

ARTICLE

Forty Canoes of Women: The Lives and Legacy of the Algonquian Women of 17th-Century New France

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Abstract: There has been an increasing tendency in recent decades to characterize North American Indigenous peoples as “people of the corn” living in permanent or semi-permanent settlements. This approach focuses on matrilineal, agricultural societies in which women play a central role in the economy and the organization of domestic life. Iroquoian women have been at the heart of this approach, while Algonquian women from patrilineal, hunter-gatherer societies remain in the shadows of the men who continue to be perceived as the main providers. In reality, on both the land and the water, the “nomadic” way of life of the people of the forest was anchored in the courage, strength, and endurance of Algonquian women providers.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, Algonquians, Iroquoians, women, canoes, hunters, providers

Résumé : Au cours des dernières années, on a de plus en plus tendance à caractériser les peuples autochtones d'Amérique du Nord comme des « gens des maïs » vivant dans des établissements permanents ou semi-permanents. Cette approche s'intéresse aux sociétés matrilineaires et agricoles dans lesquelles les femmes jouent un rôle central dans l'économie et l'organisation de la vie domestique. Les femmes iroquoises ont été au cœur de cette approche, alors que les femmes algonquiennes issues des sociétés patrilineaires de chasseurs-cueilleurs restent dans l'ombre des hommes qui continuent d'être perçus comme les principaux pourvoyeurs. En réalité, tant sur terre que sur l'eau, la mode de vie « nomade » des gens de la forêt était ancrée dans le courage, la force et l'endurance des femmes algonquiennes pourvoyeuses.

Mots clefs : peuples autochtones, Algonquines et Algonquins, Iroquoiennes et Iroquoiens, femmes, canoës, chasseurs et chasseuses, pourvoyeurs et pourvoyeuses

THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER and the Great Lakes now form the border between Canada and the United States. At the time of the arrival of Europeans, it roughly divided the agriculturalists south of the border from the hunter-gatherers to the north. The common understanding to this day is that the hunter-gatherers were Algonkian-speaking peoples and the agriculturalists were Iroquoian speakers. The reality was more complex, because the Malecite in the Gaspé, the Nipissing in what is now northeastern Ontario, and the

Anishinaabe in the area of Michilimackinac grew corn, beans, and squash. The Algonkian-speaking peoples of the Atlantic seaboard were either agriculturalists who hunted or hunters who were also agriculturalists, as were the Illinois and Miami peoples of the Mississippi Valley. At the same time, the Iroquoian-speaking Wendat (Huron), who lived north of the eastern Great Lakes, between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe, were people of the corn.

Even as our understanding of this complexity has increased, it has been accompanied by a counter tendency, one that seeks to validate Indigenous societies by denying this complexity. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, in her highly praised 2014 book, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, seeks to challenge “the settler-colonial myth of the wandering Neolithic hunter.”¹ In reality, Dunbar-Ortiz claims, America in 1492 “was not a virgin wilderness but a network of Indigenous nations, peoples of the corn.” These peoples of the corn created civilizations “based on advanced agriculture and featuring polities.”² Charles C. Mann, in the same vein, claims that the agricultural lands of the Atlantic seaboard were so vast that the Indigenous peoples who lived there left only enough forest “to allow for hunting.”³ This American-centric portrayal of Indigenous peoples denies the reality of the northern forests and the lives of the peoples who lived there. It also implies that these peoples did not have “polities,” which are reserved for the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and more southerly Algonkians.

Since the 19th century the concept of the polity in Indigenous societies has been virtually synonymous with the Iroquois Confederacy. In addition, the Five Nations – the Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Mohawk – are perceived as the quintessential people of the corn, often to the exclusion of the agricultural Algonkians. While the hunter-gatherer has historically been gendered male, in Iroquoian society the role of women has received widespread recognition. The clans of the Haudenosaunee were matrilineal, descent was in the female line, and women were responsible for the growing and sharing of agricultural crops. As a result, Haudenosaunee women have been accorded a degree of power and freedom that has been denied to Algonquian women.⁴

Seeing the power and freedom of Algonquian women in hunter-gatherer societies requires the overturning of long-standing stereotypes and the

1. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 31.

2. Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 30, 31.

3. Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 298.

4. To my knowledge, there is no term that distinguishes Algonkian-speaking peoples who were hunter-gatherers from Algonkian-speaking peoples who were also agriculturalists. I use the term “Algonquian” to describe peoples who were exclusively or primarily hunter-gatherers, who are the subject of this paper. I reserve the term “Algonquin” for the people long known as the “Algonquin proper,” who lived in the Ottawa Valley.

affirmation of kinds of power and freedom that have not been recognized. In Cree societies not based in clans, and in Anishinaabe societies with patrilineal clans, women's power and freedom must be found apart from the linkage of agriculture and matrilineal clans. It must also be found apart from the enduring tendency to see the work of Algonquian women as secondary to the hunting activities of the men. Turning the negative stereotype of the nomad on its head, and gendering the nomad as female, reveals the freedom of Algonquian women in the mobility their daily lives entailed.

Appreciating the power and freedom of Algonquian women involves an ethnohistorical approach based on the interpretation of primary documents. As Harold Hickerson points out, this approach allows us to "gain knowledge of a given culture as it existed in the past, and how it has changed."⁵ The main source is the *Jesuit Relations*, annual reports written by Jesuit missionaries between 1632 and 1673 and submitted to their superior in Montréal or Québec. The reports include both verbatim accounts and summaries put together by the superior, which were further edited in France before publication. The major purpose of the *Relations* was to report on the progress being made in the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Catholicism.⁶

This process, in addition to the fact that the reports were also intended to raise funds for the missions, raises legitimate concerns about the motives of the Jesuits and the accuracy of their reports.⁷ Yet, as Kenneth Morrison argues, it remains to be proven that the *Jesuit Relations* "consciously distorted the actual encounter between the Jesuits and Native American peoples."⁸ The same can be said about the accounts of Samuel de Champlain and other French traders and explorers who were actual observers of the Indigenous societies of the 17th century. Their observations can be compared and contrasted with the writings of Indigenous authors, whose works are largely products of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their knowledge has the great advantage of coming from inside the culture, but it is a culture that had undergone tremendous change since the 17th century. The Reverend Peter Jones, for example, sees

5. Harold Hickerson, *The Chippewa and Their Neighbors: A Study in Ethnohistory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 6.

6. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610–1791*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896–1901). Hereafter cited as *JR*.

7. The Jesuits, of course, have their defenders. John Webster Grant is forthright in his criticisms but concludes that the chief motive of the Jesuits "was the well-being of the Indians as they understood it." Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 37. James T. Moore argues that Indigenous peoples and the Jesuits shared "a belief in an imminently present spiritual world" and that the Jesuits only sought to change their "vantage point." Moore, *Indian and Jesuit: A Seventeenth-Century Encounter* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1982), xi.

8. Kenneth M. Morrison, *The Solidarity of Kin: Ethnohistory, Religious Studies, and the Algonkian-French Religious Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 105.

“traditional” practices to do with sex, marriage, and spiritual beliefs through Christian as well as Indigenous eyes.⁹

Nor can the observations of Indigenous writers be understood in isolation from the influence of Euro-American ethnologists and ethno-historians. In his chapter on the Ojibwe clan system, William W. Warren writes that he is describing “the peculiar customs and usages of the Algic type of the American aborigines.”¹⁰ We note immediately that Warren’s use of the term “peculiar” reveals the extent to which he has absorbed “white” prejudices about his own people. In addition, the word “Algic” is a term coined by American ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft in his 1839 collection of Native American legends and allegories entitled *Algic Researches*, to describe the Algonkian, Wiyot, and Yurok family of languages. Even Warren’s use of the term “American aborigines” speaks to the influence of Euro-American ethnologists.

