Fur Traders, Voyageurs, and Coureurs des Bois: Economic Masculinities in French Canadian Fur Trade Society, 1635-1754

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Abstract:

Over the course of the seventeenth century, explorers who traversed the wilderness of New France embodied such masculine characteristics as courage, strength and military prowess. These figures such as Samuel de Champlain engaged native men as allies in warfare and the burgeoning fur trade. As the fur trade increasing defined relationships between the French and Native Americans over the subsequent decades, new masculinities emerged. Three distinct masculinities developed all associated with various aspects of the fur trade, but vastly different from one another. This article argues that the advent and potential wealth of the fur trade displaced rugged, explorer masculinity in favor of these three new masculinities: fur trader, voyageur, and *coureurs des bois*. Fur traders made vast fortunes as the elite businessmen who transported and profited from the sale of furs in the Atlantic. *Voyageurs* relied heavily upon native constructions of masculinity, but retained a partial identity in French civilization. *Coureurs des bois* lived wholly in native society, eschewing French society in favor of indigenous habits and customs and often taking native wives. Though the *coureurs des bois* and voyageurs retained a respect and understanding of native culture, the elite fur trade increasingly distanced himself from native tribes and instead reflected a paternalistic attitude toward Native American men, infantilizing them while exploiting them for economic gain. Collaboration and mutual camaraderie disappeared from interactions between elites of New France and their indigenous brethren.

Keywords: Canadian history, Fur trade, masculinity, history, coureurs des bois

Kürk Tacirleri, Gezginler ve Ormancılar: Fransız Kanadası'nın Kürk Ticaretine Dayalı Toplumunda Ekonomik Erkeklikler, 1635-1754

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Özet:

On yedinci yüzyıl boyunca, New France'ın el değmemiş yerlerinden geçen gezginler cesaret, güç ve askeri maharetler gibi erkeksi özellikleri cisimleştirdiler. Samuel de Champlain gibi kişiler, yerli erkekleri hem savaşta hem de yeni yeni canlanan kürk ticaretinde müttefik kabul etti. Kürk ticareti, Fransızlar ve Amerikan yerlileri arasındaki verili ilişkileri canlandırdı ve yeni erkeklikler ortaya çıktı. Çeşitli açılardan kürk ticareti ile alakalı olan ancak hepsi birbirinden oldukça farklı üç özel erkeklik gelişti. Bu makale, kürk ticaretinin ilerlemesi ve beraberinde getirdiği zenginlik potansiyelinin, dayanıklı kaşif erkekliği şu üç yeni erkeklik lehine yerinden ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. kürk taciri, gezgin ve ormancı. Kürk tacirleri elit iş adamları olarak Atlantik'e kürk nakliyatı ve ticaretinden büyük zenginlik elde ettiler. Gezginler, çoğunlukla erkekliğin yerli kuruluşuna dayanmakla birlikte, Fransız medeniyetinde de parçalı bir kimliği sürdürdüler. Ormancılar tamamen yerli toplumun bir parçasıydı; kendilerine özgü alışkanlıkları, gelenekleri nedeniyle ve eşlerini yerliler arasından seçerek Fransız toplumundan kaçındılar. Ormancılar ve gezginler, yerli kültüre saygı ve anlayış göstermeye devam etseler de, elit kürk tacirleri kendilerini giderek yerli kabilelerden uzaklaştırdılar ve ekonomik çıkarları için kullandıkları yerli Amerikan erkeklerini çocuk yerine koyarak, onlara karşı paternalist tavırlar içine girdiler. New France'ın elitleri ve sonraki kuşaklar arasındaki ilişkilerde ortak çalışma ve karşılıklı yoldaşlık yok oldu.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kanada tarihi, kürk ticareti, erkeklik, tarih, ormancılar

The death of the aptly named Father of New France, Samuel de Champlain, in 1635 marked a milestone in the history of the burgeoning French colony in North America. Champlain and his contemporaries witnessed a vast expanse of territory ripe for exploration. They, as explorers, considered themselves a special type of man endowed with the virtues of manly courage, bravery, love of country, and an evangelical spirit toward their native friends. These men such as Samuel de Champlain, Jacques Cartier, and Marc Lescarbot gave way to different French-Canadian masculinities during the boom of fur trading in New France in the early to mid-seventeenth century. Economic wealth and accessibility to the profitable fur trade determined status as men. Three noted types emerged from this new economically competitive wilderness: *fur trader*, *voyageur*, and *coureur de bois*. Each is distinguished by a variety of characteristics that individualized their experiences, yet they all hinge on the significance of the fur trade. These were all types of manhood, forged by economics, fur, and wilderness, but they manifested identity differently.

Three dominant types of French fur culture masculinities appeared in the New World and among them, the *fur traders* were the most politically legitimate, as the French government authorized them to conduct French fur trading activities in the New World. They owned monopolies, the right to grant licenses, and corresponded directly with governing officials, but were often far removed from day-to-day activities (Vandiveer 43). The *voyageur* was a man who traversed the wilderness and acted as a guide for the highest bidder. Fur trading activities varied from *voyageur* to *voyageur*, but most distinguished themselves as apt woodsmen very familiar with the wilderness, travel routes, and native cultures. Flamboyant in dress and song, the *voyageur* has passed into folklore. The last, and in some ways the most elusive, category is that of the *coureur de bois*. The *coureur de bois*, long shrouded in mystery due to fragmentary sources, is by far the most transgressive category to established French culture in the New World. Distinguished by an unparalleled intimacy with native cultures, the *coureur de bois* often married native women and lived life immersed in indigenous

culture, but with one finger in French culture. These men who "went native" rarely left records, due in part to the illegal status of their fur trading activities. They evaded monopolies and sought to profit from their native knowledge without dealing with the government sanctioned fur traders.

