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Honouring All of Our Relations: Centering Relationality in the Study of Indigenous Religious Traditions

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Western studies of Indigenous religious traditions have historically been rooted in colonial systems of knowledge, dominated by Eurocentric understandings of both "religion" and "civilization." The application of these categories in studies of Indigenous religious traditions has resulted in major misrepresentations or misinterpretations of Indigenous religions. The resulting studies have also often been used to police the "authenticity" of Indigenous traditions, falsely identifying any "modern" aspects of Indigenous traditions (including engagements with Christianity) as evidence of the deterioration of Indigenous religious and cultural practices. These misrepresentations of Indigenous religious traditions demonstrate the need in religious studies to de-center settler colonial categories of religion. The following paper presents a case study of misrepresentations of Métis religion through an examination of works on Métis historical and religious figure, Sœur Marguerite-Marie, née Sara Riel, who was one of the first Métis Grey Nuns, the first Métis missionary in the Northwest, and sister of famed Métis leader, Louis Riel. The ways in which Riel's religious affiliations have been analyzed and misrepresented is illustrative and symptomatsanic of deep-seated

conventions within Western scholarship on mixed-heritage Indigenous peoples and syncretic Indigenous religions specifically, and of all Indigenous religions more generally. Examining the misinterpretations of Riel's religiosity provides a concentrated look into how the employment of Western categories of religion can result in the overlooking, and simultaneous undermining, of Indigenous expressions of both religious and national identity.

The Métis are a particularly useful group to study in investigating the foundations of the settler colonial gaze in the study of Indigenous religions, for, as a post-contact Indigenous people with Christianities as part of our ancestral religious traditions, the Métis are doubly affected by the settler gaze towards, and white possessiveness of, our religious traditions.[1] Historically, and even contemporarily, Métis indigeneity has been (mis)represented as inherently compromised due to the racial mixedness that serves as a foundation of the ethnogenesis of the Métis Nation,[2] and because of our historic engagement with and

1. Kim TallBear, drawing on Aileen Moreton-Robinson's The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty, examines how white possessiveness of Indigenous identity is an inherent element of settler colonialism that asserts the validity of settler presence on Indigenous land through both the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples, and the reclaiming of Indigenous identity for settlers through the appropriation of Indigenous lands, religious beliefs, and material culture. TallBear argues that "[n]on-Indigenous Americans build on the trope of the vanishing Indian, thus establishing us as a historical resource to own, distort, and exploit for their own well-being. They claim our metaphorical skins as their heritage." See Kim TallBear, "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming," *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 27.

2. While the maternal ancestors of the first generation of Métis families came from Indigenous nations (in particular, but not limited to, Cree, Saulteaux, Nakoda, and other Anishinaabe and Assiniboine peoples), the paternal ancestors of that

practice of various forms of Christianity, largely considered by settlers to be an inherently colonial settler religion. [3] These attitudes towards Métis religion and religiosity come from missionary sources, recorded by clergy in the age of westward colonial expansion. As part of the civilizing project, these missionaries (mis)interpreted and (mis)represented Indigenous religions in their records as so primitive as to be relatively non-existent or morally non-recognizable. This "lack" of recognizable religion, and the subsequent labeling of Indigenous people as souls ripe for Christian harvest, served as justification for the continuation of Christian missionary work, the "ideological arm" and necessary tool of Christian European conquest and colonialism in the Americas.[4] While very little effort was made to meaningfully represent Indigenous religious/spiritual practices in missionary logs, so too were Indigenous engagements with Christianity

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generation were largely made up of immigrants from European countries (primarily France, Scotland, England, and Ireland) as well as migrants from Upper and Lower Canada, particularly French-Canadian men.

3. Métis scholar of religion Chantal Fiola has investigated the prevalence of these stereotypes towards and among contemporary Métis communities in present-day Manitoba. She highlights how many community members have come to internalize the following beliefs: (1) that all Métis people are Christian (especially Roman Catholic); (2) that Métis people only go to church and First Nations people only go to ceremonies; and (3) that Métis people do not smudge, use hand drums, or participate in sweat lodges of other any ceremonies. See Chantal Fiola, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015) and Chantal Fiola, *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021).

4. Pablo Richard, "Hemenéutica bíblica india: Revelaciòn de Dios en las religiones indígenas y en la Biblia (Después de 500 años de dominación)," in Sentido histórico del V Centenario (1492-1992), ed. Guillermo Meléndez (San José: CEHILA-DEI, 1992), 47. Quoted in Elsa Tamez, "The Bible and Five Hundred Years of Conquest," in Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, ed. S. Sugirharah Rasiah (United States: Obris Books, 2015), 38.

(incorporation of Christian beliefs, rituals, elements, etc. into traditional religious practices) misrepresented by missionaries who, viewing these engagements through a lens of Christian superiority, recorded any interest in Christianity by Indigenous people(s) as evidence that Christianity was a powerful tool for "civilizing" Indigenous peoples, effectively turning them from heathens to Christians. These sources were then used, often uncritically in many cases, by scholars who were invested in examining the "natural" progression of Indigenous societies' social evolution from "primitive" to "civilized" via Christianization and exposure to Western social and political structures and epistemology.[5] Then, having formed the bedrock of this field of study, subsequent analyses of Métis religion reinforced these stereotypes. Gareau, in his chapter "Mary and Métis: Religion as a Site for New Insight in Métis Studies," explores the stereotype of ambivalence that has been continuously deployed in studies of Métis religion from the early colonial era to present day scholarship. He highlights the longevity of Oblate sources that continue to inform conventions of the field via "reified categories of European religion and Indigenous spirituality, which are projected onto the Métis and valued above the Métis' own religious

5. Famous examples of this type of research include *The Métis in the Canadian West* by Marcel Giraud and *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* by George Stanley whose analysis of Metis cultural, social, and political systems were based on ideas of Social Darwinism, reinforced binaries of settler/Indigenous identity, and ultimately conceived of the Métis as a hybridized "race" and not as a distinct people and nation. See Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*. 2 Vols, trans. George Woodcock. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986) and George Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

perspectives."[6] The supposed ambivalence of the Métis, so believed by missionaries due to the perceived incongruity of Métis devotion and veneration to Catholic saints paired with their persistent defiance of the moral authority of the missionaries, continues to shape contemporary investigations of both Métis religiosity and cultures, and of Métis identity more generally.[7] Thus, a discourse of ambivalence, rooted in colonial categories of religion, and focused on deploying settler colonial values, continues to undermine assertions of sovereignty and self-determination contained within Indigenous expressions of religion.

