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COMMENTARY

In Defense of *Black Robe*: A Reply to Ward Churchill

KRISTOF HAAVIK

Whatever one thinks of his notorious comments on the 9/11 attacks, Ward Churchill has long been known to scholars of Native American studies as one of their most thoughtful and influential colleagues. Whether he ultimately proves to be of American Indian background or not—a subject of current controversy—his commentaries on the treatment of Indians in American society have been cogent and persuasive. His essays on a variety of topics, from colonial history to the Men’s Movement, have repeatedly revealed the harm done by acts that may seem innocuous or even respectful of Native heritage, and his analyses have done a valuable service to both the victims and the broader society that perpetrates or condones such behavior. As a timely example, one might note that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has recently come around to Churchill’s attitude toward the use of Indians as sports team mascots, considering them demeaning and barring teams that use them from postseason play. It is as an admirer of Churchill, then, that I find myself forced, however reluctantly, to disagree with his article “And They Did It Like Dogs in the Dirt: An Indigenist Analysis of *Black Robe*.”¹ In his bitter condemnation of the film, he seems to misinterpret its intentions and message, not revealing the harm others have overlooked but imagining offense where there is none. By examining Churchill’s arguments, as well as other aspects of the movie he does not discuss, I offer a very different

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interpretation. Although he makes an ostensibly plausible case, I believe that he is mistaken and that *Black Robe* gives a historically accurate and sympathetic view of Native Americans.

Based on the novel of the same name by Brian Moore, who also wrote the screenplay, *Black Robe*, released in 1991, tells the story of Father Laforgue, a Jesuit missionary in Quebec in 1634. Sent to visit a mission established among the Huron, Laforgue travels up the Saint Lawrence River with a young French assistant named Daniel, a party of Algonquians led by a warrior named Chomina, Chomina's daughter Annuka, and a dozen other Indians. After a series of adventures that includes romance between Annuka and Daniel, the priest's temporary abandonment by his guides, and the group's capture by and escape from Mohawks, Laforgue eventually arrives alone at the mission, where he finds the Hurons dying of plague. He baptizes them but warns that the ceremony will not protect them from the disease, and the film ends with a written announcement of their subsequent destruction by the Iroquois. Through these often-traumatic events, the film traces the cultural confrontation between European and Native American civilizations.

Before reviewing Churchill's specific complaints about *Black Robe*, it is important to recognize the general historical accuracy of the film's production and story. Even Churchill concedes that it is "a truly magnificent achievement" in terms of the physical realism of scenery, sets, and costumes.² The Native villages took weeks to build, he notes, with walls made of cedar bark that cost US\$37,000 to transport to the site, and facsimile tools of the period were painstakingly produced.³ Other scenes that focus on European culture are equally accurate: the flashbacks to France are filmed in Rouen, where Father Laforgue is said to have lived; the opening shot of colonial Quebec shows a little settlement surmounted by "a rather handsome building, surrounded by a square wall, with two little towers at the corners" [un assez beau logis, environné d'une muraille en carré, avec deux petites tourelles aux coins] just as a Jesuit missionary of the period describes it.⁴ The Latin blessing "*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*" is used correctly, a fact that would be unremarkable had not several other big-budget motion pictures, from *The Godfather Part III* to *Braveheart*, failed to do so (erroneously substituting the nominative *spiritus sanctus* for the genitive *spiritus sancti*).⁵

Furthermore, the content of several scenes, including the words and attitudes of many characters, are taken directly from primary sources on Canadian history—sources written by Europeans, it is true, but the only existing historical records of the time. A workman's complaint that the French colonies have priests instead of useful personnel may derive from the comment made by Father François Du Creux in his *The History of Canada or New France* that under Champlain's administration the city "seemed more like a monastery than a citadel."⁶ The Indians' fascination with the clock, their tendency to perceive it as the "captain" of the French, and the "translation" of its chimes by the latter all appear in both Du Creux's account and the works of later historians.⁷ The Natives' amazement at the process of writing was recorded at the time;⁸ similarly, the Native guides' asking their Jesuit guest for tobacco, much to Father Laforgue's displeasure, is drawn from historical

sources;⁹ their disinterest in a heaven that had no earthly pleasures like tobacco is noted by modern scholars;¹⁰ and their practice of hiding canoes for later retrieval before setting out on foot was observed by Radisson.¹¹ Most strikingly, Champlain's speech to the Indians on the eve of their departure is taken almost word for word from the *Jesuit Relations*, the original annals upon which virtually all subsequent accounts are based or, even more precisely, upon Parkman's rendering of it in English, which Brian Moore seems to have followed in the original novel *Black Robe* and abridged for the screenplay.¹² Admittedly, these scenes are not what Churchill criticizes; nevertheless, they suggest close attention to historical accuracy by the filmmakers and render Churchill's interpretation of the movie as malicious anti-Indian propaganda suspect from the beginning.

Churchill's indictments of *Black Robe* can be grouped into four general categories: depictions of sexuality, violence, and spirituality among Indians, and the purported attitudes of the French. Because the first of these is reflected in the title of his essay, it seems an appropriate point from which to begin a rebuttal. Churchill sees the character Annuka as possessed by a "proclivity . . . to copulate voraciously with whatever male she happens to find convenient when the urge strikes," and thus the incarnation of a slanderous belief that all Indians are "imbued with crude and sometimes bestial impulses."¹³ Such a vision of Native sexuality, suggestive of animals in heat, is all the more offensive to Churchill when juxtaposed as it is in the film with the young Frenchman Daniel's use of the missionary position when with the girl and, perhaps also, though Churchill does not say so directly, with the strict chastity of Father Laforgue.

More than one answer can be given to these charges. Although Churchill claims that Annuka is shown engaging in such shameless behavior four times, three of them involving the "canine behavior" of the "dog style" named in the essay's title, the movie actually contains not four sex scenes with Annuka but three, of which only two involve her free consent. Unless the videocassette I am using contains an expurgated version, which is unlikely because it runs exactly the one hundred minutes Churchill cites as the film's length, Churchill is playing fast and loose with the facts. The first time the French priest awakes to the discomforting sight of Indians copulating near him in the lodge, Annuka is shown sleeping—alone, if it need be stated—apart from the couple; the face of the woman engaged in sex is never shown, but it is obviously one of the other women in the group. The only time Annuka is shown in the position that so offends Churchill comes later in the film, when she seduces her Mohawk captor. Here, Churchill seems to overlook her motivation: she invites the guard to intercourse not out of lust but as a ploy to engineer the prisoners' escape; crouching on her hands and knees enables her to grab a heavy object and strike the Mohawk by surprise, an act that would be much harder if not impossible were she on her back. The scene proves not her immorality but her resourcefulness, to which all the prisoners, Indians and Frenchmen alike, owe their lives. If it contains a message, it is not that Indians need the morality of Christians but rather that Christians need the problem-solving skills of Indians. It is the Indian characters' ability to overcome obstacles that

sets them apart from the Europeans throughout the movie: Laforgue gets lost in the forest while his guides are at home in it; Chomina skillfully shoots wild birds on the wing while Daniel watches in awe.¹⁴ Annuka's seduction of the guard is one more example of how resourceful the film's Indians are, strikingly more so than the Europeans.

