Lisa J.M. Poirier

Religion, Gender, and Kinship in Colonial New France of Book. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 233. Pb, \$29.95.

In *Religion, Gender, and Kinship in Colonial New France*, Lisa Poirier takes up the life histories of four figures—French translator Étienne Brûlé, Wendat convert Joseph Chihoatenhwa, his daughter Thérèse Oionhaton, and French migrant Marie Rollet Hébert—to illustrate the “processes of transformation, reorientation, and revaluation” (6) wrought by the colonial encounter between French and Wendat in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Poirier’s intention is to demonstrate how the “intercultural complexities and opacities” (5) that marked these first few decades of encounter gave rise to “new orientations [...] that can only be called ‘religious’” (5).

Poirier certainly succeeds in illuminating for her reader the various ways in which cultural misunderstandings, miscalculations, and misinterpretations confounded the first few decades of contact between the French and the Wendat. She ably demonstrates how French explorer Samuel de Champlain, for example, failed to appreciate the purpose of indigenous warfare, the function of the ritual torture of captives, the dimensions of trade, and the practice of fictive kinship; how native Christians valued baptism as a means of ritual alliance and sought to incorporate Jesuit sacred power into traditional practices; how Jesuit warnings about the fires of hell were lost on Wendat men who took torture as an occasion for the display of courage; how Wendat women converted to Christianity for reasons other than those anticipated by the Jesuits, “creatively respond[ing] to the cultural disequilibrium in which they found themselves by drawing upon the traditional modalities of life” (171).

Poirier also capably illuminates the ways in which figures like Brûlé, Chihoatenhwa, Oionhaton, and Hébert were dislocated from their cultures of origin and crafted new identities for themselves on the contested boundaries between cultures—a point made most persuasively, perhaps, in Poirier’s account of the murdered Brûlé’s ultimate exclusion both from the Wendat Feast of the Dead and the consecrated burial grounds of the French Jesuits. Poirier’s thorough treatment of Brûlé and Chihoatenhwa (which, unfortunately, does not extend to Oionhaton and Hébert) deftly illustrates the ways in which colonial encounters gave rise to hybrid identities as French and Wendat alike navigated the early decades of colonial contact and negotiated techniques of survival, sometimes with devastating personal consequences. It seems to me that Homi Bhabha’s richly-developed concept of hybridity would have usefully supported Poirier’s arguments here.

Poirier's use of the term "religious" to describe the hybrid identities fashioned by French and Wendat alike strikes me, however, as under-theorized. For Poirier, figures like Brûlé, Chihoatenhwa, Oionhaton, and Hébert became "sites of religious contestation" (121) in colonial New France, the practice of fictive kinship was "a religious modality of exchange" (68), and Brûlé's eventual murder by the Wendat is best understood as "essentially a religious act" (68). But why? What, exactly, is religious about indigenous kinship practices or the new orientations produced by the experience of colonial encounter? Oddly, especially for a scholar who explicitly grounds her work in a "history of religions" (13) approach, there is a glaring lack of critical engagement with terms like "religion" and the "sacred" as categories of analysis—save for a single sentence in the introduction that teleologically justifies Poirier's description of hybrid colonial identities as religious "because they articulated value and expressed relationship to the sacred...[and] served as sites of religious contestation" (10).

In many ways, Poirier's central argument about the "catastrophic" consequences of "the misunderstandings inherent in contact between cultures speaking different material and symbolic languages" (4) is made most cogently in the third chapter. In this chapter, Poirier offers a finely-tuned analysis of the limits and liabilities of language in the colonial mission context, indicating the ways in which a French Jesuit naiveté about the capacity of language to communicate across cultures gave way, over time and experience, to the difficult realization that "linguistic mastery" (90) did not necessarily mean theological understanding. Initially confident in their ability to make use of indigenous languages as a neutral medium for the translation of Christian theological concepts, Jesuits like Paul LeJeune came to appreciate language itself as a heavily-freighted cultural relic, one that could facilitate some kinds of understanding and frustrate others. Because this chapter so sensitively treats what I think is Poirier's principal concern in this book—that is, that the cultural exchanges wrought by the colonial encounter were never free, easy, or in any way equal—it might have been better positioned as part of the introduction.

Indeed, Poirier's claim in this chapter that "by regarding [...] Native languages as acquirable commodities with use value, the Jesuits engaged in a type of mercantile activity they had otherwise rejected" (94–95) gestures neatly to an uncompromising set of binaries that structures the analysis in the rest of the book. For Poirier, principles of reciprocity, mutual benefit, and equilibrium animated the Wendat system of exchange, while motivations of mercantilism, individual gain, and inequality drove the French; the Wendat gave gifts of value, while the French (Jesuits included) traded empty commodities; the

Wendat were religious relativists, while the French were religious exclusivists; the Wendat gave women power, while the French circumscribed that power; the Wendat were good and beautiful, while the French were anything but. To be fair, Poirier does not explicitly make this final point, but so stark are the contrasts she draws between the Wendat and the French that she might as well have. Few, at this point, would argue that the legacy of colonialism is without its ugly features, and Poirier is right to call our attention to the cultural dislocations, cataclysmic disruptions, and profound acts of material and symbolic violence inflicted by the colonial enterprise. But our understanding of the colonial encounter in seventeenth-century New France deserves a much more finely-grained analysis than Poirier delivers and a much more nuanced treatment of the French and Jesuit presence among the Wendat.

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DOI 10.1163/22141332-00403007-17