Our efforts to restore the power and freedom of Algonquian women must begin, therefore, with the widespread influence and impact of American ethnologists. First in line is Lewis Henry Morgan, the author of *The League of the Iroquois* and *Ancient Society*.¹¹ In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* – subtitled *In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* – Friedrich Engels praises Morgan’s great “rediscovery,” that the matrilineal clan, or “gens,” was the “stage preliminary” to the patrilineal clan.¹² In this stage, the interests of society were more important than individual interests and the rights of property. Morgan, and Karl Marx and Engels after him, had a future to create that emerged from their understanding of the role of matrilineal clans in “primitive” communist societies.¹³ Engels was inspired by Morgan’s claim that the “next higher plane of society” would be “a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes.”¹⁴ For Morgan, the matrilineal clan system formed the basis of the Iroquois Confederacy, “a perfect and harmonious union.”¹⁵ Indeed, the “principle of

9. Reverend Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1861); Jones, *Life and Journals of Kah-ke-wa-quo-na-by* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1860); George Copway, *Indian Life and Indian History, by an Indian Author* (Boston: Albert Colby & Company, 1858); Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison Books, 1990).

10. William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1897), 41.

11. Lewis Henry Morgan, *The League of the Iroquois* (New York: Corinth Books, 1962); Morgan, *Ancient Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1877).

12. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 18. It is a discovery Engels compares to Darwin’s theory of evolution and Marx’s theory of surplus value.

13. In saying this I am not claiming that Morgan was a Marxist. See William H. Shaw, “Marx and Morgan,” *History and Theory* 23, 2 (May 1984): 215–228.

14. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 552.

15. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 58.

democracy ... was born of the gentes.”¹⁶ As a result, the Haudenosaunee occupied “the highest position among the Indian races” on the North American continent.¹⁷

The direct linkage of the matrilineal clan to the political and cultural superiority of Haudenosaunee society has provided Haudenosaunee women with a status historically denied to Algonquian women. This is true not just of Cree peoples such as the Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi), who did not have a clan system, but also of Algonquian peoples such as the Anishinaabe, who did have a clan system. Appreciating the role of women in these societies requires a searching critique of long-standing perceptions of Algonquian peoples like the Anishinaabe. The Anishinaabe – the peoples long known as the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi, the members of the Three Fires Confederacy – were organized in patrilineal clans based on animal totems.¹⁸ Anishinaabe author William Warren identifies “five original Totems”: A-waus-e (immense fish), Bus-in-aus-e (crane), Ah-ah-wauk (loon), Noka (bear), and Waub-ish-ash-e (marten).¹⁹

Once again, we need to return to the influence of 19th-century ethnologists to begin the process of bringing Algonquian women into the light. We start with Schoolcraft, who was the Chippewa agent at Sault Ste. Marie in the 1820s and 1830s. In his discussion of the Anishinaabe clan system, Schoolcraft writes about the Anishinaabe as if all clan members are male.²⁰ Warren, in his chapter on the Anishinaabe clan system, also writes only about men.²¹ It was an approach still being taken into the second half of the 20th century. In a 1966 article in *American Anthropologist*, Harold Hickerson, a leading ethnohistorian of the Anishinaabe, writes about “clan members and their women.”²² In effect, Hickerson does not acknowledge Anishinaabe women as clan members.

The neglected factor is that the Anishinaabe, like the Haudenosaunee, practised what anthropologists call clan exogamy – that is, it was only permissible to marry outside one’s own clan. Evidence suggests that in pre-contact society marrying within one’s clan was tantamount to incest. Warren, however, acknowledges that it happened in the mid-19th century, “in the present

16. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 73.

17. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 55.

18. At times the Mississauga are included as well. There is now a tendency to use the term “Anishinaabe” to describe all Algonquian peoples, but this practice is of dubious historical and cultural validity.

19. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 44.

20. Henry R. Schoolcraft, *The American Indians, Their History, Condition and Prospects* (Buffalo: George H. Derby, 1851), 294–295.

21. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 41–53.

22. Harold Hickerson, “The Genesis of Bilaterality among Two Divisions of Chippewa,” *American Anthropologist* 68, 1 (February 1966): 8.

somewhat degenerated times.”²³ In the pre-contact period, the clan identities of women were just as important in maintaining clan exogamy as were the clan identities of men. The anthropological characterization of the Anishinaabe as patrilineal, however, has rendered Anishinaabe women virtually invisible into the 21st century.

Recently, the work of historians such as Brenda Child, Heidi Bohaker, and Cary Miller has brought to the fore the central role Anishinaabe women played in their societies. That central role was not diminished by the fact that the Anishinaabe were “patrilineal.”²⁴ Child observes that Anishinaabe women “marshaled much of the economy.”²⁵ Bohaker demonstrates that Anishinaabe women had “clearly defined political roles,” and their councils “were a central component of Anishinaabe governance.”²⁶ Miller describes roles for Anishinaabe women that are difficult to distinguish from the roles ascribed to Haudenosaunee women since the days of the 17th-century French writers; they acted as peacemakers, represented male relatives in political affairs, played a role in the adoption of captives, and had input on decisions concerning warfare as members of women’s councils.²⁷

Bohaker bases her portrayal of Anishinaabe women on the concept of the alliance, arguing that women were “active participants in the maintenance of alliance relationships.” Marriages, which were arranged by the women, “particularly grandmothers,” did not involve women being exchanged by the men, as 17th-century French observers claimed.²⁸ In contrast, marriages “had to be requested, arranged, and maintained between people, their families, and the council fires to which they belonged.”²⁹ These marriages took place within their own societies, with men from other Anishinaabe societies and at times with men from societies ranging from the Dakota to the French.

The approach is remarkably divorced from any consideration of personal relations among Anishinaabe men and women, with no consideration of Anishinaabe women as sexual beings or of their sexual relationships with Anishinaabe men, men from other Indigenous societies, or European men. In addition, there is little consideration of Anishinaabe women as spiritual beings. Ironically, the 17th-century French sources, including the *Jesuit*

23. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 42.

24. Heidi Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire: Anishinaabe Governance through Alliance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 13, 73, 78, 145.

25. Brenda J. Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (New York: Viking, 2012), xxvi.

26. Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire*, 141.

27. Cary Miller, *Ogimaag: Anishinaabeg Leadership, 1760–1845* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 66–70.

28. Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire*, 85.

29. Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire*, 78–79.

Relations, offer a more rounded portrayal of Anishinaabe women. Assessed in relation to the writings of Indigenous authors in the 19th and 20th centuries, these sources provide a greater appreciation of the power and freedom of these women.

It is necessary to begin, however, by returning to the 19th-century works of Morgan and their influence on Marx and Engels. Although *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was dedicated to Morgan, Engels' perceptions of Native American women were actually influenced as much or more by Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887), the author of *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World*. Bachofen posits four stages of cultural evolution, the first of which he calls hetaerism, characterized by sexual promiscuity. At this stage, wild, nomadic peoples, typically called hunter-gatherers, were communistic and practised group marriage. By the time of the second stage, mother right, they had evolved into what Morgan calls the lower stage of barbarism, having become agricultural, and are practising pairing marriage.

