DANAE JACOBSON

"To Obtain the Gold . . . for the Needy and Poor"

Nuns' Begging as Gendered, Environmental, and Settler-Colonial Labor

ABSTRACT This article tracks the nuns who in 1864 established a boarding school and convent at St. Ignatius, Montana Territory, on the Flathead Indian Reservation. It excavates how the nuns' notion of spiritual sacrifice and suffering fortified them to keep going in the face of the challenges of begging. Yet, their begging from gold miners was more than simply an act of self-sacrifice. Begging was also environmental labor and environmentally shaped labor. Begging was gendered. Begging was deeply interconnected with the U.S. settler empire, which included displacing Indigenous people, creating reservations, running boarding schools, fostering white settlement, establishing territories, building infrastructure, and following mineral rushes. Nuns narrated their labor as spiritual sacrifice, yet this framing decontextualized and obscured the violence and dispossession that their labor entailed. This article is part of a special issue of *Pacific Historical Review*, "Religion in the Nineteenth-Century American West." KEYWORDS Nuns, charity, environment, settler colonialism, Montana, Flathead Indian Reservation, begging, gender, conquest

> She considered the whole world her country to be conquered for God.
>
> –Necrology of Sister Rémi[1]

Her fellow Sisters of Providence remembered Sister Rémi, one of the foundresses of the St. Ignatius mission, as seeing the Flathead Indian Reservation as a place "to be conquered for God." The conquest, while spiritual, would require physical labor and sacrifice. When sand blew into her food; when the wind threatened to topple her tent; and when a horse kicked her fellow Sister in the gut, forcing them to travel by canoe instead of horseback, she was keenly aware of the physicality and challenges of the place she sought to

1. Sister Rémi was a Sister of Providence who came from Montreal, Québec to Montana Territory when she was just nineteen and had been a professed sister for only several months. "Journey to Montana," n.d., 5, Holy Family School and Holy Family Hospital, St. Ignatius, Montana, Record Group 33/137, Providence Archives, Seattle, Washington. Article title taken from Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1867, p. 224, Providence Archives, Seattle, Wash.

Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 92, Number 3, pps. 364–384. ISSN 0030-8684, electronic ISSN 1533-8584 © 2023 by the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2023.92.3.364.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

conquer for God.[2] Sister Rémi anticipated that Montana Territory would require her sweat *and* providential protection. Despite her and the other nuns' awareness of the physical aspects of their life in the West, they interpreted and understood their labors and conquest primarily as spiritual acts. In fact, their lives and labors were deeply implicated in the mining boom in the region, the establishment of the Reservation and other settler colonial efforts, and the environment of the Rocky Mountains.

The Sisters of Providence began in Montreal, Québec, in 1846. In 1856, a group of them traveled to Washington Territory to establish a mission in Vancouver, which became their hub in the region. This article tracks the nuns who then ventured from Vancouver to St. Ignatius, Montana Territory, in 1864. The four nuns who traveled by horseback on the recently built Mullan Road through the Rockies established a boarding school and convent on the Flathead Indian Reservation. From the nuns' vantage point, they were working to create Catholic places and people in the West. To do so, nuns drew from a variety of resources and labor sources. The Sisters of Providence became federal government employees, relied on the labor of Indigenous "helpers," and begged for money (in surprising amounts) from gold miners. The Sisters of Providence got up early to pray, kept linens cleaned and students fed, taught children—mostly girls—the basic subjects, and helped the local priests with their household chores. The Sisters saw these labors as integrated and overlapping. Thus, praying, preparing food, laundering linens, and teaching children all contributed to their goal of creating Catholic places in the West.[3] For the Sisters of Providence, all of life was spiritual work and spiritually significant.

Yet this spiritual interpretation is only part of the story. The Sisters of Providence began establishing their missions in Montana Territory two years after settlers first discovered gold in the region, the same year the federal government created Montana Territory, and a few years after the federal

2. "The Chronicles of the St. Ignatius Indian School 1864–1938, English Translation," n.d., 3, [History], Holy Family School and Holy Family Hospital, St. Ignatius, Montana, Record Group 33/137, Providence Archives.

3. Nuns are often not included in scholarly notions of labor in the West. An exception: Anne M. Butler, *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). In my book project, *Habits of Conquest: Nuns and the U.S. Settler Empire,* I delve more into the story of how nuns who were not Americans (such as the Sisters of Providence, who were Canadian) participated in the U.S. settler empire.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

government established the Flathead Indian Reservation.[4] This settler colonial infrastructure made it possible for the nuns to go west in the first place. Indeed, the Sisters of Providence went to the Flathead Indian Reservation explicitly to create a boarding school for Native girls, which they did in 1864, further amplifying settler colonial efforts in the region. In addition, the nuns' efforts and goals were markedly shaped by the extractive mining endeavor, which itself was rooted in the geology and environment of this intermontane region. These contexts—Reservation, a mineral rush, the Bitterroot Mountains—are central to understanding the nuns' labors as more than spiritual.

By analyzing nuns as physical, spiritual, and gendered laborers, specifically through the labor of begging from miners, this article contributes to several scholarly conversations. The first is the history of labor and mining in the nineteenth-century West. This literature has emphasized political and economic development, and the social history of the mostly male miners.[5] When women are considered, it is usually by their absence or their roles as wives or prostitutes.[6] This article centers the nuns' gendered labor of begging within the context of male-dominated mining spaces; specifically, I show how nuns narrated, experienced, and deployed their gender and religion in their begging labor. Here nuns emerge as laborers, workers who help keep the settler colonial machine moving.

