

Transversal Alliances:

White Fantasies of Indigeneity in Suzanne Desrochers's Bride of New France

Eva C. Karpinski

When Canadian Indigenous author Janice Acoose quotes Canadian Afro-Caribbean author Marlene NourbeSe Philip in order to critique the relations of ruling “in a racist, sexist, classist society” (71), we might be witnessing what I call a transversal alliance, that is, an instance of solidarity and coalition building among the oppressed. Such lateral or “minor” alliances where formerly colonized or marginalized subjects speak to each other rather than to the dominant culture can potentially destabilize the colonizer-colonized dynamic that has been imposed on discussions of Indigeneity in postcolonial studies.¹ Philip cautions that it is particularly dangerous for non-Indigenous writers to move into “the Native Canadian culture which they have oppressed and exploited” (qtd. in Acoose 71). Since Philip herself is a non-Indigenous writer, her warning raises the question of the possibility of such alliances and the degree of complicity of non-Indigenous racialized and/or culturally marginalized groups in the ongoing practices of colonization by the settler-colonial state. This is one of the dilemmas confronting the reader of Suzanne Desrochers's historical novel *Bride of New France* (2011): what happens when issues of representation of Indigenous peoples are mediated through the consciousness of a non-Indigenous minoritized author? In Desrochers's debut novel, we find an interesting experiment in inscribing the Indigenous presence from the early colonial perspective of the marginalized and subjugated white French woman. The text attempts to construct

¹ One must remember that “postcolonial” is a highly contested term since, according to Maori theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “Naming the world as ‘post-colonial’ is, from indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business” (98).

transnational and transhistorical linkages connecting the reality of a contemporary franco-Ontarian author writing in English, to the streets and poorhouses of 17th-century Paris from which future “settlers” are recruited, to the fledgling colony in New France, and to the problem of Indigeneity. These seemingly different chronotopes and the subjectivities that populate them are all interrelated through the common legacy of colonialism. According to Métis scholar Emma LaRocque, “Native peoples are perhaps the most debased and misrepresented peoples anywhere, if not in archival and scholarly sources, certainly in popular culture” (65). Following the elusive promise of transversal alliances, I want to examine if Desrochers’s narrative can avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping and acquit itself of the potential charge of romantic appropriation. In other words, can a non-hegemonic account of an encounter with the Indigenous Other ever emerge from within the colonial moment? And what difference does gender make in the consolidation of white colonial supremacy?

Desrochers engages one of the powerful grand narratives that anchor Canadian national mythology, namely the story of the *filles du roi*, or the King’s daughters. In the 17th century, King Louis XIV sent hundreds of impoverished girls and women from France—often against their will—to serve as breeding stock to create a settler population in the New World. Despite its popular apocryphal appeal, the actual history of these *filles du roi*, as they were labeled by Marguerite Bourgeoys, is little known, with no extant records of their experiences. Among the historians who have attempted to reconstruct their stories, the work of Yves Landry has been of particular importance to Desrochers, as she acknowledges in her “Historical Notes” appended to the text. She is also familiar with the earlier account, first published in 1969 by Marie-Louise Beaudoin, a sister of the Congregation of Notre-Dame, from whom she borrows an epigram to Part Three. What attests to the mythopoeic power of the image of the *filles du roi* is the fact that

their story has percolated into young adult fiction in Canada.² Such narratives seem to play straight into Margaret Atwood's well-worn thesis about preoccupation with survival as "the central symbol for Canada" (32), where "the land, the animals, and the Indians"—in that particular order—"are what white people found when they arrived here" (41).³ Moreover, Desrochers taps another tradition linked to the colonial topos of survival in the wilderness, especially narratives involving women. One such story of a woman's survival is retold in *Bride of New France* when the protagonist, Laure Beauséjour, tries to convince her friend Madeleine to come with her to Canada. Desrochers draws on a narrative by the French Queen Marguerite de Navarre, written in 1558, about a young woman who travelled to Canada with Jacques Cartier, before "any other women from France" arrived in that place (75). When her husband offended the ship's captain, the two of them were dropped from the ship in an uninhabited area, with only some basic provisions (77). The husband died, but the woman survived the winter alone and was brought back to France. This account is based on the real life-story of Marguerite de Roberval, who was abandoned on an island at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in 1542, at the beginning of the French exploration of the New World.⁴ One might argue that such gendered narratives enact the libidinal and political fantasies of the symbolic coupling of what in the white

² Most notable examples are Suzanne Martel's *Jeanne, Fille du Roy* (1974; translated into English as *The King's Daughter*) and Maxine Trottier's *Alone in an Untamed Land: The Filles du Roi Diary of Hélène St. Onge* (2003). The Quebec writer Sergine Desjardins has also written a historical novel called *Marie Major* (2006), drawing on similar inspiration. In fact, there is some resemblance between Martel's and Desrochers's heroines who are both derived from the model of romance fiction emphasizing love, passion, and the character's unconventionality. The *filles du roi* also feature in an episode from the popular documentary TV series *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada*, and later in Lindalee Tracy's book by the same title. Interestingly, there is a whole genealogical industry around *filles du roi*, including Peter J. Gagné's two-volume biographical dictionary available through genealogy sites (*King's Daughters and Founding Mothers: The Filles du Roi, 1663-1673*. Orange Park, FL: Quintin Publications, 2001-2008).