Furthermore, Annuka's relationship with Daniel seems intended to condemn not animal lust of Native Americans but rather sexual inhibitions of white men. Contrary to Churchill's claims, she is not inclined to fornicate with any and every male. Other than in her seduction of the Mohawk captor she has sex only with Daniel.¹⁵ That she saves Daniel from the Iroquois even while wanting to abandon Laforgue, and later stays with him when the priest continues on to the Huron village, suggests a real intimacy between them; in modern parlance, one might say that their union is not a one-night stand but a long-term relationship. Moreover, it is during their copulation that Daniel explains to her the strange fact that the Black Robes—Catholic priests—abjure sex as a promise to their God. The language used in the subtitles of their dialogue, "their God" (emphasis added), suggests that the young Frenchman is already turning away from his Catholic roots and paying more heed to Indian beliefs, all the more when he answers her question "Why make a promise like that?" by simply saying "Strange, isn't it?" and continues their lovemaking. Laforgue's voyeurism during the scene, followed by his violent self-flagellation with a pine branch—and masturbation, in the novel—are shown as unnatural, even disturbing, in contrast to the genuine affection of Daniel and Annuka's carefree sexuality. To draw an analogy from European literature, one might say the question of sexuality is treated here as it is in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, an Enlightenment work that shows the contrasting views of a South Pacific islander and a Catholic priest, with the latter unable to defend his incomprehensible abstinence. Thus, if *Black Robe* makes a judgment of sexual mores, it is those of Christians or Europeans, not of Indians, that are criticized.

Churchill also sees the violence of the Mohawks as a historically inaccurate "deliberate exercise in vilification."¹⁶ Captive children invariably were adopted, he argues, not killed; female prisoners were given in marriage to local men rather than being tortured or put to death; the violence against male prisoners is also grossly exaggerated in the film; and in any case it was women who controlled Iroquois society, not the movie's brutal male chieftain. Here Churchill has something of a point, but only something. Captured women and children most often were treated better than male prisoners. Richter states, "captive women and children were usually spared the gantlet [sic]" upon arrival at their captors' village, a fact that the movie faithfully reflects when Laforgue, Chomina, and Daniel are subjected to the ritual while Annuka and her younger brother are not.¹⁷ At other times in their captivity, however, women and children faced many of the same dangers that men did. Women, "like men, faced death if they tried to escape or impeded the group's progress. . . . All prisoners lived in constant fear of death."¹⁸ Arrival at their captors' home, where they might be adopted or given in marriage, was no guarantee of humane treatment or even survival. Richter continues, "Inside the village, further afflictions awaited nearly every prisoner, male or female, young or old."¹⁹ Examples of the killing

of captured women and children abound in the primary sources. Du Creux tells how the Iroquois attacked a female captive who tried to commit suicide by throwing herself into a freezing river: "they beat her to death and took her scalp."²⁰ Radisson describes the killing of children, not only by his Mohawk captors but also by the Indian friends with whom he escaped, whom he is far less likely to slander with false allegations of murder.²¹

Sagard recounts similar practices among the Hurons, with women and children killed either immediately upon capture or as part of later torture.²² Among modern scholars, White tells of a Huron war party that killed and ate a captured child every night of its trip home.²³ Women who were spared for adoption by the Iroquois still might be subjected to abuse, even if this consisted of merely being forced to dance naked for their captors.²⁴ Other degradations involved physical harm: one female prisoner had both thumbs "crushed off"; another was induced by threats of death to cut off the thumbs of her fellow prisoner Isaac Jogues.²⁵ Du Creux describes the plight of Algonquian prisoners: "they ordered the women to beat the men, even wives to beat their husbands; this they refused to do. One woman, the daughter of a certain Aouessonipini, overcome by the fear of suffering and death, did undertake the infamous work, and received a well deserved reward; they tortured her all the more." Most interesting, he concludes his account of the episode with the statement: "The lives of about thirty of the women were spared that they might marry in the enemy country."²⁶ Because he does not state the total number of women prisoners, it is impossible to say what proportion was spared in this case. But the fact that he gives a number at all, rather than simply declaring that the women of the group were spared, suggests that others were put to death.²⁷ In what he admits is an exceptional case, Du Creux also reports the case of a woman who was burned all over her body as a sacrifice to the god Areskouï, precisely what the Mohawk chief in *Black Robe* proposes to do with Annuka.²⁸ Thus, although such brutal treatment of women and children was the exception, it was not an exceedingly rare exception, and allusion to it in *Black Robe* is justified on grounds of historical accuracy.

Moreover, although Churchill is right to point out the widespread Iroquois practice of adopting prisoners, such a humane policy was not universal, and protracted torture of captives was frequent even for those who were subsequently adopted. The *Jesuit Relations* of 1647 reports that particular prisoners "whom they do not choose to put to death" [qu'on ne veut pas executer à mort] were given to families, who adopted them as relatives to replace dead family members and protected them from harm, "but when they retain some public prisoner, like the Father [Isaac Jogues], without giving him to any individual, this poor man is every day within two finger-lengths of death" [mais quand ils retiennent quelque prisonnier public, comme le Pere, sans le donner à aucun particulier, ce pauvre homme est tous les iours à deux doigts de la mort].²⁹ Even those who were later adopted often had to endure torture first. Richter views it as a necessary and integral part of a captive assuming a new identity as an Iroquois: "At the moment a prospective adoptee was seized, he or she began a grueling trial crucial to the exchange of a former group identity for an Iroquois one."³⁰ Another missionary of the

time, Father Bressani, was subjected to days of torment and only given for adoption to an old woman as a sort of reward for his fortitude throughout the ordeal.³¹ Parkman states that Indians allowed lay missionary Guillaume Couture to be adopted only “after torturing him most savagely,” out of admiration for his bravery.³²

