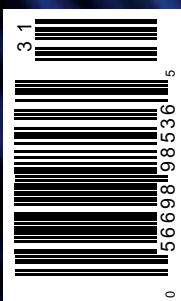


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A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE

ISSUE 49 **DEATH**

US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7





MONTANA MONADOLGY

JUSTIN E. H. SMITH

By the time the Unabomber installed himself, in 1971, in his iconic cabin in Montana's remote Lewis and Clark County, the western state had long served as refuge for characters with peculiar ideas about how the world works, and about what should be done to improve it.

Ted Kaczynski tied for the highest grade, at 98.9 percent, in the logic course he took at Harvard with W. V. O. Quine, though he left no lasting impression on the professor.¹ And anarcho-primitivism is, in the end—is it not?—a sort of application of the law of the excluded middle (one of the most basic, and easiest to retain, of the laws learned in the study of logic): it's either the earth or us. It is somewhat more difficult to trace the Montana writings of the Canadian Métis resistance fighter Louis Riel back to his philosophical education at the Sulpician College of Montreal in the 1850s.² But as with the Unabomber after him, we can be certain that there were decades-old classroom lectures ringing in his head, in the silence of his cabin, as he set about putting his thoughts to paper.

Riel was in exile in the Montana Territory, having ducked across the border in the aftermath of the Red River Rebellion, which began in 1869 in what would soon become Manitoba. He was of French and Ojibwe ancestry, and thus a Métis. This is a label non-Canadians know better in its Spanish rendering, *mestizo*, yet it has

its own distinctive meaning in the Canadian context. During the rebellion, he had ordered the execution of the government soldier Thomas Scott, in order, it is speculated, to send Canada a little message about who was in charge out on the prairie: Riel wanted nothing less than to establish a Métis republic, a goal that did not fit easily with the Canadian vision of a country that would extend "from sea to sea" (*A mari usque ad mare* has been the official motto of the country since the early twentieth century, by which time the hopes for a Métis republic had been fully vanquished). After the rebellion, Riel began to imagine himself the divinely chosen leader of all Métis, and took on the biblical name David.

In Montana, he sought the prohibition of alcohol, and campaigned for the Republican Party. He became an American citizen in 1883, and had a son, Jean-Louis, followed by a daughter, Marie-Angélique. He taught school at the Jesuits' Sun River mission, not so far from Great Falls. In 1884, Riel was called back by his fellow Canadian Métis to Saskatchewan. His campaign for the resolution of their grievances warped quickly into open rebellion; after some months of guerrilla warfare, he surrendered on 15 May 1885, and in July of that year his trial for treason began. He was hanged in Regina on 16 November.

