
Reconsidering Riel: A Necessary Exercise¹

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Abstract

Louis Riel represents the most important divisions in the Canadian society: Aboriginals versus European Canadians, West versus East, Francophones versus Anglophones, Catholics versus Protestants, the oppressed versus the oppressors. Every aspect of his life has been microscopically examined, or so we have been led to believe. Nevertheless, his ghost regularly returns to haunt us. Despite several promising developments since 1982, Canada has yet to fully recognise the role that the Métis have played in the development of Canada, their land claims or their desire for self-government. It is important to refocus one's attention upon the voice of the colonized, as the struggle undertaken by Louis Riel and the Métis continues to this day. Thus the necessity appears to reread Riel and his writings. The focus here is upon Louis Riel's years in exile in Montana and his involvement with the Métis.

Keywords

Louis Riel; Métis; colonized societies; identity recognition; national struggle.

Résumé

La figure de Louis Riel résume les dichotomies essentielles se manifestant au sein de la société canadienne: Autochtones et Canadiens d'origine européenne, Ouest et Est, francophones et anglophones, catholiques et protestants, opprimés et oppresseurs. Bien que chacun des aspects de sa vie ait fait l'objet d'un examen approfondi — du moins est-ce ce que nous sommes portés à croire —, le fantôme de Louis Riel revient nous hanter régulièrement. En dépit d'événements prometteurs survenus depuis 1982, le Canada peine à reconnaître la contribution des Métis au développement du Canada et à donner suite à leurs revendications territoriales et à leur aspiration à l'autodétermination. La lutte menée par Louis Riel et les Métis se poursuit jusqu'à ce jour. C'est pourquoi il est important de recentrer le débat sur la voix des colonisés et d'entreprendre une relecture de Riel et de ses écrits. L'attention est ici portée sur l'engagement de Louis Riel auprès des Métis durant ses années d'exil au Montana.

Mots clés

Louis Riel; Métis; sociétés colonisées; reconnaissance identitaire; lutte nationale.

Resumen

La figura de Louis Riel, resume las dicotomías esenciales que ocurren en la sociedad canadiense: los pueblos nativos frente a los canadienses de origen europeo, el oeste frente al este, francófonos frente a anglófonos, católicos frente a protestantes, oprimidos frente a opresores. Aunque todos los aspectos de su vida han sido objeto de un examen profundo—al menos eso es lo que se nos lleva a creer—el fantasma de Louis Riel viene a perseguirnos con regularidad. A pesar de los eventos prometedores que se han producido desde 1982, a Canadá se le dificulta reconocer las contribuciones del pueblo mestizo en el desarrollo del país y a responder a sus reivindicaciones territoriales y a su aspiración a la libre determinación. La lucha emprendida por Louis Riel y el pueblo mestizo continúa hasta nuestros días. Por eso es importante volver a centrar el debate en la voz de los colonizados y llevar a cabo una relectura de Riel y sus escritos. La atención aquí se centra en el compromiso de Louis Riel con los mestizos durante sus años de exilio en Montana.

Palabras claves

Louis Riel; mestizos; las sociedades colonizadas; reconocimiento de la identidad; lucha nacional.



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1. THE NEED TO REREAD RIEL

As depicted in the writings on his personality, Louis Riel was a man of many facets. To some, such as Tom Flanagan, amongst others, Riel was a self-centered, religious fanatic who led his people toward catastrophe in order to serve his own interests. He was also the greatest separatist leader Canada has ever known. In addition to his mental problems, this man would even have exhibited a certain sexual deviancy as it has indeed been insinuated that he indulged in an incestuous relationship with his sister Sarah. For others, such as Ron Bourgeault, he was a hero, the defender of the rights of both Aboriginals and Francophones². Louis Riel does in fact represent the most important divisions in the Canadian society: Aboriginals versus European Canadians, West versus East, Francophones versus Anglophones, Catholics versus Protestants, the oppressed versus the oppressors. Every aspect of his life has been microscopically examined, or so we have been led to believe. Nonetheless, his ghost regularly returns to haunt us.

For example, in October of 2002, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Dominion Institute televised a reenactment of his trial with Guy Bertrand in the role of Louis Riel, Edward Greenspan as the prosecutor and Alan Lenczner as the plaintiff. At the end of this exercise, Canadians were asked to decide on his guilt or innocence. Of the 9,700 individuals who actively participated, 87% were in favour of his acquittal (Wattie 2002). This experiment can be seen as a continuum of numerous attempts to rehabilitate this mythical character by Members of Parliament. Since his hanging, twenty-five bills have been tabled in the House of Commons to clear the name of Louis Riel, each in vain.