³ In complete denial of the crimes of the white settler-colonial society, Atwood in her 1972 *Survival* actually constructs Canada as "a victim" of its colonial mentality and exploitation for profit.

⁴ In Marguerite de Navarre's *The Heptameron* it is "Story Sixty-Seven" about Captain Robertvale's voyage to Canada. Christl Verduyn summarizes different versions of this story in her discussion of Douglas Glover's 2003 novel *Elle* that might serve as an interesting intertext for *Bride of New France*. Glover's rendering of his heroine's "indigenization" (Terry Goldie's term) and survival in the wilderness is much more radical in its critique of colonialism.

masculinist economy figures as “natural”—the white woman’s body and the wilderness—where “woman” functions as a sign of exchange (or trade by proxy) allowing the male colonizer to stake his symbolic claim to the land that can then become a territory of the colonial nation.⁵

Trained as a social historian, Desrochers braids together history and fiction to dramatize Laure’s life so as to expose little-known horrors at the heart of the French imperial metropolis and re-imagine a relatively under-studied episode from Quebec’s colonial past. As a little girl, Laure is taken on the street from her beggar parents and placed in the notorious Salpêtrière poorhouse, mentioned by Foucault in his analysis of the “great confinement of the poor” (38) marking the beginning of modern population control that is also spreading to the colonies.⁶ This emergent biopower imposed social regulation of the bodies of beggars, prostitutes, children, orphans, hysterics, women, the insane, the sick, and the unruly, removing them from public spaces into institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and prisons and also extracting labour from its wards. Following a brief adoption by a rich woman who teaches her literacy skills, Laure returns to Salpêtrière to the institutionalized life of poverty, prayer, and lace making. She is not resigned to her fate and imagines other possibilities, hoping one day to work as a seamstress in Paris. After writing a letter of complaint to the King, at the age of seventeen she is banished to Canada. In New France, she develops a friendship with Deskaheh, an Iroquois man living among the Algonquin, with whom she communicates with gestures and a bit of French. However, as a *fille du roi* Laure must marry Mathurin, a former pauper and now a *coureur de*

⁵ The slippage between the woman’s body and the body/territory of the nation is discussed in Yuval-Davis. Interestingly, these early wilderness survival narratives later give way to captivity narratives, further reinforcing the association between the female body and the boundaries of the nation. It is worth noting the contradictions in patriarchal constructions of the gendered and racialized colonial space in the novel, where from the start white women were restricted in their movement by a threat of violence and warned not to walk alone for fear of “the Savages” who “can capture you in the space of breath” (152).

⁶ Foucault discusses the royal edict of 1656 that founded the Hôpital Général, an institution that “had nothing to do with any medical concept” but was “a third order of repression” (40), in addition to the police and the courts. It administered several houses of confinement such as Salpêtrière, with “the task of preventing ‘mendicancy and idleness as the source of all disorders’” (47).

bois, an illegal trapper and fur trader, who has served as an indentured soldier for three years and has become a free settler with a wooded plot of land. On their wedding day, she fantasizes about her Indigenous friend: “Although Deskaheh is ugly, he is less so than the man she has just married. Perhaps somewhere deep in the forest he has a home that is more comfortable than the one she is being taken to” (191). Under the threat of revoking their fishing and hunting privileges, the colonial power expects men like Mathurin to stay with their families and build new settlements, but he spends each winter with the Algonquin or the Montagnais, where he has another family with a Native woman. When he abandons Laure alone and half-starved in a half-built shack, Deskaheh comes to her help, becomes her lover, and gets her pregnant. She gives birth to a girl whom she agrees to hand over to Deskaheh and an Algonquin woman, to be raised as a “Savage” child. In the end, Laure’s brief excursion into the illicit intimacy with the Other brings her back into the colonial fold as Mathurin’s widow, ready to invent a new life for herself with the help of her midwife. She has acquired a certain heroic dimension, as a tragic mother separated from her child, but also a woman capable of survival and in charge of her destiny.

