Neither One Thing Nor the Other: Discursive Polyvalence and Representations of Amerindian Women in the Jesuit Relations

Mary Dunn
St. Louis University
mdunn12@slu.edu

Abstract

This article confirms what others have argued about the bifurcated representation of Amerindian women in the *Jesuit Relations* (aggressive, insubordinate, prideful, and licentious on the one hand and docile, obedient, humble, and chaste, on the other) but extends the analysis of gendered discourse at work in the text to argue that the *Relations* persist in characterizing both types of Amerindian women as virile in excess of the limits of prescribed femininity. Attention to the stubborn persistence of the virile in Jesuit representations of Amerindian women suggests that the encounter between French Jesuit gender norms and the gendered ideals native to the indigenous populations of colonial Canada is best understood as an encounter between a range of competing discourses about gender and gestures toward a polyvalence of gendered discourses at play in colonial texts more generally.

Keywords

Jesuit Relations – New France – Canada – Amerindian – indigenous – women – gender – femininity – virile – colonial discourse

Introduction

Once upon a time, there was a woman, a “noble Huron woman,” who had “as much goodness and gentleness for others as she had rigor for herself.” She disciplined herself so severely (inspired by Christ’s own sufferings) that “the marks of it remained for a long time engraven on her shoulders.” She visited

the sick, helped them “as far as she was able,” and repeated “to them in private the exhortations which have been made publicly in our Chapel.” She provided hospitality to orphans, acting as “father, mother, and even spiritual father, to these little children, bringing them up in innocence, and inspiring them with the fear of God.” She took their indiscretions seriously—so seriously, in fact, that she frightened them into thinking they would be hung for their childish offenses, a fate, she insisted, they could avoid only by going to confession. When her own son (just two or three years old at the time) came crying to her after having been beaten by his comrades, she refused to soothe him, wipe away his tears, and caress him “as other mothers ordinarily do.” “Be quiet,” she said, and “offer your pain up to God.”¹ This good Huron woman was zealous not only for the salvation of her children but “for the conversion of her compatriots,” too. She “instructed them, exhorted them, and confounded them with her gentleness,” winning them over to the faith by means of a “charitable Christian eloquence.” She maintained her conjugal fidelity—against the custom of her countrywomen—resisting even the advances of a “wretched” and “shameless” Frenchman who attempted to seduce her with a “rich present.” When her husband lay dying, she refused to allow the local shaman to attempt a cure by means of his devilish arts, preferring to “see her husband die before her eyes.” Upon her own death, she gave everything she had to the Virgin Mary. It was not much, of course, “but if the mite of a poor woman was preferred to the gold pieces of the Pharisees in our Savior’s judgment, what are we to think of a Savage woman who [...] declares the blessed Virgin her heiress?”²

This story, told by Jérôme Lalemant (1593–1673) in the *Jesuit Relation* of 1663–65, is in many ways exemplary of Jesuit representations of Amerindian women converts in the seventeenth century. The good and noble Huron woman in this story is “virtuous:” slow to anger, eloquent of speech, chaste, and modest. She disciplines her children (sometimes too much) and is not overly attached to those she loves. She teaches others about the Christian faith—by means of both her persuasive words and her charitable actions—and encourages participation in the sacraments, particularly confession. She performs penitential acts with admirable (sometimes excessive) devotion. She rejects traditional indigenous rituals of healing, substituting in their stead a Christian interpretation of sickness and death and an absolute confidence in the will of a benevolent God.

1 Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland: Burrows, 1896–1901), 49:73–77.

2 *Ibid.*, 49:77–85.

There is, however, another sort of Amerindian woman who abides in the pages of the *Jesuit Relations*—or rather, not another sort of Amerindian woman, but the negative counterpart of the good Huron woman described by Lalemant. This sort of Amerindian woman is the personification of vice: full of wrath, sharp of tongue, wanton, and lascivious. She indulges her children and loves them too passionately. She mocks the faith and stands in the way of conversions, demanding that husbands, sons, daughters, and others stick with their own kind—a demand she makes with particular urgency when her loved ones are in their final moments and in need, she insists, of local shamans who will “sing on [them], blow on [them] and juggle for [them] with their drums.”³

