



Honoring Native American Voices in the Francophone Studies Classroom: Restoring Oral Testimonies to Their Rightful Place in the Story of the Early Modern Americas

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Bowdoin is a small and selective liberal arts college in Brunswick, Maine, with an increasingly diverse student body. It was founded in 1794 on the traditional territory of the Wabanaki.¹ Following the lead of our colleagues whose research and teaching focus most directly on post-colonial issues, in 2015 our “French” program became “Francophone Studies,” reflecting a

¹ Bowdoin currently has just under 2000 students of which 35% are “students of color.” The class of 2025 includes 40% students of color. 48% of students receive financial aid and the average aid package (including grants and work-study) is approximately \$57,000. <https://www.bowdoin.edu/ir/data/index.html>.

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collective desire to transcend persistent and problematic disciplinary boundaries between the study of continental France and other French-speaking regions of the world. As a section, we committed to a global vision of our field, one that recognizes the many French-speaking areas of the world both in their specificities and as an ensemble. We rebuilt our curriculum from language-level courses through upper-level seminars, including two new “Introduction to Francophone Studies” survey courses, one of which we present in the following pages. From the outset, the authors would like to emphasize that the course and unit we present here would not have been possible without our colleague Hanétha Vété-Congolo’s tireless visible and invisible work over the course of many years to bring about an epistemic shift in our department’s curriculum. We are deeply grateful to both her and to our colleague Meryem Belkaïd for their leadership and crucial contributions to enriching and complicating ours and our students’ understanding of the French-speaking world, without which this article and the perspective it promotes would not exist.

In the field of Francophone Studies, those of us whose research and teaching focus on earlier periods are facing the enormity of what had been left out of France-centered narratives and courses on the medieval and early modern periods: peoples, cultures, and traditions that, while very much a part of the story, have not been acknowledged as such. Though these actors and influences have always been present to some degree in French accounts of these eras, our access to them has been exclusively filtered through a colonial written tradition that intentionally frames them to perpetuate a fiction of European superiority.

Our reconfigured introductory survey course, “Spoken Word and Written Text,” spans the period from the Middle Ages through the 1848 abolition of enslavement in the French Antilles. The course is, in many ways, an homage to Christiane Taubira, who introduced the law passed by the French National Assembly in 2001 recognizing the enslavement of and trade in Sub-Saharan Africans as crimes against humanity. Taubira, deeply aware that written knowledge about enslavement has its origins in the testimonies of men and women who profited from the slavery system, suggested a path for creating a broader and more truthful history. The Taubira law proposed a formal recognition of oral and archeological sources beyond the scope of the written archive. In particular, Article 2 emphasized the value of “coordination to allow dialogue between the written archives available in Europe and oral sources and archeological knowledge gathered in Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and all the

other territories where slavery had taken place” (“Loi Taubira”).² Since the law’s passage in 2001, more visibility has been given to what a broad variety of African and Caribbean sources—many of them oral—contribute to a more global history and to the dynamic potential that emerges when written and oral archives are placed into dialogue, each questioning and serving as a source of knowledge for the other. The resulting scholarship, much of it carried out by scholars whose ancestors personally bore the brunt of enslavement and colonial violence, is changing the way we tell the story of both France and the broader world. What Taubira encouraged for rethinking the role of enslavement and the slave trade is just as apt as we think about the medieval and early modern periods more broadly, and how we teach them. Taubira’s call to incorporate the oral archive when telling the story of the Atlantic world challenges us to think more generally about what we in “literature” departments include and exclude as we build our syllabi.

We have been teaching “Spoken Word and Written Text” at Bowdoin College since fall 2016.³ It is one of two chronologically organized “Introduction to Francophone Studies” surveys required to complete the major. Taught in French, it is designed for students who have had five semesters of college-level language or the equivalent, mostly first years and sophomores. In this course, students leave their grammar books behind and plunge into reading and listening to a broad selection of written and oral sources from across what is today the French-speaking world: tales, epics, poetry, theater, short stories, testimonials, essays, and a novel. The course moves chronologically through thematic units that foreground questions of identity, race, colonization, language, and power in historical and ideological context: the *Chanson de Roland* and the crusades, told from Arab and European perspectives; West-African oral traditions and the epic of Soundjata Keita; language, national identity, and empire in sixteenth-century France; French colonizers and Native Americans in North America; the enslavement and resistance of Sub-Saharan Africans in the French Antilles.⁴ Throughout, students interrogate what sources and voices have traditionally been accounted for in both literature and history

² All translations in this chapter are our own.