A second contribution is to the story of Catholics in the West. Catholics were very active in the nineteenth-century West. For years they ran the majority of federally funded U.S. Indian schools.[7] Frequently, they were the first to establish hospitals, and in many regions, schools, for settler communities. Nuns have been largely examined by people within their own orders as

4. The government created the reservation in 1855, through the Treaty of Hellgate. Settlers discovered significant gold veins in 1862 and 1863. Thomas Jefferson purchased most of what became Montana Territory in 1803 from France, as a part of the Louisiana Purchase, and Congress established Montana Territory in 1864.

5. Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848–1880, revised edition,* with Elliott West (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); Mark Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution, 1860–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

6. See Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865–90* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Susan Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000).

7. See Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865–1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

hagiographic chronicles or conflated with narratives about priests.[8] The chronicles tend to stop with the claim that Catholics were present and suggest this was an unqualified good.[9] The focus on priests belies the numbers. Since 1820, nuns in the United States have outnumbered priests, forming the majority of full-time religious professionals in the Catholic Church.[10] This article probes the intersection of Catholicism and settler colonialism in the West, in the context of labor and extractive mining.[11] This research demonstrates that nuns and Catholicism are an integral part of western history. More broadly, in a nation imagined as Protestant, this research broadens the implications of religion within the racial and imperial projects of the nineteenth-century West. This is a case of how those at the margins of a society in several respects can and do participate in the subjugation of others.

Finally, this article contributes to the recent literature that examines labor and environmental history together.[12] This interdisciplinary work showcases the strengths of environmental history methods, how it is not just another interesting factor, but fundamentally changes the stories we tell. In this article, I show how analyzing the nuns' labor as environmental—both their

8. For historiography on nuns, see Carol K. Coburn, "An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1–26. Carol Coburn suggests that one area in need of study is Sisters' interactions with "Native American, Asian, and Hispanic populations in the American West." Almost twenty years later, this is still true.

9. For an example of a chronicle, see L. B. Palladino, *Indian and White in the Northwest; A History of Catholicity in Montana, 1831–1891 [1894]* (Lancaster, Pa.: Wickersham Publishing Company, 1922).

10. Margaret Susan Thompson, "The Ministry of Women and the Transformation of Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century America," *The European Legacy* 1, no. 4 (1996): 1509–1514. For work on priests, see Michael Pasquier, *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Gerald McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture: Italian Jesuits in the American West, 1848–1919* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

11. Katherine D. Moran analyzes Catholicism's intersections with the U.S. Empire in the Progressive Era, including in the West and the Pacific. See: Katherine D. Moran, *The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020). See also: Brennan Keegan, "Gospel of Gold: Unearthing Religious Spaces in the Nineteenth-Century American West," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 31, no. 1 (2021): 106–35).

12. Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010); Andrew C. Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2005); and Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

views of the land and shaped by the ecosystem of the Bitterroot Mountains—helps us better understand the work they did. Indeed, it allows us to see how their labor was not just spiritual (as they claimed) but also grounded in the U.S. settler empire.

As the nuns sought to create a Catholic West, they made sense of and explained the difficulties of the begging trips in the context of economic necessity and spiritual sacrifice. Yet this framing decontextualized and obscured what begging entailed. I excavate how their notion of spiritual sacrifice and suffering fortified the nuns to keep going in the face of challenges such as begging, while concealing the inequities that shaped their labors. Begging was more than simply a spiritual act requiring self-sacrifice. Begging was also environmental labor and environmentally shaped labor. Begging was gendered. It necessitated nuns traveling into the male dominated space of the mining camp. They did not feel comfortable in these spaces, but navigated such risky places by interpreting this work as a type of sacrifice. Finally, begging was deeply interconnected with the U.S. settler empire, which included removing Indigenous people, creating reservations, running boarding schools, fostering white settlement, establishing territories and eventually states, building infrastructure, and extracting minerals. By linking these efforts and showing the nuns' intersections with them, I demonstrate how their begging trips need to be understood as environmental, gendered, and settler colonial labor.

SUFFERING AND ITS BENEFITS

Most nineteenth-century Catholics considered suffering and sacrifice a spiritual good. This belief worked in at least two ways: First, if you suffered while doing good, it signaled that you were doing the right thing (i.e. nothing good comes easily). Second, suffering itself was spiritually purifying and thus important and valuable. The Sisters of Providence received commendations from priests to sacrifice and suffer. In a letter written in 1871 to the nuns at St. Ignatius, a Jesuit noted: "How gently you submitted to the great sacrifice that God required from you all these years . . . You may well say that God not only nailed you on the cross in this mountain home but wishes you buried without consolation (consoler) nay without witness of your trials."[13]

13. Joseph Giorda, S.J., "Letter to My Dear Sisters in J. & M.," September 17, 1871, Envelope T37–4 in AG-Ge52, (33) Holy Family Hospital, St. Ignatius, MT (1864–1870), Providence Archives.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

Statements like God "nailed you on the cross . . . [and] wishes you buried without consolation" would not have surprised these women. This was the religious world they lived in, and they often led the way in initiating practices of humility and mortification.[14] This view of suffering undergirded the Sisters of Providence's efforts to build their convent and the boarding school on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Yet this way of narrating cast the nuns as the heroines, willing to sacrifice everything for the Indigenous children they came to "save." For the nuns, this narrative worked. Suffering in this life would ultimately be rewarded, which enabled the nuns to face a wide range of challenges they experienced in Montana Territory. Even so, a deep inconsistency existed in their self-understanding. Despite their marked emphasis on their own humility and sacrifice, they also clearly believed they were superior to those they came to teach, save, or help. They were quick to point out their status as "first white women" to venture into "frontier" places.[15] The nuns both wanted to be humbled and to sacrifice for God in order to build Catholic sacred places in the West, and they assumed that their whiteness, religion, and culture made them better than the Bitterroot Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille whom they lived alongside on the Flathead Reservation.