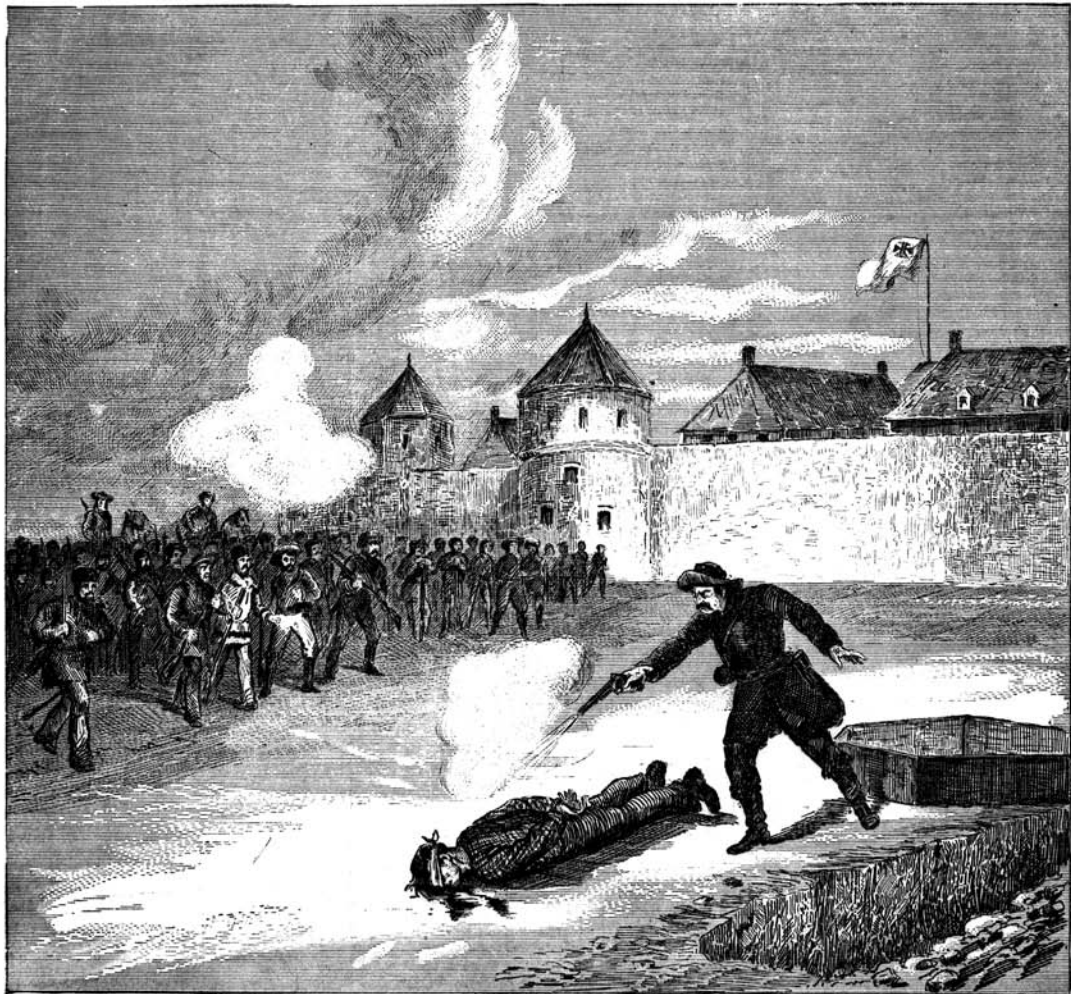
Frances Anne Hopkins, *The Red River Expedition at Kakabeka Falls, 1877*. The painting represents the military campaign to arrest Louis Riel during the Red River Rebellion. Courtesy Library and Archives Canada.



Vol. 1.—No 25]

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, APRIL 23, 1870.

[SINGLE COPIES, TEN CENTS.
\$4 PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.]



HP. 24, 1870

THE TRAGEDY AT FORT GARRY, MARCH 4, 1870.—SEE PAGE 394.

The legacy of the Métis, though long in conflict with the interests of the settlers, was eventually incorporated into the foundation myths of Canada. The nation was built through them, not on top and in spite of them. That the Métis constitute a *tertium quid* in Canadian identity, alongside settlers and natives, seems to have something to do with the fact that they are overwhelmingly the product of early fusion not between natives and settlers in general, but between natives and French settlers. This in turn creates a sort of spectrum of autochthony on which French Canadians can be placed, while for the most part Anglo-Canadians cannot be. Louis Riel is a Métis hero and a French-Canadian hero at once. It would be hard to imagine an Anglo equivalent.

A certain radical wing of the Quebec separatist movement of the 1970s sought to establish common cause with the Black Panthers by calling themselves *les nègres blancs de l'Amérique*.³ This may have been a stretch, but it is at least true that Canadian history has made Francophony into a form of non-whiteness—“Speak white!” the Anglo-Montrealers used to taunt the Francophone waiters and shopkeepers. And it has ensured that their Frenchness, as much as their partial native descent, would mark the Prairie Métis out as the problem group, as the people standing in the way of the coast-to-coast railway and other monuments to Anglo-Canadian hegemony.

These monuments would eventually be completed, and the disparate forces at play in northern North America would eventually be unified, or bound together by always undoable knots, into the modern federal Canadian identity. And in consequence of this fragile unification, Louis Riel—rather than being remembered as having been on the wrong side of history, like some Confederate general, or as a source of national regret over an unjust conquest, like Tecumseh or Sitting Bull—is now held up as one of the founders of Canada. Indeed, he is said to be the very “father” of Manitoba. There was transgression there, something ugly happened at Red River, but today Canada is at least in part a Métis nation, in a way that the United States could never be.

