religious vocation was not an option for all Aboriginal or mixed-blood women. Only girls who could afford or were chosen to board with the Grey Nuns and proved themselves of strong faith and character became nuns; Aboriginal women uneducated in the European manner could hope to rise no further than the ranks of the fille données: women accepted within the congregation with limited privileges who, more often than not, performed labour for the Grey Nuns.

Sara Riel lived and laboured in two distinct social spaces, or contact zones, in a vast Catholic missionary field. In both places, questions of faith and class complicated encounters between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers, as did gender. When approached from the perspective of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women who occupied these spaces, neither Red River nor Île-à-la-Crosse emerges as a place where male missionaries, imbued with the spirit of ultramontane Catholicism, conquered Aboriginal cultures in the name of Christ. Instead, mixed-blood women such as Riel, French and Anglo-Canadian women such as the Grey Nuns, and Cree or Dene women such as Marie-Rose Piwapiskus — women who viewed themselves as missionaries in their own right — contributed to the development of missions and served as cultural mediators. Sometimes their encounters resulted in cooperation; sometimes, as was the case with Riel’s English class, they ended in conflict and accusations of coercion. My reading of the traces is not an attempt to construct a colonialist alibi, it simply suggests that Sara Riel and other mixed-race nuns lived during an era when Euro-Canadian accommodation to and integration with Aboriginal knowledges and cultures had not yet given way to policies of assimilation and dominance, and Aboriginal women played an instrumental role in these encounters.