Sœur Marguerite-Marie, née Sara Riel: Missionary and Métisse

Sara Riel was born October 11, 1848 in St. Boniface, Red River colony located on territory that is now recognized as the province of Manitoba. The Red River settlement was a polyethnic settlement first founded by the families of Indigenous women and their husbands, retired fur traders of European/Euro-American ancestry. At its peak, Red River was home to diverse populations including

6. Paul L. Gareau, "Mary and the Métis," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 47, no. 2 (2018): 191.

7. Gareau notes how Oblates were puzzled by the persistence of "bad behaviours" in the Métis, such as "cavorting, dancing, drinking, and engaging in loud and obstinate behaviour" paired with their pious Catholic devotion evidenced by their "dominical obligation, dutiful reception of the sacraments, burial in consecrated ground, and veneration of the Sacred Heart." Fiola similarly highlights Oblate disapproval of the continued existence and influence of "'heathen sorcerers' (medicine people)" whom he believed were a bad influence on the Métis, capable of coercing the people to backslide into their "savage" ways. Gareau notes how Oblates often recorded their fears that the Métis would eventually succumb "to the call of the 'Indian' blood, negating the 'white' way." See Gareau, "Mary and the Métis," 188-193 and Fiola, "Returning to Ceremony," 31-35.

diverse Métis groups[8] often categorized as "French-speaking, Roman Catholic Métis and English-speaking, Protestant 'mixed-bloods' or 'country-born'"[9] in addition to other Indigenous people

8. The diversity of these populations was not just limited to their ethnic heritage and ancestry, but also to their economic activities with residents of Red River taking part in diverse economies of trade, agriculture, and buffalo hunting. See Irene M. Spry, "The Métis and Mixed-Bloods of Rupert's Land before 1870," in The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America, ed. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

9. These categories of Métis populations, which have dominated research on Métis history and identity, have been challenged by Métis people and scholars who question the accuracy and usefulness of these distinctions. Scholar Irene M. Spry describes the limited utility of these categories stating that they serve to overemphasize distinctions within the broader Red River community, which largely did not cause any significant or lasting divisions within the community. The prevalence of these categories can be seen as a remnant of non-Métis scholars projecting categories of religion, nationality, and race onto the Métis, attempting in vain to fit a polyethnic, multilingual community into prefabricated categories of European national and religious identity. Similarly, this obsessive focus on the national identities of paternal ancestry results in artificial distinctions, sometimes even within families, and erases and undermines the importance of maternal ancestry and the roles of Indigenous women in building these communities. These categories are also not fully accurate as most "French-speaking" or "English-speaking" Métis were, in fact, multilingual, speaking both French and English and, perhaps most importantly, sharing maternal ancestral Indigenous languages. For example, Sara and Louis Riel both spoke four languages fluently (Cree, Michif, French, and English), and famous Métis leader Gabriel Dumont spoke up to six languages (Michif, Blackfoot, Sioux, Cree, Crow, French). As such, it is disingenuous to categorize these figures as solely "French-speaking" when the myriad of other languages they spoke permitted them to make and maintain relations with other Métis both within Red River and in the many other Métis settlements across the Métis homeland. Métis scholars stress the importance of those kinship connections, facilitated through Métis multiculturalism and multilingualism, as the foundation of Métis national identity - not the former national and religious identities of their paternal ancestors. See Spry, "The Métis and Mixed-Bloods"; and Brenda Macdougall, "How We Know Who We Are: Historical Literacy, Kinscapes, and Defining a People," in *Daniels v. Canada: In*

and more recent settlers from Europe, the British Isles, and Upper and Lower Canada. Over time, these families intermarried and formed complex kinship connections, which solidified a new national Métis identity defined by "an Indigenous title to Land, extended kinship relations, and a broad sense of mobility"[10] that connected Métis communities and families across the Métis homeland.

Riel, like other Roman Catholic girls of the settlement, was educated at the Catholic school operated by the Catholic missionary congregation the Sisters of Charity of Montréal,[11] known commonly as *les Sœurs Grises* or the Grey Nuns. Upon completing her education, Riel continued her tutelage under the Grey Nuns, joining the novitiate in 1866 and becoming a fully ordained member of the congregation in 1868. She began working as a teacher at the Grey Nuns' day school in St. Norbert, but was made to change parishes several times within the next few years. Lesley Erickson reports that these changes were attempts by the Grey Nuns to protect Sara Riel, whose close association with her brother, Louis Riel, made her a target of Louis' enemies and opponents of the Métis resistance.[12] In 1871, Sara Riel was selected to join the mission being established by the Oblates of

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and Beyond the Courts, ed. Nathalie Kermoal and Chris Andersen (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021).

10. Paul L. Gareau and Jeanine Leblanc, "Pilgrimage as Peoplehood: Indigenous Relations and Self-Determination at Places of Catholic Pilgrimage in Mi'kma'ki and the Métis Homeland," *Material Religion* 18, no. 1 (2022): 35.

11. The congregation's official name is les sœurs de la charité de Montréal, though it is now more commonly referred to in French as *les Sœurs Grises (de Montréal)* and, in English, as the Grey Nuns (of Montreal).

12. See Lesley Erickson, "At the Cultural and Religious Crossroads: Sara Riel and the Grey Nuns in the Canadian Northwest, 1848–1883" (MA diss., University of Calgary, 1997).

Mary Immaculate at Île-à-la-Crosse, located in what is now known as northern Saskatchewan. At the mission, her roles included teaching at the school, working in the hospital, tending to the grounds and gardens, working on the farm, and preparing meals for the Oblates and her fellow Grey Nuns. As the only missionary at Île-à-la-Crosse fluent in multiple Indigenous languages, French, and English, Riel also served as a cultural liaison between the mission, the Hudson Bay Company, the Métis, and other Indigenous peoples (predominantly Cree and Dené) who lived and/or wintered near the mission. Riel identified herself as "the first Métis missionary in the North"[13] and frequently wrote about her joy in serving the community at Île-à-la-Crosse. In November 1872, Riel suffered through a severe case of pneumonia. Believed to be dying, she was administered her last rites and commanded by her confessor to pray to the Blessed Marguerite-Marie of Alacoque, known for her visions of and devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart, for intercession. Upon Riel's recovery, believed by her order to have been miraculous,[14] Riel took on the devotional name of Sœur Marguerite-Marie - the name she would be known as for the rest of her life. Riel again fell ill in winter of 1883 and died of tuberculosis at the age of 35 on December 27th, 1883.

Despite her important position as an Indigenous missionary and educator working within a Catholic religious congregation in

13. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 112.
14. Thomas Flanagan notes how Sara Riel's recovery was accepted as a miracle by her fellow Grey Nuns and by Bishop Grandin who "wrote to Rome to pass on the information to Association for the Propagation of Faith, to be used as evidence in future canonization proceedings" for the Blessed Marguerite-Marie. See Thomas Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Halifax, NS: Goodread Biographies, 1983), 35.

an important location and at a particularly charged moment in North American history, not much has been written about Sara Riel. She is barely and/or rarely mentioned in accounts of Métis history, and even within biographies of her famous and influential brother, Riel is referred to only in passing if not ignored completely. This erasure of Sara Riel is especially egregious considering that approximately one hundred examples of her writing, contained within letters to friends, family members, and religious superiors, have been preserved by the Saint Boniface Historical Society (La société historique de Saint-Boniface). To date, only one book has been written specifically about Sara Riel. The volume, titled *De Ta Sœur*, also focuses exclusively on Sara's relationship with her brother Louis as the book is an edited compilation of the letters written between the two siblings.