This CBC program and most of the proposed bills have been put forward without consulting those who are principally concerned, the Métis themselves, who remain rather sceptical regarding this "Rielmania". Although there are

those who support the idea of clearing his name, they have no desire for anything that is purely symbolic, while others think it would be illogical to attempt to absolve Riel of a crime he did not commit. The President of the Métis National Council (MNC), Clément Chartier, argues that the proposed bills "address the symbolism and does not [sic] deal with any of the real substantive issues facing the Métis people" (Chartier 2004). Moreover, on April 19, 2004, Paul Martin, the then Prime Minister of Canada, announced that the case of Louis Riel would be reviewed by the federal government. He did not, however, indicate how his government proposed to do so. On the other hand, in a speech delivered on April 19, 2004, Audrey Poitras, Vice-president of the MNC, pointed out that "a quick-fix pardon or exoneration is unacceptable. The truth must finally come out in order to truly begin the process of reconciliation between Canada and our people" (MNC 2004: 4).

It is undeniable that the discourse surrounding the case of Riel is grounded in emotion and often prevents us from discerning the real questions that need to be answered. The relentless hesitations that surround this idea of rehabilitation are symptomatic of more serious ills within Canadian society. Even if intellectuals of the stature of John Ralston Saul affirm that the three mainstays of Canadian society are the First Nations, the Francophones and the Anglophones, that the glue that holds them together is the Métis people and that the greatest thing that arose from the intermingling of the Europeans and the First Nations was the creation of a new people, this is not necessarily a universally-shared point of view³. Despite several promising developments since 1982 (the date the Canadian Constitution was modified to include the Métis as part of the Aboriginal population of this country), Canada has yet to fully recognize either the role that the Métis have played in the development of Canada, their land claims or their desire for self-government.

² See the debate between Tom Flanagan and Ron Bourgeault on Louis Riel (Flanagan and Bourgeault 1998).

³ John Ralston Saul made this statement during a stay in Saskatoon for the Whelen Lectures at the University of Saskatchewan, September 22-23, 1998.

Furthermore, over the last number of years, we have been confronted with a return to a certain ideological conservatism that has recoiled from what some refer to as an “Aboriginal orthodoxy”. Here, I point to Tom Flanagan’s book *First Nations? Second Thoughts*. The success of Flanagan’s book suggests that a great many readers sympathize with his vision. This observation leads political scientist Daniel Salée to state: “by presenting as an orthodoxy, what is in fact no more than the sum of repeated attempts by the Native peoples of Canada to establish equal, just and balanced conditions with non-Native people, Flanagan deliberately attempts to discredit Native claims” (Salée 2002: 142, translation). Flanagan attempts in previous writings on Louis Riel and the Métis to portray their claims as lacking legitimacy, logic, and strength (Salée 2002). Needless to say, Flanagan is fiercely opposed to any attempt at rehabilitating Riel.

If for so many years the Métis have actually been the “Forgotten People” of Canadian history and their voice has remained unheard, by fetishizing Riel, the individual, we continue to ignore the voice of the Métis. The political community is attempting to take over this discourse in order to better control it. With such a devotion, the battle of the Métis people, as well as the message of Louis Riel, are assimilated in the whitestream discourse and thus reduced to their simplest terms. This is especially true for the Métis as the Federal Government continues to refuse to recognize their territorial rights. The government’s refusal to negotiate resulted in the Métis appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada in an effort to have their rights recognized. “Irony would have it that the burden rests upon the Métis Nation to urge the government of Canada to define and defend the very Constitution of this country”. Subsequently, in September of 2003, the Supreme Court rendered its opinion in the case of *R. v. Powley*⁴, certainly the most

⁴ See the Supreme Court decision *R. v. Steve Powley and Roddy Charles Powley*, delivered September 19, 2003. Besides the recognition of the Métis as a distinct people, the Supreme Court also acknowledged that the Métis have certain rights (notably the right to hunt and gather) that are constitutionally protected. Moreover, governments are obliged to acknowledge and

important judicial proceeding for the Métis since the trial of Louis Riel.