As Herb Wyile claims, while the historical novel has usually been complicit with the colonial project, recent Canadian historical fictions “seek to reopen [...] the history of colonialism and of relations between native people and the dominant culture” (*Speculative* 36). However, in her “Historical Notes,” Desrochers makes it clear that her revisionist narrative focuses more on Quebec’s past rather on colonial attitudes to Indigeneity.⁷ She declares that in the character of Laure she wanted to create “a counterweight to the grand historical narrative of the *filles du roi* as founding mothers” of the nation (292). It also seems that she envisions her

⁷ This aspect of the novel has been picked up by John Barber, a *Globe and Mail* reviewer who situates it in the context of competing nationalist grand narratives in Quebec and English Canada.

fictional recovery of the King's daughters as a form of reclamation of "the French counterparts of Susanna Moodie" who, having arrived in Canada over a century earlier (289), equally deserve the title of pioneer women. In pioneer spirit, Laure has to learn to "roll up her sleeves and yank from the earth whatever sustenance it had to offer" (251). Her exceptional intelligence, courage and sensuality prove to be both her strength and her undoing, causing her exile and also making her an outsider and a rebel against the norms of her gender and her social rank. As one of the *Bijoux*, the most privileged girls at Salpêtrière trained in lace making and needlework, she exhibits greater independence and receptiveness to the Other, taking pity on the less fortunate such as the prostitutes scooped by the King's officers and exposed to public humiliation, or the little "*négrillon*" spotted on the deck of a slave ship. On her way to New France, she begins to understand how "reprehensible" both the fur trade and sugar plantations are as colonial enterprises. She witnesses the unloading of the spoils of colonialism in a French port, where commodities such as "coffee, sugar, cotton, tobacco, and spices" (83) are carried ashore, and where a slave ship carrying "three hundred *nègres*" from Dahomey is also docked (84). France's expansionist policies are highlighted through the letter penned by the King's Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, in which *point de France*, the type of lace made by the *Bijoux*, rises to the gendered symbol of the French pursuit of supremacy in the emerging world of mercantilism (67-8).

In Canada, Laure quickly becomes aware of the material force of colonial sexual and reproductive politics, recognizing that "no French woman has ever married a Savage" (191) even though marriages between French settlers and Indigenous women are approved by the King, especially if they produce many children.⁸ Colonial biopower situates Indigenous and white

⁸ According to Cree scholar Winona Stevenson, interracial marriages between fur traders and Aboriginal women, known as *marriages à la façon du pays*, were encouraged as part of the French mercantile strategy (51). In its drive

bodies differently: while mixed blood children fathered by the colonists are accepted, miscegenation between white women and Indigenous men is taboo. Such strict policing and vigilance over white women's sexuality in the colony, together with instilling in them a constant fear of rape, confirms that women's bodies function as symbolic boundaries of national identity and moral purity. Female bodies serve as symbolic "border guards" of the nation, a guarantee of the purity of its racialized boundaries, ethnic and cultural continuity, and national difference (Yuval-Davis 23). A lingering motif in the novel is Laure's resistance to the regulation of femininity through restrictions on extravagant feminine attire as connoting immodesty and lack of sexual restraint. She compares the different status of Indigenous women who enjoy a lot more autonomy and respect in their communities than white French women "who are prisoners in their homes, giving birth to a dozen babies, isolated from other settlers" while "the Savage men must first confer with the women of their villages before they fight a battle, trade furs, or discuss the Christian religion" (284). Still, in contrast to overpopulated France, women in the colony are valued. Madame Rouillard, the innkeeper and *femme sage* who has lived in New France for twenty years, sums up the importance of women in the empire-building project: "in order to build a new country, you need women as well as soldiers and fur traders" (130). At the same time, the wording of her explanation— "There are too few women in New France, only one per every ten men" (134)—suggests a complete erasure of Indigenous women. Thus Laure understands that "Only the women from France can give the King the French colony he wants to see in Canada" (263).

Ironically, while Laure's identity as "Bride of New France" is actually un-settled through her conflicted subject positions, putting into question her belonging to the place, the model

to establish permanent settlements, the Crown allocated dowries for French and Aboriginal women marrying French men.

settler wife is personified by her neighbour, Madame Tardif, a *Canadienne* already born here, whose fertility and prosperity are ideals every newly arrived *filles du roi* should aspire to.⁹ Yet, Laure realizes that she “must bear many children to please the King and the colony officials who need a large French population to defeat the Iroquois Savages who are still threatening the colony” (197). She views herself as “a living artefact of the absurd dreams of royal men who tear starving girls from their hospital beds and drop them in the freezing woods” (286). Her body belongs to the King who has plans for a colony populated by “ten thousand people by 1680 and ten more after that [...]. A new prosperous country will be built here and furs will be sent to France” (286-87). This passage captures the commodity circuit that collapses the material and symbolic significance of reproductive bodies and fur as they bind together the imperial economy of desire and power, where fur “circulates as a material signifier in the transnational discourses of political and libidinal exchange” (Emberley, *The Cultural* 4).