The invisibilizing of Sara Riel within the historical record mirrors a general pattern in scholarship of ignoring and undermining the specificity of Métis religious traditions and beliefs. Where Sara is overlooked as not being an integral or even interesting element of the story of the Métis nation, so too has Métis religion been overlooked as an expression of Métis peoplehood and nationhood.[15] There has recently been a slightly increased interest in Sara Riel as a historical figure in her own right, with scholars calling for more attention to be paid to her and her writings as important resources in examining intersecting issues of race, gender, class, religion, and politics during that

15. For further discussion regarding the terms "nationhood" and "peoplehood" in critical Métis studies and their relationship to the peoplehood matrix developed by Holm, Pearson, and Chavis, see Chris Andersen, "Peoplehood and the Nation Form: Core Concepts for a Critical Métis Studies," in *A People and a Nation: New Directions in Contemporary Métis Studies*, ed. Jennifer Adese and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 18–39.

particularly explosive moment in North American history. This interest has led to Riel's position at Île-à-la-Crosse being mentioned in several recent works on Métis history and religious and ethnic identity.[16] However, the majority of works produced on Sara Riel have, unfortunately, remained steeped in stereotypes of Métis "ambivalence"[17] that are rooted in Western categories of ethnicity and religion. For example, scholar Lesley Erickson produced three works on Sara Riel from 1997 to 2011,[18] and while Erickson's scholarship does great work in asserting the significance of Sara Riel as an important figure in her own right,

16. See Timothy P. Foran, *Defining Métis: Catholic Missionaries and the Idea of Civilization in Northwestern Saskatchewan 1845-1898* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017) and Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwest Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).
17. Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall unpacks the prevalence of this colonial stereotype of "mixed-race ambivalence" and how it has been historically (and contemporarily) projected onto the Métis. Her work demonstrates how the inflexibility of colonial categories of "race" and "nation" cannot allow for or reconcile the reality of collectivities made up of mixed-heritage populations, and how those same colonial categories are deployed to undermine the group identity of those nations by policing their "authentic" expressions of their racial, ethnic, and national identities. This work is particularly relevant for my analysis of representations of Sara Riel as most non-Métis scholars subscribe to and replicate this myth of cultural ambivalence in their investigation of Riel's ethnic and religious identities. See Brenda Macdougall, "The Myth of Metis Cultural Ambivalence," in *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History*, eds. Nicole St-Onge et. al (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 422–464.
18. See Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads"; Lesley Erickson, "'Bury our Sorrows in the Sacred Heart': Gender and the Métis Response to Colonialism—The Case of Sara and Louis Riel, 1848–1883," in *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History*, ed. Sarah Carter et. al. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); and Lesley Erickson, "Repositioning the Missionary: Sara Riel, the Grey Nuns, and Aboriginal Women in Catholic Missions of the Northwest," in *Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands*, ed. Sarah Carter and Patricia A. McCormack (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2011).

using Riel as an example of how women's histories are erased from popular narratives of national history, Erickson's work also, unfortunately, fails to meaningfully critique or unpack the racist colonial logics that frame Riel as being ambivalent about her ethnic, national, and religious identities. Instead, Erickson's works continue to affirm the idea of Métis ambivalence, suggesting repeatedly that Riel's identity was, at best, "a mystery clouded by contradictions"[19] and, at worst, a cause of torture for Riel that lead her to abandon completely her ties to Red River and her identity as a *métisse*. Mirroring statements about the impermanence of Métis identity and the inherent confusion of Métis religiosity found in missionary sources, Erickson states that "[b]y the time Sara Riel left for Île-à-la-Crosse, she identified more with her French-Canadian companions in the Grey Nuns' order than she did with the Métis."[20]

Erickson finds evidence of Riel's ambivalence towards her Métis identity in a number of surprising places. She suggests that Riel's decision to leave Red River and her excitement at relocating to a new community far away from her home implies that Riel was eager to distance herself from Red River and, therefore, from her Métis identity. Erickson also posits that Sara likely became disillusioned by the Métis political project for national liberation due to the violence of the movement, and so made the choice to assimilate into Canadian society by allying with colonial institutions like the Grey Nuns. The idea that Riel's religious devotion and participation in Catholic missionizing distances Riel from other Métis is based on Erickson's analysis that other Métis

19. Erickson, "Repositioning the Missionary," 134.
20. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 146.

who practiced Roman Catholicism were "only nominally Catholic,"[21] as they chose to maintain some traditional teachings and ceremonies inherited from their maternal ancestors, and because they chose to organize their lives around seasonal hunts and engaged in social activities like drinking and dancing, which went against the explicit orders of the Catholic clergy. This analysis resembles the sermon delivered by Oblate missionary Jean-Marie Pénard at Île-à-la-Crosse in 1899, wherein he berated the Métis for their continued disobedience and degenerate activities and "threaten[ed] the vengeance of God if things did not change."[22] Erickson echoes Pénard in her analysis of the Catholicism of the Métis at Île-à-la-Crosse, arguing that their rejection of church authority is enough to render their Catholicism inauthentic, and positions them in square opposition to the devotion of Riel and her allegiance to her religious congregation. To Erickson, the most telling piece of evidence that Riel no longer identified as Métis was Riel's decision to change her name to the devotional name of Sœur Marguerite-Marie. Erickson reads this decision as evidence that Riel felt that "God required her to choose between the family and her faith,"[23] and that Sara readily chose her faith over her family, and even over her own identity.

By using a framework that positions the Catholic Church and its orders and congregations as a solely colonizing force, Erickson reads all of Riel's decisions as efforts to solidify her identity as Catholic rather than Métis – an argument based on colonial logics wherein it is impossible to hold multiple religious,

21. Erickson, "'Bury Our Sorrows in the Sacred Heart,'" 22.
22. Foran, "Defining Métis," 112.
23. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 122.

cultural, or national identities simultaneously. It is no wonder that, within this framework, Erickson suggests that, by choosing to align herself with the coloniality of the Catholic church, Sara Riel "stood for everything her brother was fighting against."[24] Part of Erickson's analysis of Riel's "contradictory" identity is based on the assumption that Christianity, Catholicism in particular, acted uncomplicatedly and exclusively as a colonizing force in the settlement of the Northwest and the creation of Canada. While it is, of course, true that Christianization was certainly used as a powerful tool of colonialism, Erickson's analysis assumes that no Indigenous individuals or communities could have possibly engaged with Christianity without having first been forced or coerced. As such, Erickson believes that there is inherent tension in the beliefs of all Indigenous Christians, a tension that manifests as a profound ambivalence towards one's identities as Indigenous and Christian. This belief, again, comes from colonial categories of religion and spirituality which necessarily position Indigenous "spirituality" in opposition to colonial religions like Christianity, framing them as fundamentally different and inherently incompatible with each other. Also embedded in this assumption is a belief in the totalizing power of Christianity, and the idea that any and all Indigenous traditions that come into contact with Christianity will be inherently compromised and irreparably damaged, thus precipitating an eventual and inevitable slide into cultural extinction. While posing a critique of the colonial power and use of Christianity as a tool of the civilizing project, this view also necessarily centers Christianity, and settler understandings of

24. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 8.

Christianity, over Indigenous religions and Indigenous engagements with and experiences of Christianity.

The unquestioned centering of and belief in the totalizing destructive power of Christianity constitutes what Eve Tuck identifies as a "damage-centered"[25] paradigm–a paradigm that produces research characterizing Indigenous communities as "spaces saturated in fantasies of outsiders" wherein Indigenous spaces are "sites of disinvestment and dispossession."[26] Again, while it is true that Christianization has left a devastating impact on Indigenous communities, dispossession does not make up the entire story of Indigenous religion, and centering the damage done to Indigenous people(s) is a way to continue centering colonialism as the single most important and defining event in the lives of Indigenous nations. Tuck, therefore, proposes a movement away from viewing Indigenous communities and cultures through this lens of damage, suggesting instead the utilization of a research paradigm which centers desire. Desire-based frameworks, Tuck claims, "are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives,"[27] thus making room for a fuller imagining of Indigenous agency and futurity. Māori Scholar Brendan Hokowhitu similarly addresses the overreliance on paradigms of Indigenous "damage," and even "resistance," in describing the complex realities of Indigenous lived experience. Employing an existentialist lens, Hokowhitu argues that this tethering of Indigenous identities to a

25. Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 79, nov. 3, (2009): 409-427.
26. Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 410.
27. Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 414.