One of the ways the nuns sacrificed for God was through their labors on the reservation and through begging from gold miners. When settlers discovered gold in Montana in 1862 and 1863, veteran miners from California and Colorado converged in hope of finding wealth. The Sisters of Providence arrived the following year to start their mission and began to take "begging tours" to the mines. Begging was not new for the Sisters of Providence. Nuns had begged for hundreds of years, going back to the early female mendicant orders like the Poor Clares, founded in 1212. Though begging was familiar, the vagaries and meanings of begging in mining camps in the Rocky Mountains were new.

Typically, two nuns went together for between four and ten weeks. They traveled in the summer, when they were less likely to be stranded by bad weather. They rode on horseback and stayed in tents or the homes of people they met. The Sisters' records described one begging tour: "Sisters Marie Edouard and Remi left the Mission for this excursion of seven weeks . . . due

14. Theologies of suffering were part of nineteenth-century Catholic devotional culture constituted by "a more intense piety focused on the suffering Jesus and the miraculous." John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 25.

15. Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 41–42.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

to the dry Season, it was hard on everyone, we had to thank God for the success of our efforts—we realized a considerable sum . . . The collecting Sisters were received with great kindness by the miners."[16] Another year, the tour was six weeks, the two Sisters traveled over 600 miles, visiting "twenty-four villages and miners Camps." In general, they were well treated by the miners, and they noted, "Protestants as well as Catholics gave a warm welcome to the Sisters. They were generous with alms, each according to his means." The generosity and good will of the miners "helped reduce the feelings of fatigue and helped us forget the difficulties of the Tours." Begging was materially valuable because, as it turns out, the miners were generous. In six summers, the nuns in Montana Territory received $9,800, after expenses, from their begging tours—approximately $175,000 in today's dollars. Despite the difficulties entailed, begging was worth it. As the Sisters noted, "we felt the need of obtaining funds!"[17] Such generous contributions signaled that the Sisters might find enough support and success to continue in their labors in Montana Territory.

Despite the monetary successes, the begging tours were physically fatiguing and spiritually perilous, in that two Sisters could spend several months traveling between mining camps made up mostly of single men, separated from their community, and at the mercy of strangers. Deprivation of spiritual rituals was one of the biggest challenges: "We seldom had Holy Mass and the chance of also receiving Holy Communion even on Sundays was low; our regular Confession Day; the visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the like were real sacrifices."[18] The Sisters' records describe the begging tours this way:

> Besides, the act of begging which is always repugnant to nature and ever humiliating, we have the great fatigues attached to traveling nearly always on horseback . . . One can recall . . . difficult roads; at times perilous dangers in the mountains; the places where we must lodge—with total strangers—trusting their honesty and propriety without knowing them—all these things are difficulties through which we passed.[19]

The Sisters called begging "repugnant to nature" as well as "ever humiliating." Yet it was these very postures of repudiating the self by doing what was humiliating and repugnant that proved the nuns' spiritual mettle.

16. "Chronicles of the St. Ignatius Indian School," 26.
17. Ibid, 35–36.
18. Ibid, 31.
19. Ibid, 30.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

Framing their work collecting money as begging, and begging as humiliating, was a rhetorical move. Their willingness to sacrifice themselves in a way they recognized as humiliating demonstrated to the miners and to themselves the worthiness of their work. The nuns, and seemingly the miners, understood begging as humiliating in part because the nuns made these sacrifices on behalf of Indigenous people—whom they repeatedly referred to as "savages." Religious studies scholar Emma Anderson argues that there is a long tradition in North America of Catholic missionaries characterizing themselves as saints and Indigenous people as childish, docile, and in need of saving.[20] The Sisters of Providence's understanding of themselves as sacrificing through their begging labors fits within this tradition.

Such sacrifices purified the nuns and consecrated their labors in the West. In both Sister Rémi and Sister Marie Édouard's obituaries, their efforts at begging in the mines stand out. All of the challenges, whether the humiliation of begging, limited access to the sacraments, or physical challenges had spiritual value and demonstrated the nuns' willingness to sacrifice for their work. Their sacrifice was only magnified by their belief that as respectable, white, religious women, this was profoundly unnatural work for them to be doing.

Occasionally the nuns described the suffering Indigenous people were experiencing because of the Montana gold rush: "Beforehand we could hope that the Rocky Mountains would be an impenetrable highway to the immoderate desire of wealth; but today, unfortunately for the poor Indians of these neighboring regions, gold has been discovered, such as that gold recently found in California, and since that discovery, the inundation of rapacious men will always rise." The Sisters of Providence never acknowledged the conquest and exploitation in which they themselves participated. In their efforts to convert and civilize the "good savages" in the "infidel land" they believed themselves to be alleviating suffering and doing good.[21] The suffering they did see—in their own lives, but also within Indigenous families and communities on the Flathead Reservation—they narrated as necessary and even good in the effort to make the West Catholic. And though they lamented the finding of gold in the region, this did not stop them from benefiting from the mines, nor did it lead them to consider or question their

20. Emma Anderson, "'White' Martyrs and 'Red' Saints: The Ongoing Distortions of Hagiography on Historiography," *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 9–13.

