

The power of apprehending ‘otherness’: cultural intermediaries as imperial agents in New France

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I. INTRODUCTION

Facing otherness was not merely an inevitable feature of life in France’s culturally diverse North American empire, it stood in some fundamental sense at its very center. I propose to begin this reflection on those implications of the European confrontation with human diversity that were specific to French America by considering an experiment in cultural exchange engineered by Samuel Champlain. In 1610, early in his tenure as leader of the Québec colony, Champlain sent several young Frenchmen to live with Amerindian communities, ranging from nearby Algonquin groups to the considerably more distant Huron settled along the Great Lakes, and in return welcomed the children of Amerindian leaders into the French settlement. Champlain hoped that his emissaries would familiarize themselves with their hosts’ cultures, learn their languages, and glean valuable information about the fur trade, local politics, geography, and a possible northwest passage, so that they could subsequently serve him as interpreters and informants¹.

Traditional historiographical treatments of New France accorded Franco-Amerindian encounters like these little emphasis, focusing instead on the

¹ See Gilles Havard, *Empire et métissages. Indiens et Français dans le Pays d’en Haut 1660-1715* (Paris: Septentrion-Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), 65, 389.

origins and growth of European settlement and political institutions. These historians founded their work on the notion that the history of French North America and of Amerindians represented two separate (albeit related) histories². For much of the twentieth century, Québécois historians were preoccupied with tracing the contours of the *Belle province's* distinct society and uncovering its distinctively French roots, and therefore relegated the history of Amerindians and their relations with the French to an even harder to reach back burner³.

Beginning in the 1960s, as scholars increasingly turned their attention to the history of the native peoples of the Americas, they likewise began to think about the history of European-Amerindian contact in new, more complex ways – and to credit them with growing historical significance. Historians developed concepts like ‘frontier’, ‘borderlands’, ‘backcountry’, and Richard White’s influential ‘middle ground’ in order to problematize these interactions in ways which acknowledge the phenomenon of European empire, the structuring influence of power, and the historical reality of violence on the one hand, and the spaces for cooperation and collaboration, negotiation and compromise, Amerindian agency and autonomy on the other⁴. Their work not only drew attention to areas

2 On how the historiographies of Canada and of Amerindians developed separately, see James W. St. G. Walker, “The Indian in Canadian Historical Writing”, *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 6, 1 (1971): 21-51, and Bruce G. Trigger, “The Historian’s Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 67, 3 (1986): 315-342; and in the French Canadian context in particular, Sylvie Vincent, “Les Manuels d’histoire sont-ils porteurs de stéréotypes sur les Amérindiens, ou Que sont devenus le ‘bon Huron’ et le ‘méchant Iroquois?’”, *Bulletin de la Société des Professeurs d’Histoire du Québec*, 16, 2 (1978): 25-28, and Christian Laville, “Les Amérindiens d’hier dans les manuels d’histoire d’aujourd’hui”, *Traces*, 29, 2 (1991), 29-33. For parallel developments in the historiography of the United States, see James H. Merrell, “Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians”, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 46, 1 (January 1989): 94-119, Bernard W. Sheehan, “Indian-White Relations in Early America: A Review Essay”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 26, 2 (April 1960): 267-286, and James Axtell, “Europeans, Indians, and the Age of Discovery in American History Textbooks”, *American Historical Review*, 92, 3 (June 1987): 621-632.

3 For reviews of the historiography of New France, see John C. Rule, “The Old Regime in America: A Review of Recent Interpretations of France in America”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 19, 4 (October 1962): 575-600, Allan Greer, “Comparisons: New France”, in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 469-88, and Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, “Making New France New Again: French Historians Rediscover their American Past”, *Common-Place*, 7, 4 (July 2007), www.common-place.org/vol-07/no-4/harvard/ (consulted 7 May 2010).

4 For overviews of the frontier/borderland historiography, see David J. Weber, “Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands”, *American Historical Review* 91, 1 (February 1986): 66-81, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History”, *American Historical Review* 104, 3 (June 1999): 814-841, and the forum published in the subsequent issue, esp. Evan Haefeli, “A Note on the Use of North American Borderlands”, John R. Wunder and Pekka Hämäläinen, “Of Lethal Places and Lethal Essays”, and Adelman and Aron’s response, “Of Lively Exchanges and Larger Perspectives”, *American Historical Review*, 104, 4 (October 1999): 1222-1225, 1229-1234 and 1235-1239. Weber returned to the problem in “The Spanish Borderlands, Historiography Redux”, *History Teacher*, 39, 1 (November 2005): 43-56. On the “middle ground” concept, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge

long neglected by scholarship, it demonstrated that the history of New France in particular, and of the colonial Americas more generally, could not be understood without taking Amerindians into account⁵.