Recent scholarship supports the claim that, for at least some captives, adoption was contingent on proving their worth as Bressani did.³³ Sutton presents it as an exceptional reward granted only to men who “were able to maintain . . . [a] macho stance” throughout torture.³⁴ Furthermore, the English naturalist John Bartram remarked in the mid-1700s that adoption had been less common in the past, before warfare and disease reduced Iroquois populations to the extent that adopting most prisoners became necessary to restore former population levels.³⁵ Modern historians agree that adoption became more frequent later in the seventeenth century as a solution to the Iroquois’s reduced numbers. Parkman states that “the Iroquois were at the height of their prosperity about the year 1650,” well after the events of *Black Robe*, and thus less apt to spare prisoners.³⁶ The *Jesuit Relations* of 1664–65, telling of events a full thirty years after the setting of the movie, recounts yet another prisoner who was adopted only after extended torture and over the opposition of those who wanted to kill him.³⁷ So widespread was the “northeastern torture complex,” as Kenneth Morrison calls it, that more than one modern ethnographer or historian has speculated that these tribes may have been attentive to missionary tales of the torments of hell because the image evoked was so similar to something they all had seen repeatedly.³⁸ Sutton resumes the Iroquois practice simply: “Most male captives were tortured to death.”³⁹

In this context, the brutality of the Iroquois in *Black Robe* is completely justifiable as an accurate portrayal of their society. Furthermore, it should be noted that most of these horrific practices are never shown in the film, only threatened, making the impression of cruelty much less vivid than if such acts were actually re-created for the camera. Churchill rightly points out the institutional violence practiced in Europe by groups such as the Inquisition and objects that no mention of it is made in the film. Despite his indignation, the omission seems based not on a desire to slander Indians but simply on relevance, as European religious conflicts and oppression are not the subjects of the movie. But the most remarkable fact about the depiction of ritual violence in *Black Robe* is that it ultimately defends its villains. Chomina, who has just seen his son murdered by the Iroquois, nonetheless rejects Daniel’s statement that “the Iroquois are not men. They are animals,” by answering, “They are the same as us.” The *us* in question is never defined and may refer to Chomina’s Algonquian, who would do the same thing to the Iroquois they captured or to the French, who were carving out an empire in North America at the time. In its terse simplicity, it seems best understood as meaning all human beings, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or any other factors: people are people, period. Such a statement by the character who has the greatest reason to hate his captors goes much further than pious moralizing to assert the equality of all people, amounting to a defense not only of the Mohawks’ brutality but also of their entire culture.

In his claim that it was women who controlled Iroquois society and specifically the treatment of prisoners, Churchill again has something of a point, but the case is not as simple as he paints it. In apparent agreement with Churchill, Fenton asserts that “it was the ‘she sachems’ who decided whether captives were adopted or tortured.”⁴⁰ This statement is made, however, in the context of a discussion of the Iroquois in the eighteenth century, a passage that begins: “The eighteenth-century Iroquois were already transformed” from what they had been earlier.⁴¹ Fenton names specifically the increasing power of women as one of these changes, which was the result of enormous losses of men due to war, which had not yet struck the Iroquois in the early to mid-1600s, when *Black Robe* takes place. In the same passage quoted in the preceding text, Fenton states that “prisoners belonged to the warriors until distributed among families,” suggesting that men could do what they wanted with their captives until adoption took them out of their hands.⁴²

Critical to Churchill’s claim are the questions of at what point in their captivity prisoners were given to families and who was empowered to make this distribution. No clear answers can be found in primary documents, but a picture emerges that seems to contradict Churchill’s assertions. Jesuit missionary Isaac Jogues names as those responsible for his torment “A captain” [Vn Capitaine], “An old man” [Vn vieillard].⁴³ Some of the terms used in the original French are ambiguous, because *ils*, though grammatically masculine, is also used for mixed groups of men and women, while the indefinite *on* tells nothing about the subject.⁴⁴ Other words, however, are specifically masculine: “a [masculine] wretch” [vn mal-heureux], “one [masculine] of these Barbarians” [vn de ces Barbares].⁴⁵ Even when he is saved from his tormentors, Jogues owes his rescue to a man, “A [masculine] Savage from a more distant country” [Vn sauvage d’vn pays plus esloigné].⁴⁶ Women, even while sympathizing with the victims, seem relegated to the position of powerless onlookers: “Some women, more merciful, regarded us with much charity and were unable to look at our sores without compassion” [Quelques femmes plus pitoyables nous voyoient avec beaucoup de charité, ne pouuans regarder nos playes sans compassion].⁴⁷ The prisoners’ fate is decided by “the Council” [le Conseil], whose membership is not stated. The next chapter, however, begins with the deliberations on what to do with the captives by “les principaux du pays.” Although this grammatically masculine term could refer to a mixed group, the text is probably correctly translated as “the principal men of the country.”⁴⁸ If women exercised power over prisoners, it seems it was only in conjunction with men.

Bressani’s 1653 account, written in Italian, confirms that of Jogues. If “a Captain” [un Capitano], “Captains” [Capitani], “young men” [giouani], and “both the men and the boys” [doue e gli huomini] initially tortured him, this may be only because he was in the hands of a hunting party composed entirely of men.⁴⁹ But his ordeal after arrival at an Iroquois village continued to be directed by men. When his fate was to be decided, Bressani cites men as the principal actors, both for and against him: “I entreated a Captain, that they would commute, if it was possible, the death by fire into some other, but another man exhorted him to remain firm in the resolution already

taken” [pregauro un Capitano, che mi mutassero, se si poteua, la morte di fuoco in qualche altra. Ma un’ altro gli esortaua à star fermi nella risoluzione già presa].⁵⁰ When he is finally saved from death, it is only because “the Barbarians . . . gave me . . . to an Old Woman” [I Barbari . . . mi diedero . . . ad una Vecchia], a formulation that strongly suggests that the men held power and could do as they pleased with him.⁵¹ The old woman did have—and exercised—the power to save him from the fire, to the disappointment of the men who wanted to kill him, but only after those men voluntarily gave him to her. Furthermore, even then she had to pay a ransom to the men for his life.

Radisson’s account is only partially different. Unlike others who have recorded their experiences of captivity by the Iroquois, upon arrival at a Mohawk town, “a good old woman” who took him in and adopted him as her son saved him from both the gauntlet and subsequent tortures.⁵² When he was recaptured after attempting to escape, his adoptive family once again saved him from the gauntlet but were soon forced to hand him over to “a great number of armed men.”⁵³ Like Jogues, he describes events as being controlled by men, with women unable to intervene: “[M]y father made me rise and delivers me into their hands. My mother seeing this, cries and laments with both my sisters.”⁵⁴ His adoptive mother came to see him the next day but could only offer moral encouragement while he was tortured with the other captives and bind his wounds after watching them being inflicted on him. When he was finally saved, it was only due to the efforts of his family, who offered presents to those in charge, a process in which his father played as great a role as his mother. Here again, as near as one can infer from Radisson’s incomplete account, a prisoner was saved from death and torture only because the men who held him captive chose to give him to a family.