³ For a more detailed presentation of the larger course structure, please see our “Globalizing the Early Literature Survey: Challenges and Rewards” (2019) and its accompanying online pedagogical dossier.

⁴ Henceforth, we use the terms “Native American/s,” “First Nation/s,” as well as the adjectives “Indigenous” and “Native” to describe, in what are today the United States and

and how the inclusion of previously ignored perspectives changes everything. They deepen their understanding of the historical roots of the hierarchies, inequities, and ideas about differences that inform the French-speaking world today. This course also encourages students to reflect on these dynamics in relationship to their own positionality and lived experience. Course assignments include daily reading, listening, and collaborative annotation of texts; two short personal reflections (recorded orally or presented in writing); two essays based on close textual analysis; a group research presentation on a question or theme related to the course; and a final evaluation that includes short answers, analysis of quotations drawn from assigned sources; an argumentative essay or oral presentation based on the last unit of the course; and a final short personal reflection (recorded or written).⁵

The unit we present here, “First Nations and French Colonizers in North America,” in keeping with Taubira’s project, juxtaposes European colonial writing about the Indigenous people of what are today Québec and the northern United States with oral sources—age-old tales and contemporary testimonials—such that they both compliment and interrogate one another. Of particular importance in this conversation is our treasured collaboration with Executive Director of Maine-Wabanaki REACH Maria Girouard.⁶ A member of the Penobscot nation, former tribal leader, Penobscot historian, author, educator, and environmental activist, Girouard has honored us regularly with her presence, her stories and personal testimony, and her vast knowledge of Wabanaki culture. The unit is made up of four class sessions:

Days One and Two: French colonial perspectives

- Excerpts of the *Relation of 1634* by Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune (1592–1664).

Canada, those whose ancestors first inhabited these territories. See detailed discussion of these terms and others in Dickason (2009, xii–xiii).

⁵To prepare for in-class discussions of texts, students use *Hypothesis* for collaborative annotation, open-source software that encourages them to share their reactions, interpretations, and research with each other and to teach and learn from each other. The annotated texts then become archived collective knowledge they can draw from in their written and oral assignments: <https://web.hypothes.is/>

⁶Maine Wabanaki Reach: <https://www.mainewabanakireach.org/>

- Article by Sara Melzer, “Une ‘Seconde France’? Re-penser le paradigme ‘classique’ à partir de l’histoire oubliée de la colonisation française.”

Day Three: Native heritage, traditions, experiences, and perspectives

- Article and video conference by Maria Girouard: “Penobscots et la montagne sacrée: K’taadn” and “Genocide and Maine: Shining the Light of Truth.”
- In-class discussion with Maria Girouard.

Day Four: Colonial inheritances and Indigenous activism

- Canadian and American “Indian Schools,” land claims disputes, and environmental preservation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, discussed through newspaper articles, television reports, and continued reference to Maria Girouard’s work.

In what follows, we provide an overview of the different parts of our unit, describing readings, videos, and assignments we have used to guide students to examine these oral and written sources from multiple perspectives, an important step toward decolonizing the study of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries in the “French” classroom, especially with regard to the Americas.

COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS: JESUIT *RELATIONS*

Students begin the unit by reading excerpts from Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune’s (1591–1664) *Relation de 1634* [*Relation of 1634*] that provides them access, from a European perspective, to on-the-ground interactions between First Nation peoples and new French arrivals.⁷ In striking ways, the work links, events in continental France with what historian Sara Melzer has called “a second France”: the French presence in the Americas that has been largely left out of the French literature classroom, but nonetheless deeply informed early modern French identity (Melzer 2008).

⁷We are grateful to Sara Melzer, Micah True, and Ellen Welch for recommending this text, sharing sources, and providing helpful suggestions regarding teaching the *Relation*.

The Jesuits, who led the monarch's "civilizing mission" in "New France," converting Native Americans to the Catholic fold, sent lengthy narratives of their experiences among "the savages" back to France for publication and distribution. By the seventeenth century, *relations* of the sort written by Le Jeune had become a well-known and widely read genre, surpassing even novels in their popularity. These eagerly anticipated volumes appeared every year from 1632 to 1673 (Melzer 2008, 79) and had a profound influence on the French readers of the period. Even if they never set foot on land in the Americas, their voracious consumption of narratives created by travelers and missionaries like Le Jeune provided a sense of being there, of becoming part of the action among a community of "savages" who were a source of both fascination and fear. Safe in France, these armchair travelers internalized ideas about far-away peoples that bolstered their own sense of belonging to a "civilized" world that existed in relationship to and, indeed, depended upon this newly "discovered," "uncivilized" one.