"colonized/colonizer dialectic"[28] ensures that Indigenous existentialism is not able to find expression through Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, but is instead eternally bound by its relationship to an oppressive Other. In order to allow for Indigenous existentialism that lives beyond the bounds of colonialism, it is essential to build research through desire-based paradigms in order to investigate the agency and existentialism of our ancestors, to allow for the fullness of their lived experiences in our explorations of the past, and to create the space to highlight our communities' onto-epistemologies that have always served as the foundations for how we understand our own religious beliefs and traditions.

The Many Relations of Sara Riel

Utilizing desire-based research paradigms rooted in Indigenous onto-epistemologies is essential to counter widespread misrepresentations of Indigenous religions across Western academic disciplines. The religiosity of Sara Riel needs to be situated and understood via culturally specific frameworks of religion practiced by the Métis in order to both achieve a more accurate understanding of Riel specifically, and also to push back against colonial paradigms that distort and misrepresent Indigenous religions more generally. The application of Western categories of institutional religion and damage-centered paradigms does not accurately reflect how Sara Riel understood herself and her role as a Métisse and a missionary who, throughout her entire

28. Brendan Hokowhitu, "A Genealogy of Indigenous Resistance," in *Indigenous Identity and Resistance: Researching the Diversity of Knowledge*, eds. Chris Andersen et. al. (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2010), 210.

life, identified herself in ways that were unequivocally not ambivalent.

Exploring Riel through the lens of relationality, and specifically the Cree and Métis concept of *wahkôtowin*,[29] allows us to understand how, to Riel, her Catholicism did not negate her relations to her Métis family and communities, but served as a tool to strengthen them. Métis scholar, Brenda Macdougall writes about the Métis at Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan in the 19th century, and the role that Roman Catholicism played in reifying relational structures within and across Métis communities in her book *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan*.[30] It is important to note that, despite Erickson's hypothesis that Riel relocated to Île-a-la-Crosse in order to distance herself from both her Métis family and identity, Île-à-la-Crosse was, in fact, another Métis settlement and the birthplace of Riel's father, Jean-Louis Riel,[31] and, at the time of her missionary work, much of his family still resided in the area. Similarly, while Erickson claims that Sara Riel's devout Catholicism put her at odds with the Métis at Île-à-la-Crosse, Macdougall shows that there is ample historical evidence that Christianity was being practiced in

29. See Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth, "Indigenous Relationality: Definitions and Methods," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, (2023): 1-9; Derrick, Nault, "Louis Riel, Wahkohtowin, and the First act of Resistance at Red River*," Prairie History*, issue 8 (Summer 2022): 5–16; O'Reilly-Scanlon et. al., "Pathways to Understanding: 'Wâhkôhtowin' as a Research Methodology," *McGill Journal of Education / Revue Des Sciences De l'education de McGill*, vol. 39 (Winter 2004): 29–44.

30. See Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwest Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

31. Jean-Louis Riel was also known as Louis Riel Sr.. See Macdougall, *One of the Family*.

the Northwest by the Métis well before the establishment of missions in the 1840s. Historians John Foster and Keith Widder indicate that a form of "folk Catholicism"[32] had developed within Métis communities prior to the missionizing of Rupert's Land and the Great Lakes region. This "folk" or "lived"[33] form of Catholicism included practices like infant baptism in local bodies of water and the holding of prayer services, even though none of the Métis in that area had ever previously attended a Catholic mass. Likewise, Mary V. Jordan, in her book *De Ta Sœur*, emphasizes that Christianity, like Indigenous religions, was a heritage religion of the Métis, with Christian beliefs and practices having been inherited from their European Christian kin. She states that "evangelism began before the appearance of the Blackrobes and that a deep religious spirit was handed down from the father to the son."[34] Erickson argues that Sara Riel's devout Catholicism is evidence of an attempt to abandon her Métis identity, suggesting that First Nations religious traditions and ceremonies are more "authentic" expressions of Métis religiosity. That argument fails to take into account how the paternal ancestors of the Métis also shared their beliefs and practices with their offspring, eventually forming communities with distinct religious practices that held

32. Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 131.
33. Many scholars, communities, and activists take issue with the term "folk Catholicism" as the term can be understood as reifying structures of moral and civilizational hierarchy. In order to counter the assumptions, conventions, and structures reified by replicating that language, a more appropriate term may be drawn from the work of Robert Orsi, his work on lived religion, and the accompanying assertion that all religion is handcrafted by the people who practice it. See Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
34. Mary V. Jordan, *De Ta sœur, Sara Riel* (Toronto: Griffin Press Ltd., 1990), 58.

together belief systems from both their First Nations and European ancestors.

Until recently, both missionary accounts and the dominant historical record have been uninterested in investigating how the Métis conceived of and understood their own practices of Christianity. As Macdougall points out in her work, upon their arrival at Île-à-la-Crosse, "Catholic missionaries quickly recognized that there was enough understanding to attempt to perform the appropriate rituals, though they were unable to attempt to assess the full extent of Métis knowledge about the faith."[35] Missionaries could have tried to discern how Catholic rituals and practices were being understood by the Métis, but they elected not to as that was hardly the focus of their missionary work, which instead aimed to deliver teachings and achieve baptisms in order to expand Christian European influence. The ways in which the Métis transposed Christian teachings upon existing religious frameworks was not of particular interest to missionaries and were thus not investigated nor recorded.

Macdougall finds, however, that after missions were established, the Métis were able to maintain their own approaches to practicing Christianity that reflected their unique ways of doing, being, and knowing. Macdougall identifies *wahkôhtowin* as the framework through which the Métis practiced and understood Catholicism, stating how the Catholic privileging of family, both natural and spiritual, was easily and completely compatible with the worldview of the Métis. Thus, the early "successes" of missionaries in "converting" the Métis needs to be reconsidered,

35. Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 131.

along with the belief in Christianity as an inherently dominant belief system. The reality is that Christianity was already present in the area, and that Christianity itself is flexible, with missionaries being made to adapt their message in ways that Indigenous peoples "found appealing and did not clash with their existing values."[36]

There are many elements of Catholic belief and practice that were easily integrated into pre-existing Métis kinscapes.[37] The use of familial terms by the clergy (Father, Brother, Mother, and Sister) reflected the ways in which the Métis formed intimate familial connections with members of their extended families, including non-biologically related kin, referred to often in anthropological records as "fictive kin."[38] Similarly, the services

36. Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 134.

37. Sami Lakomäki identifies a kinscape as "a terrain of social and geographic space in which several overlapping networks of kinship radiated out from each community and connected it to dozens of others, both near and far." Lakomäki described this phenomenon in their exploration of Shawnee social organization, highlighting in particular how the mobility and connectedness of the Shawnee across their territory allowed for both social dispersion and reconsolidation as a response to threats to the nation. This concept is particularly relevant to discussions of Métis identity and nationhood, given that the Métis are also a people based on extensive kinship networks and mobility. Métis scholars Nicole St-Onge and Brenda Macdougall have also applied Lakomäki's kinscape model in their investigations of Métis kinscapes which served as the foundation of Métis buffalo-hunting brigades. See Sami Lakomäki, "Conclusion: A Living Nation," in *Gathering Together: The Shawnee People through Diaspora and Nationhood, 1600-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale Scholarship Online, 2014), 229-230; Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St-Onge, "Rooted in Mobility: Metis Buffalo-Hunting Brigades," *Manitoba History*, no. 71 (2013): 21–32; Nicole St-Onge and Brenda Macdougall, "Kinscapes and the Buffalo Chase: The Genesis of Nineteenth-Century Plains Métis Hunting Brigades," in *The Greater Plains: Rethinking a Region's Environmental Histories*, ed. Brian Frehner and Kathleen A. Brosnan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 89–113.