In a later passage, Radisson tells how an Iroquois warrior was reprimanded for keeping those he had captured instead of referring their fate to the council. As before, the makeup of the council is not stated, but it is an old man who insists on their authority: “Nephew, you must know that all slaves, as well men as women, are first brought before the Councell, and we alone can dispose [of] them.”⁵⁵ Richter attributed the power to determine captives’ fate to a mixed group of men and women—“village headmen and clan matrons.”⁵⁶ What emerges from all these eyewitness accounts is a system in which women who adopted captives immediately upon their arrival at the village were the exception, not the rule. The standard practice seems to be one of torturing all prisoners until a decision whether or not to put them up for adoption was made. Those empowered to decide the question were a council apparently composed largely if not entirely of men. Throughout this process, women could do little but watch and wait for the council’s decision.

Other details of the film’s captive sequence that Churchill does not explicitly deny but seems to question by his disparaging tone are likewise verifiable. Virtually all sources, both primary and modern, describe the ritual of the gauntlet that prisoners had to undergo.⁵⁷ Among these, Father Isaac Jogues’s account in the *Jesuit Relations* of 1647 can serve as an example of how closely the screenplay follows documented events.

They seek sticks or thorns. . . . Being thus armed, they form in line—a hundred on one side, and a hundred on the other—and make us pass, all naked, along that way of fury and anguish. . . . [T]hey made me march last, that I might be more exposed to their rage. I had not accomplished the half of this course when I fell to the earth under the weight of that hail and of those redoubled blows. [Ils cherchent des bastons ou des espines . . . estans ainsi armez ils se mettent en haye, cent d'vn costé, & cent de l'autre, & nous font passer tous nuds dans ce chemin de fureur & d'angoisses . . . ils me firent marcher le dernier, pour estre plus exposé à leur rage. Je n'auois pas fait la moitié de cette route que ie tombay par terre sous le faiz de cette gresle, & de ces coups redoublez.]⁵⁸

The details of the account—the priest going last and falling under the blows—correspond so closely to the events of the film that one may wonder if the screenplay is taken directly from Jogues's narrative; the only clear difference is that the movie leaves prisoners' clothes on during the gauntlet, thus presenting a scene that is less, not more, graphic and shocking than the historical facts. Moreover, the events Jogues describes took place immediately upon his capture, far from any Iroquois settlement, and were repeated when the group reached a town.⁵⁹ *Black Robe* actually understates the sufferings of some Iroquois prisoners by showing its protagonists forced to run the gauntlet only once.

Likewise, subsequent events inside the longhouse can be confirmed. Forcing prisoners to sing was a common practice described in nearly all sources; here again, one text can stand for many more. Radisson recounts that “when we came neere our dwellings we mette severall gangs of men to our greatest disadvantage, ffor we weare forced to sing” and that “they pluckt 4 nailles out of my fingers, and made me sing.”⁶⁰ This last passage reflects another incident in the film, the severing of Laforgue's finger, which is also drawn from historical documents. Burning or cutting the fingers or thumbs of prisoners in order to torture them in a way that would leave them alive for subsequent adoption (or further torture) was a common Iroquois practice. Even the use of a shell to perform the cutting is documented: “They used a scallop or an oyster-shell for cutting off the right thumb of the other Frenchman, so as to cause him more pain” [Ils se seruient d'vne coquille ou d'vne escalle d'huitre pour couper le pouce de l'autre François, afin de luy causer plus de douleur].⁶¹ So common was the practice that Bressani's account mentions a Huron who even dreamed about it one night, imagining that “he was in the hands of the enemies, who were cutting off one of his fingers with a sea-shell” [era in mano de' nemici, che gli tagliauano vn dito con vna conchiglia di mare].⁶² Likewise, the Mohawk chief's threat that “today was but the first caress. You will die slowly. We will peel all the skin from you and you will still be alive,” reflects documented practices.

The ironic term *caress* was standard diction among the Iroquois for the torment they inflicted on their prisoners, as both primary sources and modern scholarship attest. Jogues, for example, reports that “a Captain

exclaims that the Frenchmen ought to be caressed" [Vn Capitaine s'escrie qu'il falloit caresser les François] to incite those present to torture them.⁶³ The scene recurs in Bressani's narrative: "The Captains shouted . . . 'Up! assemble yourselves, O young men, and come to caress our prisoners'" [I Capitani gridauano . . . Sù radunateni ò giovani, et venite à far carezze à nostri prigioni].⁶⁴ Richter notes that Iroquois torturers "spoke in symbolic language of 'caressing' their adopted relative with their weapons."⁶⁵ Several contemporary writers describe peeling skin from a living victim. Sagard describes it in the present tense not as an individual incident but as a repeated and common occurrence: "they remove all the skin from their heads with the hair" [ils leur lèvent toute la peau de la tête avec la chevelure], emphasizing that this was done to live prisoners.⁶⁶ Similarly, the *Jesuit Relation* of 1640 portrays the practice as the culmination of what captives underwent: "To crown all this infernal rage, they remove the scalp from these unfortunates" [ils leur lèvent toute la peau de la tête avec la chevelure]. The next sentence begins with "After their death" [Après leur mort], indicating that the victims were alive when this was done or died during it.⁶⁷ Furthermore, as far as these practices are concerned, it can be argued again that by only mentioning the worst treatment reserved for prisoners rather than actually showing it, *Black Robe* presents an image of Iroquois practices that is not only accurate but also milder in tone than it could have been.

In keeping with his general thesis, Churchill also sees the film's depiction of Native American religion as demeaning. He argues that the character Mestigoit, a midget sorcerer, is an ugly caricature: "The dwarf (indigenous spirituality) is self-serving, malicious, and vindictive; LaForge [sic] (Christianity), on the other hand, is sensitive and selfless to the extent of self-flagellation and acceptance of martyrdom."⁶⁸ I have already argued that the priest's self-flagellation serves not to dignify his faith but to present it as unnatural and disturbing; however, Churchill's other points must be addressed. The answer could be made, at the risk of repetitiveness, that here too *Black Robe* follows historical documents: sources contain not only the name Mestigoit but also references to a Native sorcerer who "howled, whooped, rattled a tortoise-shell at his ear to expel the evil spirit" as the movie's sorcerer does at Laforgue, even "a dwarfish, humpbacked" magician who claimed to be "not a man but an *oki*,—a spirit, or as the priests rendered it, a demon,—and had dwelt with other *okies* under the earth," exactly as Mestigoit claims in the film.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, one can assume that most Native spiritual leaders were not dwarves—Parkman points out that such a deformity was "most rare among this symmetrical people"—and Mestigoit does seem repugnant or simply silly.⁷⁰ If this strange figure were the only manifestation of Indian religion in *Black Robe*, Churchill's objections might be justified, though, as will be argued in the following text, Mestigoit seems ultimately no worse—and less destructive—than the arrogant self-righteousness of the Catholic missionaries.