This project, with the central focus on these three types of masculinities, demonstrates how masculinities associated with the fur trade diverged from the masculine performance embraced by their explorer predecessors but more importantly, how they deviated from one another. With its emphasis on masculinity, certain exclusions may seem obvious. Much has been written about Native American women's role in the fur trade, particularly in regard to families in which the husband was French. While such research is enlightening, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, the impact these relationships had on native male masculinity must wait for another paper. Natives and Europeans alike were affected by these cultural and economic exchanges. Close interaction forced reinterpretations of masculinities in the new terrain of an economic wilderness. In terms of early Canadian men, clearly economics influenced behaviors, but familiarity with native culture also played a significant role. Because of the diversity of experiences and factors, masculinities vary. Masculine identity is a composite of personal convictions, societal influences, and environment. With this in mind, masculinity and identity underwent a change in 1763 following the end of the Seven Year's War and the victory and conquest of the English. The activities of fur trading in present day Canada did not cease following the English victory, but economic developments forced fur traders of all types to adapt to the new Englishness of the fur trade business.

Fur Trade

The nature of the fur trade business deserves some attention. In essence, the beaver-rich wilderness of Canada provided the commodity for the pelt-hungry Europeans who needed beaver for their hats and furs. While the French government attempted to organize fur trading through monopolies for legal edicts requiring individual fur traders to bring their furs to the communal storehouse, these measures were largely ineffective. The abundance of beaver and the influx to Europe glutted the market (Eccles 341). The economy rebounded throughout the decades of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the initial effects greatly impacted the course of civilization in New France.

The obvious repercussions of fur trading were that it required intimacy and alliance with natives who knew best how to capture and skin beaver. This dependence on native alliance brought the French into relationships with the Hurons, Montagnais, and the Ottawas who controlled much of the "fur routes through the Saguenay and the Ottawa rivers" (Rich 36). These native alliances also inspired hostility from the Iroquois to the south and provided the impetus for the Iroquois wars of the seventeenth century (Rich 36). Good relationships with allied nations were crucial to the success of any fur trading venture; hence the need for Frenchmen who spoke the language and knew the landscape of indigenous tribal cultures.

Although natives could in fact trade their furs with the English or the Dutch, a journal entry from 1754 by Anthony Hendry, an officer of the Hudson Bay Company, offers some insight into why trade with the French was preferable. He wrote, "The French talk Several Languages to perfection: they have the advantage of us in every shape; and if they had Brazile tobacco, which they have not, would entirely cut off our trade" (qtd. in Gaultier 39). Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye et de Varennes, an elite eighteenth-century fur trader, offered a French perspective and attributed French success to the natives, observing that the "French…are very different [from the English] as they fear nothing and are kindly"

(98). Furthermore, Gaultier thought, "the savages will not go to the English, whom they do not like and even despise, saying that they are not men like the French and that they are afraid of them" (98). Gaultier's statements reveal his own projection of French masculine superiority compared to both the natives and the English.

The French employed the fur trade itself, aside from its economic contributions, to stabilize native relationships for settlement and peace objectives. In this light, economics and friendship worked together to benefit the French settlements. The imperial objectives of France took precedence in the seventeenth century. Fur trading served as a funding mechanism for larger issues of discovery and territorial exploration. These designations of importance underscore the fact that Samuel de Champlain, a great explorer, received a fur trade monopoly to help fund his exploits in North America (Vandiveer 20-25, Butterfield 18). This little known fact received few comments even in Champlain's own voluminous writings, as fur was far less important in the early seventeenth century than exploration.

Explorer Masculinity and Masculine Identity in Transition

The adventures and legacy of French explorers in the New World greatly influenced the masculinities that followed the grand age of exploration. Characteristics that explorers prized translated into fur culture differently. While the masculinities forged by explorers are not the subject at hand, it is important to recognize those outstanding characteristics in order to better understand and compare them to their disparate brethren that appeared in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most important was the characteristic of *manly courage* identified by Champlain and others who strove to exemplify and illustrate, through warfare and adventure, their courage and tenacity of strength. The practice of allied warfare brought native and Frenchmen into a brotherhood that often fostered a begrudging respect and mutual admiration for bravery and military strength. These tentative friendships were continually negotiated, but always present. French explorers

encountered and respected native masculinity, though they considered such types as subservient to their own masculine traits. Explorers frequently remarked on the sexuality of native women and saw their roles as simultaneous evangelicals seeking to reform native women and as the ones to condemn women's lifestyles while protecting their virtues. This Christian ethic toward women disappeared from the writings of those involved in fur.