These scholars assigned considerable prominence in their research to Amerindian-European interactions like the exchange of French and Amerindian youths imagined by Champlain. Underscoring how frequent and intense such exchanges were, their work mapped the complex contours of European-Amerindian contact. They construed such encounters to be components of the frontier experience, liminal situations in which the distinct worlds of French settlers and Amerindian societies met, a phase of coexistence that was both initiated and bounded in time by the steady imposition of European control in the Americas.

By situating these interactions within the broader context of the construction of European Atlantic empires, their work drew particular attention to the crucial role of cultural intermediaries in brokering such relationships – and in providing imperial authorities the information and tools they needed to establish and expand their authority⁶. Perhaps the most striking illustration of how Europeans

University Press, 1991), as well as the forums on “A Historian Who Has Changed Our Thinking: A Roundtable on the Work of Richard White”, in *Western Historical Quarterly*, 33, 2 (Summer 2002), and on “The Middle Ground Revisited” in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 63, 1 (January 2006).

5 James Axtell argues that indigenous peoples shaped the history of colonial America in decisive ways in “Colonial America without the Indians: Counterfactual Reflections”, *Journal of American History*, 73, 4 (March 1987): 981-996. For reviews of Amerindians’ evolving place within the historiography, see Daniel Richter, “Whose Indian History?”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50, no. 2 (April 1993): 379-393, and Ian Steele, “Exploding Colonial American History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives”, *Review in American History*, 26, 1 (March 1998): 70-95. For recent overviews of New France’s history which follow this perspective, see for example Philip Boucher, *Les Nouvelles Frances. France in America, 1500-1815. An Imperial Perspective* (Providence, R. I.: John Carter Brown Library, 1989) and *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de l’Amérique française* (2003), 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

6 Cultural and social anthropologists have contributed to a substantial body of scholarship theorizing the complex roles cultural intermediaries play. See for example Clifford Geertz, “The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, 2 (1960): 228-249 and Irwin Press, “Ambiguity and Innovation: Implications for the Genesis of the Culture Broker”, *American Anthropologist*, 71, 2 (1969): 205-217. More specifically, historians of early modern and modern empires are increasingly underscoring go-betweens’ roles – see for example Ralph A. Austen, and Jonathan Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600-c. 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), Jeremy D. Cohen, “Cultural and Commercial Intermediaries in an Extra-Legal System of Exchange: The *Practicos* of the Venezuelan Littoral in the Eighteenth Century”, *Itinerario*, 27, 2 (2003): 105-124, Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, eds. Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), and Natalie Rothman, “Between Venice and Istanbul: Trans-Imperial Subjects and Cultural Mediation in the Early Modern Mediterranean”, Ph.D dissertation (University of Michigan, 2006). In the context of the colonial Americas, see for example Daniel

mobilized go-betweens to further their imperial interests is Hernan Cortés's conquest of Mexico. When Cortés landed in the Yucatán, he could draw on the local knowledge and linguistics skills of a Spanish priest who had been shipwrecked on the peninsula seven years before, and who during his time in captivity among the Mayans had learned their language, to win the cooperation of Mayan groups. When the conquistador marched on Tenochtitlan at the head of a Spanish-Mayan army, he turned for help to *La Malinche*, an Aztec noblewoman who had been sold to the Mayans as a slave, and who had been given to Cortés as a gift. Her mastery of her native Nahuatl proved decisive in helping the Spanish decipher internal Aztec politics⁷.

While such perspectives have shed crucial light on the importance of native-European relationships in the history of the early modern Americas, my goal in this brief article is to suggest that they do not adequately represent the full importance of coexistence in the case of New France. I argue here that cultural intermediaries played an especially important role in French North America, and contributed to the establishment, extension and perpetuation of French imperial power in decisive ways. I argue further that intermediaries' particular prominence was specific to the French case, far surpassing that enjoyed by their counterparts in the other European powers' spheres of American influence.