If these texts help us understand European identity, it is true too that they serve as a precious, if problematic, source of information about the Native Americans with whom Le Jeune spent many years, whose lives have rarely been visible in the story of French modernity told in the classroom. Unlike sixteenth-century explorers whose observations were based on limited contact with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Jesuits became part of local communities and remained with them for extended periods of time, learning their customs and languages.⁸

Paul Le Jeune spent seventeen years living among First Nation peoples, arriving in Tadoussac in 1632 as a forty-two-year-old man and returning to France in 1649. His *Relation of 1634* recounts his first winter among a people whom he refers to as "the Montagnais" in what would become the French-speaking province of Quebec. As part of his project "for the conversion of these savages," he studies their belief system and cultural practices in depth, bringing alive and preserving in the written archive the cultural practices, beliefs, and day-to-day realities of a whole world that had existed long before contact with the French, when what was not yet known as the Americas belonged to Indigenous peoples.⁹ Le Jeune's narrative treatment of Montagnais culture ranges from spiritual rituals, to oral

⁸ On the French assimilationist model, see Melzer (2008) and (2012), as well as Sayre (1997, 3, 7).

⁹ Letter to his superior, Berthélémy Jacquinot (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 538).

tradition, to social customs, to ways they hunt and preserve moose, all emerging from close observation and what Le Jeune calls his numerous “badineries” [silly chats] with the men and women with whom he shares his days. Despite their racist lens of European superiority, colonial written sources such as Le Jeune’s *Relation* provide a remarkable wealth of ethnographic detail that might otherwise have been lost. As we will see, these written texts, when considered alongside oral sources, continue today to be useful to historians of Native Americans.

Nevertheless, the *raison d’être* of Le Jeune’s text is the destruction of a cultural tradition, inseparable from centuries of oppression and, indeed, genocide. As we read Le Jeune’s *Relation* with our students, we encourage them to think about the ways this text serves as both a source of oppression and a potential source of resistance.

As Le Jeune performs what might be considered a “proto-ethnography,” he alternates between ardent admiration and ferocious critique of the Native Americans with whom he lives. Students are, at first, puzzled by these sudden shifts from praise to scorn. With the help of reading questions and in-class discussion, we invite them to unpack this complex rhetoric. They compare two major sections juxtaposed in his text: Chapter Five, “On the good things found in the savages,” and Chapter Six, “On their vices and their imperfections” (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 595–613). This guided analysis makes visible Le Jeune’s use of a double strategy. As the chapter titles suggest, on the one hand, he emphasizes what he sees as the Montagnais’s positive qualities, for example, their generosity, their ability to forgive, their religious fervor, and their kinship with Roman heroes that the French of the period so admired. On the other hand, he underlines what he sees as the numerous faults of these “sauvages” [savages] and “barbares” [barbarians] (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 538–39). Through probing the “why” behind the Jesuit’s double presentation of the Montagnais, students come to see that both the positive attributes—reinforcing the Montagnais’s admirable qualities and common ancestry with the French that make them ready for successful assimilation—and the negative—affirming the Native peoples’ need of the French to become truly civilized—together function as a seductive justification for French colonial expansion. Students see, at their very inception, the mechanisms by which are created a series of stereotypes about Native peoples that, to this day, haunt the American—and French—imagination.

According to Le Jeune, the Montagnais are “so busy scrambling for sustenance in the woods, they do not have time to save themselves,”

without the aid of the French (560). The challenge for missionaries lies in inciting the Montagnais to give up their migrant hunting habits and to adopt instead an agrarian model that will tie them to the land and facilitate sustained contact with French priests who could then more easily complete their catechism. We ask our students, in groups, to consider the concrete actions Le Jeune proposes for bringing “the light of Christian truth” to the Montagnais (538). On the board, they decipher and summarize the main elements of first, Le Jeune’s letter to his superior that begins his narrative, and second, Chapter 3, “Methods for converting the savages” (538–539, 558–563). These include three proposals intended to disrupt the Montagnais way of life: (1) suppressing the Iroquois, whose warring ways are interfering with the conversion enterprise; (2) persuading the Montagnais to leave their itinerant life and settle into an agrarian lifestyle; and (3) establishing seminary schools for Indigenous children.