With a penchant for microhistory, which Heather Murray defines as “the attempt to incorporate peripheral and marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture” (406), Desrochers’s historiographic narrative focuses on everyday life invisible in mainstream historical documents. Drawing intimate connections between personal and public realms viewed from the bottom-up, she examines the agency of one woman who becomes a pawn in the hands of French imperial power that aims to create a settler population in Canada by implementing reproductive policies. Desrochers shows the expansion of colonial mercantile rationality that appropriates women’s bodies and sexualities, criminalizes the poor, and exploits indentured workers, conscripted soldiers, Indigenous peoples, and slaves in the early nationalist project of

⁹ In this respect, the title can be seen as playing on a double meaning, referring to a bride who is an inhabitant of the colony, has become someone *from* the colony, but also a bride getting married *to* the colony. The second encapsulates the French King’s utilization of white female reproductive bodies as a symbolic “territory” of the colonial nation.

building a white settler society and promoting “commerce in our colonies” that offer “a vast abundance of furs and wood” (68). Her narrative explores the possibility of illicit transversal alliances between the oppressed in the colony, in this case involving a poor white woman and an Indigenous man. Not surprisingly then, it is tempting to read Desrochers’s portrayal of this transgressive relationship as an attempt to reconfigure gendered and racialized spaces of the Empire and as an invitation to abandon customary postcolonial models of vertical power dynamics premised on such oppositional binaries as centre/periphery, colonizer/colonized, or white/other. Interrogating patriarchy, religion, mercantilism, and colonialism, Desrochers’s narrative is trying to complicate both the dominant heroic perception of the *filles du roi* as Quebec’s French “founding mothers,” as well as the feminist postcolonial counter-discourse critical of white women’s collusion with colonialism. By foregrounding the themes of crossing-over—as in cross-dressing, like the midwife, or dressing above her station, like Laure, but mostly in transgressing racialized boundaries—the text seems to be moving beyond the nationalist frameworks of traditional history of Canada and Quebec. However, we might have to question to what extent the novel supports such decolonizing readings once we move beyond its constructed reality and expand the frame to consider what Terry Goldie calls “semiotic control” that dominant representations and ideologies hold over any depiction of whiteness and Indigeneity. It is necessary as well to pay attention to the contextual complications arising from the novel’s generic indebtedness to a tradition of women’s historical fiction.

Reading *Bride of New France* with the assistance of critics such as Emma LaRocque and Janice Acoose, who have taken on the issue of colonial stereotypes from the Indigenous standpoint, one can fully grasp the extent of this “semiotic control” and its hold on Desrochers’s imagination. LaRocque identifies the primary cognitive framework applied to Indigenous-

European relations as the antithesis of “civilization” versus “savagery,” which she calls the civ/sav dichotomy for short. The civ/sav ideology is “an invention serving colonial purposes” of domination, which still informs discursive constructs and textual strategies that dehumanize, demonize, and animalize the Indigenous subject (LaRocque 4).¹⁰ Similarly, Acoose observes that Canadian literature as an ideological apparatus of the white Euro-Canadian Christian patriarchy “fosters cultural attitudes about Indigenous peoples that are based on unrealistic, derogatory, and stereotypic images” (34). Drawing heavily on the colonial archive, Desrochers’s fictional reality is steeped in the civ/sav dualism. The protagonist’s knowledge about Indigenous peoples, which is also the knowledge imparted to the reader, is limited to the stereotype of the “Savage,” supported by terror-inspiring Jesuit stories of torture, cannibalism, superstition, and “poisonous arrows” (136). The inculcation of fear and hatred begins aboard the ship bound for the New World and continues upon landing, where Laure hears dehumanizing descriptions of the Iroquois as murderous and bloodthirsty: “The Iroquois are a tribe feared by the French and by other Savages. They attack by surprise in the forest, scalp their victims, and torture even the women and children they capture. The Iroquois are terrifying to look at, with dark, glistening bodies, shaved heads, and painted faces” (124). They are animalized as “beasts” with fangs (133) that are either roaring or moving silently through the forest (140) and are “faster than wolves” (152). Similarly, Laure’s first impression of Deskaheh is couched in animal imagery, his body exuding the odour of “animal grease and hides” (164). Even if one assumes that such descriptions are intended to reflect with historical accuracy the kind of “knowledge” about Indigenous peoples that was available to the character at the time of her arrival in New France, it is necessary to question how a contemporary novelist deals with these stereotypes that are still deeply

¹⁰ In her uncompromising assertion that such representations are the product of colonial racism LaRocque firmly distances herself from Goldie, who in *Fear and Temptation* avoids using the word “racist” based on his equivocation that no one is “beyond racism” (LaRocque 9).

entrenched in the historical consciousness of most non-Indigenous Canadians. The danger of reproducing such representations uncritically is compounded by the fact that “for a great majority of people, knowledge about Indigenous peoples’ cultures and history is very limited and is derived mostly from Eurocentric ethnographic approaches and biased historiographic accounts” (Acoose 51), which tend to view first encounters between Europeans and Indigenous peoples on the civ/sav model explicated by LaRocque rather than in terms of encounters between different *civilizations*. When such semiotically charged language and representation are not critically re-contextualized, they revert to their original role as instruments of colonization, alongside the institutions of the Church, commerce, colonial administration, and the military, all of which are mapped out in the vision of Québec City emerging out of “wilderness” dotted with a few markers of “civilization” (125).