21. A.L. Castonguay, trans., "Nomination for the Oregon Mission" (Unpublished, April 6, 1864), M1 Chronicles of the Asile de la Providence, Montreal, vol. 1., Montreal Providence Archives. For quote, see page 4.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

role in the exploitation of the region and its Indigenous inhabitants. In fact, they saw themselves as a bulwark against "the inundation of rapacious men." They saw the boarding school they started and ran as an irrefutable good for the Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, and other Native children sent to their school from the region.

Their begging worked both as a way "of being able to reduce the debt" they faced, and as "support of the Missions in the Rocky Mountains, in the Indian reductions and other distant locations" that the community was establishing.[22] These dual prospects "excited their spirit," though "it was a difficult venture."[23] But this way of framing begging, as a vital, difficult part of their labors, to both pay back debt they owed and help support their missions, hid other aspects of their begging trips.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL LABOR OF BEGGING

The intermontane region of the Rocky Mountains afforded gold miners the chance to make it big—and secondarily, for nuns to glean from these successes. This climate and region also shaped the begging tours themselves, including when they could go and how successful they would be. The Bitterroot Mountain range, the region where the nuns lived, was formed between eighty and fifty-three million years ago and is a geologically and ecologically diverse range that spans Idaho and western Montana.[24] The Sisters' begging stemmed from this varied landscape that was also a site of mineral extraction.

The weather, terrain, and geology of the Bitterroot Mountains also shaped the begging trips. In 1871, the nuns noted "the mines were less fruitful than formerly, so donations decreased . . . We had decided to go to another place but were told these miners had been delayed by spring rains and floods and had just begun to work. So we decided to return to the Mission and wait more favorable times."[25] Here, the weather directly affected the "fruitfulness" of the mines and thus, the level of success possible on their begging tours.

22. Draft Chronicles of Providence Academy, Vancouver, 1866, p. 5, Collection 22, Providence Archives; Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1874–1875, p. 344; Draft Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1873–1874, p. 156.

23. Draft Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1866, p. 5.

24. Montana Department of Transportation, "Mountains on the Move: The Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountains" (Montana). https://www.mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/docs/roadsigns/MountainsOnMove.pdf.

25. "Chronicles of the St. Ignatius Indian School," 30.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

Their language also indicates that they saw mining as a kind of harvest from the land. The difficulty of travel and uncertainty of weather in the rough terrain of the Rocky Mountains shaped when they traveled, how long they stayed out, their mode of travel, and where they went.

The nuns also saw things like the terrain and the weather as part of the challenge that they faced in their labors: "then, did our people advance into the depth of the forest and the most precipitous mountains. Apart from encountering a few miners here and there, nothing came to trouble their solitude," and when night came, despite their hunger and weariness, "everyone set to work!"[26] In this account the nuns are both intrepid explorers who "advanced" to steep mountains and dark forests, as well as laborers who persisted despite the endless tasks before them. The landscape itself demanded the nuns' sacrifice because of its wildness and assumed untamed character. Yet there is also a hint that the nuns' labors and even presence would help civilize these spaces, and that the land itself was part of the problem.[27]

In another example, two Sisters of Providence set out on a six-week begging tour and, despite the difficulties of the landscape, emerged successfully on the other side. These women, with a priest and "an Indian guide," conquered every challenge the landscape posed. In their community archives, the nuns noted: "these collections at great distances cost in devotion and abnegation, which required two to three weeks of laborious camping and which the Sisters, unaccustomed to leading horses, had to nevertheless climb mountains of stupendous height, on narrow paths, above frightful precipices and [risked] . . . encountering bears, rattle snakes and brigands."[28] Again, the landscape was a fundamental shaper of their experience of begging, shaping their participation in the extractive landscape of mining, but also serving as fodder for their narration of their own sacrifices.

26. Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1866, pp. 209–10.

27. There is a long history of gendering the land as female and conquest or "civilizing" in terms of rape. See Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). One retelling of this same journey written by a fellow nun in the twentieth century exemplifies this: "they penetrated into the dark forests, steep, precipitous mountains on Indian trails. Until nightfall they encountered only here and there a lone miner . . . all hands were at work, notwithstanding the fatigues of the day." Sr. Mary Leopoldine, SP, "Page titled 'Annals pg. 209, 1866' from research notes for The Bell and River," "Begging," Mother Joseph Collection [13], Providence Archives.

28. Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1868, p. 239.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

The land itself shaped the kind of labor the nuns engaged in—and they very much saw their begging as a form of labor.[29] The geology of the region made the mines and mineral extraction a possibility to begin with. The terrain and climate of the region shaped the physicality of their weeks-long trips through the mountains to multiple mining camps, and the nuns posited the land itself as part of the challenge they faced, part of the sacrifice they undertook. Of course, the land also provided them the opportunity to participate in the mining surplus. At the nexus of the land as both place of sacrifice and place of opportunity, the nuns situated their role as coming to help and to alleviate suffering. In their minds, they were not the exploiters, not the ones causing the suffering, even though they benefited from the labors of "rapacious men" who mined the region. The landscape of Montana Territory brought them opportunities to succeed, as well as opportunities to sacrifice.