Mediating between the virtuous Amerindian woman and her vicious counterpart within the discursive context of the *Jesuit Relations* is the moment of conversion. Consistent with a Jesuit conviction that God's grace was available to everyone, conversion to Christianity made possible the transformation of vice into virtue, infidelity into devotion, pride into humility. Take, for example, Barthélemy Vimont's (1594–1667) account of the conversion of Charles Meiasawat's wife in the *Relation* of 1642–44: before his own baptism, Charles “had taken a wife who was of a very arrogant and violent temper, and who had no inclination toward the Faith.” Despite his conversion, she “stubbornly persisted in her unbelief” until, worn down by her husband's patience persistence, she “urgently asked for Baptism and obtained it.” On the eve of their marriage, which was to take place according to the laws of the church, Charles demanded to know if his wife would “continue to be proud, disobedient, and ill-tempered, as in the past.” “Answer me,” he went on, “for, if thou wilt not behave better, I will not take thee for my wife,—I shall easily find another.” “She was quite abashed,” reports Vimont, “and replied that she would conduct herself better in future.” “Speak louder,” Charles cried, “I do not hear thee. When thou art angry, thou screamest like a mad woman; and now thou wilt not open thy mouth.” “The poor woman,” concludes Vimont, “had to shout aloud, and protest publicly that she would be obedient to her husband, and live with him in gentleness and in the utmost humility.” And, indeed, “God has visibly blessed this marriage, and we have never seen a greater change than in this woman, who has now become truly a lamb, and has very deep and affectionate feelings of devotion.”⁴ In this account and in others like it, it is conversion to Christianity that tips the scales from the vicious to the virtuous, enabling the transformation of the ungodly, disobedient, and lecherous Amerindian woman into her devout, submissive, and chaste counterpart.

3 Ibid., 24:29.

4 Ibid., 25:173–75.

The bifurcated rendering of Amerindian women—ungodly, disobedient, and lecherous on the one hand and devout, submissive, and chaste on the other—is not unique to the *Jesuit Relations*. A conspicuous and well-studied feature of early modern colonial texts more generally, representations of the indigenous other split between the binary poles of virtue on the one hand and vice on the other confirm what Edward Said argued nearly forty years ago about the systematicity of colonial discourse.⁵ The structure of colonial discourse, Said contended, is dichotomous, dependent on the articulation of absolute and essential difference between West and East, buttressed by a host of binary distinctions between, among others, male and female, health and disease, rationalism and sensuality. The Orient produced by colonial discourse, moreover, has a “reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.”⁶ Although Said’s analysis applied particularly to the ways in which Europeans sought to “manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period,” his broader points about the way colonial discourse operates to constitute the self by means of a binary dialectic illuminates the discursive strategies of seventeenth-century French Jesuit writings about Canada, too—a point that has been made and developed by Olive Dickason, Pierre Hurtubise, and others.⁷

To argue that the *Jesuit Relations* operates on the mutually constitutive binaries of self and other, savage and civilized, the West and the rest to represent colonial subjects (and their European counterparts) discursively is, therefore, to till no new scholarly ground, but rather to tread a path charted by Said and traveled by generations of postcolonial scholars since. In what follows, however,

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

6 *Ibid.*, 5.

7 *Ibid.*, 3. Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984) and Pierre Hurtubise, “Le Bon et le Mauvais Sauvage,” *Eglise et Theologie* 10 (1979): 223–37. See also, Dominique Deslandres, “Marie de l’Incarnation et la femme Amerindienne,” *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec* 13, no. 4 (1983): 277–85 and Mary Dunn, “When ‘Wolves Become Lambs’: Hybridity and the ‘Savage’ in the Letters of Marie de l’Incarnation,” *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 1 (2012): 104–20. For analysis of colonial discourse in the Americas more generally, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1984) and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978). For a discussion of colonial discourse more generally—its rhetorical features and modes of deployment—see David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

I turn my attention to the question of gender, looking closely at how representations of Amerindian women in the *Relations* actually confound and complicate the presumptive binaries that discursively distinguish between self and other in ways that have broader implications for our understanding of the way colonial discourse works.⁸

I admit that I am not the first to inquire into representations of Amerindian women in the *Jesuit Relations*. Nearly thirty years ago, Karen Anderson broke this ground with the publication of *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Anderson contends that over the course of just three decades, Jesuit missionaries succeeded in so thoroughly altering both relations between the sexes and gendered identities among the Huron and the Montagnais that indigenous women—once vocal, independent, and empowered—were “silenced, supervised, and subdued.”⁹ On the basis of missionary reports gleaned from the *Relations*, Anderson argues that by 1650 the traditional complementarity between the sexes gave way to hierarchy in the wake of the collapse of indigenous institutions and in conformity with French Jesuit ideals of feminine obedience and submission.

Or did it? In the years since the publication of *Chain Her by One Foot* Anderson’s critics have accused her of confusing Jesuit rhetoric with historical reality. Although the Jesuits “may have claimed that [Amerindian] women became ‘like lambs,’” attention to the ways in which the *Relations* function as a

8 Recent work in the field of postcolonial studies has illuminated the diverse and complicated ways in which gendered discourses interact with colonial discourses to confound the neat binary between colonized and colonizer. See, for example, Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: an Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991). For more particular analyses of the place of gendered discourses within the context of colonial missionary efforts, see Dorothy Louise Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005) and Eliza Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9 Karen L. Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 98.