It might be expected of books like *Bride of New France* to respond to the challenge of thinking history “otherwise,” beyond the customary mimicry of historical discourses about Indigeneity. Despite the obvious reductiveness of such constructs, Desrochers’s narrative faithfully reinscribes the “familiar conceptual categories and values” that Europeans applied to the inhabitants of the New World (Acoose 41). It is perhaps a problem specific to new historicism that by saturating the text with the prevailing ideas of its historical era the novel maintains the Eurocentric point of view and inadvertently verifies and reinforces these dominant assumptions. Nevertheless, in its limited attempt to expose the invisibility of poor white French women as agents of colonial history, the novel gestures toward historical fiction that is trying to resist the reductionism of simplistic essentialist approaches to history and identity as well as playful postmodernist relativism, relying instead on thick contextual description of social history, analysis of intersectional differences, and attention to the power of historical ideologies. The text

compels us to ask: What has changed in recent years since the phenomenon of historiographic metafiction described by Linda Hutcheon as part of the Canadian postmodern?¹¹ While the novel ultimately fails to interrogate the ethnocentrism of its archive and exhibits only a few rare moments of self-consciousness,¹² it employs some of the strategies of historiographic metafiction by incorporating heterogeneous historic documents such as *The Jesuit Relations*, excerpts from Marie-Louise Beaudoin's *Les Premières et Les Filles du Roi à Ville-Marie*, a quotation from Georges Didi-Huberman's *Invention of Hysteria*, letters from the Intendant Jean Talon, songs, French phrases, an epigraph from Leonard Cohen, and other intertexts. Desrochers also plays fast and loose with different historical personages, inserting them into the cast of characters. Among those who make an appearance are Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who responds to Laure's letter; the Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, the Superior of the Ursuline Congregation in Québec; Jean Talon, who welcomes the *filles du roi* at Ville-Marie; and the Mère Marguerite Bourgeoys from the Notre-Dame Congregation, who offers Laure hospitality. Significantly, what is missing is an acknowledgement of the fallaciousness and bias of many of Desrochers's primary sources that exclude and mute Indigenous perspectives. Instead, opening itself to a metafictionist reading, the novel applies reflexivity to its own fictional status, staging a mise-en-abyme of the text's hybrid production in the scene of the birth of an illegitimate inter-racial offspring, a product of miscegenation between history and literature. The irony here, of course, is the complicated aesthetic inheritance and epistemological status of the historical novel, considered an "illegitimate" or "misbegotten" genre, especially in its popular form addressed to women.

¹¹ In a comment pertinent to *Brides of New France*, Hutcheon emphasizes that this type of fiction "thematizes its own interaction both with the historical past and with the historically conditioned expectations of its readers" (65). It seems that Desrochers's text meets this expectation formally rather than politically, and in that sense it differs from Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction.

¹² Such moments include the narrator's observation that "There are so many names for the same lakes, rivers, streams, and woods of the colony, depending on who is speaking" (209), as well as the double-meaning in the comment on the settlers clearing the woods to plant their seeds: "It is a beastly endeavour to pound and rip at soil that is thick with ancient life" (223).

According to Diana Wallace, the historical novel has been important in providing women with models of female agency in history; recovering invisible histories; offering plural and more transgressive models of female desire; dealing with taboo subjects such as active female sexuality, abortion, childbirth; offering freedom to engage with serious social political issues; and producing strong affects that make historical writing more meaningful (8). Moreover, already regarded as “a ‘bastard’ form,” associated with vulgarity and historical impurity, the historical novel has been further hybridized by its female practitioners who cross-fertilized it with “romance, fantasy, [and] the Gothic” (Wallace 3).

Indeed, a primary way to contextualize *Bride of New France* as a historical novel requires that we situate it in the subgenre of “postcolonial gothic,” harking back to the tradition of *Jane Eyre*.¹³ Traditionally, Canadian historical novels, beginning with John Richardson’s *Wacousta* (1832), have included elements of melodrama and the gothic. Desrochers’s text echoes these elements through its figurations of the landscape as a threatening wilderness, the presence of hostile Indigenous elements—the Iroquois, as a foil for the martyred priests, prototypical Canadian “victims”—and materializations of such frightening embodiment as excessive female sexuality, the grotesque pregnant body, miscegenation, abortion, and birth. Canada is referred to as “a place worse than death, more frightening than hell itself” (69), and Laure repeatedly hears that it is definitely “no place for women” (83; 123).¹⁴ Death imagery is constantly projected onto the landscape, from the moment she sets her eyes on the colony described as “a frozen heaven” (118), to winter descriptions of her settlement as “ensconced in a tomb of snow” (207). The

¹³ *Bride of New France* shares *Jane Eyre*’s obsession with the lurking presence of the colonial other and the portrayal of the rebellious and transgressive heroine who was institutionalized, abused, and traumatized by the loss of her best friend.