Why did cultural intermediaries enjoy special prominence in New France? This article briefly traces a twofold explanation. Champlain's project to embed young Frenchmen among well-disposed Amerindian communities is telling for two reasons: first, it testifies to how concerned French colonial administrators were to train or recruit intermediaries to help them cultivate and maintain relationships with neighboring Amerindian groups; second, it illustrates that the close proximity of French and Amerindians in New France made this not only an urgent imperative, but one which was relatively straightforward for the French to meet. By helping French and Amerindian interlocutors bridge a multitude of difficult language and cultural barriers, intermediaries satisfied a host of important cultural, commercial, social and political functions within the spheres of French influence in North America. A variety of middlemen, ranging

K. Richter, "Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics: New York-Iroquois Relations, 1664-1701", *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988): 40-67. On linguistic intermediaries in particular, see *The Language Encounter in the Americas, 1492-1800*, ed. by Edward C. Gray and Norman Fiering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), James Axtell, *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Stephen Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century", in *Learning to Curse Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 16-39, and Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

7 See Frances Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (Piscataway, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1-22, and Cortés's own testimony, in *La Conquête du Mexique*, Désiré Charnay (trans.) (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), letter 1, 55. See also Marie-Christine Gomez-Géraud, "La lengua: problemáticas del encuentro en la conquista de Méjico", in *Diálogo y conflicto de culturas: estudios comparativos de procesos transculturales entre Europe y América Latina*, eds. Hans-Otto Dill and Gabriele Knauer (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert Verlag, 1993), 27-36.

from interpreters, soldiers, diplomats, fur traders, Jesuit missionaries, and French-Amerindian *métis*, mobilized their cultural knowledge to assist French and Amerindian leaders in brokering diplomatic agreements, Amerindian hunters and French fur traders in fixing peltry prices, and French and Amerindian soldiers in coordinating military operations.

I will develop two points in my discussion of intermediaries within France's continental North American empire:

First, the very character of France's presence in North America – sparsely populated French settlements in close proximity to Amerindian groups, commercial activity grounded in the fur trade, and missionary campaigns aimed at bringing the Christian gospel to the native populations of the Americas – guaranteed that French and Amerindian communities entered into a variety of strong relationships. This fact defined the environment within which cultural intermediaries learned the kinds of knowledge which made it possible to bridge cultural gaps.

Second, the character of the French presence in North America also defined an environment which made intermediaries' skills invaluable. Go-betweenes played a crucial role not only in making French-Amerindian coexistence possible, but in extending and sustaining French influence.

II. FRENCH-AMERINDIAN COEXISTENCE IN NEW FRANCE

The history of French empire in North America is one of frustrated ambitions and unlikely successes. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the French monarchy shared with the other major European powers a clear set of ideas concerning empire in general, and the shape it intended its future American empire to take in particular⁸. The crown, chief officials like Jean-Baptiste Colbert, apologists for royal authority and empire, theoreticians of the mercantilist system, and wealthy investors in the monopoly trading companies founded their imperial ambitions upon three distinct goals. First, the Americas were seen as the site for potentially profitable commercial ventures, regions from which natural resources as varied as Brazilian redwood, Canadian peltries and Caribbean sugar could be extracted and brought to the metropole for transformation, resale and consumption. Second, the Americas were viewed as a *tabula rasa* upon which the crown could develop ambitious projects of colonial settlement, aimed at reproducing forms of social organization, legal regimes, property ownership, agricultural development, religious practice, and political authority modeled on Old France. Third, the crown was committed to assisting the Catholic church in evangelizing the new continent and bringing the Christian gospel to its Amerindian inhabitants. The monarchy took concrete steps to achieve all three of these objectives: it chartered trading companies

⁸ See Anthony Pagden's examination of European ideologies of empire in the early modern period, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

with monopolies over commerce in commodities like peltries⁹; it conducted sustained campaigns to recruit French subjects to migrate to New France and settle in the young colony, and it imposed seigneurialism and Paris's customary law code upon New France¹⁰; and it threw its moral and financial weight behind the Catholic church's missionary enterprise¹¹.

By many measures, this enterprise was a great success. Beginning in the later decades of the seventeenth century, a Catholic, agrarian, feudal settler society took shape along the St Lawrence river, with smaller outposts in Acadia and the Illinois country. Savvy merchants and investors in the fur and salt cod trade took in healthy profits. The Society of Jesus established a network of missions deep into the Great Lakes region. At its geographical zenith, Versailles commanded a vast North American empire stretching from Newfoundland and the Gaspé peninsula to the Mississippi river valley.

By many of the crown and colony's elites' own criteria, however, New France was to a certain extent a failure. Royal efforts to recruit settlers notwithstanding, only a small number of French subjects crossed the Atlantic to live in Canada. In the period between 1660 and 1759, a mere 75,000 Frenchmen migrated to New France; by comparison, in the period between 1700 and 1775, nearly 500,000 people settled in the thirteen British colonies in North America¹². The long-term corollary to this migratory imbalance was a stark divergence in the two kingdom's American colonies' demographic fortunes. New France remained sparsely populated, counting only 3,215 white inhabitants in 1666, and a mere 42,000 in 1730 (including the Louisiana colony); in 1730, Britain's thirteen colonies counted 400,000 souls¹³.