species of colonial discourse, operating within a particular discursive context and according to particular discursive rules and strategies, should persuade us to approach the *Relations* with a healthy dose of skepticism.¹⁰ Attention to the discursive dimensions of the *Relations* illuminates the ways in which representations of both the vicious Amerindian woman and her virtuous counterpart alike served the rhetorical purposes of the Jesuits who sought, by means of the publication and distribution of the *Relations*, to attract support for their missionary efforts in Canada. Understanding the *Relations* as a species of colonial discourse primes us to see, in other words, how both kinds of Amerindian women function as an argument in defense of the Jesuit mission—the former as an argument about Canada's ongoing need for the mission, the latter as an argument about its success.¹¹

Were Amerindian Christian women converts really as docile, submissive, and chaste as the *Relations* suggest? Were their traditionalist counterparts really as aggressive, insubordinate, and promiscuous? There is reason to be skeptical on both counts—and not only because of the *Relations*' discursive agenda. Even presuming (albeit incorrectly) that the *Relations* faithfully report the observed behavior of Amerindian women (*sans* embellishment, elision, or emendation), we ought to be careful not to assume that Amerindian women and their Jesuit witnesses understood such behavior in the same way. The insight of recent work on the Canadian martyrs, after all, is that events in colonial New France were informed by a “range of perspectives” and subject to “multiple interpretations,”

10 Olive Patricia Dickason, review of *Chain Her by One Foot: the Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* by Karen L. Anderson, *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (1992): 962–63. In broad strokes, Anderson's analysis is founded upon and reproduces the binary structure that Said identified as a hallmark of colonial discourse. Operating from the premise of absolute difference between French Jesuit gender norms (hierarchical and asymmetrical) and Amerindian gender norms (complementary and symmetrical), Anderson sees in the colonial encounter the collision of one homogenous and harmonious set of gender norms and its opposite. Anderson's failure, however, to recognize the *Jesuit Relations* as a species of colonial discourse prevents her from seeing the ways in which the *Relations* operate not to describe relations of domination between the French on the one hand, and the Amerindians on the other, between men on the one hand, and women on the other, but rather to inscribe them. Arguably, Anderson's willingness to take at face value those rhetorical binaries (French/Amerindian, men/women, Christian/non-Christian, obedient/insubordinate, docile/aggressive, promiscuous/chaste) that undergird the French colonial project renders her own analysis complicit, albeit *ex post facto*, in the very same discursive regime.

11 For an insightful discussion of the *Jesuit Relations* as a species of colonial discourse, see Carole Blackburn, *Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632–1650* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 3–20.

such that Jesuit and Amerindian interpretations of the same historical event were, more often than not, largely incommensurate.¹²

In what follows, I provide a corrective to Anderson's analysis—one founded on a sensitivity to the structures and strategies of colonial discourse. I argue that the encounter between French Jesuit gender norms and the gendered ideals native to the indigenous populations of colonial Canada is best understood not as an encounter between one kind of discourse about gender and its opposite—à la Said—but rather as an encounter between a range of competing discourses about gender. When the Jesuits arrived in the woodlands of seventeenth-century New France, they did not just bring with them Aristotelian and Thomistic ideas about gender, which colluded to render women irrational, weak, passive, and properly subject to the supervision of men, but other ideas, too, informed by the figures of the Amazon, *femme forte*, and holy *virago* whose feminine fortitude and aggressive autonomy chafed against early modern French gendered conventions. Although my own read of the *Jesuit Relations* confirms, by and large, what Anderson argues about the bifurcated representation of Amerindian women, attention to the ways in which the *Relations* subtly persist in characterizing Amerindian women on both sides of the conversion divide as virile in excess of the limits of prescribed femininity destabilizes a dichotomous reading and gestures toward a polyvalence of gendered discourses at play in the *Relations* and in colonial texts more generally.

Representations of Amerindian women in the *Jesuit Relations* are, indeed, largely bifurcated between descriptions of indigenous women, on the one hand, whose “fury and cruelty” astounds, whose disobedience to their husbands matched only their inordinate attachment to their children, whose haughtiness and pride present frustrating and persistent obstacles to the conversions of their families and friends, whose sexual license appalls the prudish sensibilities of the Jesuit fathers, and descriptions of indigenous women, on the other hand, whose utter lack of “savage tendencies,” “refinement,” and “admirable modest bearing” impress, whose compliance, obedience, and humility elicits admiration, whose severity toward their children and commitment to perpetual virginity astound, whose incredible devotion, eloquent speeches in defense of the faith, and assiduous efforts to compel the conversions of their

12 Emma Anderson, *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 370. See also Timothy G. Pearson, *Becoming Holy in Early Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), who argues that the death of the Canadian Jesuit martyrs “took place within and as a result of indigenous ritual practices of warfare, captivity, and adoption [and] became reinscribed as performances of the drama of Christian martyrdom.” Ibid., 37.

husbands and children were absolutely critical in the success of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mission in New France.¹³ In nearly all respects, these two types of Amerindian women are almost perfect mirror images of each other: the one aggressive, insubordinate, prideful, and licentious, the other docile, obedient, humble, and chaste.