¹⁴ Desrochers the historian did not make up such details but must have corroborated them with the use of her historical sources. We find proof of their authenticity, for example, in Natalie Zemon Davis’s microhistorical essay on Marie de l’Incarnation, whom she quotes as admitting in her writings that “Canada” was “just a word used to scare children” (78).

protagonist gets “accustomed to death [...] to the burying force of this country” (253). The gothic is preoccupied with the liminal and the unspoken, and also with the presence of the uncanny right at the centre of the familiar. Thus Laure spends her first winter in the company of a pig whom she names Mathurin (her mock stand-in husband later devoured by her real husband). She hangs in her one-room cabin the dead woman’s dress that reminds her of her late friend “performing a gentle dance for her” (204). A *lit-cabane*, a bed built by her husband, makes her think of a coffin (206). Inasmuch as we view the gothic as a racialized genre, marked by pervasive Eurocentrism and exclusive whiteness, we can recognize its place in representing the “hauntings” of colonialism and imperialism. According to Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte, it is associated with anxiety about repressed or silenced histories, fear of territorial illegitimacy, indigenous presence, hybrid cultural forms, and “interrogations of national belonging and citizenship” (ix)—all related to a perception of overlapping realities within a settler-colonial state. Such anxieties are voiced in *Bride of New France* by two women most closely attuned to the otherness of this place, Laure and her unconventional midwife Madame Rouillard, who suspect that “some other spirit watches over this place” (120), “some Savage deity with true dominion here” (156), that cannot be removed by the priests and nuns arriving in the colony. However, it is important to remember that if the Canadian nation-state is haunted by its “Others”—women and Indigenous peoples—they are also necessary for the consolidation of the hegemonic, homogeneous national identity. In addition to consolidating the understanding of the self, ideas about the Other “helped to shape and delineate the essential differences between Europe and the rest” (L.T. Smith 60). Hence, ambivalence and contradictions inherent to the gothic account for its propensity to be both conservative and radical, transgressive and reactionary.

Wylie comments that the experience of women writers shows that the genre “poses difficulties to non-dominant groups because of the very exclusiveness of the historical record, which tends to be preoccupied with the activities of white, upper-class English males” (“Introduction” 5). While the gendering and racializing of the genre of the female historical novel with its gothic elements as white and feminine, in contrast to the white masculinist domain of serious historiography, has been productive of multiple subversions in the hands of women writers, critics of historical fiction recognize its instrumental role in the formation of the national imaginary and its potential to “variously challenge and uphold the national allegory” (Cabajsky and Grubisic xii). As mentioned earlier, sifting through “colonial debris” (LaRocque 162), Desrochers works with the thematic stereotypes of the Noble Savage and the bad Indian, as well as terror-arousing nature. In this context, the use of the term “Savages” re-enacts the discursive violence that was constitutive of colonial representation of the Natives and European assertions of cultural hegemony, coupled with the militaristic violence of the state.¹⁵ In addition to historical inscriptions of Native inferiority, we find a carnivalesque personification of the figure of Indigeneity in the description of Le Bonhomme Terre-Neuve wearing “a wooden mask of Savage origin,” with feathers, arrows, knives, and other instruments of hunting and war hanging round his neck (120). He presides over the sea “baptism” of those ship passengers who have made their first crossing to Canada. Later, Laure directly correlates the Bonhomme Terre-Neuve to the Iroquois and even to Deskaneh. Positioned reflexively within the text, this “monster” prefigures both the demonization of the Natives and the monstrosity of colonial crimes. Such stereotypes “fix meanings and values, and [...] reduce the complexity of indigenous lived experience to a fixed set of images” (Emberley, *Defamiliarizing* 12). In Terry Goldie’s terms,

¹⁵ While it is an intentional usage, a kind of historical stylization on the part of Desrochers, it is interesting to compare her decision to refer to Indigenous peoples as “Savages” to the one taken by the English editors of Suzanne Martel’s novel, who expunged all such “offensive language” in the second edition.

they become a representation of a representation or a simulacrum: each representation of Indigenous peoples “is a signifier for which there is no signified except the image” (191). However, even though these figures do not represent any historical reality but rather the semiotic reality of colonial representation, reading *Bride of New France* it is impossible to ignore the effects of these enduring representations on the Indigenous peoples and not to wonder how Indigenous readers would respond to this novel.¹⁶