Jean Nicolet embodied the transition from explorer to woodsman. Nicolet was a man somewhere between explorer, *voyageur*, and *coureur de bois*. He certainly engaged in native and French alliances, but rejected native culture as his permanent mode of life (Nicolet 28). Sent by Champlain to live among the natives after his arrival in New France in 1618, Nicolet resided with the Ottawas for two years in complete isolation from French society (29). From there he moved to live among the Nipissings for the next nine years where he "was recognized as one of the nation [and] had his own cabin and establishment, doing his own fishing and trading. He became, indeed, a naturalized Nipissing" (29). Despite Jean Nicolet's intimacy with native cultures and his apparent acceptance into their tribes, he still mingled freely among the French in Québec. He returned permanently to Québec in 1633 where he volunteered to lead French expeditions into the wilderness. According to the Jesuit Priest, Brébeuf, "Jean Nicolet, en son voyage qu'il fit avec nous iusques á l'Iisle souffrit ausse tous les travaux d'un des plus robustes Sauvauges" (Jean Nicolet on his journey with all of us to the Island suffered them to perform he labors of the more robust savages.) (Nicolet 30, 46). Champlain rewarded his courage, strength, and adeptness in the wilderness with a position at the trading Post at Three Rivers where he served in the Office of Commissary and was an interpreter (Nicolet 77). Nicolet perished in the rapids of the frontier attempting to save some captive natives.

What makes Nicolet unique is the heroic legacy he left behind. His skills and adventures opened up important trade relations with Northwestern tribes and his knowledge of geography and culture pushed the French further inland. In this sense, the adulation given him is not

surprising. He pits neatly in the tradition of the great explorers. However, he lived comfortably among the Ottawa, Nipissing, and other tribes who fully accepted into their society. This practice would be discouraged when those who lived with natives chose to adopt native culture to the exclusion of their own. Nicolet retained his French masculinity and even excelled at its physical attributes by managing to impart the admirable characteristics possessed by the natives and admired by the French. He, at the same time, balanced his French culture and Christian masculinity in Quebec. Contemporary historian and Jesuit, Father Du Creux, recorded that while "[Nicolet] was popular with both the French and the Indians….he was anxious to use his popularity with the savages to the advantage, whenever possible, of the Fathers of the Society and to draw all whom he could to the Church" (359). Father Barthélemy Vimont recounted the story of Nicolet in 1634. He recalled that Nicolet was known to the Huron as *Manitouirniou,* translated as "the wonderful man" (Du Creux 359). According to Vimont, Nicolet lived happily in New France "to the great satisfaction of both the French and the savages, by whom he was equally and singularly loved" (Vimont 16). Du Creux echoed this sentiment when he wrote that Nicolet's death caused unspeakable grief to several native tribes for whom he many times "risked his life" and they "with a great wail of lamentation …mourned the truly tragic fate of their benefactor" (Du Creux 360). This cultural limbo made it historically acceptable to praise his valor. Worthy of note was Franklin Roosevelt's mention of Nicolet at a speech in Wisconsin where he discussed the theme of "opportunity for the average man" (a clever positioning of his New Deal philosophies) (Roosevelt 370-375). This combination of exploration and economics persisted, but transformed itself in importance, particularly to fur traders. No longer was exploration necessarily dominant.

Fur Traders and Economic Masculinity

Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye et de Varennes combined his lust for discovery with the lure of fur. A Three Rivers native, Gaultier served in the French King's navy from 1708 to 1712, but returned to New France to trade in furs (Burpee 1). He expected to accumulate enough funds for his supposed larger objective of finding the westward route to the Pacific by generating enough profits through possessing a "monopoly" of the fur trading in New France. He and his sons oversaw one of the largest monopolies in the history of New France and their legacy is embroiled with controversies that shed light on the shifting importance of economics in Canadian society and what those alterations invoked about the men involved.

Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye et de Varennes was the son of René Gaultier, Sieur de Varennes, Governor of Montréal, and subsequently experienced a fairly privileged upbringing in the Canadian trade post of Three Rivers. There, he encountered the wilderness explorers and fur trappers (Burpee 2). This contact with *voyageurs* and the adventurous tales they wove deeply affected young Pierre, who dreamed of becoming one of those virile men who subdued the wild. After his release from the army in 1712, Gaultier married and requested the rights to a small trading post near Three Rivers. It would be from this spot, strategically placed at the center of commercial development in New France, that Gaultier would carve out a legacy for himself (Gaultier 71).

Gaultier, like Champlain, intended to use the profits from trade to fund exploration. His goal of finding the Western sea proved elusive, due in part to the demands of the fur trade. Important for the construction of masculinity is the useful contrast between Champlain and Gaultier. For Champlain, fur truly was secondary to exploration and glorification to the realm of France through conquest of territories and native souls. While Champlain financed his expeditions through the business of fur, he was primarily an explorer. Gaultier became controversial for his

dedication to the fur business and provoked suspicions of the French court that exploration was an excuse to gain a license and to profit from fur. In this new environment of economics, exploration somehow became a secondary concern to all those involved. Initial explorers found little to advance them financially, but once fur became a monetary opportunity, priorities changed. Men found the attainment of respected and superior masculinity through commercial enterprises, not conquest and exploration. Defining one's success as a man had changed.