And yet, a close reading of the *Relations* reveals a troubling inconsistency that belies the easy symmetry between the one type of Amerindian woman and the other. Read with an open receptivity to the evidence on its own terms, unencumbered by a Saidian hermeneutic, the *Relations* betray a decided ambivalence toward what the Jesuits persisted in seeing as the ineradicable virility (or commendable masculinity) of Amerindian women. If, for the Jesuits, conversion to Christianity transformed aggression into docility, pride into humility, lechery into modesty, it did not—or could not—eradicate the manliness that Jesuits noticed (and sometimes admired) in Amerindian women, whether Christian or not. As early as 1634, Jesuit impressions of Amerindian women suggest something of an ambivalence about gender. In winter, Paul le Jeune (1591–1664) reported that there is “no difference at all” in what men and women wear: “anything is good, provided it is warm.”¹⁴ The following year, Julien Perrault (1602–47) confirmed and extended le Jeune’s observation, commenting that “the women cannot be distinguished” from the men since both have long hair and neither have beards.¹⁵ In the *Relation* of 1657–58, another Jesuit went so far as to describe “savage women” as having “mustaches” in the backs of their heads, presumably referring to the conspicuous style in which some Amerindian women wore their hair.¹⁶

And it was not just in matters of appearance that Amerindian women confounded French expectations about gender difference. Amerindian women (at least in the eyes of the Jesuits) acted like men, too. They displayed a manly fortitude, engineering daring and courageous escapes from their captors that obliged them to employ every trick of survival as they navigated their way independently back to their own countries, enduring days and nights in the woods without food or shelter, even “in the midst of the snow.”¹⁷ Take, for example, a group of Algonquin captives who, in 1642, “crept away into the deep forest [at a distance from their Iroquois captors] [...] the better to find their way home again. They had no food for the first ten days, after which they found

13 Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, 6:243 and 50:155.

14 Ibid., 7:7.

15 Ibid., 8:157.

16 Ibid., 44:285.

17 Ibid., 32:235.

some wild animals that a band of Iroquois on their way to war, had killed and half-consumed. They cut off long strips of flesh from these, [...] produced fire by means of fire-sticks made of cedar wood, [...] caught some Beavers, and crossed great rivers, enduring sufferings and hardships sufficient to kill men.”¹⁸

They also exercised “great power” within their homes and had total freedom over whom to marry and when. Writing in the *Relation* of 1633, le Jeune wondered at the deference Amerindian men showed their wives. In response to le Jeune’s request that he hand over his son to be educated—and fed and clothed—by the Jesuits, an Algonquin chief replied “that he would be very glad to give us his son, but that his wife did not wish to do so.” Here in North America, le Jeune continued, a “man may promise you something, and, if he does not keep his promise, he thinks he is sufficiently excused when he tells you that his wife did not wish to do it. I told him then that he was the master, and that in France women do not rule their husbands.”¹⁹ In the eyes of the Jesuits, Amerindian women enjoyed such a degree of sexual freedom, too, that “it is very difficult for a young man [...] to parry [the] blows” of “women and girls [who] have nothing to restrain them.” Sounding a note in harmony with hagiographic descriptions of virgin women who admirably and persistently resist the advances of their many male suitors, Lalemant tells the story of a young Arendaenhronon convert’s struggle to preserve his chastity: “In vain did [the girls] solicit him; he refused presents, and trembled with fear [...] when he fled from the danger of losing what Faith alone had taught him to cherish above pleasure and above life.”²⁰

Amerindian women, too, held public positions of authority alongside men, serving on councils and giving indispensable advice to tribal elders. Claude d’Ablon (1619–97) described in the *Relation* of 1669–71 a woman from the nation of Annié who had come to Quebec “this spring with two little children of hers, [from] her own Country, where she was highly esteemed” as *Otiander*—a title merited by the woman’s “intelligence, prudence, and discreet conduct.” “Women of this rank,” D’Ablon explained, “are much respected; they hold councils, and the Elders decide no important affair without their advice.”²¹ In the *Relation* of 1696–1702, Jacques Gravier (1651–1708) even reported on a woman chief among the Natchez who “is very intelligent, and enjoys greater influence than one thinks.”²²

18 Ibid., 22:265.

19 Ibid., 5:179.

20 Ibid., 23:163.

21 Ibid., 54:279.

22 Ibid., 65:141–43. “Her brother,” Gravier went on to say, “is not a great genius.”

In the eyes of the Jesuits, even after the moment of conversion Amerindian women continued to exhibit tendencies toward what, in an exclusively French context, might have been considered masculine behavior. Amerindian women converts continued to act with a manly fortitude—only now, inspired by their ardent devotion. Take, for example, the “poor woman helplessly crippled in her legs” described by Lalemant in the *Relation* of 1662–64 who nonetheless “had the courage to undertake a long journey full of rapids and precipices” in order to bring her companions to receive the sacrament of baptism.²³ Amerindian women converts continued to exercise “great power” within their homes—only now, this power was wielded for the purpose of securing the salvation of their children and others (and this, sometimes in opposition to the wishes and intentions of their husbands, to whom Christianity, paradoxically, subordinated them under ordinary circumstances). Take, for example, the Christian woman who, having once been an *Otiander*, now turned her social standing and rhetorical abilities to securing the conversion of her countrymen, beseeching “her whole nation to rid itself of all that prevented it from listening to the Preachers of the Gospel.”²⁴ And they continued to enjoy a surprising degree of public authority—only now, this authority was a religious authority that mimicked what was theoretically (and in a European context) the exclusive preserve of clerical men.²⁵