It is clear when it comes to referring to Louis Riel and the Métis that we still have too great a tendency to choose what it is we wish to hear. Consciously or unconsciously, we continue to produce “[...] an image of helpless subalternity [...] which characterizes not only the perception of (migrants and) the minoritized as a whole, but also all of their utterances” (Steyer 2002:1). To turn Louis Riel into a symbol has a reductive effect on the intellectual scope of his thought and, to utilize a term dear to Michel Foucault, on the archaeology of his struggle as well as that of his people. According to Albert Braz in *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Literature*, “in order to be turned into an icon by the descendants of the people who opposed and hanged him, Riel is deprived of his otherness, his national specificity as a Métis” (Braz 1999: 11). All considered, what has been written about Louis Riel tells us more about the values and the dreams of European Canadians than it does about Riel himself.

It remains to be seen “how the other can be represented in an acceptable manner, ‘from a libertarian perspective, neither repressive nor manipulative’” (Chollet 1998: 6, translation). According to Edward Saïd, “it’s a matter of unlearning the spontaneous mindset of domination’, to strive for awareness and perception of nuance” (Chollet 1998: 6, translation).

In his essay *The Politics of Knowledge*, Edward Saïd contends that it is not enough to reintegrate the peoples and cultures that have been heretofore confined to the periphery. The recognition of identity on its own “amounts to little more than saying that you want a kind of attention easily and superficially granted, like the attention given an individual in a crowded room at a roll call” (Saïd 2002: 379). A partial recognition does not allow an individual to thrive, leading Saïd to state that “the subject has only to sit there silently as the proceeding unfolds as if in his or her absence” (Saïd 2002: 379). Therefore, it is important to refocus one’s

accommodate these rights, therefore they must negotiate with the Métis.

attention upon the voice of the colonized, as the struggle undertaken by Louis Riel and the Métis continues to this day. Therein lies a way to better understand the political and cultural impact of the European conquest on the colonized societies. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Saïd states: “[t]he point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded [...]” as “[n]ever was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance [...]” (Saïd 1994: 66-67 and xii). Through Riel, the struggle of his people can be rediscovered.

Riel certainly risked everything for a cause that he believed to be just. Riel is, in effect, at the center of the creation of Manitoba in 1870 and the troubles of 1885 in Batoche but he is much more than that:

It is by placing him in a context, in the life of his time, through his involvements, his personal characteristics; his relations with those close to him that [Riel is Riel]. It is the man and the work that represent the intellectual and not the work alone. Far from diminishing or discrediting him as an intellectual, this complexity contributes to enriching his intentions, exposing his humanity and making him fallible. (Chollet 1998: 11, translation)

Thus, it seems to me, the necessity to reread him, to discover in his writings another depth, to discern the multiple facets and successive layers in order to unearth what was always there, albeit undetected, but for one reason or another was rejected, partially observed or completely overlooked. To illustrate my contention, I shall focus upon Louis Riel's years in exile in Montana, concentrating exclusively on his involvement with the Métis even though there are other aspects of these years that could benefit equally from such attention.

2. EXILE IN MONTANA

As Edward Saïd underlines in *Reflections on Exile*,

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. (Saïd 2002: 173)

Various pressures and constraints are at the heart of the exile's plight. Beyond the evident reality of displacement or isolation, the exiled has the choice between fixating on his plight by withdrawing into a narcissistic masochism that inhibits the development of relationships or involvement in the host society and joining a party or a national movement that will facilitate the development of new loyalties and affiliations (Saïd 2002:183). Riel's writings during his years in exile exactly reflect this desire to give new meaning to his life and to establish new relationships.

Yet historians have devoted very little attention to this subject. In *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World*, Tom Flanagan sees these years as dark, negative and frustrating. He finds no link between Montana and the troubles of 1885. While Pierre Anctil, in an article entitled *L'exil américain de Louis Riel*, states: “[...] nothing could have led one to believe, in 1882, that Riel would once again become enamoured with the cause of the Canadian Métis, so greatly it seemed had he been integrated into his adopted country, to the point of wanting to become a full-fledged citizen” (Anctil 1981: 246, translation). According to literary critic Albert Braz “Riel's Montana life [...] was remarkably uneventful” (Braz 1999: 36). Nonetheless, as historian Gerald Friesen points out in his article *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, one could ask whether these years in Montana were not a prelude to the upheavals in Saskatchewan in 1885. Unfortunately, Friesen fails to answer this very question. By rereading Riel's letters, I propose to set out what these years in Montana represent. Does one speak of dark and

enigmatic years or might one see a fecund period that provided a context to the events that would follow?