The predominance of commercial interests permeates the writings of La Vérendrye. In a letter to Comte de Maurepas in 1731, Gaultier declared his ambition to "carry the name and arms of His Majesty into a vast stretch of countries hitherto unknown, to enlarge the colony and increase its commerce" (Gaultier 71). The significance of this comment is best appreciated in comparison with his predecessors. Jacques Cartier, the first French explorer to New France, described his undertaking of exploration as "not being so afraid…to run the risk of those perils and dangers…and being desirous…of doing [the King] some humble service to the increase of the most holy Christian faith" (Cartier 87-88). Along the same vein, Champlain, in the *Preface* to his *Voyages* of 1619, declared his interest in the New World to be "not to gain wealth so much as honour and the glory of God, on behalf of my king and country" (Champlain 71-72). Whereas Champlain and his contemporaries shared Gaultier's devotion to King and Country, they did not employ the language of trade. Over the course of the eighteenth century trade began to rival king and country for importance and, very noticeably, replaces evangelicalism as a goal. In seeking fur and Western water routes, Gaultier found no time for concerning himself with Christianizing indigenous peoples.

A transition from viewing native men as a competitive masculinity to perceiving them only as producers of a commodity (i.e. fur and peltry) drastically altered European/native interactions. Patterns of mutual admiration and exchanges of genuine friendship exemplified these tenuous relationships in the early seventeenth century. While Frenchmen clearly assumed themselves as the superior to the native in

civilization, religiosity, and ambition, they did not seek to dominate, patronize, or belittle. French explorers, particularly Champlain, eagerly participated in battle with their native brethren as an exposition of their masculine prowess, but also as a competitive exchange for masculine authority with their allies. It is important to recognize that early Frenchmen viewed native masculinity as worthy of competition. This disappeared from fur trader masculine identity. Instead, a paternalistic construction wherein fur traders served as "father" figures to their native children, replaced the earlier construction.

The native perspective is crucial to understanding the impact of the new gendered order. Though limited, sources underscore the importance of middle-men and middle-women in Indian society that trade influenced their own perceptions of competitive masculinities (Schleisier 129-145). Trade had always been important in facilitating native friendships and settlement, but after the beaver demand in Europe boomed, the call for fur in New France drastically altered French perceptions of native men. No longer were they worthy adversaries, but economic producers. The fur trade produced the native middle-man, a hitherto unknown masculinity that brokered the trade of fur from his native allies and traveled to the trading posts to exchange them for European goods. He, of course, took a profit. Mercantilism had found the indigenous peoples. These Indian middle-men usually adopted some aspects of French culture and used their knowledge of the potential rewards in fur to exploit their tribes and allies. This is a drastic change from traditional virtues of native culture that emphasized tribal alliance and devotion to allies over all else.

Gaultier's relationship with his economic producers diverges from that of Champlain's. More importantly, the language itself changed. In 1733, Gaultier began to refer to Indians as children. In a letter that underscores the desire of the Cree nation to "submit entirely to become obedient" to the French nation, the fur trader informs Governor Beauhornois, the recipient, that the Cree and their Assiniboin allies "beg you to admit them to the number of your children" (136). The father figure changes throughout the course of Gaultier's letters and journals.

At times he himself appears to be the father, but more often the French king or a French governing official such as Beauhornois is the father figure. The King is sometimes referred to as "our father" (136). Gaultier embodies the parental figure to admonish the Cree and prevent them from making war on the Saulteurs who were French allies. Gaultier gathered all the chiefs together and "gave them a collar in the name of our Father who forbade them to make war on his children the Saulteurs; and I said to them that, if they were obedient to his word, I would give them everything they asked" (147). This exchange utilizes the language of paternalism, most often used in reference to nineteenth century slave/master relationships. It relied heavily on a system of authority and subservience that subjugated Native American men and forced them into an infantile state. Rejecting the possibility that such men posed a potential threat, particularly an economic threat, male fur traders reinforced their dominance all the while emasculating their native producers. It is appropriate here because of the imbalanced nature of agreement of roles and reciprocity of obligation. Gaultier offered the Cree French protection, friendship, and trade if they produced beaver pelts. While mutual obligation was understood, clearly the chiefs occupied the subservient role as the children who must be obedient to "our Father, the great chief" (147-148). As a sign of ownership, these French named the tribes the "French Sioux" or the "French Cree," no longer allies, but possessions.

In this context, paternal language appeared in religious discourse. Cartier, Champlain, and others employed the terminology of "Father" to represent God. Those who visited Gaultier at Fort St. Charles were received in language and deed similar to that of the Christian baptism. Gaultier wrote:

> in his name [our Father] I received them into the number of his children; I recommended them never to listen to any other word than his, which would be announced to them by me or by someone in my place; and not to forget the words I was speaking to them but to bring them to the knowledge of those who were absent; the French were numerous,

> there was no land unknown to them, and there was only one great chief among them, whose mouthpiece I was, and whom all the others obeyed. If they obeyed him also as his children, every year he would send Frenchmen to them to bring them such things as they required to satisfy their needs. And finally, if they were clever, that is to say, if they brought plenty of skins, they would benefit by what I was saying to them (147-148).

In the previous passage Gaultier serves as a priest figure trading salvation for obedience and furs. He, the mouthpiece of the great chief, offered an opportunity they could then share with other Indians (162). True religious conversion is absent from these works and instead, importance by trade, occupies French concerns. Later in his narratives, Gaultier offers comfort to warring Assiniboins by charging them, "My children, take courage, keep well in mind the word of our father, the great chief" (292). From Gaultier's own account we know that the natives were not always so passive about their subservient role as children. In the summer of 1738 he writes after chastising Kaministikwia for making war, the Chief defiantly retorted "we are not children, what we say we mean" (292). Gaultier's noted, but refused to engage resistance.