Moreover, frustrating a tidy reading of the *Relations* as either the documentary evidence of the successful imposition of a gendered binary that subordinated women to men or the discursive construction of a colonial regime founded on the same, the *Relations* represent Amerindian women as not just the helpmeets of the Jesuit missionaries, recasting and repeating to their families and friends the catechetical lessons they had learned from the Jesuits, but as preachers whose occasional sacramental authority was not just tolerated,

23 Ibid., 48:67.

24 Ibid., 55:263.

25 There is room here for thinking about the sort of religious authority exercised by Amerindian women within the interpretative framework provided by Homi Bhabha, although a sustained inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper. The concept of mimicry, by which Bhabha refers to the displacement of the authoritative discourse of the colonizer to the site of the colonized is a central one within Bhabha's postcolonial theory. The sign of a double articulation, mimicry proves at once the means by which colonial authority attempts to “reform, regulat[e], and discipline” the colonial subject and at the same time a strategy that “poses an imminent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges [of colonial subjects] and disciplinary powers [of colonial authority].” Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 125–33, here 126.

but admired.²⁶ Against the gendered norms of a post-Tridentine Catholicism that, if anything, shored up the boundaries between the sexes, the *Relations* bear witness to Amerindian women who preached, heard confessions, and even administered baptism. Sometimes the *Relations* are careful to describe the eloquent speeches of converted women as instances of instruction or catechesis, as in the case of a “good Christian woman” from the Neutral Nation who so thoroughly “instructed” a Sonnontoueronnon captive that he immediately asked to be baptized.²⁷ At other times, though, the *Relations* betray a curious sort of slippage, attributing to the female Amerindian converts the authority to preach, as in the case of an Algonquin convert named Monique who so ably “instructed, catechized, encouraged, and taught” her fellow captives that Paul Ragueneau (1608–80) was forced to admit that “God enabled her to perform, in that land of horror and darkness, the office of a *dogique* or preacher.”²⁸ Elsewhere in the *Relations*, Amerindian women converts not only urge their family and friends to go and confess to an ordained priest, but in at least one instance a fervent old woman named Geneviève exhorted her dying husband “earnestly, and constantly made him perform acts of Contrition, so that, as a result of her fervent admonitions, he died a good Christian.”²⁹ Finally, there are accounts in the *Relations* not just of women who labor vigorously to ensure that their compatriots seek out baptism from the Jesuits but the occasional story, too, of women who themselves administer the sacrament—not, admittedly, in direct contravention of gendered norms, but in decided tension with an ecclesial sacramental system that under ordinary circumstances reserved sacramental authority to a male clerical elite.³⁰ Take, for example, the story of Thérèse Oionhaton who admitted to a Jesuit priest that she herself had baptized her child with these words, “Jesus, take pity on my child. I Baptize thee, my little one, that thou mayst be blessed in Heaven.”³¹

26 For a comparative study of the roles and responsibilities assumed by women converts to Christianity during Japan's Christian century, see Haruko Nawata Ward, *Women Religion Leaders in Japan's Christian Century, 1549–1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). See also John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) for a more general discussion of women in the sixteenth-century Jesuit missions.

27 Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, 33:165.

28 *Ibid.*, 35:247.

29 *Ibid.*, 49:95.

30 While the Catholic Church recognized—and still does—the legitimacy of baptisms performed *in extremis* by lay men and women alike, the story of the baptism performed by Thérèse Oionhaton is still an exception to the general rule that empowers an exclusively male clergy with sacramental authority.

31 *Ibid.*, 42:79.

The persistence of the virile in Jesuit representations of Amerindian women confounds a dichotomous reading of the *Relations*, suggesting that the history of the encounter between seventeenth-century French Jesuits and their Amerindian counterparts is not one of the collision between two opposing sets of gender norms that ended in the inversion of sexed relations and the conversion of gendered identities. This persistence suggests, rather, that the gendered discourses at work in the *Relations* are richly polyvalent. When the Jesuits came to New France in the early part of the seventeenth century, they imported with them not just Aristotelian and Thomistic ideas about gender, but a set of discourses already fractured by competing ideals of femininity, inclusive of the figures of the *honnête fille*, the Amazon, the *femme forte*, and the *virago*, as well as an equal diversity of negative counterparts. The encounter consequent to the Jesuit arrival in early modern Canada, then, was not so much between one set of gender norms and its opposite, but between a diversity of discourses about gender that alternately challenged, confirmed, and subtly inflected relations between the sexes and gendered identities among Amerindian and French alike.