9 Commerce is probably the most thoroughly studied aspect of France's presence in the Americas. See for example Cameron Nish, *Les Bourgeois-Gentilshommes de la Nouvelle-France, 1729-1748* (Ville Saint-Laurent: Fides, 1968), Dale Miquelon, *Dugard of Rouen: French Trade to Canada and the West Indies, 1729-1770* (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), Miquelon, *New France, 1701-1744: A Supplement to Europe* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), Miquelon, "Canada's Place in the French Imperial Economy: An Eighteenth-Century Overview", *French Historical Studies*, 15, 3 (Spring 1988): 432-443, and John F. Boshier, *The Canada Merchants, 1713-1763* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

10 See for example Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), Louis Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth Century Montreal* (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), and Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

11 See Carole Blackburn, *Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632-1650* (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000) and Dominique Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire. Les missions françaises au XVIIe siècle (1600-1650)* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

12 Compare figures in Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants* with Aaron Fogleman, "Migrations to the Thirteen British North American Colonies, 1700-1775: New Estimates", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 22, 4 (Spring 1992): 691-709.

13 Population figures in James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31, 321, and 423-427.

French settlements' low population densities had important consequences for French relations with Amerindian communities. Unlike the dynamic, robust, and densely populated colonies of British North America, engaged in intensive agriculture and commerce, and which progressively pushed native groups to their boundaries, New France's inhabitants generally lived in close proximity to Amerindian communities. The French colony's white settlers could not avoid coming into frequent contact with Amerindians, even in urbanized centers like Québec and Montréal.

The French colony's broader objectives generated three distinct 'push factors' which drew Frenchmen away from French settlements on the St Lawrence and into the largely Amerindian world beyond. The first was commercial: initially founded by trading companies with monopolies on the fur trade, New France's economic fortunes depended upon the maintenance of lasting relationships with Amerindian suppliers of peltries. *Coueurs des bois* lived in close proximity with Amerindians to hunt and trap animals, trade for furs, and supply the French merchants in Québec and Montréal who then resold furs to the hungry French market.

The second was geopolitical. Faced with the menace of Britain's North American colonies and its substantially greater population, wealth, and military power, the French sought out Amerindian political allies and military auxiliaries to complement their own limited financial, demographic and military resources. Indeed, for the French monarchy, the establishment of diplomatic agreements and military alliances with Amerindian communities stood at the very heart of its strategy to defend its North American colony¹⁴. The crown's financial investment in establishing and sustaining these alliances made up nearly a quarter of its total expenditures in the colony¹⁵. As Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, who served as governor of New France from 1703 to 1725, put it, "The policy of a governor of Canada does not consist so much in taking care of the French who are within the scope of his government as in maintaining a close union with the savage Nations that are his Allies"¹⁶. Strategic imperatives thus sent royal officials to negotiate alliances with Amerindian groups, French soldiers to fight alongside native allies and man French forts and trading posts along the Great Lakes and the Mississippi.

14 On the role of France's Amerindian diplomatic and military partners in conflicts with Britain, see Richard R. Johnson, "The Search for a Usable Indian: An Aspect of the Defense of Colonial New England", *Journal of American History*, 63, 3 (December 1977): 623-651, White, *Middle Ground*, and Denys Delâge, "War and the French-Indian Alliance", *European Review of Native American Studies*, 5, 1 (1991): 15-20.

15 Catherine Desbarats, "The Cost of Early Canada's Native Alliances: Reality and Scarcity's Rhetoric", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52, 4 (October 1995), 609-630.

16 Archives Nationales de France, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence), Colonies, F3, vol. 7, fols. 178, 252-253, quoted here from Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701: French-Native Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century*, Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (trans.) (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 181.

The third push factor was religious. French Catholic religious orders, including the Recollect Friars, the Ursuline sisters, and the Society of Jesus, and with the direct assistance of the crown, set the Christian evangelical imperative to work by establishing missions aimed at converting Amerindians to Christianity. Jesuit priests in particular settled among the Huron, Iroquois and other groups, to build missions and begin the challenging, long-term task of converting Amerindians to Catholicism.

Furthermore, a number of 'pull factors' encouraged various inhabitants of the French colony to leave of their own initiative and integrate Amerindian communities in varying degrees. The extremely skewed sex ratio within the French colony – the 1666 census indicated that two-thirds of New France's white inhabitants were men, a situation which did not reach equilibrium until the eighteenth century –, and Amerindian sex ratios skewed in turn towards women among communities whose male populations had been decimated by warfare, created strong incentives for French men to flee poor marriage prospects on the St Lawrence and instead seek female companionship among the Algonquin or Huron. The booming fur trade likewise created economic incentives for young men to abandon the life of peasantry and agricultural labor that awaited them within the colony to chase the substantial profits which could be made in the peltry exchange. The fur trade and the Amerindian sexual economy convinced many to become *coureurs des bois*.