Warfare, traditionally a masculine enterprise, gave way to economic prudence in the early eighteenth century. Unlike Champlain who eagerly engaged in warfare with natives to illustrate his own masculine superiority and military prowess, Gaultier refused to participate in war with the Cree (Gaultier 136). By the age of Gaultier, the French could not risk becoming involved in Indian wars because of the potential dangers each tribe might pose to trade and the collection and shipments of beaver. Traditionally, men engaged in warfare to demonstrate physical aptitude, bravery, and courage in the face of a formidable enemy. These demonstrations were no longer necessary in light of economics. The Cree chief planned to wage war against the Saulteur and Sioux "without consulting" La Vérendrye, much to the outrage and anger of the fur trader (Gaultier168). The Cree chief then invited Gaultier to join them, but he refused and instead allowed them to

take his son, Jean-Baptiste. He did not need to display his physical prowess because it had little to do with trading furs. His justification for this sacrifice of "entrust[ing his] eldest son to barbarians" was that if he were "to refuse him to them, there was much reason to fear that they would attribute it to fear and take the French for cowards, with the result of their shaking off the French yoke (176). The Sioux killed his son, but the French yoke lived on unabated. The surrender of his son for the good of Indian relations with the French is reminiscent of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the good of all mankind. This connection surely did not escape Vérendrye, positioned himself as mouthpiece for "our father" and countless examples of employing Christian discourse to extract obedience.

Natives responded to the dismantling of traditional enactments of masculinity with occasional violence. The "massacre of the twenty-one," or what later became known as the Lake of the Woods Tragedy, exemplified recognition by the Sioux of French manipulation. The victims were an amalgamation of native French allies, Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye, and Father Aulneau, as well as other Frenchmen camped on an island in the Lake of the Woods. The Sioux, French allies, killed them all, decapitated their bodies, and wrapped their heads in beaver skins (Gaultier 219-223). Symbolically, the killing of the French allies and the wrapping of death in beaver profoundly stated Sioux recognition of the altered dynamics of masculinity, as well as their hostility to the French valuation on fur. The Sioux, aware of the aims of the fur-starved French, delivered the goods, but cloaked them in death. Several small parties of Indians offered to make war on the Sioux to avenge this loss, particularly the death of Jean-Baptiste, but Gaultier refused (Gaultier 228). According to his writings, avenging his honor and the death of his son was secondary in priority to bringing in the oat harvest.

The legacy of Gaultier is further complicated by the controversy surrounding him in the latter years of his residence in New France. He professed to be an explorer in search of the Western Sea, but locals and officials in France repeatedly accused him of manipulating the guise of exploration to reap profit from the fur trade. Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux,

Comte de Maurepas wrote in a letter to Governor Beauharnois that Gaultier's problems in New France, of which there were many, stemmed from the fact "that the beaver trade had more to do than anything else with the Sieur de Gaultier's Western Sea expedition" (Phélypeaux 270). Gaultier repeatedly denied this accusation and wrote to Phélypeaux in 1737 claiming that "far from making any profit in the business, I am using up a considerable portion of my own means and am heavy burdened" (Gaultier 268). An investigation revealed that Gaultier was not making any revenue and was indeed using his own funds to finance parts of his expedition. However, these allegations reappeared throughout the course of his service (Gaultier 392). His intentions as regards the beaver trade cannot be ascertained, but to the end he insisted on the purity of his motives (Gaultier 432-434). Nevertheless, the accusations of fraud, greed, and failure taint the legacy of Gaultier. These allegations further underscore the importance of economics in the minds of governmental authorities and their subjects in New France. In the decades before, exploration, courage, and creating alliances with the natives for the purposes of settlement, dominated the writings between important figures in New France and those sent to France. These letters reveal the changing dynamics and the recognition by all those involved that stabilizing and perpetuating the fur trade was now more important than settlement or evangelical concerns.

Gaultier, mostly due to his explorations, employed dozens of *voyageurs* to transport him across the expanse of New France in search of the Western Sea (Gaultier 67). The *voyageur* was employed by governing officials, fur traders, and ambitious explorers who by themselves were not familiar with the geography or temperament of the North American expanse and its native inhabitants. *Voyageurs*, usually because of significant time spent living with Native Americans in the wilderness, knew and utilized their skills and knowledge for profit. Aside from this business as guide, interpreter, and traveler, many *voyageurs* received legitimate licenses (*congés*) from the French government to hunt fur and bring peltry to the storehouse for payment. Initially, the term *voyageur* was used loosely as it means "traveler" in French, but in

the seventeenth century it designated operators of canoes, interpreters, and guides (Nute 3). This specification of meanings of language placed the *voyageur* in the position beneath the fur traders, proprietors, or government clerks (bourgeois) who frequently employed them. Within this category of *voyageur*, the *mangeur de lard* or "pork eaters" were the novices who were unable to endure the challenges of winter hunts and *hivernants* or "winterers" who achieved the highest rank based on experience and skill (Nute 5).

Voyageurs and *Coureurs des Bois*

Voyageurs inhabited a world between France and native. They created a flamboyant culture of dress and style that culturally distinguished them from any other group in New France. Historian Grace Lee Nute writes that they "had a further unifying characteristic of speaking a language which was not the native tongue either of their employers or of the people with whom they did business (7). The work of Luc Lacourceire has found this third language, known as a *metis*, to continue among modern lumbermen, whose forefathers had married Indian women (374). This allowed them verbal freedoms, but also became a marker of inferior social status.