Domna Stanton's recent intervention in the field of French literary and cultural studies illuminates the heterogeneous variety of gendered discourses at work in early modern France. It is true, Stanton admits, that seventeenth-century French women struggled under the heavy weight of gendered presumptions borrowed from classical philosophy and ancient medical texts. Early modern French writers "perpetuated tropes [...] that opposed male to female as mind to matter, reason to unreason, spirituality to carnality," at once enabling and legitimating women's legal incapacitation and professional marginalization.³² Even into the seventeenth century, a gendered discourse rooted in the humoral system and women's unfortunate association with the cold and wet elements influenced cultural convictions in women's sensitivity, impulsivity, and passivity, and justified women's subordination to men (who were, by nature, more rational, steadfast, and active). Indeed, Stanton argues, women's status in seventeenth-century France deteriorated, if anything, under the pressure of a broader cultural preoccupation with the threat of chaos and decay. Anxieties about national, cultural, and religious identity—at a fever pitch in seventeenth-century France—were, Stanton argues, displaced onto the gendered figures of the coquette and the libertine whose presumed insatiable sexuality was cultural shorthand for deviance and disorder. Thus, Stanton concludes, Maïté Albistur and Daniel Armogathe could argue for the "generalized

32 Domna C. Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France: Women Writ, Women Writing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 7.

repression" of women after 1653, a period known in early modern French historiography as "the great confinement of women."³³

Alongside stereotypes of the coquette and the libertine that justified the strict imposition of a gendered hierarchy, however, early modern French writers also made room for countervailing ideals of femininity, suggestive of a multiplicity of gendered discourses in seventeenth-century France. Although they condemned the sexually rapacious coquette and libertine, early modern French writers celebrated not just the *honnête fille* (whose modesty and silence fit comfortably with conventional gendered ideals) but also the Amazon and the *femme forte* whose aggressive heroism and public virtue pushed against traditional gendered expectations in important ways.³⁴ By the middle of the seventeenth century, the figure of the Amazon had become a prominent one in French literature. Boldly heroic and possessed of both military and political prowess, the Amazon of mid-century French literature was a profoundly menacing figure, threatening to overturn gendered norms and upset the natural hierarchy of the sexes in ways that found real-world expression in the example of French women who fought valiantly in the Fronde.³⁵

Closely related to the Amazon—although considerably less frightening—was the *femme forte*, whose incarnation in seventeenth-century France was the paradox of womanly fortitude.³⁶ At once feminine and virile, the *femme forte* lived in the contradictory interstices between womanly weakness and masculine strength, confounding the neat binary between male and female. In contrast to the literary figure of the Amazon who tended to elicit anxiety rather than admiration for threatening to invert the gendered status quo, the *femme forte* seemed to belie early modern stereotypes about femininity and at the same time to confirm them. Although as patriotic, resolute, and heroic as any man (and sometimes more so), the *femme forte* was at the same time invariably beautiful and unfailingly compassionate.

33 Ibid., 13.

34 Stanton contends that in some ways the figures of the Amazon and the *femme forte* actually confirmed traditional gender roles, cohering with the ideals of the good wife of Proverbs 31 and functioning rather to "embolden" traditional female virtues. Ibid., 21.

35 For further discussion of the Amazon in French literature, see Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 33–42.

36 For a discussion of the *femme forte*, see Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610–1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Tamara Harvey, *Figuring Modesty in Feminist Discourse Across the Americas: 1633–1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 113–40; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 117–22.

If we consider, in conjunction with the literary figures of the Amazon and the *femme forte*, the Christian hagiographic ideal of the *virago*, the range of competing discourses about gender in early modern France extends still further. The subject of extensive scholarly analysis, the virile woman (or *virago*) of hagiographic tradition testifies to the ways in which for early Christians manliness and holiness were intimately connected.³⁷ Despite the fact, as Elizabeth Clark has argued, that some degree of gender fluidity characterizes early Christian saints in general—both male and female—the promise of gender reversal seems to have held particular spiritual potential for women with saintly aspirations. By the fifth century, the female transvestite had become a familiar figure in Christian hagiography with no comparable male counterpart. A testament, perhaps, to the tight bind between masculinity and virtue (virtue's etymological roots, after all, are in the Latin *vir*, or “man”), the *virago* deserved admiration for having triumphed over her sex and the temptations of her fleshy femininity. As Valerie Hotchkiss puts it, the *virago* in hagiographic tradition stands “alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) [...] as a sign of the power of Christianity to transform, a sign of woman's commitment to asceticism, and disregard for her own body, a glorified escape from the sinfulness of womanhood, and a sacrificial and self-effacing choice that only the most pious of women would make.”³⁸

37 See, Patricia Cox Miller, “Is There a Harlot in this Text?,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 419–35; Elizabeth A. Clark, “Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 413–30; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); and Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Bodyguards: The Cultural Contexts of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–49. But see Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101, who argues that women do not become men or even *like* men in Christian hagiography but rather transcend gender altogether.