At the time of his hanging, it probably seemed no more likely that there would someday be statues of Riel in Winnipeg than, for us, a future situation in which Kaczynski wins for himself similar memorials in Sacramento. Riel was a traitor; he killed Canadian soldiers. Today it is generally supposed that Riel was suffering from delusions, hearing voices, exhibiting symptoms of illnesses that had not yet been named. But as with Kaczynski, the diagnosis of mental illness depends much on the supposition that one must be



Councillors of the provisional government of the Métis Nation, 1869. Riel is seated at center. Courtesy Glenbow Archives.

mad in order to be driven to such excesses by one’s own beliefs, not only in brutality toward others but in the practice of one’s private life: dropping off the grid, as they say, or standing and praying for days at a time. They both had something prodding at them, that much is clear, a constant electrical charge that makes it simply impossible for some people to live in this world and that can take on different valences, and yield different results, depending on the ideas with which the prodded man comes to dress up the buzzing amorphous thing that afflicts him: a bit of Marcuse, some Jacques Ellul, perhaps a fleeting fragment of Quine; or, in the case that interests us, some creative Roman Catholicism, some Métis liberationism, and, for biographical reasons that remain untraced, a large dose of Leibnizian monadology.

Here is what a Sulpician college professor in Montreal in the mid-nineteenth century would likely have been able to tell his students about Leibniz:⁴ there was a great German metaphysician, an idealist and a theist, who in 1714 published a book we call *The Monadology*. In it, he claims that there is nothing in the world but simple substances or monads, which is to say “unities.” These monads are simple in that they have no parts, but consist entirely of perception—which is to say, of the representation of the order of coexistence of infinitely many monads—and of appetite, which is to say the tendency to move from one such representation to another. “Representation,” in turn, is much harder to define, and should perhaps simply be taken as a primitive concept, but it means something like “the capacity of what is one and simple to contain or express or unfold from itself what is many or multiple.” Monads are not

opposite: *Canadian Illustrated News* of 23 April 1870 depicting the killing of government soldier Thomas Scott at Fort Garry on 4 March 1870. Almost every detail of the episode is disputed, though most historians agree that Riel ordered the man’s execution by firing squad. This scene probably depicts the *coup de grâce*. Courtesy Glenbow Archives.

physical atoms, since the latter, were they to exist, could be conceptually if not actually divided, and thus could not really be basic elements at all. Monads are thus “metaphysical atoms” or “atoms of substance” that ground being by providing the principles of unity within the multiple and composite world of bodies.

This world of bodies, in turn, results, in an extremely complicated way that has given rise to several centuries of scholarly disputation, from the perceptual activity of incorporeal monads, even if it is not built up out of them as a house is out of bricks. Monads differ from one another only with respect to the point of view of their representation of the order of coexistence; Leibniz’s is thus a “perspectivalist” philosophy—a point of which much was made in the early twentieth century at the dawn of the age of cinema by philosophers who saw a correlation between his system and the new medium’s ability to depict an object from many different angles. And from the fact that they represent the entire order, it follows that there is no truth in the universe that could not be derived from the internal representations of any given monad. Every monad, though simple, contains the entire world within itself. Every monad is “a world apart,” as each of its successive states unfolds entirely from the states prior to it, never from causal interaction with other monads. No monad ever really brings about effects in any other monad; each is entirely isolated.

Bodies are the phenomenal result of the perceptual activity of immaterial monads: where their perception is clear, this manifests itself phenomenally as activity; but where their perception is confused, this is manifested in a way that strikes us at the phenomenal level as bodily: passive, impenetrable, heavy. There is no world of bodies independent of the activity of monads, from which it follows that there is no part of the material world that is monad-free. The entire physical world is nothing but the phenomenal result of the activity of immaterial monads, all the way down.

There has likely never been anyone saner than Leibniz, yet this is not at all to say that Leibnizianism is a useful prophylactic against insanity. On the contrary, from a raving speaker, it is hard to understand talk of bodies as consisting in infinitely many immaterial nodes of striving and subjective perception as anything other than, at best, a symptom of some sort of severe dissociation, or, at worst, the very cause of this dissociation. One thinks straightaway of Daniel Paul Schreber’s 1903 *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, with his attribution of cogitative power to entities he called “nerves,” and with his “fleetingly improvised men.”⁵ Now, we would not want to perpetuate the naive view that mental illness

amounts to a sort of recrudescence of the primitive, but it is still worth noting that Schreber’s vision of reality might not have seemed so peculiar in a world that preceded the Cartesian definition of the material world as consisting in “bare extension,” but instead saw bodily reality as in some way or other charged through with active, mind-like beings. In the ethnographic record, in fact, there are abundant examples of traditional beliefs about the human body as constituted out of multiple consciousnesses. Some, such as those in the Paracelsian medical tradition, held that each organ had its own little soul or subordinate monarch: the gastranax for the stomach, the cardianax for the heart, and so on. Knud Rasmussen reports that one of the principal sources of anxiety in Inuit society stems from the fact that food, and, thus, eventually, human bodies, is entirely constituted out of souls.⁶