38. Macdougall critiques the use of the term "fictive kin" in describing Métis kinship and family designations. She notes that, while what anthropologists were acknowledging was the propensity of the Métis to create relationships "style as siblings, parents, or other types of close family" between individuals with no

provided by missionaries to Métis communities (such as their work in schools, orphanages, and hospitals), based on Catholic principles of caretaking and reciprocity,[39] also enabled the development of deep bonds between certain missionaries and Métis families and communities. The buildings erected by the Oblates and Grey Nuns also served as sites of community connection, as family milestones such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals were hosted in those spaces. Those buildings also provided dedicated spaces for prayer wherein the Métis could engage in religio-spiritual intercession and popular devotions to Mary, Saint Anne, and the cult of saints—Catholic practices that easily mapped onto Métis kinship systems that already allowed for intimate, tangible relationships with ancestors, spirits, and other more-than-human relatives.

Perhaps the most material way that clergy became integrated into Métis kinscapes was by becoming godparents to

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biological or marital connections, she also states that the term "fictive kin" implies an unreality which obscures the reality of those relationships and their validity and veracity in Métis communities. Brenda Macdougall, "Speaking of Métis: Reading Family Life into Colonial Records," in *Ethnohistory* 61:1 (Winter 2014): 31.

39. Macdougall critiques how mainstream historians have viewed the Grey Nuns establishment of schools, orphanages, and hospitals as evidence that the Grey Nuns were strictly a colonizing force in the Northwest. Instead, Macdougall highlights that the establishment of these institutions could also be seen as acts of community reciprocity. She explains that because "the Church was both the symbolic embodiment of family and was consecrated within a social relationship with the community, what families expected from one another they now expected from the clergy." She also states that, from the community's perspective, the Grey Nuns helped fulfill "important components central to the ideal of 'Homeness'" by filling the roles of havens of education and health and that, ultimately, "wahkôhtowin was not undermined by the operation of the hospital, orphanage, or the school. On the contrary, these institutions - evidence of Homeness - became avenues for Métis families to access both new resources and another family system by which they extended their connections to others." (Macdougall, One of the Family, 142–3)

Métis congregants. The notion of spiritual guardians, Macdougall argues, was a concept that was also readily adapted to *wahkôhtowin*. She states that while godparents had a clearly defined and somewhat strict role within the Catholic church as spiritual mentors but not daily caregivers, "the niche they filled in the traditional family structures of *wahkôhtowin* also reinforced traditional Indigenous values by providing children with multiple parents upon whom they could rely."[40] More than providing Métis children with another parental figure within their kinship networks, the spiritual role of godparents also reflected a pre-existing role in Cree/Métis socio-political and religious beliefs—that of *pawaganak*[41], benevolent guardian spirits who, through dream revelations, "helped human beings to accomplish things they could never do without assistance"[42] such as hunt extraordinarily well, attain gifts as a healer, and communicate with spiritual beings. Thus, the spiritual guardianship of a godparent was not dissimilar to the parental roles of "fictive" kin in Métis kinscapes and likewise provided similar spiritual guidance offered by *pawaganak* who were also conceived as being part of a "holistic notion of family that involved the spirit world."[43]

It is especially important, then, to recognize that Sara Riel served as a godparent four times between 1876 and 1880 to local Métis and/or Hudson Bay Company families at Île-à-la-Crosse.

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40. Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 152.
41. *Pawaganak* are a part of many First Nations' religious practices, including the Cree, Ojibwe, and Saulteaux. These are home nations of many of the maternal ancestors of the first generation of the Métis nation.
42. Susan Elaine Gray, "Pakwâciskwew: A Reacquaintance with Wilderness Woman," in *Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands*, ed. Sarah Carter and Patricia A. McCormack (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 245-259.
43. Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 152.

One of her godchildren was even a blood relative, Marguerite Marie, daughter of Charles Lafleur and Josette Lagimodière. Macdougall notes how it was atypical for clergy to serve as godparents generally, and so for Sara Riel to have performed this role four times shows a level of integration into the community, its families, and its cultural practices that was likely not accessible, or even possible, for non-Métis clergy. It seems likely that Riel held unique positions both at the mission and within the community at Île-à-la-Crosse, acting as both a community member through kinship ties and as a spiritual guardian through her affiliation with the Grey Nuns. She also provided specific religious services at Île-à-la-Crosse by fashioning hand-painted devotional images for Métis families who took part in veneration of the sacred heart. According to missionary accounts, veneration of this kind seemed to be practiced seemingly only or primarily by Métis families–not First Nations, nor settler families–and so Riel's creation of these images helped the religious orders understand which Île-à-la-Crosse families belonged to each specific ethnic and national group.[44]

The active role that Sara Riel played in both her position as a Grey Nun missionary and as a community member of Île-à-la-Crosse calls into question all previous analysis of Riel, which, having been based on colonial categories of religion, asserted that her Catholic identity somehow undermined or caused her to forfeit any claim to indigeneity. In Riel's personal letters, she unambiguously refers to herself as both a missionary and a *métisse* and seems to find no conflict in those identities. In a letter to Louis

44. Foran, *Defining Métis*, 103-107.

Riel following his exile in 1870, rather than distancing herself from the liberatory project of the Red River Resistance, Sara comforts her brother with the following passage: "'Louis, let us Bury our Sorrows in the Wound of His Sacred Heart.... [T]o love and pray, these are the arms with which we must fight to vanquish the conqueror.'"[45] Near the end of her life, Riel attempted to found an orphanage at Île-à-la-Crosse, using the lands that were owed to her as a Métis person under the Manitoba Act. In a letter to her superiors, she asserts the importance of her Métisness in carrying out this project, stating: "I have always counted on my right as a Métis child in order to found our orphanage."[46] Riel's lifelong assertion of herself as a Catholic Métis demonstrates how colonial categories of religion that place Indigenous religiosity in diametric opposition to institutional Christianity are not useful in investigating the ways that Indigenous peoples understand their own religious practices and experiences, especially when those practices adapt and incorporate elements of outsider and/or new heritage religions into their belief systems.

Macdougall's examination of the role of *wahkôhtowin* in translating and making sense of Métis Catholicism reframes the "easy success" of Catholic colonial projects in the Northwest and challenges the myth of colonial Catholic inflexibility. Rather than taking for granted Christianization as a hegemonic force[47] that is both an inevitable and unstoppable element of colonialism and cultural assimilation, viewing these processes through a

45. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 18.
46. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 135-136.
47. Hokowhitu calls for a "post-hegemonic" understanding of how Indigenous peoples navigate their realities which does not aim to ceaselessly bind Indigenous peoples to the trauma of colonialism. See Brendan Hokowhitu, "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body," *Cultural Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 101–18.

framework of relationality shows how new traditions were, 1) co-constituted by the European paternal ancestors and the Indigenous maternal ancestors of the first generation of the Métis nation, 2) reified by Christian missionaries providing religious and social services to Métis communities, and 3) recreated by generations of Métis families continuing these practices to the present day. While members of religious orders participated in the creation of new traditions—they developed and altered missionary practices to fulfill the unique spiritual needs of these communities, such as holding services in Indigenous languages, integrating Indigenous material cultures in worship, and allowing clergy to participate in bison brigades,[48] etc.—they themselves were not the sole architects of this process, as missionaries often viewed these new constructions as temporary measures to bring Indigenous people into the fold of the institutional church.[49] The recreation, replication, and further adaptation of these new Christianities was thus spearheaded by the Métis themselves who crafted practices and understandings of Christianity to suit the unique religious needs of their nation.