New France thus took shape as a modest, thinly peopled European-style settlement which constantly bled large numbers of colonists, who left to spend substantial stretches of time among Amerindian communities in what was called the *Pays d'en haut* (which the British would later call Upper Canada)¹⁷. It thus differed in fundamental ways from its British neighbors to the south. It also diverged from the hopes and goals which the French crown had set for it. The monarchy repeatedly attempted to set the colony back on its alleged course. Louis XIV's program to offer passage and dowries to 700 unmarried women hailing from modest backgrounds to be married to French colonists was aimed at equalizing the colony's skewed sex ratios¹⁸. The monarchy also regularly tried to close the *Pays*

17 On French and Amerindian coexistence, see White, *The Middle Ground*, Jan Grabowski, "Searching for the Common Ground: Natives and French in Montreal, 1700-1730", in *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society, Montréal, May 1992*, ed. James Pritchard (Cleveland: French Colonial Historical Society, 1993), 59-73, Grabowski, "The Common Ground: Settled, Natives and French in Montreal, 1667-1760", Ph.D dissertation, Université de Montréal (1993), Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), Havard, *Empire et métissages*, and Denys Delâge, "L'Alliance franco-amérindienne des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Spécificités, changements de régime, mémoires", in *Actes du Colloque international Expériences et mémoire. Partager en français la diversité du monde*, University of Bucarest, 12-16 September 2006, <http://www.celat.ulaval.ca/histoire.memoire/b2006/Delage.pdf>.

18 See Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants* and Yves Landry, *Orphelines en France, pionnières au Canada. Les filles du roi au XVII^e siècle* (Montréal: Lémeac, 1992).

d'en haut to French men, by prohibiting them from leaving the St Lawrence. The fact that these latter measures were largely failures testifies to the Amerindians world's considerable political, social and commercial importance for the French presence in North America – and the considerable force of attraction this world exercised over many of the colony's inhabitants¹⁹. It illustrates the paradox of an imperial venture which, though conceived as an attempt to reproduce a white, European, Catholic, sedentary and largely agricultural society on the American continent, found itself compelled to abandon much of this ideal and instead pursue coexistence and cooperation with Amerindians²⁰.

III. GO-BETWEENS

In a thinly peopled empire, built upon the fur trade and imbued with a religious ethos oriented to the conversion of the other, and whose good conscience, prosperity and, indeed, very survival were predicated on cultivating and maintaining close relationships with Amerindian partners, intermediaries and go-betweens of all sorts fulfilled decisive functions. Diplomats negotiated treaties and military alliances, *coureurs des bois* brought Amerindian fur trappers and French fur traders together, *métis* helped Jesuit priests master local tongues and make sense of Amerindian religious beliefs, cultural brokers smoothed over misunderstandings, and interpreters helped people bridge intractable language gaps²¹. It was France's capacity to recruit and train go-betweens that made it possible to project French influence far into the interior of the North American continent.

The need for intermediaries – particularly interpreters capable of bridging language barriers – manifested itself from the very beginning of contact. As everywhere in the early stages of European colonization in the Americas, one of the earliest solutions was to convince or coerce Amerindians to cross the Atlantic to spend an extended period in France, learn French, and then serve as interpreters upon their return to North America. Jacques Cartier, for example, kidnapped the sons of an Indian chief and forced them to winter in Saint-Malo (although Cartier ultimately convinced the chief to grant his approval)²². As time went on, the French succeeded in enticing Amerindians to make the trip to France voluntarily, thus forsaking kidnapping²³.

¹⁹ See Havard, *Empire et métissages*.

²⁰ For a similar argument, see Havard and Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française*, 12.

²¹ See for example Victor E. Hanzeli, "De la connaissance des langues indiennes de la Nouvelle France aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles", *Amerindia: Revue d'Ethnolinguistique Amérindienne*, 6 (1984): 209-225.

²² Jacques Cartier, *Relations*, ed. Michel Bideaux (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1986), 2nd relation, ch. 2, 135-138, and ch. 3, 142.

²³ On the kidnapping of Amerindians to train interpreters, see Bruce G. Trigger and William R. Swagerty, "Entertaining Strangers: North America in the Sixteenth Century", in *The Cambridge*

The French also set out to master Amerindian tongues for themselves. The authors of many early travel accounts took pains to transcribe Indian words as they learned them – like Cartier, who notes in passing that the Algonquian “call a hatchet in their language *cochy* and a knife *bacan*”²⁴ – and to include rudimentary lexicons. Such evidence illustrates not only how rapidly a minimal knowledge of local cultures was acquired, but also their authors’ concerns to transmit this knowledge and accelerate the process of training intermediaries. Only extensive immersion in Amerindian societies could make possible the genuine acquisition of a deeper familiarity with their languages and cultures – a fact, as we have seen, that Champlain clearly recognized. It was precisely those Frenchmen who spent long periods of time among Amerindians, like fur traders, soldiers and missionaries, who could ultimately serve as effective intermediaries.