In 1891 Engels encapsulated his reading of Bachofen in four stages. Engels takes from Bachofen that in the beginning “humanity lived in a state of sexual promiscuity” that Bachofen calls hetaerism.³⁰ As paternity was uncertain, lineage could only be reckoned through the mother. As a result, “women were treated with a high degree of consideration and respect,” which evolved into “the complete rule of women.”³¹ Engels sets out a cause-and-effect relationship between sexual promiscuity and matriarchy, or what Bachofen calls mother right.

In one school of feminism the sexual behaviour of Indigenous women became a major theme in the last quarter of the 20th century, as it embodied the much greater freedom Indigenous women had from male control. The key figure in this historiography is American anthropologist Eleanor Leacock, who wrote the introduction to a 1972 edition of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.³² In 1978 Leacock published a highly influential article in *Current Anthropology*, which was sent to 50 other academics for commentary.³³ Three years later, Monthly Review Press published a collection of her articles in *Myths of Male Dominance*.³⁴ Leacock's influence continues to this day on the left; a February 2020 book review places her at the head of a list

30. Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 10.

31. Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 10.

32. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

33. Eleanor Leacock, “Women's Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution,” *Current Anthropology* 19, 2 (June 1978): 247–275. Twenty of the responses were published with Leacock's article.

34. Eleanor Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1981).

of authors who have made “major attempts to integrate Marxian theory with Native American struggles.”³⁵

While the power and freedom of Haudenosaunee women is associated with the central role they played in the growing and sharing of food, the choosing of sachems, the adoption of captives, and the influence they had in choosing war or peace, Leacock takes the power and freedom of Algonquian women in a different direction. Although she is theoretically writing about Indigenous women as a whole, the fact that her fieldwork and writing are about the Montagnais-Naskapi (Innu) puts the focus on Algonquian women. Leacock characterizes Algonquian wives sleeping with men other than their husbands as an assertion of individual autonomy.³⁶ She claims it is accepted behaviour, not sexual infidelity – that is a European perspective.³⁷ There was, Leacock claims, “unquestioned acceptance ... of sexual freedom after marriage.”³⁸ Carole Blackburn, influenced by Leacock’s work, posits “women’s relative autonomy and lack of obedience to their husbands.”³⁹

While Haudenosaunee women are primarily perceived on the basis of the linkage between descent and matriarchy, Leacock’s approach links the status of Algonquian women to sexual promiscuity. Her argument does more to bias our understanding of Algonquian women than it does to affect how we see Haudenosaunee women. Our perceptions of them have been formed by historians such as Cornelius Jaenen. One of Canada’s best known and most influential historians of New France, Jaenen links matriarchy with monogamy, not sexual promiscuity, when he argues that the Haudenosaunee “upheld the ideal of marital fidelity.”⁴⁰

Morgan’s depiction of sex and marriage among the Haudenosaunee is upheld by Jaenen, while Leacock’s depiction of the sexuality of Algonquian women comes from Engels and Bachofen. In *The League of the Iroquois*, Morgan states that “there was but little sociality” between the sexes, adding that no “attempts by the unmarried to please or gratify each other by acts of personal attention, were ever made.”⁴¹ Divorce was “unfrequent” in pre-contact society, and couples splitting up for “the most frivolous reasons” was a post-contact

35. John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark & Hannah Holleman, “Marx and the Indigenous,” *Monthly Review* 71, 9 (February 2020): 14.

36. The Montagnais-Naskapi now self-identify, and are increasingly known to others, as the Innu.

37. Leacock, “Women’s Status,” 249.

38. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, 49.

39. Carole Blackburn, *Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632–1650* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 98.

40. Cornelius Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 60.

41. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 323.

phenomenon.⁴² In *Ancient Society*, Morgan solidifies his depiction of the Haudenosaunee as the Indigenous version of Euro-Americans, claiming that “chastity had come to be required of the wife under severe penalties which the husband might inflict; but he did not admit the reciprocal obligation.”⁴³

Morgan’s emphasis on chastity and Leacock’s emphasis on sexual freedom by way of Engels associate Haudenosaunee women with the former and Algonquian women with the latter. An ethnohistorical approach cannot reveal any absolute truths, but it can further our understanding, and it can create a vision of these women that goes beyond anthropological categories and the desire to see Indigenous women as the opposite of “white” women. Linking the observations of 17th-century French writers and 19th- and 20th-century Indigenous writers provides a more rounded portrayal of Algonquian women as human beings and historical actors.

According to the Leacock school, the pre-contact sexual behaviour of Indigenous women was characterized by freedom from the patriarchy and religious oppression of European societies. The most forceful assertion of this behaviour is to be found in the work of sociologist Karen Anderson, who states that her understanding of Indigenous women in New France “is part of a larger and on-going project in feminism which has taken as its object the description, explanation and analysis of how women came to be dominated by men.”⁴⁴ According to Anderson, Indigenous women were more difficult to convert than the men, and they were “the Jesuits’ most vociferous and relentless opponents. Wild, ill-mannered, rude and dangerously lewd they challenged Jesuit beliefs, and teachings. As women, they refused to conform to the behaviour that the Jesuits knew God had ordained for their sex. They would not submit themselves to the authority of their husbands and fathers. They would not behave in a modest and gentle fashion. They made no attempt to hide their sexuality, did not value virginity, chastity, or sexual continence and refused to remain married to an unsuitable spouse.”⁴⁵ There is a surprising reason why this feminist depiction of the sexual behaviour of Aboriginal women must be challenged: its reliance on the accounts of the Jesuits, notably Paul Le Jeune, who spent the winter of 1633–34 with the Montagnais. While living with the Montagnais, Anderson concludes, Le Jeune discovered “just how dangerously free women were.”⁴⁶ Yet this is the same Paul Le Jeune who, writing from Sillery in 1639, describes the largely Algonquian women there as “sufficiently reserved, fearing that they may not find a husband if they make themselves

42. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 324–325.

43. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 455.

44. Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

45. Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*, 18.

46. Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*, 29.

common.”⁴⁷ The women Anderson describes as “dangerously lewd” Le Jeune describes at one point as “naturally bashful.”⁴⁸

One of the great mysteries in the existing literature is that Jesuit depictions of Indigenous peoples are questioned at every turn, yet when they write about the sexual licentiousness of Algonquian women, almost everything they say is accepted as fact. In this way it is possible to depict the Jesuits taking away the sexual freedom and individual autonomy of Algonquian women, as their insistence on chastity and obedience is a European, Catholic imposition with no roots in pre-contact society. In reality, however, it did have roots in the traditional culture. The portrayal of Algonquian women as sexual libertines is more driven by a desire to make them freer than European women, less under the thumb of the patriarchy, than it is informed by an understanding of the ways in which their sexual behaviour emerged from pre-contact cultural practices. In addition, the Leacock approach essentially equates the personal freedom of Algonquian women with sexual freedom. Taking another look at courting behaviour, marriage, and divorce shines a light on the ability of Algonquian women to control their own bodies and exercise personal freedom.