Furthermore, *wahkôhtowin* as a core philosophical value had existed on these lands long before the first missionaries entered

48. See Brenda Macdougall with Nicole St-Onge, "Rooted in Mobility: Metis Buffalo Hunting Brigades," *Manitoba History* 71 (2013): 21-32 and Émilie Pigeon and Carolyn Podruchny, "The Mobile Village: Metis Women, Bison Brigades, and Social Order on the Nineteenth-Century Plains," in *Violence, Order, and Unrest: A History of British North America*, 1749-1876, eds. Elizabeth Mancke, et. al., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 236-263.

49. Foran examines the efforts of Oblates such as Jean-Marie Pénard and Father Albert Lacombe who tried to walk back the authority of the Métis in developing their own approaches to practicing Roman Catholicism. See Foran, "La civilisation moderne: The World Came Seeping In", in *Defining Métis*, 115–118.

the territory. Examining Métis Catholicism through the framework of *wahkôhtowin* relocates Sara Riel within the web of relations that defined her as both a Catholic and as a Métisse. It not only provides a more fulsome and accurate picture of Sara Riel's roles, responsibilities, and relations both at Red River and Île-à-la-Crosse, but it also helps to undo the prevalent stereotype of Métis ambivalence[50] and demonstrates how Métis religious practices were open to and capable of honouring all their relations—their lands, spirits and saints, and both their Indigenous and European ancestors. This centering of relationality also honours the ways in which Riel's many relatives connected with her. It embraces the ways in which both her fellow Grey Nuns and her relatives at Île-à-la-Crosse and Red River related to her, and provides context for her greater connection to the Métis nation and her own identity as a Métis missionary – an identity emphatically stated by Riel in her own writings and re-affirmed by those close to her. After Riel's death in 1883, her superior at the mission, Sister Agnès, wrote to Sara's mother, Julie Riel, with news of Riel's funeral stating that "people from everywhere came to pray by her body. She was loved and respected as Métisse."[51]

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50. Brenda Macdougall in her chapter "The Myth of Culture Ambivalence" in *Contours of a People: Métis Family, Mobility, and History* illustrates how prominent, mainstream works on the Métis, including Marcel Giraud's monograph The Métis in the Canadian West (1986), often frame these conflicts as a "conflict between civilization and savagery" with the Métis representing an in-between point on that axis. Macdougall also describes how this "ambivalence" perpetuates in mainstream scholarship stating that the: "colonial era's ambivalence about people who did not fit fixed racial categories was recreated within the academic arena, where scholars ascribed meanings to events and categorized Métis people as either more Indian or more white, which is to say more authentically or inauthentically aboriginal." See Macdougall, "The Myth of Cultural Ambivalence," 433–450.
51. Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads," 145.

Undoing the God Trick: Relationality in the Study of Religion

As illustrated by the case study of Sara Riel, the unquestioned and uncritical adherence to Western categories of religion lead to gross misrepresentations of Métis religion generally, and of Sara Riel's personal religiosity specifically. Taking for granted the perspective of Christianity solely as a colonizing force that dominates and erases Indigenous religions perpetuates reifying a damaged-centered view of Métis religion as being irreparably damaged and inherently compromised by its engagement with Christianity. In addition to these theoretical and methodological issues, there is another foundational flaw in Erickson's examination of Sara Riel – the same flaw present in many scholars' fascination with her brother, Louis Riel. Far too often, studies of the Métis and other Indigenous peoples are centered solely on individuals whom settler society finds to be exceptional. This focus on the exceptionalism of the Riels necessarily emphasizes how they differ from the perceived "average" Métis person, a positioning of excellence as being attainable only through removal or distance from Métis collective identity.[52] Erickson identifies this issue in biographies

52. This proclivity to exceptionalize Indigenous individuals can also be seen in Catholic master narratives of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. See Michelle M. Jacob, "The Ecstasy of Saint Kateri: Native Feminism in the Catholic Church," in *Indian Pilgrims: Indigenous Journeys of Activism and Healing with Saint Kateri Tekakwitha* wherein Saint Kateri's "difference" from other Indigenous people is the main takeaway of her story. Her story of transformation, from Indigenous woman to Christian woman, is explicitly racialized in the biography of Saint Kateri written by French Jesuit Pierre Cholenec in 1696 in which he states: "This face, so marked and swarthy, suddenly changed about a quarter of an hour after her death and became in a moment so beautiful and so white that I observed it immediately." The holy whiteness of Kateri is also emphasized in the famous portrait of her, painted in 1696, by French Jesuit Father Claude Chauchetière, which shows Kateri

of Louis Riel and calls attention to the Western reliance on the "Great Man" theory of history in which history is analyzed through the feats of so-called "great men."[53] Erickson points out the sexism and misogyny intrinsic in this patriarchal ordering of history, but falls short of highlighting the racist and ethnocentric implications of its use in biographies of Louis Riel. These biographies valorize Riel as an individual set apart from the nation into which he was born, with the fact of his excellence demonstrating that he is an exception to the rule of the Métis. Many historians also specifically highlight Louis Riel's proximity to whiteness, both in his education in Québec, but also, and especially, in his heritage, as the foundation of his exceptionalism. Stanley George, author of one of the most influential books on Louis Riel, titled simply *Louis Riel*, makes this connection explicit in his description of Louis Riel's parental heritage: "His mother, Julie Lagimodière, was the

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with pale skin and wrapped in a shawl, reminiscient of a nun's habit. See Jacob, Michelle M. "The Ecstasy of Saint Kateri: Native Feminism in the Catholic Church." In *Indian Pilgrims: Indigenous Journeys of Activism and Healing with Saint Kateri Tekakwitha,* 112–142. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2016: 13..

53. The Great Man theory, while obviously influenced more generally by patriarchal systems and institutions in Western societies, is primarily attributed to Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle who, in his book On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, wrote:

> Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is [...] the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.

See Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (London: James Fraser, 1841), 1-2.

daughter of the first white woman in the North-West, and his father, one of the leaders of the free trade in furs movements of the 'forties, was a French Canadian with a dash of Indian blood in his veins."[54]

The idea that Louis Riel could and should be considered less Métis than his compatriots due to the degree of his racial mixedness and/or his ability to navigate settler educational and political systems is a continuation of the racist paradigms on which both missionary accounts and early anthropological and historical texts on the Métis were based. This fixation on racial mixedness and the scrutiny of Métis performances of whiteness and Indigeneity undermines the Métis as a people and a nation, and imagines them instead as a racialized identity, floating impermanently between two legitimate identities, before reaching the inevitable assimilation into whiteness or backsliding into "Otherness." This racialized exceptionalism has similarly been applied to Sara Riel, as evidenced by Erickson's argument that

54. George Stanley, has *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 67. A related and inverted version of the Great Man theory of history is the One Man to Blame theory, as described by Jean Teillet in her book *The North-West is Our Mother: the Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation* (359). Teillet describes the relationship between these two perspectives of Louis Riel, both informed by racialized understandings of the Métis, wherein Riel is conceived of as brilliant when performing whiteness in the political arena, and then instantly racialized by missionaries as a corrupting force, encouraging the Métis to backslide into "savagery," once he is executed as a traitor. Raymond J. Huel similarly highlights this reversal of Riel's racialization, stating that the Oblates, upon Riel's death, felt the need to frame Riel as an insane person who duped the Métis into the Rebellion in order to justify their continued presence as missionaries in the Northwest. See Raymond J. Huel*, Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Métis* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 212.