Le Jeune’s efforts to force assimilation on a people at the cost of their centuries-old way of life inspire strong reactions in our students. Many are especially outraged at the role played by seminary schools in Le Jeune’s vision, seeing in his text the model for boarding schools for Native children that would reach its apogee in Canada and the United States in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Le Jeune’s design, these schools are explicitly intended to keep children away from their families, a distance he deems necessary because of what he views as an unreasonable parental protectiveness: “These barbarians cannot abide by our punishing their children, not even with words, being completely unable to refuse anything to a crying child” (563). Students are taken aback not only by the enforced separation of children from their parents and their culture but also by the punishment that Le Jeune so blithely assumes Native children will experience at the hands of priests in residential schools. Students recognize that by stealing children and placing them in schools far from their homes, the Jesuits seek to forcibly convert a new generation while bending the older generation to its dictates. For, as an added “benefit” of his schooling project, Le Jeune believes that by effectively holding children hostage, Jesuits will experience less resistance from their parents. While Le Jeune’s vision of residential boarding schools did not see the light of day in his lifetime, his model led to the later creation of the schools that exploded into the news early in the summer of 2021 with the discovery of the remains of hundreds of First Nation children near what had been residential boarding schools in Canada, as we examine further in depth on day four of the unit (Austin 2001).

Though student reactions may differ from institution to institution, or indeed from student to student, we are at a cultural moment where most students need little encouragement to notice the racism in a text. But they often need guidance to think about how this, in many ways, abominable text might have been so successful in convincing early modern readers to adopt a racist viewpoint. By looking closely at the language of Le Jeune's text, our students, many of whom are already suspicious readers, become more careful readers. We encourage students to notice the narrative techniques used by Le Jeune. His first-person text asks readers to identify with the author's perspective in multiple ways, including, for example, the consistent use of a jocular tone that invites us to be with him in a space of knowing while looking out at the Native Americans he casts as naive and silly—not in on the joke. For instance, in his chapter on the Montagnais religion, Le Jeune uses irony to invite his readers to laugh at and thereby dismiss the validity of "their religion or, more appropriately, their superstition" (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 585, 595). He mocks the Montagnais's animism—the belief that all parts of the interconnected natural world have souls—ridiculing their prayers to porcupines, beavers, and moose. He invites his readers to be both mystified and astonished by their seemingly endless hours of repetitive "massive, ... somber and unpleasant" chanting (576). Students see how techniques such as these (the use of first-person, tone, irony, and humor) naturalize a particular view among readers while, at the same time, closing out others.

By identifying these structures, it then becomes possible to resist them and to destabilize Le Jeune's portrayal of the Montagnais and his role among them. As we and our students learn to listen, we can hear in Le Jeune's text the distant voices of those he seeks to convert and even their resistance to his colonial project. We become what Judith Fetterly famously called "resisting readers," who refuse the generic call of the text by a kind of "reading against the grain" (Fetterly 1978; Bartholomae and Petrosky 2003). Students work in groups to examine citations of Montagnais speech, dialogues between Le Jeune and the Montagnais, and stories of their interactions that the Jesuit reports at length in his narrative. While Le Jeune includes these exchanges to display Montagnais inferiority, students find in them moments where the missionary's would-be converts overtly question and mock both the Catholic religion and him personally, as well as clear instances of outright defiance and resistance. Some students point, for example, to Le Jeune's frequent citation the Montagnais's negative reactions to him. Some note that Le Jeune's juxtaposition of what he casts

as the Montagnais's fantastical beliefs with equally incredible beliefs espoused within Catholicism undermines the authority of his critique. When his hosts respond with irony or with "You are ignorant," "you are stupid," students see that whatever Le Jeune wishes to communicate, his hosts do not seem to be buying it (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 573, 589). What they learn in this unit about reading colonial texts deeply informs their approach to sources considered later in the semester, in particular those concerning the experience of Africans captured and deported to the Atlantic colonies.¹⁰

As we have shown, a colonial text like Le Jeune's *Relation* can be a valuable source for learning about Native Americans in the past. Yet, as historian Olive Patricia Dickason points out, for Indigenous peoples, entering history through texts like Le Jeune's remains problematic, to say the least. She underlines the limitations of a notion of history in which only documents "count," one that excludes anything that has not been inscribed as letters on paper:

(H)istory has been described as a document-bound discipline. If something was not written, preferably in an official document, it was not historical. Thus were pre-literate societies excluded from history and labeled pre-historic, or perhaps proto-historic. The best (founding nations) could hope for was to become historic by extension, when they came into contact with literate societies. (Dickason 2009, viii)

Suggesting that the written archive be the *unique* authoritative source for Native American actions, beliefs, and practices of earlier periods perpetuates a Eurocentric idea of history that refuses to acknowledge that Native Americans did not come into existence when Europeans encountered them, but had a thriving culture for millennia before the arrival of white seamen in search of a new route to India.¹¹ Second, as we have seen, Le Jeune's text and other contemporary written narratives are riddled with biases central to France's colonial efforts, which leave them sorely lacking

¹⁰Williard (2018) provides a helpful model for this approach to reading missionary texts in the context of the French Caribbean.