GENDERED SACRIFICE

When the Sisters of Providence traveled from Montreal to St. Ignatius in 1864, they sometimes described themselves as the first white women in the region. In fact, they joined many other white women who journeyed from eastern North America to the West in this period.[30] Though the nuns were hardly the only white women settlers on the move west, they were exceptional in one respect. When it came to the early years of mineral rushes, gender demographics were different from the rest of settler expansion in this period. Men formed the bulk of settler-miners in initial mineral rush spaces, with women notably absent.[31] In the 1870 census, 81 percent of Montana's settler population was male.[32] Communities of single women like nuns were minority exceptions in these male-dominated spaces, as the nuns experienced when they visited the mining camps of Montana throughout the 1860s and 1870s.

29. Another vital aspect of their labor is their persistent dependence on Indigenous labor, as paid employees, as tertiary members of their religious communities, and informally: for knowledge and access to water, fishing, and other provisioning sources and guidance while traveling. In my book project, *Habits of Conquest: Nuns and the U.S. Settler Empire*, I explore these questions more fully.

30. "The Chronicles of the St. Ignatius Indian School," 7. See John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

31. Two years after gold was discovered in California, in the Southern Mines, 97 percent of non-Native people were men. Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 142.

32. Paul, *Mining Frontiers*, 140.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

These women felt out of place while begging: "They had collected, amidst fatigue and innumerable dangers, $3000. The tale of their voyage would seem almost fictitious. The season of spring having been later than normal, they found themselves passing through the Mountains while the snow was melting, which made the paths impracticable. They had to cross rivers by swimming on horseback, holding the necks of their horses. Other times on tree trunks, which served as rafts."[33] The animals, the elements, and the necessity of camping all contributed to their understanding that they were making sacrifices. And it makes sense to think about these sacrifices in gendered terms, because the nuns were doing things that (white) women did not typically, or at least ideally, do in the 1860s and 1870s. Almost every aspect of the begging tours fit this description. When the nuns traveled by horseback, camped outdoors or with strangers, slept in tents, interacted with male miners in the camps—for them this was specifically gendered labor and gendered sacrifice.

On an 1866 begging trip, Mother Joseph and Sister Catherine traveled throughout the mines of Idaho and Montana Territory. While begging for about six weeks in Idaho, "the Protestants and even the infidels themselves, while shocked that women could undertake such a difficult voyage, were admiring the sublimity of a religion that knows how to inspire in everyone such a beautiful devotion."[34] Here, the gendered sacrifices of the begging tours highlighted the rectitude and worth of their religion and their work, so that even "Protestants" and "infidels" appreciated their religion because of their gendered sacrifice.

These same Sisters of Providence, "encouraged by so much kindness," decided to visit the nuns on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The journey from Idaho Territory to Montana Territory left them "exhausted," in part because the journey was not by boat or stagecoach, "but on horseback and through dark forests."[35] The environment remained a hostile place, especially for white women isolated in the wilderness. This act of riding horses, a common and often necessary mode of travel in the U.S. West, was seen as gender troubled and outside the bounds of appropriate labor for nuns to undertake. The founding mother of the Sisters of Providence in the U.S. West wrote in condemnation of nuns riding horseback, after hearing reports of nuns in

33. Draft Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1867, p. 30.
34. Ibid, 1866, p. 5.
35. Ibid, p. 208–09.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

eastern Washington Territory doing so. Should we, "accept a Mission where the Sisters can have the Sacraments and Mass only once in eight or fifteen days, and then must ride a man's saddle into town, transgressing a proprietary not allowed women of the world?" she queried.[36] She reported that the Québécois bishop to whom she posed the question thought it "deplorable," and that a nun "must never forget the dignity her vocation demands."[37] The nun who had permitted this "violation of modesty" had quickly been forbidden to allow it any more. This articulation of propriety rested on both racialized and classed ideas of gender that nuns sought to embody.

Begging often required "such a long trip on horseback." During these long trips, the nuns placed their gendered bodies in overwhelmingly male spaces of mining camps and dark forests.[38] This labor exhausted the nuns, making them "weakened by fatigue."[39] Not only was it exhausting, but they had to go to great lengths to access these male spaces. In addition to weeks on horseback, this labor sometimes included descending into the mines themselves. However, the miners came up to meet them, which made "the descent into the mines easier."[40] Physical peril, exhaustion, and gender transgressive labor all marked the nuns' begging tours, and their interpretation of them as gendered sacrifice. For the nuns, there was something fundamentally harrowing about this labor.

The nuns' labor of begging was overtly gendered in obvious ways, from their clearly marked habits and bodies, to less obvious practices such as riding horses far from their missions and sometimes far from priests who could offer them sacraments. These were women who had chosen to live their lives primarily in the company of other women. The begging tours, which lasted from one to four months, were a radical break from the rhythms, labors, and companions they were used to. In short, the nuns' demonstrated a keen awareness of how their begging labors transgressed norms for women, and even more particularly, for white, vowed, Catholic women.

36. Letter from Mother Joseph to Mother Praxedes, 1877, Mother Joseph Correspondence, Box 9, Providence Archives. There were laws and ordinances that sought to require women to ride sidesaddle into the twentieth century. Tracey Hanshew, "'Here She Comes Wearin' Them Britches!' Saddles, Riding Skirts, and Social Reform in the Turn-of-the Century Rural West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 70, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 39–53.

37. Letter from Mother Joseph to Mother Praxedes, 1877, 219–20.

38. Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1866, p. 215.