Riel's religiosity had fundamentally altered her ethnic identity. The racialization of Sara Riel's religiosity is achieved through the individualization of Riel; individualizing Riel's faith also individualizes her from her people and nation, and precludes any investigation into how her Métisness influenced her personal religiosity and the choices she made in expressing it.

This uncritical application of individualism as the universal foundation and driving force of social organization is not something unique to studies of the Métis but is prevalent in many studies of Indigenous religion and identity. Scholars Robin Kimmerer (Potawatomi) and Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate/Cheyenne/Arapaho) have both produced scholarship on forms of Indigenous citizenship that are not based on an individualized allegiance to a nation-state, itself based on settler understandings of property and borders, but instead are founded on relational connections between lands, water, humans, and other-than-human relations, and the responsibilities and obligations we have to each other.[55] Similarly, Delgado Shorter, in his article chapter "Spirituality" in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, discusses the entrenchment of individualism in studies of Indigenous religions, and describes how this "interpretive method relies on a primary and false binary between objectivity and subjectivity"[56] rooted in the conflation of science and objectivist thought as demonstrated by Cartesian objectivism, most concisely

55. See TallBear, "Caretaking Relations," 24–41; and Robin Kimmerer, "Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 167–174.
56. David Delgado Shorter, "Spirituality," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 435.

expressed through Descartes' famous declaration, "I think, therefore I am." Delgado Shorter argues that the accentuation of separated individuality as a prerequisite for rationality fails to make sense of Indigenous peoples "whose lives are typically organized around the existence of relations with other humans and other-than-human persons,"[57] making their primary mode of social organization dividual rather than individual, and with identity being produced through intersubjective co-constitution with other beings. qcknowleding that Indigenous identity is often produced through intersubjective co-consitution with other beings, Delgado shorter cites the work of Morrison and Bird-David who suggest that Descartes' famous statement be re-imagined in a dividual, relational, and intersubjective context to better represent Indigenous religion and relationality: "We relate, therefore we are."[58] The disharmony between logocentric individualism and relational dividualism and intersubjectivity demonstrates the shortcomings in spotlighting Louis and Sara Riel as exceptional Métis–by accentuating their actions, identities, and belief systems as individuals, we obscure the ways in which the Métis (including the "exceptional" Louis and Sara Riel) come to know and identify themselves through relations.[59]

This critical analysis of logocentric individualism demonstrates how engaging relationality in the study of religion helps to elucidate the inherited metaphysical principles upon which Western categories of religion and standards of research, are based. Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Goenpul) explains

57. Delgado Shorter, "Spirituality," 445.
58. Delgado Shorter, "Spirituality," 436.
59. See Macdougall, "How We Know Who We Are," 233–67.

how frameworks of relationality and related Indigenous research methodologies are often criticized on the grounds that they are "metaphysical and, by implication, lacking rationality."[60] Arguing for the importance of recognizing the metaphysical origins of all methodologies in order to deflect assumptions of the universality of Western methodologies, she highlights how Western methodologies also have "metaphysical origins in Greek mythology and Judeo-Christian beliefs, which privilege human hierarchical centredness and disconnection through otherworldliness,"[61] and are expressed most saliently in Western conventions of classification. Moreton-Robinson suggests that classification, long taken to be an essential element of scientific methodology and the absolute model of rationality, easily evolved into an apparatus for measuring and adjudicating levels of "hummanness," which, in turn, produced a hierarchy of "races." This system of racial ordering has been used to both further produce categories of human behaviours and social structures (including religion), and to consolidate the authority of adjudicating the rationality and validity of said behaviours and structures. Anti-colonial philosopher and essayist Sylvia Wynter, in her essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument," similarly examines changing definitions of "humanness" and the religious logics of the 16th century that determined what kinds of peoples and knowledges

60. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm," in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien (London: Routledge, 2017), 74.
61. Morteon-Robinson, "Relationality," 74.

counted as "human."[62] Wynter examines how Christian Europe's first forays into colonizing "new" lands first relied upon updating a classic element of the politics of Christendom – the identification of the Untrue Other, the Heretic, the Enemies-of-Christ in opposition to the True Christian Self. Wynter identifies Jews as the prototypical "infidel" to the Christian Self, the boundary-transgressive figure being expanded to include the Muslim populations of the Maghreb, al-Andalus/Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, and Malta during the Middle Ages. It was in the advent of the West's reinvention of the True Self from a Christian Self to a Rational Self of Man than the Untrue Other, defined previously as an Enemy-of-Christ, had to be reimagined in terms that placed it in opposition to the new Rational Man. As such, "it was the to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes), that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness - to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other."[63] Wynter highlights the 1550 Debate at Valladolid, which she characterizes as "a dispute...between the theocentric conception of the human, Christian, and the new humanist and ratiocentric conception of the human,"[64] as the turning point of this ideology, wherein Las Casas argued for the humanity of "Indians" based on the religious idea of "wilderness" and the innate potential of each human to exit the

62. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003).
63. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 265-266.
64. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 269.

wilderness and move into Christian salvation (which, he also argued, was the function of the Spanish evangelizing mission), and with Sepúlveda arguing that Spain's mission was instead a function of the imperial expansion of the state, which promised no such salvation for the subhuman "Indians". While it is impossible to determine which party "won" this debate, it is the fact of the debate itself that shows how categories of humanity were emerging in this era, and how a function of classifying these new categories of humanity based on rationality was still, naturally and unquestioningly, the purview of Christian European nations.

Adjacent to and paired with this process of classification is the principle of possession, which is part and parcel of the process of classifying. Moreton-Robinson explains how the process of identifying produces "epistemological possessions by bringing into consciousness and naming the previously unknown" and that this "racialized knowledge operates discursively within disciplines, moderating what can be known, who can know, and what constitutes value knowledge enabled by claims to objectivity."[65] Moreton-Robinson identifies this process of identifying, classifying, and moderating objectivity as the "God trick," wherein this way of knowing disguises itself as universal and natural. She states that "it is simultaneously the view from everywhere and nowhere and is the arbiter of everything," and clarifies how "the distinct metaphysical origins embedded within Western social research paradigms predispose Western researchers to particular ways of understanding and interpreting the world."[66] These particular ways of understanding the world are so embedded

65. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 75.
66. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 75.

in Western discursive practices that even research which seeks to critique it often necessarily, albeit unintentionally, reaffirms it.[67] Wynter too identifies how the emergence of secular rationality can best be described as a process of "de-godding" Christian theology into "Western knowledge" and how this change is effectively obscured through the process of producing it. Citing Godelier, Wynter argues that:

> as human beings who live in society, and who must also produce society in order to live, we have hitherto always done so by producing, at the same time, the mechanisms by means of which we have been able to invert cause and effect, allowing us to repress the recognition of our collective production of our modes of social reality.... Central to these mechanisms was the one by which we projected our own authorship of our societies onto the ostensible extra-human agency of supernatural Imaginary Beings (Godelier 1999). This imperative has been total in the case of all human orders, even where in the case of our now purely secular order, the extra-human agency on which our authorship is now projected is no longer supernatural, but rather that of Evolution/Natural Selection together with its imagined entity of "Race."[68]

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67. Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, ed. Roger Maaka and Chris Andersen (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 165–73; and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Colonizing Knowledges," in *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, ed. Roger Maaka and Chris Andersen (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 91–110."
68. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 273.