¹¹Dickason notes that, rather than face this fact, Canadian historians have "found it much easier to ignore the earlier period; hence the blinkered view of Canada as a 'young' country" (2009, ix).

in their ability to represent with accuracy and cultural sensitivity the views and values of the ancestors of today's First Nations communities. However closely Le Jeune observed Montagnais practices and beliefs during his time living among them, reporting everything he “saw with (his) own eyes ... while following them through the woods to learn their language,” his ultimate goal in seeking to understand their culture was to eradicate it through replacement with French social and religious customs (Le Jeune [1634] 1979, 539). The systematic exclusion in our courses of the oral tradition—the only kind of “archive” created from a First Nations’ point of view for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century encounters between them and the French—is, then, indefensible.

TALKING BACK: LOCAL PENOBSCOT TALES AND TESTIMONIES

In days three and four of the unit, in keeping with Taubira’s charge, we place Le Jeune’s European written narrative in dialogue with “oral sources and archeological knowledge” (“Loi Taubira”) not typically found in an “early French literature” survey, but vibrantly alive in the territories inhabited by the Wabanaki, Algonquin, Huron, Iroquois, and Innu (whom the French called the Montagnais) that were colonized by the French. The urgency of our endeavor is palpable at Bowdoin College, which, like all American colleges and universities, was built on tribal lands. While students are at first surprised to find in “a French class” the inclusion of Native American tales and oral histories, they are quick to see the intersections between Le Jeune’s French colonial narrative and the story told from an Indigenous perspective, so close to home.¹²

On day three, students meet activist-educator Maria Girouard, a member of the Penobscot nation, one of five tribes in Maine—the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot—who together make up the Wabanaki people from “the land first touched by the light of dawn.” Through their interactions with Girouard, who honors us each

¹²In some ways, we are catching up at the university level with what has been happening at the elementary and secondary levels. Since 2001, a Wabanaki Studies curriculum has been mandated in all Maine schools (Feinberg 2019).

semester with her visit, students come to see Native American oral traditions as a living and essential part of who the Penobscot are today in deep relation to who they have been. Girouard's contribution to our course cannot be overstated. Learning *with* a member of the local Native American community heightens the stakes of the historical encounters between First Nations people and Europeans in ways that written texts alone cannot. Students connect with Girouard, and through her, with a larger group of descendants of the very area in which they are living. While we are deeply fortunate to have forged this partnership with Maria Girouard in Maine, we want to stress that such a collaboration with tribal educators can be established anywhere across the United States. We encourage our colleagues to reach out to members of local tribal communities to share in the telling of a more complete and more vibrant story of the early modern period and its legacy today.

In preparation for Girouard's visit, students have read and reflected through reading questions on her article, "Penobscots and the Sacred Mountain" in which she shares the story of the origin and sacred significance of Maine's tallest mountain, K'taadn, that rises up in the heart of the Wabanaki homeland, the source of the Penobscot River (Girouard 2017, 4–5). They have also watched a video of her lecture, "Genocide and Maine: Shining the Light of Truth," delivered at the University of Southern Maine in Portland on November 20, 2014, and completed a listening sheet with questions designed to help them identify key terms, places, and moments in Maine's history (Girouard 2015). Students prepare questions for Girouard as well.

In her article on K'taadn, Girouard describes and discusses a series of legends, beliefs, and practices associated with the mountain—including an annual pilgrimage to its base participated in today by hundreds of Wabanaki men, women, and children. Our students, many of whom have climbed K'taadn during Bowdoin pre-orientation or outing club trips, are amazed to learn of a vast and living Wabanaki tradition surrounding a mountain that they have until now seen simply as a beautiful landmark, the endpoint of the Appalachian Trail. But it is Girouard's presence with them that brings the stories to life. When she enters the classroom, her first words are "Kwai kwai," hello in her ancestral Penobscot language. Students have read transcriptions of the Montagnais language in *Le Jeune*, and Girouard's greeting connects Native languages of the past with the here and now. From the beginning, Girouard emphasizes to the students that they are with her in this project of learning and sharing, that what they are learning

from Le Jeune and what she brings to them are the means to arrive together at a broader base of knowledge. Throughout her conversation she shares bits of tales that she adopted after hearing them told in her youth by elders in the home and at tribal gatherings. Girouard, a passionate advocate for environmental protection, uses legends to tell us about her work to protect the Penobscot River, a waterway that has been inseparable for centuries from Wabanaki livelihood and identity. She cites Wabanaki hero Gluskape's victory over the giant water monster Aglebem, who had dammed up the great river and let it go dry. She shows rather than explains how the spoken word functions, the historical and the present blending in a kind of sharing with its own rules. Through their interactions with Girouard, students see the powerful role of the oral tradition in supporting a collective knowledge and way of life and as a tool for activism in defense of Native rights and values.