38 Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland, 1996), 19. In a striking counterpoint to my broader argument about the polyvalence of gendered discourses at work in the *Jesuit Relations*, it is worth noting here that the hagiographic figure of the *virago* is an ambivalent one. Neither entirely feminine (obviously) nor entirely masculine (perhaps less obviously), the *virago* belies the supposition of a neatly bifurcated gendered universe at work in Christian hagiography. At once feminine (in some respects) and at the same time masculine (in other respects), the *virago* straddles the boundary between the sexes. Take, for instance, the example of Perpetua who fought heroically in the gladiatorial ring like a man and yet “drew [her robe]

Given the insights of decades of colonial discourse analysis, it is, of course, difficult to accept the argument that sexed relations and gendered identities among the Amerindians of New France were actually transformed by the Jesuits. But what the polyvalence of discourses about gender operative in seventeenth-century France suggests, however, is that it is also difficult to contend that the Jesuits wanted to transform sexed relations and gendered identities among Amerindian women.³⁹ The virility that the Jesuits persisted in seeing in Amerindian women, whether Christian or not, was arguably just as foreign as it was familiar. It is true that the Jesuits might have interpreted the manliness of Amerindian women as deviant, symptomatic of a transgressive femininity in need “of constant vigilance and supervision.”⁴⁰ But they might just as readily have interpreted such manliness as consistent with what they knew about the eminent Amazons, *femmes fortes*, and *viragos* of French literature and Christian hagiography.

up to cover her thigh, more mindful of her modesty than her suffering.” Or St. Wilgefortis who grew a beard like a man but whose disfigurement ensures the preservation of her virginity. Or even Teresa of Ávila whose Spanish devotees praised her Amazonian capacities and at the same time admired her feminine obedience and humility. Indeed, it was precisely the *virago*'s femininity that rendered her masculinity spiritually meaningful. The *virago* deserved admiration not as a woman who had *become* a man but as a woman who—despite being a woman—could *act like* a man. Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134. For an analysis of the gender ambivalence in the passion of Perpetua as well as in other early Christian martyr accounts, see L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Lewis Wallace, “Bearded Woman, Female Christ: Gendered Transformations in the Legends and Cult of Saint Wilgefortis,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 1 (2014): 43–63; Erin Kathleen Rowe, “The Spanish Minerva: Imagining Teresa of Ávila as Patron Saint in Seventeenth-century Spain,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (2006): 574–96.

39 Although a sustained examination of the range of gendered discourses at work among the Amerindians of colonial New France is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to suggest here that Anderson's claim of symmetrical relations between the sexes and complementary gender identities is in tension with recent research that exposes evidence of gendered asymmetry and hierarchy among Canada's indigenous people. See, for example, R. Todd Romero, “‘Ranging Foresters’ and ‘Women like Men’: Physical Accomplishment, Spiritual Power, and Indian Masculinity in Early-Seventeenth-Century New England,” *Ethnohistory* 53, no. 2 (2006): 281–329. See also, Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, trans. John L. Vantine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

40 Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*, 98.

Indeed, evidence from the *Relations* suggests they did so. Although allusions to the literary figure of the *femme forte* and to the hagiographic model of the *virago* are only implicit in the *Relations*, Jesuit observers explicitly invoked the figure of the Amazon to make sense of Amerindian women whose fortitude and authority pushed provocatively against conventional European standards of femininity and threatened to invert traditional gender hierarchies.⁴¹ Take, for example, the account of an Algonquin woman in the *Relation* of 1654–56 “who, when she saw her husband surprised and bound by five Iroquois, seized a hatchet and with two blows—struck right and left, with astounding rapidity [...] killed two of those Barbarians outright on the spot; then, having promptly unbound her husband, she advanced to do the same to the three others, who, dismayed at that Amazon’s furious onslaught, retained only sense enough to seek safety in flight.”⁴² Or the woman described by Jean de Quen (1603–59) in the *Relation* of 1657 who “displayed the courage of an Amazon in an attack made by a Frenchman upon her chastity from which she came forth victorious.”⁴³ Or, finally, the Natchez chief that Gravier identified as “an Amazon” who “had so distinguished herself by the blows that she inflicted upon their enemies, having in person led several war-parties, that she was looked upon [...] as the mistress of the whole village.” True to Amazonian form, this woman enjoyed a public esteem that surpassed even that due to the great chief, “for she occupied the 1st place in all the Councils, and, when she walked about, was always preceded by four young men, who sang and danced the Calumet to her.” She dressed, too, “as an Amazon; she painted her face and Wore her Hair like the men.”⁴⁴ Like their textual counterparts in the literature of seventeenth-century France, these real-life women were heroically aggressive and possessed of a military and political prowess in ways that at once fascinated and frightened their Jesuit witnesses.