After the events at the Red River in 1869, Louis Riel was ordered into exile by an expulsion decree signed into law in the spring of 1874 by Members of Parliament in Ottawa. Riel would consequently state to his mother, Julie Riel, that: "During the five years that I will spend in exile, that is all I need do, that and to tell the Métis to become more Métis than ever" (Stanley 1963: 467). He would move first to New England and then on to Minnesota, finally settling in Montana where he would remain until the spring of 1884.

On September 15, 1879, Riel writes that it took 28 days to reach Wood Mountain (Montagne de bois) in the company of his friend Joseph Gariépy: "It's been a long time since I have been as rattled about as I was in my cart. I assure you, my dear mother, that I was delighted to see the prairies. It gives me strength; the prairie is medicinal"⁵. Montana provided him with the opportunity to affirm his Métis identity as for the first time in his life he took part in the hunt and the trading that followed. He spent most of his time with his compatriots, the latter having settled in the area in three successive waves during the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s⁶.

Due to a growing demand for buffalo hides that would push them further and further west, Métis from the Red River who had links with Pembina, North Dakota, would follow the herds as far as Montana's Milk River. Over time, they would build cabins there and, rather than return to Pembina or to the Red River, certain families decided to stay. In parish registries, one comes upon names such as Morrin, Choteau, Champaigne, Ducharme, Cardinal, Jarvais and Paul (Dusenberry 1996: 124). With the disappearance of the buffalo, these families were once again obliged to move, this time to a region in central Montana called Judith Basin. They were actually the ones who established

Lewistown, one of the oldest Métis communities in the territory⁷. Once settled, the challenges they faced were imposing inasmuch as an economy based on the buffalo was, so to speak, a thing of the past and the Métis were regularly subjected to pressure from ranchers as well as homesteaders who were beginning to flood the Territory. Following the events of 1870, other Métis would come to join the Montana Métis in order to live a life more in keeping with their wants. In 1883, while Louis Riel was teaching at St. Peter's Jesuit Mission, he sent a letter to the *Helena Daily Herald* that gives us an idea about the number of Métis living in Montana:

There are at St. Peter's Mission, near Fort Shaw, about twenty-five Half-breed families who are willing and trying to farm. There are fifty of them settled in the Judith Basin and its close vicinity. There were seventy of them settled in the neighborhood of Wilder's Landing last winter, eighty others at the mouth of the Musselshell and further down towards Fort Peck. How many more Half-breed families live separated from each other and scattered over the Territory? (Stanley 1985: 272)

Thus, upon his arrival in Montana, Louis Riel would write to Julie Riel: "I am happy to be able to inform you that my health is good. [...] The buffalo meat is a good remedy: as I feel stronger. I find myself among the Métis: there are some thirty lodges in our camp"⁸. In 1880, he even invited the Red River Métis to come and settle in: "There is hunting here. If the Métis can no longer live in our dear province, they should come directly to Montana with their plows and their livestock. Perhaps it will be better for them here than elsewhere"⁹.

However, behind this apparent serenity lay certain difficulties. To begin with, he was witness to the decline of the Native Americans, notably the Blackfoot, the Cree and the Assiniboine, who crossed the border in search

⁵ Letter to Julie Riel, Fort Belknap, October 12, 1879, in Stanley 1985: 20.

⁶ Montana became a territory in 1864 and in 1889 became the United States' 41st state.

⁷ What's more, it was here that Gabriel Dumont would live after the events of 1885. He would take in certain orphans (Dusenberry 1996: 126).

⁸ Letter to Julie Riel, Fort Belknap, October 12, 1879, in Stanley 1985: 20.

⁹ Letter to Joseph Riel, Wolf Point, July, 1880 in Stanley 1985: 222.

of the rapidly decreasing herds of buffalo¹⁰. The competition to hunt these last herds was such that the American government found itself strengthening its border-control policy and undertaking a series of treaty negotiations with the First Nations.

Moreover, the American authorities attempted to prevent the Métis from hunting along the Milk River in order to preserve what was left of the buffalo for the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine (Harroun Foster 2001: 101). The authorities went so far as to accuse the Métis of hunting illegally in the United States and a number of them were escorted back to the border. As little distinction was made between individuals, even some Métis born in the United States were included in this group. The Métis who did remain in the Territory were worried about their future and decided to elect a spokesman to negotiate hunting rights with the First Nations and the American Government. In 1879, they turned to Louis Riel.