This process of producing Others has resulted in those once deemed "sinful by nature" being transmuted into Others now considered "irrational by nature" and, thus, subhuman. It goes without saying that the onto-epistemologies of these irrational subhuman Others are similarly framed as inherently inferior to the previously Christian, now secular, rationality. This production of "rationality" as the principal measurement of human subjectivity, achieved via employment of the God trick, ensures a naturalized and normalized distance between and separation from "the authentic, essentialist, deeply spiritual 'Other[s],'" of the "New World," the "Orient,"[69] and the European-imagined Africa, and the rational, objective self – in short, between the West and the Rest.[70]

Relationality can serve as a necessary balance to the deployment of the "God trick" in Western methodologies. By accentuating the intersubjective and dividual nature of Indigenous societies, and highlighting the ways in which relations with other human and non-human beings inform both our understandings of ourselves and our understanding of the world, relational research paradigms can counter Western assertions of disconnectedness as integral to achieving objectivity and rationality. Indigenous and feminist research paradigms demonstrate that relational modes of existence that emphasize connectedness are important elements of research and knowledge production, and that "[i]t is as valid and appropriate to approach the world on this basis as it is to make a metaphysical argument that one is disconnected from the living earth."[71] Centering relationality in the study of Indigenous

69. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, NY: Vintage Books/Random House, 2003.
70. See footnote 12.
71. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 75.

religions is vital, as is using socio-political and culturally specific frameworks to explore situated knowledges within their appropriate contexts; and, as all knowledge is partial and situated, it reasons that relationality can be a useful paradigm in examining the study of religion itself. Relationality can provide the tools necessary to identify how religion and relations form the conventions that inform both Indigenous and Western research methodologies, and through highlighting the ways in which meaning is co-constituted through relations, relationality can also help scholars to de-apotheosize the "God trick" in their own work.

Conclusion

This article engages a case study of Métis missionary, Sœur Marguerite-Marie, née Sara Riel, in order to demonstrate that the uncritical application of Western categories of nationality and religion resulted in egregious misrepresentations of both Riel's individual religiosity, and of the religious/spiritual practices and beliefs of the Métis more generally. Taking for granted the belief in a rigid, inflexible, and monolithic form of institutional Catholicism, various non-Métis scholars who have tried to analyze the lives and practices of key Métis historical figures (namely Louis and Sara Riel) have failed to identify the unique ways in which the Métis relate to and practice Christianity. Métis Christianities have largely been invisibilized in scholarship, with scholars instead misidentifying all Métis religious practices as reproduced forms of French-Canadian Catholicism.[72] This

72. See Flanagan, *Prophet of the New World*.

assertion also posits an inauthenticity of Métis indigeneity by implying that, while Métis material culture may borrow from their Indigenous relatives, Métis epistemologies are largely or exclusively French-Canadian, i.e. not Indigenous. In the case of Sara Riel, analyses of her religious identity are also used to make claims about her national and ethnic identities, with scholar Lesley Erickson arguing that Riel's role as a Catholic missionary permanently changed Riel's ethnic and national loyalities, causing Riel to feel ambivalent about her own Métis identity.[73] The stereotype of "cultural ambivalence"[74] being used by these authors runs counter to how these Métis figures and communities identified their religious and ethnic identities—like Sara Riel who frequently and unambiguously asserted her identity as both a missionary and a *métisse*.

To counteract these discourses of inauthenticity and cultural ambivalence that have long shaped scholarship on the Métis, it is imperative to utilize a framework and research paradigm that accurately represents how relationality served as the foundational element of both Métis religiosity and national identity. The use of *wahkôhtowin*, a specific form of prairie Indigenous relationality, as a theoretical perspective allows a more fulsome understanding of both Métis religious traditions generally, and Riel's personal religiosity more specifically. Brenda Macdougall's analysis of kinscape[75] building through family acculturation and Roman Catholicism at Île-à-la-Crosse elucidates the culturally specific ways in which the Métis, in this settlement,

73. See Erickson, "At the Cultural Crossroads"; Erickson, "'Bury our Sorrows in the Sacred Heart'"; and Erickson, "Repositioning the Missionary."
74. See Macdougall, "Cultural Ambivalence," 422–464.
75. See Lakomäki, "Conclusion: A Living Nation," 224-234.

understood their form of Catholicism: from Catholic godparents extending the role of *pawaganak* (guardian spirits), to the integration of Catholic saints into kinship networks, and to the creation of new religious traditions that stitched together beliefs and practices from both their European and Indigenous ancestors. This analysis of Métis Christianity through the lens of *wahkôhtowin* highlights the shortcomings of solely utilizing Western perspectives and methods in analyzing Indigenous religions, and, importantly, embraces a post-hegemonic[76] perspective in analyzing how and why the Métis claimed Christianity as a heritage religion. This case study heeds the call of Indigenous scholars like Eve Tuck and Brendan Hokowhitu who urge scholars to move away from damage-centered research paradigms that continue to frame Indigenous experience as being eternally bound to and defined by oppression. To borrow Tuck's language, employing relationality as a research paradigm moves us away from damage-centered narratives of Indigenous suffering towards paradigms of desire[77] – paradigms which allow for the fullness of Indigenous experience, acknowledging both the lasting effects and impacts of colonialism while simultaneously holding space for a recognition of Indigenous joy and futurity.

Lastly, relationality, while stemming from global, particular, and inter-Indigenous onto-epistemologies[78], is not only limited to studies of Indigenous peoples but can, and should, be applied to studies of other religious traditions as well. As Moreton-Robinson argues, relationality as a theoretical framework and

76. See Hokowhitu, "A Genealogy of Indigenous Resistance," 207–225.
77. See Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 409–427.
78. See Wildcat and Voth, "Indigenous Relationality," 2.

research paradigm has the potential to critically examine and unsettle conventions of knowledge and research that have been normalized and invisibilized within our field. While Indigenous research methods are all too often criticized for their explicit "metaphysical origins,"[79] Moreton-Robinson argues that Western methodologies have similarly been developed from mythological and religious sources, particularly Greek mythology and Judeo-Christian beliefs. She argues that these belief systems serve as the basis for contemporary research conventions of scientific classification, researcher objectivity, and separation of fields of study. If relationality is grounded in metaphysicality, so too are Western methods a "faith-based, inherited, and institutionalized pursuit of a metaphysical ideal"[80] of "human hierarchical centredness and disconnection through otherworldliness."[81] While metaphysical throughline which connects contemporary research to its roots in Greek mythology and Judeo-Christian beliefs is as obvious and important as the intersubjectivity and interconnectedness that informs Indigenous relationality, only the metaphysical origins of Western research paradigms has been obscured through deployment of the "God trick,"[82] which positions Western paradigms as natural and/or universal in opposition to the onto-epistemologies of the, to borrow from Smith, essentialist and deeply spiritual Others. The recognition of these metaphysical principles that undergird all forms of inquiry is not a weakness of research, but a strength, as the acknowledgement and exploration

79. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 74.
80. Clayton W. Dumont Jr., *The Promise of Poststructuralist Sociology: Marginalized Peoples and the Problem of Knowledge* (Albany: State of New York Press, 200): 52 quoted in Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 75.
81. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 74.
82. Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality," 75.

of these metaphysical influences can help to counter the continual reification of Eurocentrism within the field of religious studies and create space for scholarship that investigates Indigenous religiosity through culturally appropriate relational paradigms.

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