An examination of the behaviour of courting couples immediately brings to the fore a number of questions related to the interpretation of sources. Typical of comments about this behaviour are the observations of Samuel de Champlain about unmarried Huron girls. Champlain says that among the Huron, young girls between the ages of eleven and fifteen had suitors.⁴⁹ He claims that young women could have as many as “twenty mates” over a period of some years.⁵⁰ Both sexes had multiple partners, with no jealousy arising. The girl chose, often against the wishes of her parents, whom she would marry.⁵¹ The “discrete and considerate” girls married with the approval of their parents, while the others refused parental advice.⁵² In Algonquian societies, Champlain observes, unmarried girls also had greater sexual freedom than married women. In Montagnais society, young women took lovers over a period of five or six years, and it was the women who decided whom to marry.⁵³

47. *JR*, 16:63. Sillery, also known to the French as Saint Joseph, was called Kamiskouaouangachit by the Algonquians. Located at Québec, it was the first mission settlement on the St. Lawrence, founded in 1637. See Jean-François Lozier, *Flesh Reborn: The Saint Lawrence Valley Mission Settlements through the Seventeenth Century* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018), 53–85.

48. *JR*, 16:91.

49. Reverend Edmund F. Slafter, ed., *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, vol. 3, 1611–18 (Boston: Prince Society, 1882), 168.

50. Slafter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 3:169.

51. Slafter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 3:168.

52. Slafter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 3:168.

53. Reverend Edmund F. Slafter, ed., *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, vol. 2, 1604–10 (Boston: Prince Society, 1878), 191.

There is a convincing body of evidence that the sexual behaviour of betrothed and married women was quite different from the sexual behaviour of unmarried women. Nicolas Perrot asserts the stability of Algonquian marriages, claiming that Outaoüas (Ottawa, Odawa) men marry for life, unless their wives give them a compelling reason to end the relationship.⁵⁴ Thomas Forsyth observes in the 19th century that “altho there are many loose girls among them, the married women are generally very constant.”⁵⁵ Once married, Champlain argues of Montagnais society, “the women are chaste, and their husbands generally jealous.”⁵⁶ Pierre Liette, writing about the Illinois, states that he knew one woman “who assured me that she and her husband had lived together six months without having intercourse.”⁵⁷

This woman may actually have been referring to a trial period in which the suitor lived with his prospective wife’s family, during which time he demonstrated his fitness to be married to their daughter. Basil Johnston observes that “in many instances,” a marriage took place “only after the young man had proved by living in the home of the girl’s parents and supporting the family that he was capable of providing adequately for a future wife.”⁵⁸ It is reasonable to believe that the young woman, supported by her parents, did not want to become pregnant by a man who might prove to be a poor hunter and provider. Such an interpretation of the evidence is borne out by Champlain’s contemporary Nicolas Denys, who observes of courtship among the Mi’kmaq, “The father, the mother, the daughter, and the suitor all slept in the same wigwam, the daughter was near her mother, and the suitor on the other side, always with the fire between them.”⁵⁹ Peter Jones notes the “great reserve manifested by the young females, and not to maintain it would be to lose the spotlessness of their character, and bring on themselves the reproach of the old people.”⁶⁰ Ethnologist Frances Densmore observes that young Anishinaabe women “were closely guarded and were modest in their behavior toward the young men of the tribe.”⁶¹ Echoing the observations of Denys about the Mi’kmaq,

54. Nicolas Perrot, *Mémoire sur les moeurs, costumes et religion des sauvages de l’Amérique septentrionale* (Leipzig & Paris: Librairie A. Franck, 1864), 22.

55. Emma Helen Blair, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, vol. 2 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1912), 215.

56. Slaughter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 2:191.

57. Milo Milton Quaipe, ed., *The Western Country in the 17th Century: The Memoirs of Antoine Lamothe Cadillac and Pierre Liette* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 117.

58. Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 117.

59. Nicolas Denys, *The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1908), 407.

60. Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians*, 78–79.

61. Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1929), 72.

Densmore notes that in the lodge, the daughter and her suitor were closely watched by the mother or grandmother.⁶²

In this regard it is of more than passing interest that Indigenous authors such as Jones, George Copway, and Johnston have almost nothing to say about sexual relations. Warren's only claim is that there was "more chastity" in men and women in the past than in his own day, that is, "since their baneful intercourse with the white race."⁶³ In employing a term such as "spotlessness," Protestant minister Jones reveals the influence of Christianity and his agreement with Warren that women had lost their pre-contact purity under white influence.

We must not be too quick to embrace the Leacock school and to dismiss the recollections of Jones, Copway, Johnston, and Warren as romantic recollections of an imagined past. The 17th-century evidence tells us that young Algonquian women were not the paragons of virtue the Jesuits wanted them to be, but it also warns us against rushing to see them as so much more sexually active than their European counterparts. Given the age at which young women reportedly began having sexual relations, the later desire to maintain control of their own bodies and to choose a marriage partner is quite remarkable. This is consistent with the Baron de Lahontan's observation that "elles boivent le jus de certaines racines qui les empêchent de concevoir, ou qui fait perir leur fruit."⁶⁴ His claim that young girls and women practised birth control and abortion is borne out in observations made two centuries later. According to Thomas Forsyth, US agent at Fort Armstrong in the Mississippi Valley in the 19th century, among the Algonkians it "is very uncommon for unmarried women to have children, except it be those who live with whitemen for sometime."⁶⁵ Perhaps Warren was not so wrong after all.

In a chapter entitled "Amours & Mariages" the Baron de Lahontan turns Leacock's portrayal of the sexual behaviour of Algonkian women on its head. He confirms the widespread observation that both men and women are free to leave a spouse when it pleases them but entirely disagrees with Leacock's reading that this demonstrates the freedom of Algonkian wives to have sex with men other than their husbands. Infidelity, Lahontan argues, is considered a vile action by both men and women, and he states that women would rather be dead than to commit adultery.⁶⁶ Lahontan writes, "Je suis persuadé qu'un

62. Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 72.

63. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 101.

64. "They drink the juice of certain roots, which prevents them from conceiving or ends their pregnancy." Le Baron de Lahontan, *Mémoires de L'Amérique septentrionale Ou La Suite Des Voyages de Mr Le Baron De Lahontan* (A La Haye: Chez les Frères L'Honoré, Marchands Libraires, 1704), 133.

65. Blair, *Indian Tribes*, 2:16.

66. Lahontan, *Mémoires de L'Amérique septentrionale*, 132. Peter Jones claims that adultery was a "heinous crime" that led to the husband biting off his wife's nose. Jones, *History of the*

Sauvage souffrirait plutôt la mutilation, que d'avoir caressé la femme de son voisin. Les Sauvages ne sont pas d'une chasteté moins austère."⁶⁷ Algonkian wives, Lahontan tells us, are not committed to the male-dominated double standard of European society; some of them do want to have sex with men other than their husbands. The crucial point is that the sexual freedom they seek is anchored in fidelity to their husbands, not in infidelity. This fidelity has not been imposed upon them by Catholic priests; as Lahontan observes, they have been influenced by couples they have grown up among, who have married for life and maintained "une fidélité inviolable."⁶⁸

Lahontan's observations notwithstanding, a body of evidence in the 17th-century sources tells us that some Algonkian wives, like some wives in all societies, had sexual relationships with men other than their husbands. There is, however, an alternative way of perceiving this "infidelity." In the 1930s, anthropologist Ruth Landes observes of the Ojibwe, "Full, and especially faithful, sex activity outside of wedlock is forbidden; and so strong is the feeling, and so considerable the ease of separation, that lovers often break up their respective marital establishments in order to live openly together."⁶⁹ Landes, echoing Lahontan, acknowledges that married women have sex outside marriage, but they do not have what we now call "affairs." The main consideration is being faithful to a partner, and ease of separation allows women to be faithful. They have, in effect, a kind of personal freedom that cannot be collapsed into sexual freedom.