Adopting the same tactical approach as in Manitoba (letters and petitions), Riel decided to fight the illegal sale of alcohol in particular and to ask the American authorities to set aside land for the Métis. He concluded that becoming an American citizen was by far the best way he could help the Métis: "As for me, I shall become an American citizen. I have stated my intention to the powers that be and I have had my papers since May 17. I think I can be of more help to the Métis in this way than in any other"¹¹. In 1882, he decided to marry a Métis woman by the name of Marguerite Monette dit Bellehumeur¹².

Louis Riel would spend part of the year 1882 condemning the illegal sale of alcohol to the Indians and the Métis and would send letters of protest to American Deputy Marshall J. X. Beidler. The Canadian and American governments had established a certain number of measures to control the sale of alcohol; however, as Riel would note, these policies had varying degrees of success. During the 1870s, the North West Mounted Police played a significant role in enforcing the law and ridding the Canadian West of the American whisky traders. On the American side of the border, enforcement of the law was lax. Local juries refused to convict their neighbors who were involved in one of the most lucrative private undertakings in Montana (Samek 1987: 158). The rights of white citizens took precedence over those of the Natives or the Métis while no one worried about alcohol's destructive toll on the reserves. As Riel saw it, alcohol prevented a hunter from setting himself up on a piece of land. On May 20, 1882, in a letter to the editor of the *Helena Independent*, Riel states: "When [a Métis] visits a store with the produce of his chase, if the trader meets him with intoxicating liquor and trickery, he throws him into demoralization and poverty and retards his final settlement"¹³.

In 1879, having already been elected camp leader by 150 Métis families, Riel had had enough of running from one fort to the other in search of a place for the Métis to winter¹⁴. Permission was usually granted by the American authorities on the condition that the band of Métis would leave the reserve come spring. On August 6, 1880, in an attempt to put an end to this ceaseless nomadism, Riel made public a petition, signed by the heads of 101

¹⁰ For further information on this subject, see Kermaol 1997.

¹¹ Letter to Joseph Riel, Wolf Point, July, 1880, in Stanley 1985: 222. During his trial in 1885 in Regina, he would explain why he had waited until May 17, 1880 to take American citizenship: "I did not want to give to the states a citizen of banishment. [...] It sored my heart to say that kind of adieu to my mother, to my brothers, to my sisters, to my countrymen, my native land, but I felt that in coming back to the country I could not re-enter it without protesting against all injustice which I had been suffering [...]" in Bliss 1974: 361.

¹² The wedding took place on March 9, 1882 but Riel and Marguerite Bellehumeur began living together on April

28, 1881. See the marriage certificate published in Stanley 1985: 222.

¹³ Letter to the Editor of the *Helena Independent*. Between Rocky Point and Carroll, May 29, 1882 in Stanley 1985: 247-248.

¹⁴ Letter to Joseph Riel, Fort Assiniboine, December 1879 in Stanley 1985: 210: "[...] at the grand bend in the Milk River. There are about 150 Métis families. They honored me by electing me camp leader. I accepted but reluctantly. As I assure you, there is work to be done. It was necessary to run from one Fort to the other to try to get permission for our people to winter in the spot that they actually found themselves."

Métis families¹⁵, in which he asked the American authorities to set aside land for the Métis that would isolate them from the Americans. He also requested schools, agricultural implements, seed and domestic animals. In an effort to persuade the government, he underlined the important role the Métis played, and could continue to play, with the Natives, as both pacifiers and mediators (C Stanley 1985: 224).

According to Flanagan, he even had two possible sites in mind, one situated to the south of Yellowstone on the Crow River and the other between the Yellowstone River and the Musselshell River. However, this request was turned down by the government. The Indian Agent on the Crow Reserve went so far as to explain that, inasmuch as the Métis were British subjects, they had no right to this land and, furthermore, the Crows had no desire to share their territory (Flanagan 1986:110), most likely because these territories had too great a tendency to shrink. The Americans, like their Canadian counterparts, were not ready to recognize the Métis as a distinct people.

Far from being dark years, all this might lead one to believe that Louis Riel would once again become enamoured with the cause of the Métis on the other side of the border. There really is no disconnection between the events of 1869-70 at the Red River, the years spent in Montana with the Métis and the final assault at Batoche in 1885. His battle was the same and would remain so until his execution, while his tactics of persuasion remained the same. What continued to be honed was his political thought.