Tellingly, implicit in Jesuit descriptions of the (virile) strength, independence, and authority of Amerindian Christian women is not resigned toleration but genuine admiration. When le Jeune reported on the “poor Huron woman who [...] ran and plunged twice into the water, in very cold weather, in

41 The only direct appeal to the figure of the *femme forte* in the *Relations* is made by the *Relation* of 1672 in connection to Marie de l’Incarnation who arrived in Quebec from Tours, France in 1639 to found the first Ursuline community in Canada. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, 56:285. Elsewhere in the *Relations*, Marie and her Ursulines sisters are described as Amazons (ibid., 16: 7; 18:75; and 38:97–105, 147).

42 Ibid., 41:213.

43 Ibid., 43:225.

44 Ibid., 65:145–47.

order to cross two rivers and hasten” to receive the sacrament of penance from a newly-arrived Jesuit, he did not rebuke the woman for her indelicacy, but found in her example an instructive counterpoint to the tepid devotion of even the “best Christians” of France.⁴⁵ When, similarly, François le Mercier (1604–90) reported that Cécile Gannendâris had “made [her husband] go through all the ceremonies which it is customary to have the sick observe under those circumstances” and so “clearly convinced [him] of the truth of our Mysteries [...] during an exhortation that she made him,” he did not reprove her for her insubordinate impudence vis-à-vis the husband to whom she owed an unquestioning obedience but praised her for having lived “so exemplary a life and [having possessed] such recognized ability.”⁴⁶ Finally, when Pierre Millet (1635–1708) described a Christian woman named Félicité whose “sound [...] knowledge,” “piety,” and “virtue” enabled her “to assume and ever to maintain a certain ascendancy over all the other Christians” such that even “the men themselves willingly listen to her as their teacher,” he did not censure her for having upset a gendered hierarchy that recognized men as the natural superiors of women but commended her (albeit implicitly) for having actively and publicly promoted the faith.⁴⁷

Jesuit admiration for Amerindian women who did not passively accept governance by another (but actively pursued the things of the faith), who did not obediently submit their husbands (but boldly instructed them instead), who were not modest and docile (but publicly outspoken in defense of Christianity) belies any claim about a gendered binary at work in the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary project in New France. A close reading of the *Relations* reveals not the encounter between one kind of gendered discourse and its opposite—and surely not the inversion of sexed relations and the conversion of gendered identities—but rather the encounter between a diversity of discourses about gender, which perhaps did not so much clash and collide as play together in alternating harmony and dissonance.

Thinking about the *Jesuit Relations* as a species of colonial discourse fractured by a range of competing discourses about gender has implications not only for our understanding of the history of the seventeenth-century encounter between Jesuit missionaries and their Amerindian interlocutors but also for the way we read colonial discourse more generally. Colonial discourse is not, contrary to what Said had presumed, (always) neatly structured according to the conceptual binaries of self and other, savage and civilized, the West and

45 Ibid., 47:55.

46 Ibid., 52:245–51.

47 Ibid., 58:197.

the rest. It is true, of course, that much of colonial discourse does make use of essentialized dichotomies like these to draw the boundaries between colonizer and colonized, but in the years since *Orientalism's* publication postcolonial theorists have illuminated the ways in which "alterity and ambivalence" persistently threaten to undermine the discursively constructed binaries that undergird colonial authority.⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, one of Said's most vocal critics, argues for example that although "the exercise of colonial power through discourse demands an articulation of forms of difference—racial and sexual," colonial discourse remains conspicuously ambivalent as it attempts to render the colonial subject at once knowable and at the same time different.⁴⁹ The effect of this ambivalent discourse is not, as Said had suggested, to shore up the boundaries between colonizer and colonized but rather to produce what Bhabha calls hybrid colonial identities that confound the neat binaries of colonized and colonizer and expose the fact that colonial discourse always slips the grasp of the colonized.

What my analysis of the representation of Amerindian women in the *Jesuit Relations* suggests, however, is that perhaps even Bhabha's theoretical tools are in need of a whetstone. If the *Relations* are any indication, perhaps what is going on in colonial discourse is neither simply the encounter between one thing and its opposite that ends in the preservation of difference (even if it also makes room for the transformation of the one into the other) nor simply the encounter between one thing and its opposite that ends in the production of a hybrid third thing, but the messier and more fluid encounter between a wide range of ideas, norms, and conceptual structures that were fractured and polyvalent long before the moment of colonial encounter.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Becky Walker whose careful and thorough assistance in reading the *Jesuit Relations* contributed immeasurably to this essay, and to Elizabeth Nelson whose sharp editorial eye was of great help in this essay's final stages. Thank you, too, to Grant Kaplan, Bill O'Brien, and Randy Rosenberg, and the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Jesuit Studies* for their incisive comments and suggestions on prior drafts of this essay.

48 Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question [...] Homi Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18–37, here 24.

49 Ibid., 19.