Like Champlain, French officials in general clearly understood the importance of locating and retaining competent and reliable interpreters. They frequently offered regular interpreters long-term, remunerated offices. Particularly valuable linguistic intermediaries were sometimes thanked for their services with substantial titles or rewards. The Brittany native Olivier Letardif, who had learned Montagnais, Huron and Algonquin while working with the Jesuits, served Champlain and the royal superintendant of New France as clerk-interpreter, purchased a share in the seigneurie of Beaupré and ultimately served as seigneurial judge²⁵. Charles Le Moyne, born in Normandy, served the Jesuits in Huronia, before working as an interpreter and a soldier for the French army, was subsequently granted a *seigneurie* and a noble title²⁶. In the culturally social and fluid world of New France, where social barriers could be porous and interactions with Amerindian groups a commonplace fact, cultural intermediaries could parlay their skills into an upward social trajectory that would have been unthinkable in Old France.

Cultural intermediaries’ skills made them indispensable actors in the mediation of European-Amerindian diplomatic, commercial and social relations, which in turn gave them considerable influence as individuals. Well aware of

History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, vol. I, *North America*, [1996], pt. 1, 325-398, es 337-338, James Axtell, “At the Water’s Edge: Trading in the Sixteenth Century”, in *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 144-181, and Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), es 12-15.

24 Cartier, *Relations*, 1st relation, ch. 18, 113: “appellent ung hachot en leur langue *cochy* et ung cousteau *bacan*”.

25 Marcel Trudel, “Olivier Letardif”, in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, vol. 1, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id__nbr=407&interval=25&PHPSESSID=s1u60pa61pe005rfv55ciubia6 (consulted 25 May 2010).

26 Jean-Jacques Lefebvre, “Charles le Moyne de Longueil et de Châteauguay”, in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, vol. 1, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id__nbr=426&PHPSESSID=s1u60pa61pe005rfv55ciubia6 (consulted 25 May 2010).

their importance in brokering Franco-Amerindian relationships, intermediaries naturally sought to capitalize on their role, and were jealous of their precious cultural knowledge. French Jesuits who at the start of their missions worked hard to acquire Amerindian tongues so as to be equipped to preach the Christian good news, often found interpreters – whether Amerindian, French, or *métis* – extremely reluctant to help them learn local idioms. Jesuits filled the pages of their *Relations* with desperate laments concerning recalcitrant interpreters and language teachers. In one example, Pierre Biard complained that “This Interpreter had never wanted to communicate his knowledge of the language to any one, not even to the Reverend Recollect Fathers, who had constantly importuned him for ten years”²⁷. In another instance, the same Jesuit threw up his hands concerning an Amerindian who had traveled to France, learned French and been baptized a Catholic there, but had given up Christianity after returning to Canada: “the perfidy of the Apostate, who, contrary to his promise, and notwithstanding the offers I made him, was never willing to teach me, – his disloyalty even going so far as to purposely give me a word of one signification for another”²⁸. Here, an intermediary furnished false linguistic information in order to throw his eager pupil off the cultural scent. For intermediaries, to disseminate mastery of their skill set would have been to debase their own value and importance.

Their functions as indispensable linchpins and facilitators of intercultural dialogue made it possible for intermediaries to manipulate their skills in more surreptitious ways as well. For French officials, merchants and missionaries who were largely or even entirely dependent on go-betweens in their dealings with Amerindians constantly faced the possibility that their intermediaries were not working in good faith on their behalf. Interpreters for example could conceal, mistranslate, invent or modify messages across language barriers. Such actions could lead to serious misunderstandings, modify the outcome of trade negotiations, or influence diplomatic conversations. In one episode which took place during one of Jacques Cartier’s Canadian expeditions, when the French had intended to exchange European goods they considered to be of little value for peltries, they learned to their chagrin that their interpreters had revealed to their Amerindian interlocutors that “what we bartered to them was of no value, and that for what they brought us, they could as easily get hatchets as knives”²⁹.

27 See Biard, *Relation* (1616), quoted here from *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), vol. 4, 210-211: “ce Truchement n’avoit jamais voulu communiquer a personne la cognoissance qu’il avoit de ce langage, non pas mesme aux RR. Recolects, qui depuis dix ans n’avoient cessé de l’en importuner”.