Churchill ignores, however, an entire other dimension of *Black Robe's* portrayal of Indian religion, one that is much more respectful and sympathetic. The importance of dreams in Native spirituality is noted by most European visitors of the period. Bressani observes that the Huron followed

the course of action presented in dreams even “at the cost of blood,—causing their very limbs to be cut off, with extreme pain, if the dream so commanded” [à costo di sangue, facendosi recidere, se il sogno lo comandava, i membri stessi con estremo dolore].⁷¹ The insistence by more than one Indian character of *Black Robe* that a dream must be obeyed is thus solidly founded. More remarkable, however, is the film’s attitude toward Aboriginal belief in dreams as preternatural sources of information. Champlain states that “they believe that all the dreams they have are true and, in fact, there are many of them who say they have seen and dreamed of things that happen or will happen” [ils croient que tous les songes qu’ils font sont véritables et, de fait, il y en a beaucoup qui disent avoir vu et songé à des choses qui adviennent ou adviendront].⁷² Father Laforgue, predictably, scoffs at such notions, asking, “What can we say to people who believe dreams are reality?” as missionaries of the period habitually did, but the cinematography of the film suggests a very different position.⁷³ Chomina’s dreams, in which he sees the island on which he subsequently dies and the Black Robe walking alone through the snow and then standing inside a palisade, are taken by all the Indian characters to be prophetic. Not only do events unfold as the dream predicts but also they are shown using precisely the same film segments as the dream, the same visual sequences shot from the same angle and distance, the only difference being that the dream is shown in black and white while the action is in color. This repetition suggests—virtually insists—that Chomina’s dreams are prophetic, that he actually did foresee the future for both himself and the priest. In contrast to this affirmation, no such miracles or supernatural powers in the movie validate Christian beliefs. Thus, it is indigenous spirituality, not Christianity, that is portrayed as truly in touch with supernatural powers.

The same argument can be made in relation to divinities in the film. As Chomina lies dying on the island, the “she-Manitou,” also seen in his dream, comes to him, as he predicts. Essential to the meaning of the scene is the exact way in which it is filmed. Were this spirit shown through Chomina’s eyes, it could be interpreted as simply the product of his own imagination, fueled by superstition or by the fever that is killing him. The manitou is shown, however, from another angle, looking down at Chomina as the viewer watches from his vantage point outside the action, just as he sees any other characters of the movie. Such a portrayal, coming immediately after the proof that Chomina’s dream of the island was truly prophetic, suggests that the divinity is real, not an empty myth accepted by simple minds or the hallucination of a dying man but an actual presence, as real as the film’s human characters. Here again, no parallel apparition validates Christian belief; despite Laforgue’s repeated prayers, neither Jesus nor Mary nor any saint ever arrives to help him. Their absence, juxtaposed with the appearance of the manitou, makes Indian religion the more believable of the two competing faiths.

In this context, Chomina’s refusal to accept baptism seems justified, even admirable. His argument that his people, including his recently murdered son, are not in the Christian heaven, so he has no desire to go there, reflects a position frequently encountered by missionaries of the period. Parkman notes that “‘I wish to go where my relations and ancestors have gone,’ was

a common reply. 'Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen,' said another; 'but I wish to be among Indians.'⁷⁴ *Black Robe* could have tried to ennoble Christianity by having its most important Indian character undergo a deathbed conversion, reducing Native spiritual beliefs to silly superstitions he finally rose above, and producing a feel-good scene as shallow—and unreal—as Darth Vader's conversion to the forces of good at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. It is to the film's credit that it refuses such simplistic devices. Instead, Chomina's refusal is shown as an act of self-affirmation, almost Sartrean in its insistence on remaining true to oneself. If the deck has been stacked, so to speak, it is not to condemn the ignorance of a savage who refuses the true faith, as Laforgue sees it, but to suggest the nobility of one who remains true to his principles. In the light of the validation of those principles mentioned in the preceding text, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Chomina makes the right choice.

That Chomina believes his relatives are banished from heaven speaks volumes about the faith preached by the Jesuits. Only the baptized, it was believed, could enter God's presence, and no allowance was made for "baptism of desire," as the Catholic Church does today, to accommodate those who never undergo the ceremony. So deep was this belief among missionaries of the period that they even rejoiced in the capture and torment of their Indian charges if it led them to accept baptism before death. Du Creux celebrates the martyrdom of a band of Iroquois captured and killed by the Huron: "not one of them died unbaptized" and "Of a certainty the Lord God is generally most merciful when he is apparently most cruel. He had chosen that band of Iroquois for Himself and no doubt it was His will that through the salutary advice of Pierre [a convert] they should reach Heaven and by that hard pathway through the fire which each in his turn had to tread."⁷⁵ The inevitable result of this absolute faith in the power of Christian ritual and the truth of Catholic doctrine was undisguised contempt for Indian spirituality. Primary sources written by Jesuits almost invariably use a "frankly contemptuous, scoffing or indifferent" tone, as Sioui puts it, alternating between ridicule for Native religion and firm statements that nothing deserving the name of religion even exists among unconverted Indians.⁷⁶ Sagard, for example, who lived among the Huron, defends Indian society at times with statements like "this people is not so deep in crudeness and ignorance as many think" [ce peuple n'est pas tant dans la rudesse et la rusticité qu'on l'estime].⁷⁷ Yet even he still scorns the ideas of his hosts, entitling the chapter of his book that describes aspects of their culture "Of dances, songs, and other ridiculous ceremonies" [Des danses, chansons et autres cérémonies ridicules].⁷⁸ Laforgue's condescending attitude toward Native religion in *Black Robe*, then, is once again an accurate depiction of historical events.