In fact, Louis Riel's Montana writings allow us first to understand the full scope of the policies put into place by the American and Canadian governments. Like Las Casas before him, Riel, in his function as witness, rebelled against the lamentable conditions in which the Aboriginal nations of Canada and the United States lived and condemned the nomadic existence imposed upon the Métis by the American government. Secondly, we observe how he immersed himself in the host society,

¹⁵ Petition to N.A. Miles, Musselshell River, Augst 6, 1880 in Stanley 1985 : 223-26.

condemning the irresponsibility of the civil and military authorities. Moreover, he hoped to interest Washington in the lot of his people. Riel did not pass his time in exile in withdrawn introspection but discovered new loyalties and new battles. His involvement was such that he would be accused of having influenced the Métis to vote Republican, when actually they were not American citizens, an accusation that was dismissed due to lack of evidence.

His years in exile in Montana actually intensified his sense of identity as a Métis and his nationalism. In his writings, he tells us of the superiority of the French-Canadian Métis people. He even begins to put forward the idea of a Métis independence movement and the establishment of a republic in the provinces of Assiniboia and Saskatchewan, where he plans to assemble Métis from Canada and the United States (Martel 1984:195). Moreover, he envisaged an overall settling of the Canadian West by the Métis that would evolve into a sort of American-style republicanism. He hoped as well to publish a volume entitled *The Massinahican*. In excerpts from this unfinished work, Riel provides us with a glimpse of a new political and religious utopia¹⁶, a type of confederation at once multinational and ecumenical. According to Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in exceptional circumstances the colonized intellectual feels the need to speak for his nation. This writing that Fanon defines as pre-combat marks the beginning of a period referred to as combat where the colonized intellectual attempts to spur his people to action. "Well before the political or fighting phase of the national movement an attentive spectator can thus feel and see the manifestation of new vigour and feel the approaching conflict" (Fanon 1967: 196).

To return to Saïd, we can see that exile enabled Riel to see what he had left behind as

¹⁶ According to Gilles Martel, Riel stated: "It is my duty to express my opposition to the Roman organization of my religion." And, he suggests, firstly, that Ville-Marie (Montréal) become the "new Rome"; secondly, that Nouvelle-France become the new sacerdotal country; and, thirdly, that Monsignor Bourget become the sovereign Pontiff of the New World (Martel 1984).

well as to experience his daily reality, the double perspective allowing him to avoid seeing things in isolation: "Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (Saïd 2002: 186). Upon his arrival in Montana, Riel firmly believed in the superiority of the United States when compared to Canada as the Americans had known how to separate themselves from the influence of the mother country, to abolish slavery and to support the cause of the Métis in 1869-70 (in the hope of later annexing the territory). Faced with the indifference of the American authorities to the plight of the Métis, when the time came to decide whether to rejoin his people at Batoche, Saskatchewan, he did hesitate but only briefly. By 1885, following attempts at negotiated settlements, Riel had nothing left to lose and, despite his abhorrence of weapons, he authorized his lieutenant Gabriel Dumont to engage the Canadian army in battle. On May 12, 1885, the Métis were defeated by the army and soon after Riel surrendered. On November 16, 1885, he was hanged for treason in Regina.

CONCLUSION

The historian Denys Delâge recently asked for which "we" are we making history and what is the place of Aboriginals in this "we" (Delâge 2000: 526). According to Daniel Salée, "as long as we broach the Aboriginal question from a point of view residing within the limits of the present state, it is doubtful that the real dynamic can be amended in a long-lasting manner beneficial to the Aboriginal people" (Salée 2002: 157, translation). What the political scientist finds valuable so might the historian. "Basically, for [the Aboriginals] the whole question of identity recognition springs from this dilemma: whether or not to accept to function within norms that are foreign to them and that, moreover, are the source of many ills" (Salée 2002:159, translation). Louis Riel understood this and therein lies the importance of returning to his writings as I think the full scope of his anti-imperialist thought has yet to be understood. In fact, at a time when British-

Canadian and American imperialism were at their height, Riel became "[...] the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (Fanon 1967:179). At a time when one spoke of assimilation and the progress of "civilization", Louis Riel was speaking about the relations between peoples and imagining a new world, a more just one in which colonizers and colonized could work together towards liberation. In his final plea, he foretold that: "this work is not the work of a few days or a few years, it's the work of hundreds of years" (Bliss 1974: 319). Perhaps this moment has finally arrived for the Métis Nation of Canada.

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