28 Le Jeune, *Relation* (1635), in *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, vol. 7, 112, 283n: “En tant d’années qu’on a esté en ces païs, on n’a jamais rien pü tirer de l’interprete ou truchement nommé Marsolet, qui pour excusé disoit qu’il avoit juré qu’il ne donneroit rien du langage de des Sauvages à qui que ce fût”.

29 Quoted from Axtell, “At the Water’s Edge”, 160.

Amerindian groups likewise recognized the advantages that could accrue from limiting European access to knowledge of their own cultures. Controlling the mediation of cultural difference made it possible for natives to more successfully define the terms of their relationships with Europeans. Le Jeune summed up his frustration with Nicolas Marsolet, a native of Rouen who had learned the Montagnais and Algonquin languages while in Canada, as follows: “In all the years that we have been in this country no one has ever been able to learn anything from the interpreter named Marsolet, who, for excuse, said he had sworn that he would never teach the Savage tongue to any one whomsoever”. Marsolet’s remark points to the possibility that Amerindian communities themselves sought to restrict the dissemination of their linguistic knowledge, by imposing oaths upon interpreters not to reveal their philological secrets. Even if Marsolet’s defense was merely a self-serving fiction, he clearly expected it to be plausible to the Jesuit, suggesting that this was a familiar phenomenon in New France³⁰. In seventeenth-century New Netherlands, for example, a Dutchman observed precisely this phenomenon:

that they [local Indian communities] rather try to conceal their language from us than to properly communicate it, except in things that have to do with everyday trade, saying that it is sufficient for us to understand them to this extent³¹.

Likewise, Amerindian leaders and shamans sometimes counseled their communities to refuse to teach their languages to Jesuits, recognizing in missionaries’ linguistic curiosity a prelude to future attempts to carry out a wholesale transformation in their belief systems. Le Jeune for example recalled having to face “the malice of the sorcerer [a shaman], who sometimes prevented them from teaching me”³². These examples suggest that Amerindians sought to control the training of go-betweens and intermediaries, so as to resist outside influence over their communities and manage the character of their relationships with the French.

A comparison of the history of cultural intermediaries in Britain’s North American colonies throws the specificity of the French case into sharp relief. The inhabitants of British North America experienced considerably greater difficulties in training and recruiting go-betweens than the French. In the period following first

30 Le Jeune, *Relation* (1635), in *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, vol. 7, 30-31: “la perfidie de l’Apostat, qui contre sa promesse, & nonobstant les offres que le luy faisois, ne m’a jamais voulu enseigner, voire sa déloyauté est venuë jusques à ce point de me donner exprez un mot d’une signification pour un autre”.

31 James H. Merrell, “‘The Customes of Our Countrey’: Indians and Colonists in Early America”, in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, eds. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 117-156, quote on 129.

32 See for example the Jesuit Paul Le Jeune’s complaints in *Le Jeune, Relation* (1635), in *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, vol. 7, 30-31: “la malice du sorcier qui defendoit par fois qu’on m’enseignast”.

contact, the British case followed that of the other European powers, and whenever possible Englishmen themselves served as intermediaries or interpreters, or local authorities sought out competent go-betweens. Subsequently, however, British colonial authorities began to demand that Amerindians who did business with them learn the English tongue themselves. In the 1670s, the government of Virginia required that Amerindians furnish their own interpreters. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonial authorities fixed knowledge of English as a prerequisite for Amerindians who wished to submit to British rule as settlement Indians. In Maryland, for example, the Piscataway chief began to study English, rejected polygamy, adopted English dress, and embraced Christianity³³. In their relations with their powerful Iroquois neighbors, British authorities in New England experienced substantial difficulties in scaring up effective interpreters and intermediaries. At the start of the eighteenth century, the government of New York does not appear to have been aware of a single Englishman who could speak the Iroquoian tongue. They instead named Lawrence Claessen van der Volgen, a Dutchman who had become a fluent Iroquois speaker after being taken into captivity in the 1690 Iroquois raid on Schenectady. The fact that Claessen knew no English made this a particularly awkward arrangement, and British officials had to call upon a second interpreter to translate their Dutch interpreter's rendering of Iroquois from the Dutch language into English³⁴.

The British 'failure' to mediate cultural difference with the Amerindian groups with which they came into contact stems from divergences in local conditions in the two sets of North American colonies. As we have already seen, Britain's colonies differed from France's territories in fundamental respects: land-hungry, densely populated, based upon European-style agriculture, and less committed to disseminating the Christian faith among America's indigenous peoples, Britain's relationships with neighboring Amerindian groups were in general substantially more hostile than those of the French. Surer of its military power and demographic resources, its society organized at greater remove from the Amerindian world, its economy more autonomous from Amerindian partnerships, and less engaged in the cross-cultural missionary dialogue, the British simply did not need or rely upon go-betweens to anywhere the same degree that the French did.