More important, however, is what it tells about Christian missionaries among the Indians. Here more than anywhere else, Churchill seems to miss the fundamental point the film is making. The priests' repeated use of derogatory terms like "savages," "poor barbarians," and "these savage people who will never look upon your face in paradise" to describe Native Americans shows not the alleged primitive nature of Indians but the arrogance of Europeans. Clearly

these words were placed in the script to show the extreme narrow-minded prejudice of the Jesuit missionaries. A comparison with attitudes toward African Americans is revealing. In his book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Randall Kennedy cites a passage from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which Twain shows the racist attitudes of white Southerners: “We blowed a cylinder.’ ‘Good gracious! Anybody hurt?’ ‘No’m. Killed a nigger.’ ‘Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.” As Kennedy rightly points out, “Twain is not willfully buttressing racism here; he is seeking ruthlessly to unveil and ridicule it. By putting *nigger* in the white characters’ mouths, the author is not branding blacks, but rather branding the whites.” Interpreting Twain’s words to mean that blacks are not human, he insists, is “ludicrous, a frightening exhibition of how thought becomes stunted in the absence of any sense of irony.”⁷⁹ The same could be said of Churchill’s interpretation of *Black Robe*; his serious tone, in contrast to the often humorous irony of Twain, shows prejudice against Indians to be all the more repugnant.

Among the French of the time, however, the emphasis was not on race in the modern sense, a concept that had not yet fully developed, but on culture. Then as now, the French were willing to accept others as equals, provided they showed the good sense to recognize the superiority of French civilization, of which Christianity is but one part. The mutilated priest from whom Laforgue first learns of the Canadian missions shows this attitude when he excuses his tormentors: “They are uncivilized, just as the English or the Germans were before we took our faith to them.” Similarly, Laforgue insists that the Indians are intelligent—“Intelligence is not lacking among this people”—but need to change their ways, which clearly means to adopt those of Europeans. Interestingly, the Algonquian fail to see the same potential in the French, answering the Montagnais’s question “Are they intelligent?” with a categorical “No,” which shows that incomprehension of the other is universal. Similarly, Annuka’s comment to Daniel—“My father says nothing you French do makes any sense”—also turns European cultural arrogance on its head. Just before his death, Chomina shows a similar attitude toward Europeans, stating, “I’m as stupid and greedy as any white man.” In this context, Laforgue’s inability to smoke the Algonquians’ tobacco, to their great amusement, is symbolic of his inability to adapt to their culture. For a Euro-American moviegoer, the lesson is clear: if Indians’ contempt for his culture is misguided, his own attitudes toward Native culture may be equally wrong.

These issues are directly raised in the film at one point, when Laforgue confronts Daniel about his liaison with Annuka. Daniel suggests that Native beliefs in an afterlife where the spirits of men hunt the spirits of animals, condemned by the priest as childish, are no more ridiculous than the Christian concept of heaven as a place “where we all sit on clouds and look at God.” Tellingly, Laforgue has no answer to this. In an earlier scene, Daniel defends the Indians as true Christians who “share everything without question,” to which the Jesuit replies vehemently: “And they *should* question!” It is he, however, who shows arrogant self-assurance, refusing to question his own beliefs. He does undergo a change of sorts later in the movie, and when he leaves Daniel and Annuka to go to the Huron village, he seems to

repudiate his former position, mentioning again the Indian belief in dreams and concluding: "Perhaps they're right. . . . The forests speak, the dead talk at night." Despite this softening of his position, however, he "ultimately fails to cross the gap separating indigenous and white cultures," as Angela Aleiss observes.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that he does seem to gain a kind of regard for what he earlier disdained indicates respect for Native religion on the part of the filmmakers. Moreover, Laforgue's evolution stands in contrast to Chomina's refusal to convert; if neither of the two faiths gives way entirely to the other, Christianity seems to bend. Clearly the unspoken lesson is that it is Europeans, Christians, who need to question their beliefs.

The movie's final segment in the Huron village makes this point forcefully. Unlike the Iroquois and Algonquian, the Huron are suffering from an epidemic, which many of them blame on the arrival of white men among them. It is well established that whites did bring diseases to which Native Americans had no resistance, depleting the population of the western hemisphere by as much as 95 percent, and that an epidemic struck the Huron before their neighbors, just as in *Black Robe*.⁸¹ The choice to set the action of the film (and novel) among these tribes, however, instead of any of the many other possible settings, suggests a metaphoric value to this plague: Christianity goes hand in hand with destruction, and those who accept the new faith are the first to be destroyed. Not only does conversion fail to cure the Huron of their sickness, as Laforgue warns them before administering baptism, but also it is explicitly linked to their annihilation by the non-Christian Iroquois. *Black Robe* does not defend Christian missionaries; rather, it shows them as the causes of the suffering and destruction of Indians. They, not the bloodthirsty Iroquois, are ultimately responsible for the downfall of the Huron.

Furthermore, much as disease, liquor, war with their neighbors stirred up by Europeans, and the firearms that made it deadlier all contributed to the tribe's downfall, it is the introduction of a new religion that is shown to be the most destructive factor. As one Huron in the movie tells another: "If we obey them [the missionaries] we will no longer be Hurons. And soon our enemies will know our weakness and wipe us from this earth," a claim forcefully validated by the written epilogue at the end of the film: "Fifteen years later, the Hurons, having accepted Christianity, were routed and killed by their enemies, the Iroquois." By undermining the culture of their charges, the Jesuits wreak destruction on a scale that dwarfs anything done by mere physical means. Chomina's dream, already seen to be prophetic, also includes a raven that attacks him, which his wife tells him represents Laforgue, the *Black Robe*. This is also a change from the book, in which Chomina dreams not of a raven but of a snake; the change was made presumably to make the association of the attacker with the priest more obvious. The link between the two shows that despite his affection for Chomina, Laforgue's missionary activity is in effect an attack on him, on his entire way of life, and the dream warns once again of the danger ahead not just for Chomina but for all Indians. The film's basic thesis is exactly the opposite of what Churchill reads into it.