Visually, *voyageurs* further designated their profession with red woolen caps to accent a costume of clothing that combined native and European elements. They forged a unique visual identity that marked their professional skill, European heritage, and embrace of native elements. There was a great amount of pride within the *voyageur* community and these men eagerly sought the ink tattoos that designated their skills and superiority (Nute 17). A "gaudy sash" and pipe completed the ensemble (Nute13). This uniform of the *voyageur* rested on a small figure (little because he needed to fit easily in canoes) with an overdeveloped upper body because of the continual paddling over the years.

The *voyageurs'* relationship to the native inhabitants was markedly different from that of the fur trader that Gaultier exemplified. Whereas Gaultier consciously separated himself from the "barbarians" who, while an economic necessity, were unworthy of polite society, *voyageurs* moved freely among various tribes. As *Mon Canot D'Ecorce* would suggest, they took great pride in knowing the "savage races and the tongues that them divide" (Barbeau 40). This friendly and somewhat trusting relationship with native peoples, combined with their extensive knowledge of the terrain, allowed *voyageurs* to become adept fur collectors and hunters. They frequently dealt with Indians one on one, spoke their language, and facilitated profitable trade for themselves.

According to La Potherie, a contemporary of Perrot, Perrot's "acquaintance with the savage tongues, his experience, and his mental ability…enabled him to make discoveries which gave opportunity to Monsieur de la Salle to push forward all those explorations in which he achieved so great success" in the Mississippi valley (La Potherie 74). This passage suggests that while explorers such as La Salle, Marquette, and Joliet received the glory that came with discovery, it was built on the efforts of less visible *voyageurs* like Perrot. It is commonly acknowledged among social historians that frequently the most active and contributing members of society are lost in favor of the glorious individuals who claim the spotlight. With this in mind, La Potherie's perception calls into question the grandeur of all explorers and revives the histories of the *voyageurs* who made their work possible.

Perrot, by all accounts, was a devout Christian who rejected displays of reverence from natives who "often took the Frenchmen for spirits and gods" (La Potherie 74). Unlike Gaultier, Perrot held no illusions of personal deification. Many times during the course of his exploits in the Northwest Territory, natives would attempt to express adoration, but he only accepted these "honors so far as the interests of religion were not concerned" (La Potherie 75). This predisposition towards religion affected his relationship with natives, particularly the Algonquian. He desired to offer Christian salvation, much in the same way as the early explorers whose evangelical zeal was among their

primary motivations. Unlike Gaultier, he did not hesitate to clarify God as the "true spirit" and himself as a mere mortal (La Potherie 76, 87).

Despite the obvious religious motives, Perrot was also a tradesman whose job was to facilitate favorable relations with the natives. However, the records left of these encounters suggest that the natives were negotiating their own positions in the frontier economics of New France. Aware that beaver was the tie that bound, the Pouteouatemis tribe told the French that the Miami and Maskoutech had no beaver in order to prevent them from becoming allies with these peoples and diverting profitable trade opportunities from themselves (La Potherie 84, 88). Negotiation of status was also more pronounced in terms of mutual appreciation for physical prowess. Like the earlier explorers, Perrot expressed great admiration for the youth who were "as courageous as they [were] well built" (La Potherie 86-87). Such a willingness to see native men in terms of their own culture allowed Perrot to understand their motivations for entering into trade relations with Frenchmen. Perrot understood that they "preferred the needs of life to those of the [French] state" (La Potherie 90). Any furs that were brought to the French were sacrificed in order to provide better lives for their families.

Daniel Greysolon, Sieur Duluth, a peer of Perrot and La Salle, in many ways, followed the course of Perrot. Duluth's family alliances gave him opportunities at the French court where he served in the King's Guard and participated quite nobly in the Battle of Seneff in 1674 (Duluth 332). Unsatisfied in France he moved to Montréal where opportunities for exploration and frontier experiences abounded. In 1678 he pushed himself further by resolving to explore the Sioux country. Over the next twenty years he lived primarily with the Sioux, whose impressive territories and allies produced great wealth in beaver and other peltry for New France (330). His friendship with the Assiniboin also allowed him to divert their profitable beaver trade from the English Hudson Bay Company to the French posts on the Great Lakes.

Duluth's character was that of a peaceful mind who valued honor and kindness. He, like Perrot, acknowledged allegiance to King and Country, but emphasized religion. This particular predisposition made him more eager to establish friendships with native peoples in hopes of Christianizing them. However, when native relations competed with religious integrity, the latter won out. In 1680, Duluth rescued Father Louis Hennepin from a group of Indians who were holding him captive. According to Duluth, "the want of respect that was being shown to the said Reverend Father provoked me, and I let them know it, tell them [the Indians] that he was my brother" (332). Duluth brokered the release of two Frenchmen that day in addition to Father Hennepin.

In 1678, the French courts forced Duluth to answer to charges that he was a *coureur de bois*. The distinction between a *voyageur* and a *coureur de bois* had serious legal repercussions as the latter was a serious offense. The danger of being a *coureur de bois*, or illegal "runner of the woods," was underscored by the multitude of negative edicts written by the King in the colonial period. In a Letter to the Marquis de Seignelay, Minister of Marine and the French official in charge of trade in New France, Duluth made the case for his innocence. In reference to his exploration of the Nadouecioux and the Assenipoualaks (Assiniboin) countries, Duluth wrote:

> I do not believe that such an expedition can give anyone ground to accuse me of having disobeyed the King's orders of the year 1676, since he merely forbade all his subjects to go into the depths of the woods to trade there with the savages. This I have never done, nor even been willing to take any presents from them, though they have several times thrown them to me, which I have always refused and left, in order that no one might be able to accuse me of having carried on any indirect traffic (330).