39. Draft Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1866, p. 5.

40. Chronicles of Providence Academy, 1866, p. 208.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

FIGURE 1. This is the only extant photo of the Sisters of Providence on a begging tour. Note that the nuns are riding sidesaddle, not astride. *Source:* "Sisters Mary of Nazareth (left) and Mary Conrad on horseback, with Native Americans, preparing to leave on a begging tour at St. Eugene Mission, Kootenay, British Columbia, ca. 1896." Photo courtesy of Providence Archives, Seattle, Wash.

BEGGING AND SETTLER COLONIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Begging was not only a gendered practice and environmental labor but deeply implicated in expansion of the U.S. settler empire—an empire described euphemistically as "westward expansion" or "manifest destiny."[41] The U.S. settler empire's aims were predicated on securing Indigenous land for white people and on extracting resources like gold and furs. Sometimes taking land meant actual war, such as with the U.S.-Mexico War. Often, taking land took the form of treaty brokering, reservation creation, and assimilative education

41. The phrase "U.S. settler empire" is a way to describe the territorial conquest of Indigenous nations, the procurement of land for white settlers, and the extraction of resources by the government and capitalists. I use "settler empire" to encapsulate the plethora of means and aims of conquest and extraction over time. Others have made similar arguments: Bethel Saler, *Settlers' Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105; Allan Greer, "Settler Colonialism and Empire in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 383–90.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

efforts, all of which took place in Montana Territory. Yet the manifestations of and paths toward the U.S. settler empire were many. It often centered on gendered, religious, and racialized efforts to assimilate, convert, and "improve" both the land and the people of the West.[42]

The nuns' arrival in Montana Territory in 1864 was not incidental. The U.S. settler empire functioned as context and as partial impetus for the nuns' establishment in the particular places and at the historical moments that they went. The Sisters of Providence went to St. Ignatius in 1864, two years after settlers discovered gold in the region and the same year the federal government created Montana Territory. The federal government created the Flathead Reservation through the 1855 Treaty of Hellgate (though into the 1890s, some Flathead people refused to relocate to the reservation). Policies like the 1862 Homestead Act offered "free land" to white settlers, but Indigenous removal and relocation to reservations were the necessary precursors to the creation of this "free" land. Again, the nuns' arrival was not serendipity. They came to labor on the Flathead Indian Reservation, a linchpin in the settler-colonial effort to secure Indigenous land in Montana Territory for white settlers. The U.S. settler empire made it possible for the nuns to go west, and the interconnections went both ways. The nuns joined and intensified these processes of dispossession and conquest.

Some of the most celebrated moments in "westward expansion" such as the expansion of infrastructure like roads, railroads, and telegraphs were actually fundamental building blocks of the settler empire.[43] Often infrastructure such as roads and railroads served multiple purposes at the same time. Typically, infrastructure was built and often protected by the military.[44] A prime example of this kind of infrastructure was the Mullan Road, which eventually connected Ft. Walla Walla in eastern Washington Territory to Ft. Benton, in central Montana Territory.

42. Scholars have argued that these cultural elements of the U.S. settler empire were at least as important as the "political" aspects: Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Margaret Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

43. As late as 1879, a guidebook for Montana noted that no other territory remained so isolated. Paul, *Mining Frontiers,* 142. For the relation between religion and infrastructure (though not settler colonialism), see Ferenc Morton Szaz, "How Religion Created an Infrastructure for the Mountain West," in *Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West: Sacred Landscapes in Transition,* eds. Jan Shipps and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2004).

44. An example is Ft. Phil Kearney, which was built in 1866 to protect travelers on the Bozeman Trail.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