Churchill likewise misinterprets the symbolism of light and darkness as it relates to this thesis. Laforgue's arrival at the Huron village is "bathed in

sunlight,” whereas “all the scenes of the Mohawk village are framed against an overcast and threatening sky.”⁸² He even, rather fantastically, compares the fire-lit interior scenes to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. More than one response can be made to these claims. First, it is a long cinematic tradition, championed by the likes of Eisenstein and Hitchcock, to use light and darkness to create an atmosphere of safety or danger; in this context, it seems natural to use this technique to show the danger brought by the Mohawks. Furthermore, as with Annuka’s sexual position in front of the guard, this darkness plays an important role in the movie’s plot: to be at all believable, the prisoners’ escape must occur at night. More important, the Huron village is far from the hallowed place uplifted by Christianity that Churchill wants to see in it. The vast expanses of snow surrounding it, creating a cold sheet devoid of any human presence—even during the day, unlike in the Mohawk town—creates an aura of desolation, made even bleaker by the sound of bitter winds howling, which are louder and more persistent than at the Iroquois town. The empty buildings, a dead priest, another who is dying, and the hordes of sick create of the village a ghastly, depressing environment, diametrically opposed to the place of salvation that the missionaries want to make. Most of all, the very last shot of the movie shows the sun low on the horizon, as though to underline the impending doom that is written on the screen, or, if it is interpreted to be rising, the intent can only be ironic, as it rises over death and destruction. The scene freezes exactly when the cross is blocking the sun, so the viewer’s final impression is of Christianity as a creed that interferes with what is good, that causes harm and suffering. Perhaps this is intended as an echo of Chomina’s dying words: “No man should welcome death. This world is a cruel place . . . but it is the sunlight,” a sunlight that Laforgue’s faith blocks. Far from defending Christian missionaries, *Black Robe* condemns them.

This is not good enough for Churchill, however, because the intentions of those destructive missionaries are shown to be good. For him, the movie claims that no white man ever meant harm to Indians, no moral fault was ever committed, and the Europeans who despoiled the Americas were innocent of any crime. Here again, more than one answer can be given. In the film’s opening scene in Quebec, Laforgue accuses a French trader of selling brandy to the Indians. Whether true or not—the trader denies the charge—the claim establishes from the outset that not all Europeans in America are well meaning and generous. Daniel, despite his pious repetition of the Jesuit motto “for the greater glory of God” as his reason for accompanying Laforgue, is clearly motivated by desire for Annuka from the very beginning, as the shots of him stealing glances at her in the chapel show. Nevertheless, Churchill is right to point out Laforgue’s devotion to the Indians. As with virtually every other aspect of the movie, this selfless devotion is documented in both primary sources and modern scholarship. Father Isaac Jogues refused to try to escape from the Mohawks who ambushed his party of Algonquians, preferring to stay with his flock in order to minister to them in captivity even while he encouraged an Algonquian convert to flee.⁸³ Father Bressani similarly refused to attempt to escape when his band was captured.⁸⁴ Radisson tells of a group of missionaries who refused to flee when warned of an approaching war party.⁸⁵

Parkman asserts of the Jesuits in North America: "Their maligners may taunt them, if they will, with credulity, superstition, or a blind enthusiasm; but slander itself cannot accuse them of hypocrisy or ambition."⁸⁶

Churchill's claim that the French wanted to convert the Indians for earthly and devious motives, to serve as "surrogate troops deployed as fodder by the French Crown in its struggle with Great Britain for imperial hegemony in North America" echoes several texts, both primary and modern, and has a certain justification to it.⁸⁷ Some writings of the period also accuse the Jesuits of profiting from the fur trade, a charge that others strenuously deny.⁸⁸ The answer to these contradictory claims may be that the missionaries were motivated by the loftiest goals, while political leaders cynically exploited them for more mundane purposes. Such is often the case in colonial contexts. In nineteenth-century Africa, for example, selfless missionaries like David Livingstone, who defended the tribes of Botswana against Boer slave raids, unwittingly paved the way for European empires. If both motivations played an important role in French penetration of the Canadian interior, *Black Robe's* nearly exclusive focus on the positive side of this activity would seem to validate Churchill's thesis that it is whitewashing history to exculpate white men. Upon closer examination, however, the movie proves to do exactly the opposite.

The very crux of the problem in *Black Robe* is that people with good intentions do harm. It is the very subtlety of their attitude, full of goodwill but colored by self-righteous cultural arrogance, that makes the story into a tragedy. A conflict between good and evil, although morally satisfying to watch, is a simplistic way of looking at complex historical events, and it is to the film's credit that it refuses so simple a dichotomy; one is tempted to repeat in this context Daniel's reply to Laforgue: "Life is not so simple for the rest of us." *Black Robe* is no morality play that pits pious Christians against evil savages; Churchill's objection is that it fails to go to the other extreme, pitting innocent Indians against evil white men. Showing the harm done by racism, greed, and violence is easy, and many other films take that route, including *The Mission* and *Dances with Wolves*. What *Black Robe* shows is that goodwill is not enough; those who mean well can do even more harm by destroying the cultural underpinnings of a people. Ultimately, it holds Europeans to a higher standard than movies that focus on their nefarious deeds, insisting that smug ethnocentrism is as dangerous as blatant malevolence. Those who enter into contact with another culture, it tells us, need not just good intentions but respect for the other as an autonomous party rather than an inferior version of oneself, without which they will wreak havoc despite their best intentions. The point is crucial, for as Ellis Cose points out in his book *Color-Blind* on black-white relations in contemporary America, raw hatred is rarely the problem; rather, racial divisions are fostered and perpetuated by people who have no intention of doing so. His statement "if we tell ourselves that the only problem is hate, we avoid facing the reality . . . that it is mostly nice, not-hating people . . . who perpetuate racial inequality" applies equally well to the Indian-European relations of the film.⁸⁹ The missionaries are guilty not of the kind of virulent racism revealed at Wounded Knee but of a much subtler crime, the inability to conceive of others as being like themselves or,

more precisely, to conceive of another culture as being equal to their own. The results are just as destructive, however, as the movie's epilogue insists.

Laforgue and his fellow missionaries may be blind to the innate value of Indian civilization, but the makers of *Black Robe* are not. Arguably the most interesting element of the film, and its most forceful argument for respectful treatment of indigenous peoples, lies in its careful juxtaposition of European and Native American cultures. Early on, a series of parallels between the French in Quebec and the neighboring Algonquian are established. As both groups ready themselves for a public meeting, very precise correlations are shown between the two: Chomina receives painted marks *on his chest* while Champlain receives a metal breastplate *on his chest*; the Indian *gets a necklace hung around his neck* while the Frenchman *gets a necklace hung around his neck*; to complete their regalia, Chomina is *wrapped* in an animal hide while Champlain is *wrapped* in a long cape. One French onlooker points out the obvious similarities, saying that Champlain is "dressed like a savage chieftain." In the same scene, the Algonquian *play their traditional music* while the French *play their traditional music*. The significance of these segments, juxtaposed with each other in rapid counterpoint to emphasize the parallels, is clear: the "savages" have a civilization of their own, equal to that of the Europeans. Moreover, Champlain's pendant is a cross with a dove to represent the Holy Spirit, a symbol of faith, and Chomina's appears to be a medicine pouch, suggesting parallels specifically in the domain of religion, the greatest point of conflict between Europe and America in *Black Robe*. Later, the film cuts from the face of Mestigoit to a statue of Joan of Arc, juxtaposing the holy leaders of both peoples. This might be interpreted as a means of undercutting the Native medicine man, as Churchill sees his encounter with Laforgue, were not the statue old, decaying, and covered with bird droppings, thus becoming more a parallel than a contrast to Mestigoit's painted face. Even in the sacred realm, it seems, Indians yield nothing to Europeans.