His adamant disassociation with *coureurs des bois* simultaneously emphasized his own noble conduct, and also pointed to the marginalization of *coureurs des bois* and the contempt in which they

were held by *voyageurs* whose professional pride made them elitist. Frenchmen who made their living in the wilderness had their own hierarchies of power that placed *coureur de bois* a mere step above Native American men.

The *coureur de bois* is the most elusive of the masculinities affiliated with the fur trade. The desire by these runners of the woods to remain obscure and evade French authorities, who forbade internal trade with the natives, has rendered them equally invisible to historians. What is known about these shadowy men is that they lived freely and contently among native peoples and had little to no affinity for the laws of France or New France. The first generation of these peoples was French, but as they mingled, married, and reproduced with native women, the latter generations would be *métis*. It is important to note that early in the history of New France, intermarriage with the natives was not only accepted, but was encouraged through reward as French officials hoped to populate their colonial ventures. However, these social mores were premised on the notion that native women would become "civilized" or, more accurately, "Frenchified." *Coureurs des bois*, however, rejected French society in favor of native communities which prompted people of New France to regard them with scorn and distaste.

The character of the *coureur de bois* first appeared with Etienne Brule, an associate of Champlain who left New France to abide with the natives. It could be argued that explorer Pierre Radisson followed in this trend because of his treasonous defection to the British that resulted in illegal trade. By 1672, Jean-Baptiste Patoulet, an associate of Jean Talon, guessed that there were roughly 300 to 400 illegal traders operating in New France. Jacques Duchesneau estimates at least 800 existed by 1680 (Tanner 182). Principal among the characteristics of the *coureur de bois* was a lack of political allegiance. Jean Couture, a former member of the La Salle expeditions, allied himself with the British in 1693, which allowed him to go down the Mississippi valley well into the Cherokee towns of Tennessee and there make trade alliances (Tanner182). There is further record of two *coureurs des bo*is, Bellefeuille and Sauton,

making an appearance in Carolina to negotiate trade with Governor James Moore (182).

Despite the extent to which *coureurs des bois* traveled, most successfully avoided running into French authorities. The only first hand account by a *coureur de bois* comes from an interview taken after his capture by the British on the Hudson Bay in June 1742. Joseph La France was transported to London where Arthur Dobbs, a prominent Irishman and literary figure, conducted an interview. What remains of Dobbs' account reveals a rare insight into the life of *coureurs des bois*.

La France, a product of a French fur trader father and a woman of the Ojibwa tribe (also known as the Saulters), lived in the Michilimackinac (Tanner172). He learned the art of trade from his father and the skill of hunting from his mother's people, with whom he chose to reside after reaching adulthood. La France's relationship with traders and his knowledge of native culture, combined with his own blood ties, prompted him to begin trading fur. Expecting a *congé*, or license, he was refused on the charge that he had sold brandy to Indians, a common, but still illegal, practice. He began trading illegally and evaded the law on more than one occasion. Estimates place the overall extent of his travels before his capture at 17,000 miles by canoe and 500 additional miles overland, a staggering amount by the standards of 1742 (Tanner177).

La France's status as a *métis* singularly would not have outcast him from society. It was his choice to ostracize himself. He chose between two worlds and utilized his connections in both to attempt a profitable trade. La France's allegiance to any entity was limited. His account reveals that he owned two Indian slaves (*Panis*) who were most likely Pawnees, a frequently targeted tribe for slavery. Indian slaves were not uncommon, particularly among warring tribes, but La France's story suggests that he had little affinity for any nation. In 1737, he was charged with selling brandy to Indians. Brandy was frequently offered by French traders at the beginning of an exchange with natives in order to negotiate better prices from their inebriated producers. Given La France's ambition and knowledge of the systems and customs of trade, it

is quite likely that he followed in this tradition of using brandy as an economic tactic. Clearly, La France was not sacrificing himself for the good of his native brethren. Interestingly, La France claimed that the "avarice and injustice" of the governor of Canada had "disgusted the Natives," who had diverted some of their trade to the English (Tanner179).

What are we to make of these divergent sentiments? I argue that economic interests overrode affections for either culture. As with fur traders such as Gaultier, economics changed construction and discourse of masculinity in New France. No longer was nobility of character, allegiance to God and country, Christian fervor, or the interests of the majority what commanded power and respect. Profitable trade, successful fur barter, and money were the new markers of masculine status in New France. Men defined themselves through finance rather than displays of Christian allegiance, physical courage in war, or civilized virtues that actively engaged native culture for supremacy of masculine identity.

Alexander Ross, an early nineteenth-century fur trader and writer, recalled an incident with a man who saw himself as a *voyageur*, but whom everyone else would designate as a *coureur de bois*. This nameless woodsman boasted that "no water, no weather ever stopped the paddle or the song. I have had twenty wives in the country; and was once possessed of fifty horses and six running dogs trimmed in the first style. I was then like a bourgeois, rich and happy" (Ross1). This successful adventurer also estimated his wealth in relation to native standards. "No bourgeois had better-dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses," he bragged (1). Physically he compared himself to both cultures, claiming that "I beat all the Indians at the race, and no white man ever passed me in the chase" (1). This unidentified man, well in advanced years, became excited recalling his youth and extravagance as he "spent all [his] earnings in the enjoyment of pleasure" (1). In the Indian country, man was free to "enjoy so much variety and freedom.