The consideration of sources drawn from Native American oral tradition brings students face to face with a lot of pain. Girouard's recorded lecture on "Genocide and Maine" graphically depicts the horrific violence and racism of the English and French colonization of Wabanaki lands, where 95% of the Native population was decimated, twenty tribes were reduced to five, and voting and religious rights were severely restricted until late in the twentieth century. As they listen to Penobscot versions of events that took place in Maine and recognize the names of nearby towns and regions, the violent history of colonial conquest becomes all the more real. Girouard shares with students Governor Phipp's 1755 proclamation that encouraged scalping Native Americans and how inhabitants in nearby Woolwich, Maine, took up the offer of a bounty for this chilling practice, each scalp serving as proof of the capture and killing of a local tribe member.¹³ The combination of Girouard's orally transmitted knowledge of tribal history and this document from the written archive has a powerful impact. What students learn from Girouard deepens and challenges their understanding and their own relationship to the land and to the people that make up their adopted state. When signs go up on campus each fall, their white letters on a green background declaring "You are on Indigenous land," the message reverberates with them.

Girouard's testimony also brings alive a vision that goes far beyond the Penobscot. The values she shares traverse First Nation cultures,

¹³As late as 2009, the offer for sale on the internet of Native American scalps and bones was investigated by the FBI (Erikson 2009).

countering a European mindset that since the sixteenth century has placed “man” at the center. As Dickason underlines,

(The) dazzling variety of cultural particularities (of different tribes) has tended to obscure the underlying unity of the Amerindian world view, which saw humans as part of a cosmological order depending on a balance of reciprocating forces to keep the universe functioning in harmony. This contrasts with the Judeo-Christian view of a cosmos dominated by a God in the image of man. In this perspective man is in the privileged position, as up to a certain point he can control nature for his own benefit. (Dickason 2009, ix–x)

These shared values and worldview allow us to place the knowledge our students have gained from learning with Girouard and the Penobscot today in dialogue with what they have learned from reading Le Jeune’s historical treatment of the Montagnais, both in class and in written assignments. Students see how the written narratives they have read provide them a context that helps them better understand the stakes of First Nation stories and testimonials told today. At the same time, they observe how reading, listening to, and interacting with the oral testimonials of Native people today changes and enriches their understanding of the texts they have studied. For instance, students note the remarkable consistency between the themes and characterizations of the Montagnais that fill Le Jeune’s seventeenth-century written account and those of Penobscot oral tradition as shared by Girouard. Yet, they also note the significant difference in tone between the narratives. What is scorned in Le Jeune’s *Relation*, is treated with respect and veneration by Girouard. While Le Jeune denigrates the Montagnais’s intimate relationship with the earth, Girouard deeply values the Wabanaki’s sacred connection with the land. While Le Jeune mocks Montagnais’s belief in the presence of a spirit in all elements of the natural world, the Penobscot assert the intrinsic value and sacredness of all creation. They see the earth as an interconnected web of which human beings are just a part and affirm their role as its sacred stewards (Girouard 2017, 5). One prompt for the essay assignment that concludes this unit asks students to consider the ways in which their new knowledge of Wabanaki values and traditions can inform and complicate the way they read colonial texts like Le Jeune’s: How do the sources and perspectives presented by Girouard and others about the Penobscot change our reading of Le Jeune’s *Relation* about the Montagnais and

vice-versa? How does Le Jeune’s interpretation of the characteristics, values, legends, practices, and beliefs of the Indigenous people he describes compare to how similar traits and traditions are presented by Native speakers and writers in Maine? How does Le Jeune’s account inform our understanding of Native traditions of the past and how do Native story traditions and testimonials challenge and complicate Le Jeune’s colonial narrative? This work makes apparent that when considered together, oral and written sources enrich and complicate each other, going a long way toward fulfilling Christiane Taubira’s wish—and ours—to arrive at a truer and richer story through collaboration.