In contrast to reproducing these stereotypes of Indigeneity, Desrochers avoids homogenizing whiteness by paying attention to differences within (describing several categories of the *filles du roi*, or specifying dialects in the colony). She manages to expose the role of racist stereotypes in controlling white women’s behaviour through threats of being captured by the “Savages” and admonitions to be careful (152). As a result, the colonial space is revealed as gendered and racialized through violence. But within the space of the novel, there is no response to the violence of colonization with regard to Indigenous peoples, but mostly to the subjugation of the reproductive female body as a reluctant site of the production of the nation-state. In attending to the historical specificity of Laure’s life, Desrochers is trying to avoid atemporal allegorizing of the relationship between a white woman and an Indigenous man. She is striving to achieve what Sugars and Turcotte call “a situated gothic voice” (xvi) in constructing a transversal or horizontal rather than vertical “margin-centre” dialogue between the dispossessed and the disempowered. In claiming the commonality of outcasts and outsiders, her text carries the promise of abolishing the orientalist illusion of absolute difference between self and other. However, despite the seduction of such a reading, Desrochers’s depiction of Laure’s lover

¹⁶ Both Acoose and LaRocque foreground the damaging psychological effects of Indigenous internalization of such images. LaRocque’s work in particular has tried to show “how dehumanizing it is to be seen and treated as savages, as less than human creatures bereft of valuable culture, coherent language, and multidimensional personalities” (17-18).

Deskaheh remains problematic. The Indigenous man emerges in *Bride of New France* as a discursive construct “disseminated through gothic tropes of savagery, sexuality, and primitivism” (Sugars and Turcotte vii) that inspire fear and desire. As Andrea Smith notes, during the “500 years of sexual colonization” Native peoples’ bodies have been seen as libidinous, sexually perverse, and sinful (13). In the romance between Laure and Deskaheh, he appears as another semiotic figure of such sexualized Indigeneity, devoid of subjectivity, impenetrable, a “Savage stranger” whose face Laure cannot read (164). He embodies a familiar gothic fantasy of the demonic dark lover, including sexual mutilation and sadomasochistic pleasure. Strangely, such images mirror John Richardson’s portrayal in *Wacousta* of “Indians as grotesque cannibals that tear into human organs and slurp human blood” (LaRocque 216). When Deskaheh cuts Laure’s breast with a knife and sucks her blood, she swoons with pleasure until “she is weak with adoration for him. What woman would feel this way?” She wonders why she can’t feel “limp, consumed like this when Mathurin touches her” (217). In the act of consummation, conflating sex and cannibalism as she lets her lover “consume her body, limb by limb” (247), the Indigenous male is used as an enabler through whom the white female protagonist liberates herself.

Inasmuch as Deskaheh is appropriated in the role of helper and serves as an instrument of improvement and self-knowledge for Laure, he also embodies and produces affect, recalling both the Noble Savage and the bad Indian through his compassion, nobility, ferociousness, and unbridled passion. Emma LaRocque observes that in colonial texts authored by non-Indigenous writers the flip side of the “vilification of Indians” is the extolling of “Indian virtues” such as generosity, helpfulness, compassion, openness, and love of children (47-8). Deskaheh embodies some of these positive characteristics that have been recorded by missionaries and other archival

sources, often but not always linked to the romanticized concept of the Noble Savage. However, according to LaRocque, when “Indian virtues” were positively noticed they were exceptionalized and could never threaten the persistence of the dominant civ/sav framework “applied to all Indians” (49). In accordance with the Christian underpinnings of this framework, Laure’s first encounters with Deskaheh are imbued with biblical symbolism, recreating the Edenic myth of the Fall, in which he is both Adam and the snake (his French sounds like hissing) and she the New Eve, nurturing and seductive. She gives him vegetables from the nuns’ garden and allows him to watch her undressing at the window, all the while enjoying her sense of control over him. One might say that Desrochers’s narrative stages a reversal of Pauline Johnson’s “As It Was in the Beginning” (1913), the allegory of colonial contact, in which the Native girl Esther is betrayed by three male figures: her father, the missionary, and her white lover. Here the white woman’s subjectivity is highlighted front and centre, and the plot builds up to Laure’s apotheosis as a martyr and a goddess:

This baby brands Laure as a transgressor, a woman who spits in the face of the King’s dreams. She is the one the sailors fear. The one they burn as a witch for fornicating with a Savage enemy, for killing her husband for giving away her own flesh. Still, who can destroy her, when she is the one who guides the ships, when her gentle waves or foaming wrath decide who makes it to the other side? Whether the precious colony lives or dies. (287)

In keeping with the convention of women’s historical fiction, this passage glorifies female strength, comparing Laure to Amphitrite, a sea-goddess and a figurehead from the ship’s prow. However, the roles are more ambivalent, and it is Laure whose libidinal fantasies lead to seduction and betrayal. It is not accidental that Laure offers herself to her lover at the fur-trade fair by the river at Ville-Marie, fur trade being the basis of the colonial mercantile economy. Sexual desire, draped in fur, produces Deskaheh as a commodity fetish for the protagonist and, metafictionally, also for the novel’s author.