It is true, as so many 17th-century French observers attest, that most young women in the process of choosing a mate slept with a series of men. Once a potential husband was chosen, however, and he began to live with the young woman's family, her sexual behaviour underwent a dramatic change because her priorities underwent a dramatic change. Her personal freedom now had to do with finding a partner who was a good provider, not just for her but for her family as well. Given the greater uncertainty of the hunter-gatherer way of life, marital stability may have been, as Perrot suggests, more important to Algonkian women than to Iroquoian women.

The Leacock school does not take into consideration one of the inescapable realities of the lives of Algonkian women, which is that changing partners did not change the nature of their daily work lives. Changing sexual partners did not change the fact that in hunter-gatherer societies men were the main providers, and the lives of women revolved around dealing with the animals

Ojibway Indians, 80.

67. "I am persuaded that a savage would rather suffer mutilation than caress his neighbor's wife. The savages are not of a less austere morality." Lahontan, *Mémoires de L'Amérique septentrionale*, 140. I have changed the 17th-century orthography to accord with current practice.

68. Lahontan, *Mémoires de l'Amérique septentrionale*, 137.

69. Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 54.

killed by the men. The gender roles of Algonquian women entailed a great deal of hard, physical labour, and there is no denying this basic reality. That said, there is new evidence to be considered and different ways of looking at the work lives of Algonquian women that heighten our appreciation of their lives and contributions.

Once again, it is necessary to begin by acknowledging the long-standing stereotypes that have continued to influence thinking about Algonquian women to our own day. In the early days of New France the widespread opinion of French explorers, traders, and Catholic priests was that Indigenous women endured all hardships. Their days were ones of unremitting toil, determined by a gendered division of labour that ensured life was harder for them than for Indigenous men. The theme was taken up in the 19th century by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous authors. Schoolcraft claimed that Chippewa women were “compelled to do the work and drudgery of savage life.”⁷⁰ In *Histoire du Canada*, first published in 1845, François-Xavier Garneau argued that work, as distinct from hunting, fishing, and waging war, was a dishonourable occupation that the men left to the women. For Indigenous men, it was an insult to work in the fields.⁷¹ As Nancy Shoemaker observes, Europeans “cast Indian men as idle spongers living off the drudgery of their women.”⁷² Jones echoed Schoolcraft, saying of the Ojibwe wife that “her fatigues and drudgery are often great.”⁷³

From the mid-19th century, women in hunter-gatherer societies were cast into the shadows, even by Garneau, whose descriptions are largely based on his understanding of the Algonquian peoples who inhabited the St. Lawrence and Ottawa River valleys, Atlantic Canada, and the Great Lakes region. Yet his observation about men refusing to work in the fields is based on an assumption that all Indigenous peoples were peoples of the corn. Algonquian women were relegated to lives of drudgery, while Haudenosaunee women were accorded a higher status because of their control over the growing and sharing of agricultural crops. There is, even if only implicitly, an assumption that Algonquian women did not have a comparable control over the killing of game animals and the sharing of meat. Morgan says of Haudenosaunee hospitality that it “rested chiefly upon the industry, and therefore upon the natural kindness of the Indian woman; who, by the cultivation of the maize, and their other plants,

70. Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal of Travels from Detroit Northwest through the Great Chain of American Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River* (Albany, New York: E & E Hosford, 1821), 228.

71. François-Xavier Garneau, *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours* (Québec: N. Aubin, 1845), 208, <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2022752>.

72. Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124.

73. Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians*, 79.

and the gathering of the wild fruits, provided the principal part of their subsistence, for the warrior despised the toil of husbandry, and held all labor beneath him."⁷⁴

In part because of the semi-permanent nature of Haudenosaunee settlements, and the dynamics of the longhouse, Haudenosaunee women are perceived to have a role in the household that Algonquian women do not. We see this in the work of Engels, based on Morgan's work on the Haudenosaunee, when he writes that "the communistic household implies the supremacy of women in the house."⁷⁵ In the decades since Engels wrote, that supremacy has become virtually synonymous with Haudenosaunee women.

The association of matriarchy, agriculture, and marital fidelity has created a more positive image of Haudenosaunee women. The key role of Haudenosaunee women in the growing of corn, beans, and squash has led to arguments about their importance in Haudenosaunee society as a whole. Diamond Jenness attributes the privileges and freedoms of Haudenosaunee women to a gendered division of labour that gave them a leading role in agriculture, which made them responsible for "the greater part of the food supply."⁷⁶ Judith K. Brown, who influenced Leacock and was in turn influenced by her, argues that Haudenosaunee women "controlled the factors of agricultural production" and life in the longhouse – indeed, the entire "economic organization" of the tribe. "Iroquois matrons," Brown asserts, "enjoyed unusual authority in their society, perhaps more than women have ever enjoyed anywhere at any time."⁷⁷

We can go back to the ideas of Leacock to begin the process of earning Algonquian women the respect they deserve. Leacock's depiction of the sexual behaviour of married women has serious evidentiary problems, but she is quite right in her Marxist-based argument that Indigenous peoples were "economically independent exchangers of goods and services." In Indigenous societies, "all individuals" – men and women – controlled the conditions and products of their labour.⁷⁸ Leacock's argument includes Algonquian women, but the dominance of the linkage of agriculture, matrilineality, and the heightened role of women makes them difficult to see.

74. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 329.

75. Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 49.

76. Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1963), 137.

77. Judith K. Brown, "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note," in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 251, 243. Kathryn Magee Labelle argues that in Iroquoian-speaking Wendat society, "women controlled community fields, activities around the home, and domestic life." Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 2.

78. Eleanor Leacock, "Interpreting the Origins of Gender Inequality: Conceptual and Historical Problems," *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, 4 (February 1983): 280, 266.

In Algonquian society this control has been overshadowed by the “real pack mules” perception of Algonquian women. The Jesuits, and other 17th-century French writers, point out that it was the women who dressed the animals killed by the men and brought the meat back to the camp. Pierre Biard, writing from Port Royal in 1612, says the women “transport the game from the place where it has fallen.”⁷⁹ In 1616, writing from Paris, Biard confirms his earlier assertion, stating that the women “go to bring the game from the place where it has been killed.”⁸⁰ Denys observes that in Mi’kmaq society it is the work of the women “to go fetch the animal after it was killed, to skin it, and cut it into pieces for cooking.”⁸¹ Paul Le Jeune, writing in 1633 about the Montagnais, says the men “go hunting, and kill the animals; and the women go after them, skin them, and clean the hides.”⁸²

The key point is that French observers were more alive to the “enduring all hardships” aspect of this task than they were to its significance for the role of women. Once the animals were killed the women were responsible for the meat, bones, and hides. Proper treatment of the bones was crucial because improper treatment not only was disrespectful but could lead to the animals not being found by the hunters. The success of the hunters greatly depended on the respectful treatment accorded to the animals by the women, and this has remained the case. While living with the Mistissini Cree between 1969 and 1971, Adrian Tanner observed that after a meal the bones were still sorted by the women and stored on the women’s side of the dwelling.⁸³

The evidence is fragmentary and does not allow for firm conclusions, but there is enough to tip the scales in favour of the “supremacy” of Algonquian women in the household. In 1616 Biard commented that “women are everywhere better managers” than men.⁸⁴ Le Jeune had no doubt about who was in charge in the 1630s, observing that the men “leave the arrangement of the household to the women, without interfering with them; they cut, and decide, and give away as they please, without making the husband angry.”⁸⁵ Algonquian women played a leading role in the household, a role based in their responsibility for the game killed by the men. That responsibility also made Algonquian women mobile; in the spring, summer, and fall, game was retrieved in canoes. The women’s standing was related as much to mobility as

79. *JR*, 2:77.

