



Romola V Thumbadoo Winnipeg



**Acknowledging Metis Leader Louis Riel on November 16, the original Louis Riel Day
Photos from the "Tomb of Louis Riel"
President of the Provisional Government of Manitoba
1869 – 1870**

From my Facebook Post, acknowledging November 16 and the anniversary of Riel's execution in 1885. During that year, Riel led Métis people in the Northwest Resistance, which was a stand against the Government of Canada because it was encroaching on Metis rights and way-of-life.

I researched his background in the early nineties when I was working in Urban Aboriginal Policing. Of course, I already knew about Metis before that, and in the eighties I used to live in Prince Albert Saskatchewan, close to Duck Lake and Metis and First Nations history in the Prairies. (Of course, with my South African heritage, I was already more than familiar with realities of mixed race peoples - "coloured" as we used to call it there).

Here is a specific trail down my Louis Riel/Metis memory lane:

1. From 1991 to 1996, I coordinated the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police - Policing with Aboriginal Peoples Committee (Dept of Solicitor General of Canada), and it was in the course of our work that we visited the RCMP Police Academy in Regina, and noted the rope that Louis Riel had been hanged with on display; our committee advocated for its removal. I recall a committee member Lee Seto-Thomas playing an active role in this effort.
2. During a mid nineties trip to Winnipeg, I met a Metis actor reciting the Riel Proclamation of Independence - I developed a project to support him to deliver this publicly in the context of my work with the Aboriginal Justice Learning Network (Dept of Justice) - and during the first Urban Aboriginal Policing Forum that I organized for November 1996, hosted in Winnipeg, arranged for the RCMP and City Police and conference partners to do a walk/drive to acknowledge his grave; he also delivered the proclamation reading at our Forum - and many police officers acknowledged that before that, they did not know of the difference between First Nations, Inuit and Metis Peoples; of course other distinctions like status, non-status, Indian, individual nation status and heritage etc were not understood either. That Urban Aboriginal Policing Forum was a big wake up moment for Aboriginal Justice - my FB friend Clayton Sandy helped with its organization.
3. We had four elders supporting our Forum - including the late Dorothy Betz, an elder at the Winnipeg Friendship Centre - now I had already known her from the 80s - she was likely one of the first Indigenous National Parole Board members. She would knit during parole board meetings - she once knitted me a blue scarf!
4. I developed and supported the first Ontario Metis Justice conference in Ontario as a part of my work with the Aboriginal Justice Learning Network - it was hosted in Sturgeon Falls Ontario in about 1997. Tony Belcourt was President of Metis Nation of Ontario at the time - he may recall

the multi day gathering on the land. I remember little turtles were just being born and so we had to drive with great care.

5. Around this time I met Grandfather William Commanda - I learned about his work as Supreme Chief of the North American Indian Nations Government, advanced with his Huron friend Jules Sioui from the mid-nineties. Metis were formally a part of its invited membership.

I learned also that during one of his visits to Winnipeg, he had been asked to do a Pipe Ceremony at Louis Riel's grave. I think Algonquin Elder/Firekeeper Peter Decontie was there as well. We have a photograph of this moment in William Commanda's archives.

6. In 2013, I visited the Louis Riel Tomb again with my friend Clayton Sandy - it is interesting to note the French inscription presented first in the plaque that points to his Tomb. He was born in St Boniface, Manitoba, and the connections with the East and West and South were also strong for him.

7. Today, Louis Riel is recognized as the first premier of Manitoba.

8. Finally, did you know this? William Commanda's daughter Evelyn, of Algonquin and French heritage, raised by him and his wife from birth, raised in the language and culture, lost her rights when she married Tommy Dewache, more "pure blooded" Indian than her, but without legal acknowledgement as First Nations till William Commanda retrieved documents to wage that challenge with Indian Affairs. He was the first President of the Metis and Non-status Indians in Maniwaki. Evelyn has often told me how she paid for medical services for the births of all her children, helped by her father - Indian Affairs did not support her, because she had "lost" her rights by marrying Tommy. Ironically, her wedding (in full Indian dress) was showcased on CBC - 63 years ago. There are many more painful stories to tell in this regard, including with respect to the different spellings of the names of each of her children. Narrow understandings of identity have been a costly experience for this family, as well as others. AND at this particular moment, I ask you to hold Evelyn and Tommy in your prayers.

9. I drove Grandfather to a meeting of the Metis in Fort Colonge Quebec, and took photographs of the cabin he and his wife Mary used to stay in when they attended meetings decades ago - Real Paul is one of the leaders I recall from that time; younger ones were late Chief Roger Fleury, and Gil Dupius; and I met Michel Tremblay and his family there in Fort Colonge in more recent years - they used to attend our Circle of All Nations gatherings.

10. Here are a couple of my photos of the Tomb of Louis Riel.

With respect.

Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo,
Circle of All Nations