Leibniz’s picture of the world, in short, did not come out of nowhere, but rather is an untimely expression of a fairly widespread way of thinking about the constitution of reality. This is not to deny that there are many highly original and ingenious elements of his iteration of it, but only to affirm that the basic picture is counterintuitive only relative to the particular prevailing ontology against which he proposed it. From the perspective of this ontology, the typical reaction to a view of reality as consisting in multiple nodes of perceptual activity has been to denounce it as deviant, even mad. Thus, for example, Ralph Cudworth, writing in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* of 1678, complains that “to make every man and animal to be a multitude or commonwealth of percipients, and persons, as it were, clubbing together, is ... absurd and ridiculous.”⁷

Yet, in essence, this is what Leibniz believed. While, as his example shows, the constitution of reality out of congregations of consciousnesses *can* be proposed by a sane and well-positioned courtly philosopher, its untimely irruption in the modern era seems more likely to happen where the ordinary commitments to conventional beliefs start to break down, and a person begins to account for the experience of everyday reality in this now-counterintuitive way not because he is a brilliant and lucid metaphysician, but rather, or perhaps also, because he has started, as they say, to crack.

Riel’s principal work of monadology is the *Mémoire sur les monades*, written while awaiting execution in Saskatchewan in 1885.⁸ This work, to which we will return shortly, was preceded by a number of notes toward an unfinished work entitled “Système philosophico-théologique,” which he made on the same subject while in Montana in the first half of the decade.



Louis Riel addressing the jury during his 1885 trial for treason in Regina, Saskatchewan. Courtesy Library and Archives Canada.

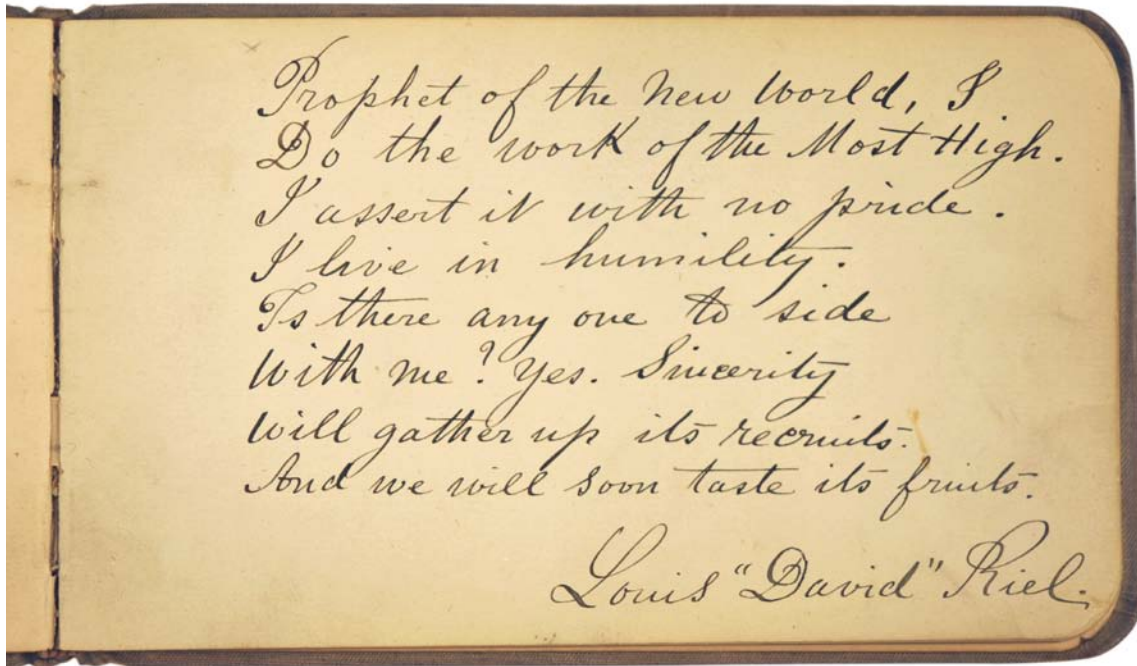
Many of the notes from this period are believed to have been intended for a never-completed work called *Massinahican* (The Book), to be written in Cree.