80. *JR*, 3:101.

81. Denys, *Description and Natural History*, 422.

82. *JR*, 5:133.

83. Adrian Tanner, *Bringing Home Animals: Mistissini Hunters of Northern Quebec*, 2nd ed. (St. John’s: ISER Books, 2014), 143. The men, however, were responsible for the skulls.

84. *JR*, 3:107.

85. *JR*, 6:233.

to their control of the household. The full significance of Algonquian women can only be understood in terms of their relationship to the canoe.

One of the early French explorers who quickly appreciated the relationship of Algonquian women and the canoe was Champlain. In 1603, Champlain was at Tadoussac from 26 May to 18 June, long enough to observe the culture of the local Algonquian peoples. His account includes a description of the canoe, a small craft eight to nine feet long, paddled by two people, "l'homme et la femme."⁸⁶ In one of the first European descriptions of the canoe that we have, Champlain identifies the canoe as being paddled by a man and his wife, not by two men. In addition, he was impressed by their abilities, "car encore que notre chaloupe fut bien armée, ils allaient plus vite que nous."⁸⁷ This early appreciation of the skill and strength of Algonquian women paddlers was to be noted again and again in the coming years by the Jesuits.

In 1613 Champlain journeyed from Sault St. Louis (Montréal) to Morrison Island in the Ottawa River, near the present-day town of Pembroke. It was on this journey that he lost his famous astrolabe, an event that has garnered most of the attention of historians and the reading public. While on Morrison Island he went to an Algonquin cemetery and later described the custom of burying artifacts with the deceased to be used in the afterlife. Champlain observed that the women were buried with "a boiler, an earthen vessel, a wooden spoon, and an oar."⁸⁸ The mistranslation of the French word "*rame*" as "oar" instead of "paddle" notwithstanding, Champlain's observation reveals the powerful connection between Algonquin women and paddling.

The existing historical evidence indicates that women were buried with paddles, and men were not. Perrot observes that an Odawa man is buried with "des vivres and des armes."⁸⁹ In the 19th century Henry Youle Hind observes that Montagnais and Naskapi men are buried with a "gun, axe, fire-steel, flint, tinder, and kettle," while women are buried with their paddles and wooden dishes.⁹⁰ In the 20th century Basil Johnston states that a warrior is buried with "his medicine bag and weapons."⁹¹

Le Jeune provides one of the most compelling accounts of women being buried with paddles. It is the story of a young married girl who is dying. One

86. *Les Voyages de Samuel de Champlain au Canada de 1603 à 1618* (Québec: La Compagnie Vigue, 1908), 10. No editor is identified, but the preface suggests the volume was published under the auspices of the Catholic Church.

87. "Because even though our boat was well rigged, they were going faster than us." *Les Voyages de Samuel de Champlain*, 10.

88. Slafter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 3:70.

89. Perrot, *Mémoire*, 40.

90. Henry Youle Hind, *Explorations in the Interior of the Labrador Peninsula: The Country of the Montagnais and Nasquapee Indians*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1863), 170.

91. Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 118.

of the attempts to save her is made by her father's brother-in-law, who dreams that she needs to lie on a sheepskin "painted with various figures." In response to the dream, they paint "canoes, paddles, animals, and such things" on a sheepskin.⁹² Their efforts are in vain, and when she dies two paddles are placed in her grave, as well as "different utensils or instruments which the girls and women use."⁹³

The connection of Algonquin women and the canoe is confirmed by the fact that on Champlain's return journey there were Algonquin women in the party who were not with the party when it left Montréal. At one point two canoes of Algonquins who had been fishing returned to camp, claiming to have seen four Iroquois canoes. Three canoes sent out to find the Iroquois canoes failed to do so. Alarmed by the possible presence of a Haudenosaunee war party, the women "resolved to spend the night in their canoes, not feeling at ease on land."⁹⁴

Not only does Champlain tell us that the women were paddling "their" canoes; he also posits a powerful relationship between Algonquin women and the water. Champlain's observation is confirmed by Le Jeune in an incident that happened at Cap Rouge in August 1637. Le Jeune describes two Huron canoes leaving Cap Rouge, with one returning, the second canoe having been captured by the Haudenosaunee. In a state of panic, some men are sent out to reconnoitre and return with the frightening news that there are two hundred Haudenosaunee at the entrance to Lake St. Pierre. The response to this news is quite astonishing: at four o'clock in the morning the Montagnais women, with their children, leave by canoe for Québec, Trois-Rivières, and other places.⁹⁵ The men, in contrast, seek refuge in the fort.

This incident is rich in meanings and possibilities. Le Jeune says that initially the women wanted access to the fort, so at some point there was a change in thinking. A "rationalist" explanation suggests that the Montagnais, fearing the wrath of the Haudenosaunee, decided that the women were more likely to escape on the water under cover of darkness than to survive an attack on the fort. However, given that the Huron men were captured on the river, the willingness of the Montagnais women to seek safety on the water takes us back to Champlain's observation that they were more at ease there. It is this relationship, not French arms or the Christian God, that they turned to in their hour of need.⁹⁶

92. *JR*, 8:261.

93. *JR*, 8: 269.

94. Slafter, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, 3:82.

95. Le Jeune only makes reference to Huron men, but we cannot assume there were no Huron women and children among them.

96. The choice warns us against objectification of the Haudenosaunee because it seems based in a belief that, if captured, the women will not be raped or killed.

Not surprisingly, Le Jeune goes on to describe the conflict with the Haudenosaunee in some detail, while the fate of the women and children goes unrecorded. What is recorded, at a number of points in the *Jesuit Relations*, is a number of accounts of Algonquian women paddling canoes.⁹⁷ In one instance, a woman who was five months pregnant – and dying – paddled a canoe twelve leagues on her own.⁹⁸ But it is in the letters of Charles and Jérôme Lalement that we find the most striking evidence of the relationship. The first instance is a letter Charles Lalement wrote to his brother Jérôme from Québec in 1626. Charles writes that the paddles “are proportioned to the canoes, one at the bow and one at the stern; ordinarily, the woman holds the one at the stern, and consequently steers. These poor women are real pack mules, enduring all hardships.”⁹⁹

Lalement perceives paddling a canoe as something that men should be doing and one of the tasks that makes the lives of Algonquian women extremely onerous. This characterization of Indigenous women as “enduring all hardships” is always perceived negatively, as a condemnation of the Indigenous way of life in general and a critique of the subjugation of Indigenous women to Indigenous men. The Jesuits have contributed to this perception, as Lalement’s observation demonstrates. We need to understand, however, that there is another side to the story, one that places the focus on the ways in which the “enduring all hardships” characterization reveals the skill, strength, and endurance of Algonquian women.

This other side of the story is to be found in Jérôme Lalement and Marie de L’Incarnation’s description of the escape of Marie Ka Makatewingwetch (Kamakateouingouetch) from Haudenosaunee captivity. For the first ten days after escaping, Marie had only “two little dishfuls” of corn kernels found under the snow. Her diet also included roots and the inner bark of trees, until she found a Haudenosaunee hatchet that allowed her to make a fire stick. With the arrival of spring she was able to eat turtle eggs found in small rivers and the eggs of river birds. She took “great sturgeons” with a spear she made. She made off with the canoe of some Haudenosaunee hunters; it being too large, she used the hatchet to shorten it for her own use.¹⁰⁰ She rushed deer into the water, “easily pursuing them” in her canoe, killing them with hatchet blows,

97. For just some of the references in the *Jesuit Relations* to women paddling canoes, at times by themselves over long distances, see 9:55, 11:83, 16:213, 18:223, 21:41, 26:123, 30:275, 37:215–217, 51:79, and 62:137.