The interview conducted by Ross in 1700 is of particular interest because of the conflicting representations of masculinity embodied in the woodsman. On one hand, he sang the songs and paddled the canoes like a *voyageur*; but he also embraced the freedom and amenities of native life. His legal status is unclear, but socially it is apparent that he was a *coureur de bois* by eighteenth-century standards. His wealth earned from trade afforded him the pleasures and luxury enjoyed by the wealthiest Frenchmen. Yet according to his own account he spent "five hundred pounds twice told," a small fortune and at the time of his interview had "not a spare shirt…not a penny to buy one"; but he was happy (Ross 1). Money was important, but to the *coureur de bois*, who rejected French impositions of propriety, lifestyle was the motivating factor. Freedom, fun, adventure, and nature were the defining characteristics of these unique men who found their opportunities in native culture.

The *Hymne au Coureur de Bois* written by Father Henri-Raymond Casgrain, a contemporary of nineteenth-century fur trappers, echoes these sentiments so personal to Ross's interview. In his poem Casgrain underscores the importance of a carefree lifestyle and the "amour de liberté" found in the hearts of the *coureur de bois* (Casgrain 1). In nature, a *coureur* was a king, holding a rifle for his scepter and the sky serving as his palace, the moss as a rug, and as a throne, the mountains and forests ("J'ai pour scepter ma carabine/ Le dome des cieux pour palais/ Pour tapis, j'ai l mousse fine/ Pour tone, les monts, les forets). This was a far cry from the French inspired homes of government fur traders in Québec.

Mythology and Folklore of *Voyageurs* and *Coureurs des Bois*

The legacy of the *coureur de bois* has not always been romantic or appreciated. Contemporaries, particularly Jesuits, despised their embrace of native culture, which often included rejection of religious tenets. Referring to an unnamed *coureur de bois*, Father François de Crepieul described "a certain Canadian who was worse and

more importunate for liquor than a Savage" (Crepieul 257). Furthermore, Father Crepieul warned that *coureurs* should not be allowed to go to the cabins of "Young Women or marriageable Girls**,"** who**,** it was thought, would be sexually corrupted (257). Etienne de Carheil wrote to Governor Callières in 1702 that the "fugitive *voyageurs* [also known as *coureur de bois*]…go from one mission to another, making the savages drunk and seducing the women in all the Cabins," echoing Crepieul's sentiments (Carheil 207).

The *coureurs des bois*, despite the hatred they found among the French Jesuits, have not passed into history as the enemy of the Christian faith. The *coureur* enjoys a renewed fame among folklorists and social historians who praise their rugged individualism and strength. *Voyageurs*, the modern umbrella term that includes *voyageurs* as well as *coureurs des bois*, became synonymous with adventure and freedom, while all vestiges of the illegal activities and rabble rousing culture has been sentimentalized. Novels, such as those by Elphinstone and Yates, romantically recall the glorious history of these brave souls. For the right price, you too can retrace the routes of the *voyageurs*, as Ian and Sally Wilson attest. The popular figure of the *voyageur,* as he has come to us historically, was a jocular character worthy of the highest echelons of folklore. However, we choose to forget the salacious and corrupt behavior of the shifty *coureur de bois* who slipped through the woods, undetected by contemporaries, and who glided quite as deftly into the history of Canada.

Interestingly, middle-women carved out an economic space for themselves, using their command of tribal language and customs to facilitate trade for their French husbands. Investigations by historians Brown, Peterson-del Mar, Sleeper-Smith, White, and Van Kirk attest to the vitality of this process. According to new historical studies, this empowered native women with economic viability in areas of trade that had been denied them in their native cultures. Feminists have seen this negotiation of culture as empowerment. Although feminist scholars would contend that native middle-women economically and socially

progressed through advantageous marriages, it could be argued differently. For the purpose of looking at masculinity, we must question the *coureurs des bois*' motivations in marrying native women. Certain affections and admiration of native culture must not be discounted, but it was certainly a clever move to ally with someone who had command of culture and language of the necessary producers of the commodities in demand. This perspective would place native middle-women in a not very flattering light, as more victims than heroines. Regardless, we see that the prevalence of economics in New France embraced women as well. Indeed, it was all encompassing.

Conclusion

When taken together, these three types of New France masculinities (fur trader, *voyageur*, *coureur de bois*) defined themselves very differently from their predecessors and each other. They complicate the narrative of the influence of fur trading and early Canadian economics on the construction and performance of masculine identities. Certainly, these men recognized themselves as belonging to a particular designation of masculine characteristics that were sometimes comparable to other men, but more often than not, they diverged from their contemporaries. French men saw and established themselves in relation to each other and the native men they encountered. These men of the wilderness and of the fur trade focused their energies on economic advancement instead of a rugged construction embodied by the first explorers. They created new and interesting constructions of manhood that affected not only themselves, but the native masculinities they encountered. New formations of native and French masculinities altered the social order in New France and introduced economics as the most opportune way to status and masculine success.

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