In the Montana notes, Riel, breaking with Leibniz, identifies sex (which is to say, the male/female binary) and positive and negative electrical charge among the basic pairs of properties that characterize the monad. Sometimes he deploys “electricities” as a synonym for “monads,” and he warns against allowing our own negative electricities to come into conflict with those of God.⁹ In the Montana notes, Riel maintains that “sex is in the monads,” and that every monad is capable of alternating between the male and female forms. He believes that maleness and femaleness are the principles of monadic combination (“clubbing,” in Cudworth’s words), and that monads are capable of happiness as a result of their “tight conjugal connection” with each other.¹⁰

We are a far cry from Leibniz here. His monads had been the source of dynamical active force in the world of bodies, but they did not “have” force, let alone electrical charge. There were varieties of qualitative

corpuscularianism in the seventeenth century that indeed attributed sex to the fundamental particles of the world (Henry Power’s, for example), but Leibniz’s monads were conceived precisely to move away from all the conceptual difficulties of such theories: surely maleness is a composite property of an entity, resulting from its parts and systems; if a particle is male, and if what is fundamental is simple, then such a particle cannot really be fundamental.

But Riel never so much as mentions Leibniz; instead, he takes the philosopher’s central concept of monad and turns it into something quite original. By the time of the 1885 *Mémoire*, he has added tenderness, softness, and polish to the basic qualities—monads are said to be *tendres*, *douces*, and *polies*—and maintains that this trio together gives rise to the monads’ sensibility. By this point, every monad is fixedly either male or female, and a male monad is itself “a positive electricity,” while a female monad is a negative one. Male monads are less soft, and this causes them to repel one another. Female monads are softer, more polished, and more



One of several poems written by Riel while awaiting execution. Courtesy Manitoba Métis Federation.

tender. When female monads come into contact with others, they "experience a quiver that soon transforms into a stirring. When it is prolonged, this stirring itself becomes intolerable. In this way repulsion occurs between female monads." This much, Riel maintains, has been confirmed by science "when through experimentation it saw that negative electricities repel one another."

Now, monads are also luminous, scented. They have a taste, and they emit a distinctive noise. Leibniz had spoken of dominant and subordinate monads as defining the hierarchical relations between the infinitely many nested individuals that constitute a corporeal substance, but Riel speaks of domination in a way that seems to owe a more direct debt to Sade: "Every active monad," he writes, "has a passive monad that belongs to it. And with which it does what it pleases." The attractions and repulsions of monads, their scent and sex, are what hold bodies, including Riel's own body, together. He imagines he can feel the attractions and repulsions within him, the infinitely many male and female monads, dominating and being dominated, giving off odors and quivering.

Riel is about to die as he writes all this, waiting in a Regina prison cell, yet he continues to hope for the intervention of the local monseigneur, and thereby to gain more time to "lay out this revelation in all its beauty!" He imagines his eventual holiness will give him

occasion to "explain the existence of God, creation, and the plan of creation itself." But for now he had better keep silent on these things, since "my mission consists above all in obeying." It is not clear what Riel intends to obey here—the state, perhaps, or the church, or God. Nor is it clear why he thinks his electro-sexual monadology is in line with Catholic obedience, while laying out the rest of God's plan would not be. It is impossible, in contrast to the case of Kaczynski, to ground the political desiderata with any precision in the philosophical speculation. It is clear, at least, that Riel is, politically, a utopian. He envisions the establishment of a perfect society in the Canadian prairies, which will be a final realization of the divine order on earth. This divine order, in turn, is reflected at the deepest metaphysical level in the conflict, attraction, and love of the monads that make up the entire natural world. Riel shares with other utopian thinkers, particularly Christians such as Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella, the conviction that the realization of the perfect political order first requires a comprehension of the deepest nature of reality, even if the practical utility of this theoretical grounding is not always evident.