98. *JR*, 26:205–207. There are conflicting estimates of the length of a league in this period, but most historians would agree that twelve leagues is roughly 50 kilometres.

99. *JR*, 4:205.

100. Lalement’s account can be corroborated. Champlain describes Montagnais canoes as being eight to nine feet long, while Morgan points out that the smallest Iroquois canoes were twelve feet long. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 367–368.

hauling them into the canoe, and eating them.¹⁰¹ In this manner she was able to return home, following a journey of more than two months.

The skill and bravery of Algonquian women was also on display in the relationship with their canoe partners. In 1647 Jérôme Lalement related an incident that confirmed his brother's earlier account. It is the story of an Algonquin man and his wife "who was steering the canoe." They encounter a Haudenosaunee canoe with seven or eight warriors in it, and the man decides, against all odds, to attack the canoe. His wife says that she will give up her life to help him, but they reconsider when four or five more Haudenosaunee canoes come into view.¹⁰² In a sense, the response of the wife confirms Charles Lalement's perception that Algonquian women were willing to endure all hardships. The greater meaning, however, lies in the fact that the husband was willing to entrust his fate to the strength, endurance, and quick-thinking of his wife, whose abilities literally meant the difference between life and death.

The relationship between Algonquian women and the canoe has been consistently downplayed, even by historians as knowledgeable and sympathetic as Leacock. In a chapter on Jesuit efforts to convert Montagnais-Naskapi women, she includes a long quotation taken from the account of the Jesuit Pierre Biard at Port Royal in 1612. Biard observes that Mi'kmaq women make the canoes. In a note at the bottom of the page Leacock writes, "Actually, men usually made canoe frames and women covered them, though either sex could do both if necessary."¹⁰³ Leacock is right but in the process shifts the focus to the men, rather than following up on Biard's point about the centrality of the women. Gilles Havard does the same thing, quoting Nicolas Perrot to the effect that men made the canoes. Then, six pages later, he acknowledges that Algonkian women were involved in building canoes.¹⁰⁴ What we do not learn from Havard is that Perrot at another point in his *Mémoire* observes that the "sauvages, et leurs femmes surtout, excellent dans l'art de faire ces canots."¹⁰⁵ Here, Perrot asserts that women are the best canoe builders, confirming the observations of Biard.

The lives of Algonquian women were lived out in canoes; in the canoe they fished, gathered wild rice, travelled to find roots, berries, and birchbark with which to build canoes and cover wigwams, fled attacking enemy warriors, and travelled to the winter hunting grounds and the summer meeting places.

101. *JR*, 30:263–265. The striking similarity between Lalement's account and that of Marie de L'Incarnation leaves no doubt that she is the source of his story. See Joyce Marshall, ed., *Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de L'Incarnation* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 171–175.

102. *JR*, 30:283.

103. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, 45.

104. Gilles Havard, *Empire et Métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660–1715* (Québec: Septentrion, 2003), 449, 454.

105. Perrot, *Mémoire*, 298.

Algonquian women had to be experts at paddling and shooting rapids, as well as repairing and building canoes. Jones observes that a young couple's courtship ended with a wedding trip; they went hunting and fishing, with "*the bride steering the canoe.*"¹⁰⁶ According to Densmore, she did so with an *ikwe' abwi'*, a woman's paddle, instead of an "ordinary paddle."¹⁰⁷

Over time, the relationship among Algonquian women, their responsibility for feeding the people, and the canoe was increasingly weakened. An incident that occurred in the late summer of 1616 or early spring of 1617 reminds us of the importance this relationship once had. In this case two Montagnais warriors responded to being abused by some Frenchmen by murdering them. Having done the deed, they tied rocks to the bodies and dumped them in the St. Lawrence River. Then, almost certainly in the spring of 1618, the bodies were found washed up on the shore. In response to the ensuing demands by the French for restitution, an Indigenous man by the name of La Ferrière revealed to the French a plan to wipe them out that a council of 800 Montagnais had discussed at Trois-Rivières. Deciding against this plan of action, the Montagnais asked the French to accept gifts as restitution for the murders, appealing to the traditional way of dealing with such crimes. The gifts included moose hides, deerskins, beaver pelts, and wampum.

In describing these gifts, H. P. Biggar says the French accepted them "as there was insufficiency of provisions in the settlement."¹⁰⁸ The problem, of course, is that the gifts given to the French were not provisions. Biggar is alluding to the fact that both the French and the Montagnais, emerging from the winter, were on the verge of starvation. Gabriel Sagard, in fact, claims that the Montagnais were dying of hunger, and hunger was causing both sides to seek peace.¹⁰⁹ The gifts of the Montagnais could not feed the hungry French. All the attention paid to the gifts being exchanged by the men has overshadowed the fact that the concern with provisions is the story of the Montagnais women. According to the Récollet father Chrestien le Clercq, the Montagnais sent "quarante Canots de femmes" to the French to obtain "des vivres."¹¹⁰ The French, however, had little to give, and the women were able to obtain only some prunes and nothing else.¹¹¹

106. Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians*, 79. The italics, which are in the original, may be the author's way of emphasizing the role of Ojibwe women in paddling canoes.

107. Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 20.

108. H. P. Biggar, ed., *The Works of Samuel de Champlain, 1615–18*, vol. 3 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1929), 190n2.

109. Gabriel Sagard Theodat, *Histoire du Canada et voyages que les frères mineurs recollects y ont faits pour la conversion des infidèles* (Paris: Librairie Tross, 1866), 55–56.

110. Chrestien Le Clercq, *Premier établissement de la foy dans la Nouvelle France* (Paris: Amable Auroy, 1691), 113–116.

111. Sagard, *Histoire du Canada*, 55–56.

What gets lost in the attention paid to the negotiations among the men, and the giving of moose hides, beaver pelts, deerskins, and wampum, is that these few prunes may have had as great a symbolic value to the Montagnais as the gifts had to the French. Getting them was entrusted to the women and, as with so many of their activities connected with obtaining food, was done by canoe. The image of their canoes spread out across the St. Lawrence between Trois-Rivières and Québec is a reminder of a lost world. It is an image that embodies the role of Algonquian women as providers that would gradually be eroded by the expanding fur trade and the wars fought over its control.

As the fur trade expanded and the wars over control of it did as well, the canoe as a vehicle for Algonquian women increasingly became the fur trade canoe and the war canoe, both paddled by men. The canoe that Champlain described as being 8 to 9 feet long became the much longer and wider fur trade canoe. William Warren provides a description of the building of a birchbark fur trade canoe that was 36 feet long and 5 feet wide.¹¹² These canoes were not an Indigenous creation to meet the needs of Indigenous men and women but canoes built to transport the furs provided by the labour of Indigenous men and women.