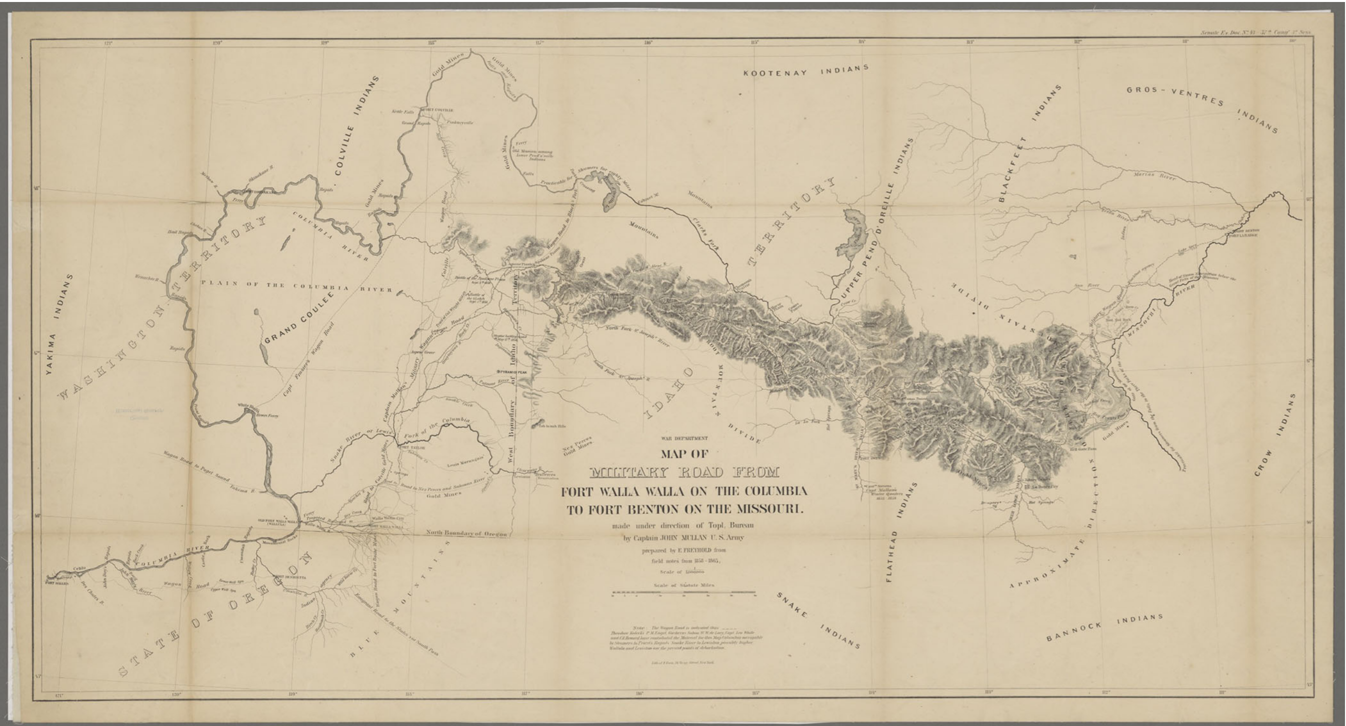

FIGURE 2. Historic map produced by Captain Mullan, the military officer who designed and oversaw the building of the Mullan Road. *Source:* E. Freyhold, *Map of military road from Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia to Fort Benton on the Missouri / made under direction of Topl. Bureau by Captain John Mullan, U. S. Army*, 1863, OHS Maps Collection, G4241 .R1 1863 .M84, https://digitalcollections.ohs.org/g4241-r1-1863-m84.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

In 1853, Lt. John Mullan was assigned to find routes for the future construction of a northern railroad.[45] The purpose of this road was twofold: it would aid in the development of a land already deemed "fruitful," as well as provide a route for the deployment of troops to the region should hostilities recommence with local Indigenous people.[46] Mullan utilized the knowledge of a mixed-race voyageur named Aeneas and Jesuit priests from the nearby Coeur d'Alene mission, as well as $30,000 he received from the federal government in his initial explorations and determinations of where to construct the route.[47] Mullan's stated purposes for the road—to develop "fruitful" land for mining and farming and to deploy troops when necessary—show the explicit and compounding intersections between infrastructure and settler colonialism.

In 1859, the crew started from the West at Fort Walla Walla and moved east, toward Fort Benton.[48] In a report to superiors, Mullan explained that the first section needed very little improvement, because of the presence of white settlers, writing "Already have each and all these valleys became the comfortable homes of the pioneer farmer and grazier, where the hand of industry, adding daily to the wealth and prosperity of the country, gives a new beauty, by the erection of school-houses and churches, those barometers of the intelligence and morality of a people."[49] Mullan's efforts were aligned with core tenets of the settler empire: fostering white settlement, bringing industry, and erecting schools and churches that would displace Indigenous communities. Even as they labored to displace and (they believed) to decimate Native peoples, Mullan's crew continued to rely on Indigenous people as guides and for vital rations and supplies, such as when Flathead men brought his scurvy-ridden men desperately needed food in the mountains.[50] The crew reached Fort Benton on August 1, 1862, completing the road at the estimated cost of $230,000.[51]

45. John Mullan, *Report on the construction of a military road from Fort Walla-Walla to Fort Benton* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O. 1863), 2.

46. Ibid, 4; Henry Talkington, "Mullan Road," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (October, 1916): 301.

47. I believe this appropriation came directly from the War Department; Mullan, *Report*, 2–8.

48. Talkington, "Mullan Road," 303.

49. Mullan, *Report,* 15, 12.

50. Ibid, 18–22. For John Mullan's belief that the demise of Native people was inevitable, see Ibid, 14.

51. Ibid, 36. In 2023, this is approximately: $7,000,000. The relative cost, based on GDP per capita, is over 100 billion. "Purchasing Power Today of a US Dollar Transaction in the Past," MeasuringWorth, 2023. Accessed on March 31, 2023: www.measuringworth.com/ppowerus/

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

Not only did roads such as Mullan's bring miners and white settlers to the region, they also helped ship gold out to eastern markets via steamboats on the Upper Missouri River. Mullan himself was very clear on the direct links between infrastructure, settlement of the region, mining, and Indigenous displacement. He noted that more military roads, like the one he constructed, were needed to protect "overland emigrants."[52] Such protection was needed, he implied, because Indigenous people would continue to resist displacement, removal, and destruction of their lives and homelands. Referring to the sheltered valleys in the mountains, Mullan noted these "constitute the homes and abiding places of the Indians, and promise to be important nuclei in the settlement of the country."[53] Though he recognized the region as homelands of Indigenous peoples, he viewed their "extermination from the face of the North American continent" as inevitable.[54] White homes would replace Native ones. Mining was central to the task of settling, as miners brought volumes of settlers, which "constituted security" and created a "market."[55] Mining brought capitalism and white bodies, and the incentive to build out regional infrastructure, all aspects that built up the U.S. settler empire.[56]

Nuns came to Montana Territory for different stated reasons than gold miners and military officers like Mullan. They saw their work as separate or only incidentally connected. But we cannot separate their aims and labors from the multifaceted branches of the U.S. settler empire. They benefited and participated in it. The nuns traveled in 1864 on the Mullan Road, two years after Mullan's crew completed it, on their way to the Flathead Indian Reservation to establish their convent and boarding school. And, they came to a reservation, a central tool in the effort to dispossess and remove Indigenous peoples from their lands. The nuns themselves set up a school to Christianize

52. Captain John Mullan, *Miners and Travelers' Guide to Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado via The Missouri and Columbia Rivers, accompanied by a general map of the mineral region of the northern sections of the rocky mountains* (New York: W.M. M. Franklin, 1865), 49.