TALKING BACK: TESTIMONIALS FROM FRENCH CANADA

On this final day of the unit, students examine stories and testimonies of Indigenous Canadians living now in the very land that Le Jeune wrote about in the seventeenth century. Extending their discussions with Girouard, students listen to recorded Native testimonials from the oral archive and read recent news articles that highlight painful connections between past and present from an Indigenous perspective that counters that of European colonizers.¹⁴

Videos of testimonials from First Nation peoples living in the province of Québec, who are closer descendants of those Le Jeune refers to as “les Montagnais,” tell the horrific history of state-sponsored and church-run “Indian Schools,” that existed in both Canada and the United States through the twentieth century. These schools, established to “kill the Indian, and save the man,” vividly show the costs of the assimilationist project as it unfolds over time.¹⁵ Given the emotional challenges and risks inherent in the act of witnessing other people’s trauma, we prepare students to grapple with this material through explicit negotiation of the stakes: How do we create a “listening community,” to use Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s term, that honors the subjectivity and truth shared by the speaker and allows us to welcome their testimony without judgment or

¹⁴ All the sources we draw on here are widely available online.

¹⁵ Richard H. Pratt’s 1892 speech, quoted in Girouard (2015). One hundred and thirty such residential schools existed across Canada during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (“Les pensionnats” 2013). “Indian Schools” in the United States, that trace their origins to early seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries, were even more numerous, with a few off-reservation schools still operating today.

voyeurism (Chun 2002)¹⁶ How does who we are and what we have experienced change our ability to identify with the speaker and the ways we receive and react to their experience of trauma? What defense mechanisms emerge for some of us? How do we increase solidarity through bearing witness to another's pain rather than reinforce the speaker's otherness? Our students then listen, with heightened awareness, to oral histories told in French by older Canadians who as children were forced to enroll in schools far from their families and tribes, where traditional braids were sliced away and tribal languages banished. Our students watch a short Radio-Canada news report produced in 2013, just as the Canadian Commission on Truth and Reconciliation was preparing to hold public meetings in Québec, part of a six-year series of events in cities across the country to reeducate citizens through finally hearing and honoring the testimonies of survivors ("Les pensionnats" 2013). Our students listen, for example, to the testimony of Marcel Petiquay, first sent at the age of six to a boarding school for Indigenous Canadian children. He describes his rape by a priest at the age of seven, the beginning of a long series of sexual aggressions that would be the source of enduring self-hatred, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and recurrent suicidal thoughts. He makes plain the heartbreaking cycle of violence that has swept up generation after generation. Students recognize in Petiquay's lived experience of state-sanctioned cultural denial and violence the modern-day persistence of the very schooling project first advanced by Le Jeune in the seventeenth century. As we have seen, Le Jeune's seminars, though initially unsuccessful, were brought to fruition with the advent of greater state control—still hand in hand with the church—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ As through conversations with Girouard—who recounts her memories of the terror of Penobscot mothers at the approach of an unknown car, who hid their children from social workers for fear they would be taken away—students see in these testimonies the long-term costs of European-style progress. At the same time, students observe the remarkable resilience of tribal heritage and rituals that, in Petiquay's words, "a century of internment did not succeed in destroying" ("Les pensionnats de la honte" 2013).

¹⁶See also Patricia Yaeger (2002), and other essays assembled in Nancy K. Miller's and Jason Tougaw's 2002 volume.

¹⁷For a detailed account of the history of "Indian Schools" in Canada, see the first volume of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report (2015).

As noted by *Washington Post* journalist Brenda J. Child, herself a grandchild of Native American grandparents, “for many in the United States, the conversation is, perhaps, just beginning” (Child 2021). She reminds us that the question of Indigenous schools is an American tragedy as much as it is a Canadian one, calling attention to the mass deaths of children in similar boarding schools right here in the United States, “beginning with Carlisle in Pennsylvania in 1879 and ending with the Sherman Institute in California in 1903.” These stories go a long way for students toward connecting Le Jeune’s colonial ambitions in the “time of encounters” to the here and now, a time when many non-Native students have had little to no contact with Native Americans. First Nation youth attend college at rates much lower than the average for Americans overall and they often face enormous obstacles to attending prestigious schools like Bowdoin (PNPI 2020). This unit is a reminder of the importance of learning to listen for Native American history in the past but also in the present.

Students also read about several current cases of Native American activism that resonate with the colonial past they have studied. During their visit with Girouard in the previous class session, students had already begun the conversation about the Penobscot tribe’s engagement with current-day environmental issues. Girouard and other members of the Penobscot tribe have long fought to protect their rights as stewards of the river that bears their name. Sherri Mitchell, an attorney and Indigenous rights activist, emphasizes the historical inseparability of the tribe and the river and its link to present-day concerns: “The Penobscot River is the first relative on our census, it’s the first citizen of the Penobscot Nation. Because when you ask me who I am, where I come from, I answer with one word: Penobscot. That’s who I am, that’s who the river is, that’s who the land is, and we are all one. All of us” (Carpenter 2021). When in 2012, the Maine attorney general informed the Penobscot that they had no right to participate in regulating water quality, so important for fishing, the tribe struck back with a lawsuit against the state, including “municipalities and businesses that discharge wastewater to the Penobscot River.” Recently, the First Circuit Court of Appeals narrowly ruled in the state’s favor but included an eighty-page dissenting opinion that has given continued hope to the tribe. The Penobscot will soon be petitioning the Supreme Court to hear the case.