4. CONCLUSION

What does this discussion of the importance of cultural intermediaries tell us about the nature of France's North American empire? I would argue that it should draw our attention to four important characteristics of this historical experience.

³³ Merrell, "The Customes of Our Countrey", 129-130.

³⁴ See Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), *passim*, and esp. 220.

First, go-betweens played crucial roles in situations of cultural contact like that which prevailed in New France. Trade, intercultural dialogue, coexistence, political and military cooperation all depended upon the training and ready availability of culturally and linguistically competent intermediaries. This was a generalized phenomenon throughout the early modern Americas wherever and whenever Europeans and Amerindians faced off.

Second, the specific character of France's North American empire lent intermediaries particular importance in facilitating those activities and functions most important to its survival and vocation: commerce, diplomacy and military alliances with Amerindian partners, and the Catholic missionary enterprise. In this New France, composed of small colonial settlements located amidst independent and powerful Amerindian communities, whose prosperity and vitality depended upon the French-Amerindian peltry exchange, and whose strategic security in the face of rapidly growing British colonies likewise rested upon the assistance and cooperation of native military partners, intermediaries were kept busy doing indispensable work. To a certain extent, their capacity to successfully negotiate otherness stood at the very heart of the French imperial project.

Third, not only was intermediaries' work central to New France's security, prosperity, stability and day-to-day social life, it was nothing less than the key which made the extension and maintenance of French influence in North America possible. No asset was more valuable for the French with which to perpetuate their presence on the continent and protect it from Britain than the capacity to confront 'otherness', to attain a substantive understanding of the languages, cultural attitudes, political systems, intentions, and commercial interests of a range of actual and potential Amerindian partners. France's success in establishing a vast North American empire which, at its zenith, reached from the Gulf of Mexico north to the Great Lakes, and east to the Atlantic depended upon the mobilization of go-betweens in order to broker partnerships with native allies. As we saw in the episode with which we began this article, Champlain displayed from the colony's very beginnings a clear understanding of the importance of establishing cooperative relationships with Amerindians and of cultivating go-betweens when he sent French men off to join Amerindian communities. Cultural intermediaries should be seen as the 'weapons of the weak' for a fragile empire³⁵, a precious imperial 'force multiplier', a form of 'soft power' which allowed the French crown to leverage modest demographic, economic and military resources into a set of Franco-Amerindian partnerships which, when taken as a whole, represented something substantially more formidable.

And finally, the crucial, and as yet not fully understood, role of go-betweens in the history of French America throws into sharp relief essential features of France's North American empire which distinguish it from the other European

³⁵ The notion of "imperial weapons of the weak" is a nod to James Scott's concept of *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), who defines it in an entirely different context.

empires in the Americas. The formal conceptions of empire which European theorists developed on behalf of their patrons – including those who planned, promoted and defended the French imperial project – fixed as their objective the emergence of empires organized around European settler societies at their core. This was precisely what took shape in Britain's thirteen North American colonies, and in a more modest scale in the French settlements which grew up along the St Lawrence. But, as our discussion suggests, it would be a mistake to consider this the true 'core' of France's imperial presence. Rather, it was the arc of military posts, trading stations, and Jesuit missions which, in spite of their location along the very edges of French colonial settlement in the Americas, made it possible to link the Great Lakes, the Mississippi river valley and Louisiana together into a loose network capable of representing and promoting French interests. The soldiers, interpreters, *coureurs de bois*, fur traders, *métis* and Jesuit priests who could mediate the various French and Amerindian cultural worlds between which they shuttled, helped to broker the associations, compromises and agreements which allowed Franco-Amerindian coexistence and cooperation to take place. To a very real degree, then, France's 'empire' was not a form of colonial or imperial domination over native peoples at all (despite the fact that this is what the French crown had initially intended). Rather, it was both constituted and perpetuated by a loose web of partnerships and interdependent relationships between the French and Amerindian allies. In this world, decision-making could not be centralized in Versailles, or even in colonial capitals like Québec. Power was instead disseminated diffusely and widely in a complex and multipolar environment, shared between royal officials, fur traders, missionaries, settlers, and the Amerindian partners with which they interacted and upon whom the success of their commercial, religious, political and military enterprises depended. In a world built upon intercultural negotiation and cooperation – however vexed and problematic –, cultural intermediaries were the linchpins of the French imperial system, the sites and sinews of French power in New France, the real core of an imperial configuration quite unlike that of the other European empires in the Americas.