Thus despite the novel's incorporation of progressive social history, sexual contact between the white female protagonist and her mysterious Indigenous lover seems likely to be a manipulative form of white "indigenization." It is a process defined by Goldie as "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" that allows white settlers in Canada to overcome their sense of alienation by ingesting the Native in order to become native (194). The text contains ample examples of such fantasies of indigenization, when Laure "wonders what it feels like to run through the woods" (182), when she symbolically scalps herself for Deskaheh (240), or when Mathurin paints his face and dresses "like a Savage" (226). What is more, Laure's seduction of Deskaheh, initiated despite the presence of his pregnant wife, casts a dubious light on her role vis-à-vis the project of colonization. The well-documented history of the imposition of the European nuclear family and hierarchical gender relations on Indigenous communities was a process that, according to Julia Emberley, turned the family and the domestic sphere "into a significant site for the colonization of First Nations women and children" (*Defamiliarizing* 4-5) and destroyed pre-contact kinship structures. In this process, white bourgeois women acted as instrumental agents of "civilization." Laure paradoxically both defies and upholds this role: she is the antithesis of the white mother of the nation, with her flawed hygiene and unrestrained sexuality. But at the same time, coming in-between Deskaheh and his wife, claiming him as her lover, she disrupts the invulnerability of the Indigenous couple, and hence embodies the colonial practices that interfered in the lives of Indigenous men and women. By "gothicizing" settler/Indigenous relations Desrochers's historical novel may be inescapably complicit in reinscribing a Canadian national identity and duplicating "imperialist habits of thought" (Härting 261). It may be guilty of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as the "Trading of the Other," referring to the commercial circulating (for example, in the form of bestselling historical fiction)

of images, beliefs, and fantasies about the Indigenous peoples that become “the stuff of dreams and imagination, or stereotypes and eroticism” (89).

With the notable exception of critical Indigenous analysis, Desrochers makes an effort to employ different historical methodologies and mixed (sometimes incompatible) perspectives, from the convention of fact-based historical objectivity, to celebratory Canadian historiography extolling home-building in the new land, to feminist revisionist history focused on recovery, and critical social science intersectional analysis of gender, race, class, and other inequities in France and the colonies. As a result, her feminist attempt to re-read the imperial moment through the stock repertoire of gothic images, even though well intentioned, cannot be free from the risk of repeating the gendered and racial traumas of colonialism. Ultimately, the politics of historical fiction is a matter of its reading, again stressing the role of reading and reception as this type of writing yields itself to contradictory claims. Part of the problem may be related to the demands of the literary marketplace that exerts a lot of pressure on writers of historical fiction to render history in a commodified, digestible form and to produce bestsellers, which in fact is what Desrochers’s book has become.¹⁷ Wylie brings up the issue of the impact of this commodification of history and complicity in consumer culture on what he diagnoses as “the more muted self-consciousness” and “relative conservatism” of recent Canadian historical fiction. He links the difficulties faced by these writers to “the somewhat paradoxical dual task of making [...] history and questioning it too” (*Speculative* 253), which seems to be a predicament

¹⁷ Desrochers’ novel has received many positive reviews, including those in *The Globe and Mail*, *Quill & Quire*, and *The Toronto Star*. Not surprisingly, most reviewers tend to overlook the issue of Indigenous representation in the novel. While women’s historical fiction is currently experiencing quite a boom in its many incarnations in the works of such Canadian authors as Frances Itani, Afua Cooper, Joan Thomas, Esi Edugyan, Helen Humphreys, Ami McKay, Jane Urquhart, Mary Novik, Alison Pick, Eva Stachniak, and others, Wylie bemoans the scarcity of historical novels by Aboriginal writers. He quotes Joseph Boyden’s hypothesis that this situation may have been caused by “the cataclysmic break with the past effected by the residential school system” (“Introduction” 4-5). What seems equally plausible is the insidious influence of colonialist assumptions that Indigenous peoples have “tradition” rather than “history” to write about.

shared by Desrochers, who is torn between the celebration of survival and finding “home” in New France and the critique of patriarchy and colonial authority. Consequently, it may well be that in *Bride of New France* revisionist history and historical fiction work at cross-purposes, achieving a curiously conservative effect of reterritorializing the nation albeit from a minoritized French perspective. Mythologizing the “freedom” of the New World lying ahead of her, Laure is ready to become a settler. Her portrayal can also be read as an endorsement of Western individualism, and New France compared to Europe does not “seem quite so bad” (132). She finds a “home” here, in a legitimizing fantasy of indigenization during the birth scene when Jesus/Deskaheh welcomes her to heaven/this land (271). The nation-building imagery playing on the rhetoric of “home” and “the doctrine of terra *nullis* or ‘empty land’” (L.T. Smith 11), echoes familiar colonial expansionist discourses that denied Indigenous peoples any claim to this territory, seeing them as merely roaming this “vast and empty country” (151). Thus a feminist revisionist reading of social history coexists with a narrative desire to reinscribe Quebec’s cultural nationalism, and in the final analysis the goal of celebrating the history of French Canadians takes precedence over decolonizing representation and building transversal alliances.

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