In the process of this transformation of the canoe, Algonquian women underwent an equally dramatic transformation: from paddlers to “prostitutes.” In August 1702 Jesuit Etienne de Carheil wrote a long letter to the governor of New France, Louis Hector de Callière, from Michilimackinac. De Carheil states that “the traders have become so accustomed to have women for their Use in the trading-places, and these have become so necessary to them, that they cannot do without them even on their journeys.” The voyages, de Carheil writes, “are no longer performed without a continual flow and Ebb of That tide of prostitutes, – whom we see ascending and descending, going and coming from one mission to another, without cessation.”¹¹³ De Carheil says that the “tide of prostitutes” flows from Montréal to Michilimackinac and back again, as well as involving French traders and their Indigenous partners travelling from mission to mission.

Two misrepresentations of de Carheil’s letter have served to diminish the role of Algonquian women in the fur trade. First, in her book *Many Tender Ties*, Sylvia Van Kirk tells readers that de Carheil is referring to services performed by married Indigenous women in supporting their white husbands. In fact, de Carheil states explicitly that he is not talking about married women; he is talking about single women.¹¹⁴ It may be, as Van Kirk argues, that fur trade wives were not “simply an object of sexual exploitation” and that their lives

112. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 473.

113. *JR*, 65:241.

114. *JR*, 65:241.

were “easier physically and richer in material ways.”¹¹⁵ It may also be that the lives of single Algonquian women were much as de Carheil describes.

The second misrepresentation revolves around a mistranslation in the Thwaites edition of the *Jesuit Relations*. It has de Carheil saying that these young women “are satisfied with lower wages” for performing “the same services” as the male employees. In fact, de Carheil wrote that they perform “le même service,” not “les mêmes services.”¹¹⁶ It is a seemingly minor point, but actually one of great significance, because it forces us to ask what this service is. The fact that these women were being paid wages tells us that they were being paid to paddle the canoes. Havard, instead of attempting to explain de Carheil’s meaning, focuses on his characterization of these women as prostitutes and claims that while the women travelling from Michilimackinac to Montréal were Indigenous, the ones travelling in the opposite direction were likely French.¹¹⁷ Havard’s evidence for this is less than convincing, and his depiction of them as “French” makes it easier for us to believe that they were prostitutes rather than paddlers.

Cornelius Jaenen refers to the French “taking along” women to cook, cut wood, and provide sexual services, implying that they were not involved in paddling the canoes.¹¹⁸ Michael McDonnell states that they “accompanied” French traders on their journeys.¹¹⁹ Havard makes light of the abilities of Algonquian women who were the partners of French men, claiming that these women “étaient susceptibles de suivre le coureur de bois dans son canot d’écorce.”¹²⁰ Havard’s description conjures an image of the *coureur de bois* paddling down the stream, his female companion frantically running along the shore beside him, trying to keep up. The historical reality, of course, is that she was not following “his” canoe; she was paddling their canoe.

Contemporary evidence corroborating de Carheil’s observations is scant, but Van Kirk provides evidence from a later period that lends credibility to his observations. She observes that on Alexander Mackenzie’s voyage in 1789 two women “assisted in paddling the canoes.” She also notes that Indigenous women “rendered valuable assistance” to the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) as paddlers, citing a 1779 case of canoes with Indigenous women in the stern and

115. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 4, 6.

116. Etienne de Carheil à Louis Hector de Callières, *Archives des jésuites au Canada*, 30 August 1702, 16. Callières himself signed his name “Callière.”

117. Havard, *Empire et Métissages*, 443.

118. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 109.

119. Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2016), 103.

120. “[The women] were prone to following the *coureur de bois* in his bark canoe.” Havard, *Empire et Métissages*, 453.

Englishmen in the bow.¹²¹ By the 1790s, however, the HBC was prohibiting the Indigenous wives of employees from paddling canoes.¹²²

In the North West Company in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the wives of traders and voyageurs were integral to the fur brigades travelling back and forth between Grand Portage and Fort William and the interior posts. Carolyn Podruchny observes that at times they helped assemble the provisions for the journey and that they paddled their own canoes.¹²³ There is no actual acknowledgement, however, that they were travelling the same distances, enduring the same hardships, and carrying the same packs at portages as the men. When they stopped for the night, after paddling all day, it was the women who did the cooking and looked after the children.

We will likely never know how long, and to what extent, Algonquian women were fur trade paddlers, but it is beyond doubt that they had the skill, strength, and endurance to paddle all day. In the traditional accounts of the voyageurs, who are all perceived to be white men, the canoe has been taken away from Algonquian women and turned into a symbol of the heroic white explorers of the North American continent. Women paddlers were doing so much more than providing “assistance” to the men. There was a time, as Samuel de Champlain, Chrestien le Clercq, Nicholas Perrot, and Jérôme and Charles Lalement attest, when the water was an Algonquian woman’s world.

A study of the observations of 17th-century French writers and the Indigenous authors who came after them does not give us the truth about the lives of Algonquian women before the European invasion of North America. It does give us the ability to question long-standing assumptions and perceptions of Algonquian women and to see long-hidden sources of their influence and personal freedom. Since the 19th century it has been difficult to appreciate the contributions of Algonquian women, beginning with the greater attention paid to the matrilineal clans of the Iroquois and evolving into the 21st-century focus on the peoples of the corn.

Even the sources dedicated to the study of the Algonquians have marginalized the contributions of women, because the relationship between the Algonquian peoples and animals has been gendered male. This is especially true in societies such as the Anishinaabe, who have an animal-based clan system that has historically been gendered male, to the almost complete exclusion of the central role of women in that system. This does not mean that in Algonquian societies without a clan system, such as the Montagnais, the relationship between women and animals was somehow diminished. In these societies women played a central role in treating the bones of the dead animals, the other-than-human persons, with respect. Kenneth Morrison

121. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 61.

122. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 61–63.

123. Carolyn Podruchny, *Les voyageurs et leur monde: Voyageurs et traiteurs de fourrures en Amérique du Nord* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2009), 102.

points out that the Montagnais believed “their religious orientation to hunting ... ensured their survival.”¹²⁴ It was a belief shared by Montagnais women, and they, as well as the men, were constantly reproved by the Jesuits for their “superstitious” beliefs about the unbreakable bond between human and other-than-human persons.

For all that we have questioned Leacock and her reliance on Morgan and Engels, it must be recognized that her emphasis on the economic is our gateway to appreciating the lives of Algonquian women. As Leacock argues, the importance of Haudenosaunee women was based in their control of the products of their agricultural labour. At the same time, we must recognize that what agriculture gave to Haudenosaunee women it gradually took away from Algonquian women. It weakened their connection not only with the other-than-human persons but also with the canoe, the mobility that came with the canoe, and the powerful bond between Algonquian husband and wife that they shared in the canoe.

These relationships, of course, have continued into the present in some form among Algonquian peoples able to live off the land. The connection between Algonquian women and the water remains alive in the singing of the Algonquin Water Song, which is now sung by women of many backgrounds around the world. It embodies a reconnection with the water that intensifying warfare, the fur trade, and the mission took away from so many Algonquian women. By putting Algonquian women back on the water, we cannot undo the ravages of the past, but we can begin to restore meaning to their lives and legacy.

It has been an honour and a privilege to make a small contribution to restoring the legacy of Algonquian women. Thanks to Dieter Buse, Robert Shenton, and especially Bryan Palmer for insightful comments and criticisms. Joan Sangster and Kathy Killoh have been their usual marvellous selves, and Alison Jacques provided insightful copyediting suggestions. Ironically, the main ideas that made the finished piece so much better came from the reviewer who suggested the most extensive revisions. Sometimes life is just like that.

124. Morrison, *Solidarity of Kin*, 110.