53. Ibid, 66.

54. Ibid, 81.

55. Ibid, 67.

56. In the three years after the discovery of gold in 1863 at Alder Gulch and Virginia City, roughly $30,000,000 (1860s dollars) was mined. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Map Showing the Location of Productive Lode and Placer Gold Mines,* available at: https://pubs.usgs.gov/mr/96/report.pdf.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

and "civilize" their pupils (the majority of whom were Indigenous children). This work of setting up a school on the reservation, as historian Margaret Jacobs puts it, was fundamentally about "the elimination of Indianness and Indian claims to land," a mainstay of the U.S. settler empire.[57]

Within this context, begging by nuns was not a Robin Hood–like act of redistributing the wealth, but actively furthered settler colonialism in multiple ways. The nuns utilized infrastructure like the Mullan Road that was built by the U.S. military to aid settlement, develop mining, and expand capitalism. Nuns' begging tours relied on this kind of infrastructure, which supported the ongoing mineral rushes in the region. Even as nuns utilized and benefited from the infrastructure of settler colonialism, they buttressed the expansion and the establishment of the U.S. settler empire in their efforts to Christianize and civilize through the reservation school and their presence as white, religious women. They begged from miners to provide financial backing for the Holy Family Boarding School on the Flathead Indian Reservation. Their very reason for coming to Montana Territory, in particular, was to educate Indigenous children on the reservation—a key component of the settler empire's effort to dispossess, remove, and replace the families and communities of the children who attended their school. The nuns not only exploited the infrastructure of the settler empire; they explicitly augmented the settler empire.

The Catholic mission on the Flathead Indian Reservation aimed to reconfigure Indigenous lifeways. As Father DeSmet, an early Jesuit missionary in the Rocky Mountains, wrote in a fundraising letter, "it would be impossible to do any solid and permanent good among these poor people, if they continue to roam about from place to place, to seek their daily subsistence. They must be assembled in villages—must be taught the art of agriculture, consequently must be supplied with implements, with cattle, with seed."[58] This work of "assembling" Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille "in villages," of destroying their lifeways, and of planting the Catholic faith and culture proceeded in

57. Margaret Jacobs, "Breaking and Remaking Families: The Fostering and Adoption of Native American Children in Non-Native Families in the American West, 1880–1940," in *On the Borders of Love and Power: Families and Kinship in the Intercultural American Southwest,* eds. David Wallace Adams and Crista DeLuzio (University of California Press, 2012), 42.

58. Pierre-Jean de Smet, *Origin, Progress, and Prospects of the Catholic Mission to the Rocky Mountains (1843)* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1972), 11.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

concert with the U.S. settler empire. As I have argued, this linkage was direct and intentional.

The nuns saw their work in the West, including begging, as labor. But they maintained a decontextualized, spiritualized view of their labor. Though they described miners as rapacious, the nuns did not acknowledge the destruction and dispossession to which their work contributed. Operating within a long tradition of what Anderson calls "hagiographic tropes of encounter," the nuns saw themselves as white saviors, and Indigenous people as needy, dependent "others."[59] These tropes assumed the nuns' superiority. Begging, in particular, fit well within this frame, as a practice that rhetorically relied on a racialized "other" in need of help. At the same time, begging depended on infrastructure and furthered the aims of extractive mining and the U.S. settler empire in Montana Territory. This labor of begging and interweaving with settler colonialism shaped the nuns—and it also shaped U.S. Catholicism going forward.

The Sisters of Providence's begging in the mines did much more than provide them with cash and a chance to demonstrate their spiritual fortitude through sacrifice. Their begging was intricately shaped by the environment of the Bitterroot Mountains. The physical act of begging and all that it entailed, from horseback riding to camping to descending into the mines, was gendered labor. Finally, this labor's taproot was the U.S. settler empire. The nuns believed they were alleviating suffering on the Flathead Indian Reservation, as they taught Indigenous girls, prepared children for their first communions, nursed the sick, and offered meals to the hungry. These efforts were possible in large part due to the monies they collected while begging in the gold mines. The Sisters did not shy away from benefiting from the exploitation of the mines, though they did so, as they saw it, to work against the negative effects of the coming of gold miners. They noted, "as all the world knows, it is always the richest mines where one finds the greatest suffering," and they saw their work as seeking to alleviate some of this suffering.[60] They recognized the greed and rapaciousness that came with mining, yet they saw themselves as extracting wealth for the benefit of others, not for their own personal gain. The nuns used the funds they received from the miners to do the work they saw as vital, but this work

59. Anderson, "'White' Martyrs and 'Red' Saints," 9–13.
60. A.L. Castonguay, "Nomination for the Oregon Mission," 5.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024

directly and intimately furthered the colonization and destruction of Indigenous communities, religious practices, and ways of life. The Sisters of Providence shared more in common with the exploitative miners and military officers like Mullan than they cared to acknowledge.

DANAE JACOBSON is an assistant professor of history at Colby College.

NOTE

The author would like to thank Tisa Wenger, Quincy Newell, the anonymous reviewers, the editors at *PHR*, and the other NYHS fellows for feedback, support, and constructive criticism on this article.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-pdf/92/3/364/783664/phr.2023.92.3.364.pdf by guest on 13 June 2024