Students examine another case in the news: Wolfdon Resources, a Canadian mining company, has been seeking zoning permits to build a precious minerals mine in the state of Maine that would adversely impact

hunting and fishing on tribal lands. The CEO of the company was caught telling shareholders that “there are no Indigenous Rights in Maine,” clearly rejoicing in that “fact.” Taking a page from Le Jeune’s playbook, the company also told investors that the Penobscots supported the program when, in fact, they have opposed it from the beginning (MacDougall 2021).

Throughout their discussions with Girouard regarding her own activism and their reading and discussion of recent cases in the news, our environmentally aware students, many of whom are active in the fight for sound environmental policy, express gratitude for the contributions of Native Americans, environmentalists long before others took up the cause. As they often mention in their course evaluations, the inclusion of this material, drawn largely from oral sources, immediately links the continued fight for the rights and recognition of First Nations people today to their study of francophone literatures and cultures in ways many of them did not anticipate. They are moved by the experience of Native Americans here in Maine and note how important having a broad sense of history is to understanding the problems around race and exclusion that live on in both American and French culture today.

CONCLUSION

The clash of worldviews explored in this unit is not something we have left behind as we have moved into more modern times. Our university system, like the European institutions that informed Le Jeune’s thinking some four hundred years ago, privileges a kind of knowledge associated almost exclusively with the written tradition. Earlier we considered Dickason’s distinction between, on the one hand, the Judeo-Christian view “of a cosmos dominated by a God in the image of man” with “man ... in the privileged position ... controll(ing) nature for his own benefit” and, on the other hand, a Native American worldview that “saw humans as part of a cosmological order depending on a balance of reciprocating forces to keep the universe functioning in harmony” (Dickason 2009, ix–x). In *Teaching Across Cultural Strengths*, Alicia Fedelina Chávez and Susan D. Longerbeam similarly distinguish two broad cultural epistemologies in today’s classrooms: a “culturally individuated worldview” that values privacy, compartmentalization, and abstraction, and a “culturally integrated worldview” in which interconnectedness and mutual dependence matter (Chávez and

Longerbeam 2016). Western institutions, including American and European universities, have traditionally given overwhelming preference to the “individuated” model, often leading students brought up in “integrated” cultures where the oral tradition has played an important role, to feel self-doubt and a sense of not belonging. Our focus on the value of Native American “integrated” cultures in this unit offers a helpful counterpoint. As Chávez and Longerbeam have shown, greater emphasis on the “integrated worldview” in the classroom encourages students from more “integrated” cultures to feel more included and to find their perspectives legitimized. Witnessing the spoken word valued in an academic setting transforms the playing field and invites different kinds of knowledge to take center stage for all students.

Clearly, the need to feel that our cultures and contributions are legitimate, acknowledged, and valued is not just true for our students, but for faculty as well. The issues raised here are not intellectual issues alone but deeply relevant, timely, and personal. As James Baldwin reminds us, “history is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us, We *are* our history” ([1980] 2010, 125).¹⁸ Our work in rethinking how we teach the early modern period is about the past but also about us in the present. The borders between disciplines are changing but they, like territories, still matter. For those of us trained in earlier periods, engaging with this work means reaching outside our specialty and therefore entering the specialty of other scholars. As Hanétha Vété-Congolo addressed in her keynote, “Decolonizing the White French Curriculum: Which Ethics?”, at the 2020 Conference on Diversity, Decolonization, and the French Curriculum, how do we do this and at the same time avoid a sort of academic neo-colonialism (Vété-Congolo 2020)? Our efforts are null if we, in our process, replicate the power structures that we are ostensibly attempting to tear down. Those of us whose primary specialties are not “francophone” literature or post-colonial studies must remember to honor those whose fields we learn from and draw on, particularly our colleagues of the global majority who have made possible this watershed moment. The work of these scholars, past and ongoing, must be given full credit at every turn, especially as some post-colonial concepts become widely used. While encouraging students to reflect carefully on their subject positions, we need to be constantly reflecting on our own.

¹⁸ Emphasis in original.

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