Riel's variation on the theory of monads, while easily dismissed as the product of mental instability, makes at least some good historical sense. Though Leibniz insisted his monads were non-physical and thus could not have physical properties, for the most part this fine

point would be overlooked by his successors. Already by the mid-1750s, a young Immanuel Kant had presented his *Monadologia physica*, and many since then would, intentionally or not, also be inclined to conceptualize these basic entities more along the lines of biological cells than of immaterial nodes of subjectivity. From here, in turn, it is not so hard to imagine the monad outfitted with all the qualities Riel imagined for it, including sex. And what is electricity, in Riel's understanding, but a nineteenth-century update of the early modern concept of force?

Riel's monads are not Leibniz's, but they are more or less respectable. They embody not just his own preoccupations, but his era's: in their electric charge, Riel's monads are the contemporaries of Thomas Edison's electrical supply network, first switched on in New York in 1882; in their sexual charge, his monads are somewhat precocious. Not at all Victorian, they can perhaps be understood as an advance signal, sent from an unstable man in Montana, of the coming century of sex talk.

In 1902, another Winnipegger transplanted to the area near Great Falls, the nineteen-year-old Mary MacLane, would make H. L. Mencken uncomfortable with her *Story of Mary MacLane*, in which she would write frankly of her amours and celebrate her own ego without shame.¹¹ Her 1929 obituary in *The Chicagoan* asked: "What seed fell upon that austere provincial soil to produce this amorous diarist with a narcissus complex?" Now it is Mary who has sex, not her monads, and yet she, no less than Riel, drives us to ask, along lines similar to those of the Chicago newspaper: How does that state, at first glance so sparse and inactive, yield up such curious specimens? And what was it about the porous border between it and the prairie provinces that invited these characters?

In the end, it is more this legacy of *fin-de-siècle* Montana, as unlikely breeding ground of late-modern preoccupations, than of the Montana of our own lifetime, as refuge for enemies of modernity like Kaczynski, that helps us to place Louis Riel. He in turn helps us, like no other modern philosopher after Leibniz—not Kant, not Husserl (who uses *monad* as a simple synonym of "ego")—to chart the remarkable variability, and to sound the psychological depth, of monadology.

Niggers of America: The Precocious Autobiography of a Quebec "Terrorist" (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

⁴ Thomas Flanagan doubts the importance of Leibniz in the development of Riel's conception of monad, arguing that it comes instead from his interest in theosophy, particularly the work of Madame Blavatsky. He notes that while most of us associate the concept of the monad with Leibniz, in fact there is an alternative lineage, which extends back through Henry More and Paracelsus, and ultimately to Pythagorean numerology. But Leibniz also consciously inscribes himself within this lineage by adopting the term, and by the time the theosophists are writing, they recognize the distinctly Leibnizian impact on the history of the concept's development. See Flanagan, "On the Trail of the *Mas-sinahanican*: Louis Riel's Encounter with Theosophy," in *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, vol. 37, no. 2 (October 1995), pp. 89–98.

⁵ See Daniel Paul Schreiber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (Leipzig: O. Mutze, 1903).

⁶ Cited in Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). "Le grand péril de l'humanité, c'est que la nourriture des humains est entièrement faite d'âmes."

⁷ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845), p. 406.

⁸ Louis Riel, "Mémoire sur les monades," in *Collected Writings* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1985), vol. 3, sec. 179, pp. 335–339.

⁹ Louis Riel, "Système philosophico-théologique: Les essences sont des électricités," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, sec. 179, p. 398.

¹⁰ Louis Riel, "Système philosophico-théologique: Les propriétés sexuelles des monades," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, sec. 180, p. 399.

¹¹ See Mary MacLane, *Human Days: A Mary MacLane Reader*, ed. Michael R. Brown, (Chico, CA: Petrarca Press, 2011).

¹ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Philosopher Who Analyzed Language and Reality, Dies at 92," *The New York Times*, 29 December 2000. Available at <www.nytimes.com/2000/12/29/arts/w-v-quine-philosopher-who-analyzed-language-and-reality-dies-at-92.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

² I wish to thank Max Hamon, PhD candidate in the history department at McGill University, for sharing his expertise on Louis Riel.

³ See Pierre Vallières, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" québécois* (Montréal: Éditions Parti-Pris, 1967). Translated as *White*