Several other segments of the movie underline these cultural similarities. Chomina's advice to his daughter about her involvement with Daniel is immediately followed by a flashback to Laforgue's life in France, with his mother advising him on the graces of a young lady she wants him to marry. Parents' concern for their children, evidently, is universal, and Indian culture is in no way inferior to that of Europe. The fact that the scene in France never occurs in the book and was invented for the film demonstrates the care that was taken to show the similarities between the two cultures. Another scene, the first flashback to France, is introduced by an interesting transition: from a shot looking down inside an Indian shelter at the travelers sleeping below, the film cuts to a scene inside a French church, looking down at Laforgue entering below. Although this may be simply a visual technique for linking two scenes, it seems to continue the thematic of cultural relativity, relating the grand stone edifice, and the civilization it represents, to the Indian lodge. Another section of the film, when Laforgue is lost in the forest, is unambiguous in its intent. In the middle of shots of tall, immobile trees surrounding the priest, the film inserts a view of the interior of a French cathedral, with tall, immobile Gothic columns surrounding the camera. Where the viewer

expects another flashback, none follows: the quick glimpse of the church is all one sees, followed by Laforgue's isolation in the forest and subsequent rescue by the Indians. The church segment is not the introduction to another piece of narrative but makes a point all by itself: clearly, the director's intent is to suggest that the American forest, a wild, uncivilized place in the eyes of French missionaries, is the home of a civilization, as much as man-made environments like a medieval church. By this simple juxtaposition, the film shows the parallel between Europe and America and places the two in a relationship not between civilization and barbarism but between two civilizations. The Indians' amazed reaction when they find Laforgue—"How could anyone become lost here? The woods are for men"—makes explicit the message: the forest is no more trackless and unfathomable than the streets of a city; what is necessary in both cases is familiarity with one's surroundings.⁹⁰ Those familiar with the civilization are able to do so and are no more uncivilized for their ignorance of European culture than the Frenchman is for his inability to navigate in the woods. Once again, the Indians are presented as the creators and inheritors of a civilization equal to that of their detractors. One might repeat Michel Butor's comment on Chateaubriand's depiction of Native Americans: they "could not be considered as 'savages' in the ordinary sense of the word, but as civilized people of a different kind" [ne pouvaient être considérés comme des 'sauvages' au sens ordinaire du mot, mais comme des civilisés d'une autre espèce].⁹¹

The tragedy of *Black Robe* is that Laforgue and his contemporaries are unable to see these parallels that are all around them. For all their noble intentions, they are too wrapped in paternalism to see anything of value in Native culture. Their attitude is the same as that of twentieth-century whites described by Cherokee chief Wilma Mankiller in her autobiography:

My wariness of white people developed when I was a little girl walking to school with my sister. Some well-dressed white ladies occasionally would drive up in their big cars. They came to bring us clothes and offer us rides to school. I suppose they felt it was their Christian duty to pick us up and take us to school. One time when we got inside their car, those ladies looked at us with sad expressions and said, "Bless your little hearts." It was not the words that got to me, but the way they said them, with the looks on their faces. . . . Even as a child, I could tell if someone was being condescending or patronizing to me because I was Indian.⁹²

Black Robe carefully shows that white people's condescending beliefs about Native culture are illusions, as false as the gods and demons they discount, starting with the opening credits. The very first shot shows sea monsters on the map used as a background, indicating how little Europeans of the time understood about the broader world. From this moment forward, the film presents the falsehood of European beliefs, the humanity of Indians, the inherent value of their civilization, and the catastrophic results of tampering with it, no matter how generous the intentions. A straight line of ignorance

and condescension leads from the sea serpent of the first frame to the destruction of the Huron described in the last. Ultimately, *Black Robe* actually demands of European settlers in America a higher standard than Churchill seems to apply: it is not enough simply to rise above crass racism and selfishness; only when the other is seen as *equal* can cultural exchange be beneficial.

Acknowledgment

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NOTES

1. Ward Churchill, *From A Native Son: Selected Essays in Indigenism, 1985–1995* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1996), 423–37. Although others have joined in such criticism—Angela Aleiss states in *Making the White Man’s Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005) that the movie “nearly triggered a national outcry” in Canada (156)—Churchill’s denunciation is probably the most detailed and has been the most influential in the United States. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick points out specific historical inaccuracies in the film and criticizes its depiction of the Algonquians in *Celluloid Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 141; Olive Patricia Dickason finds both good and bad in the movie in her review (*American Historical Review* 97, no. 4 [October 1992], 1168–70). Other reviewers are more positive, including Jay Carr (*Boston Globe*, 30 October 1991), Vincent Canby (*New York Times*, 30 October 1991), and Marion Finlay (*Toronto Star*, 30 October 1991).

2. Churchill, *From A Native Son*, 423.

3. *Ibid.*, 424.

4. Gabriel Sagard, *Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons* (St. Lawrence, QC: Bibliothèque québécoise, 1990), 115. My own translation. The *Jesuit Relation* and José Antônio Brandão’s *Nation Iroquoise: A Seventeenth-Century Ethnography of the Iroquois* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) are double texts that have the original French (or in one case Italian) and an English translation on facing pages; all other translations from French are my own.

5. In the scene of the departure from Quebec, another Latin formula is used: “Benedicat vos Deus, pater et filius et spiritus sanctus,” in which *sanctus* is correct because it is now nominative. Champlain also tells the travelers “pax vobiscum” as any Catholic of the period knew to say.

6. François Du Creux, *The History of Canada or New France* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1951), 179.

7. *Ibid.*, 186; Peter N. Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada—A Cultural History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 24; Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century: France and England in North America. Part Second* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1908), 148; Evan T. Pritchard, *No Word For Time: The Way of the Algonquin People* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1997), 20.

8. Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 257; Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 186, 251.

9. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 118; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., vol. 7 of *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610–1791* (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1899), 137.

10. Moogk, *La Nouvelle France*, 31; Max Gros-Louis, *First among the Hurons*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Montreal: Harvest House, 1974), 121.

11. Pierre-Esprit Radisson, *Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson. Being an Account of his Travels and Experiences among the North American Indians, from 1652 to 1684* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), 67.

12. It is perhaps useful to present the four versions—the *Jesuit Relations*, Parkman's, and *Black Robe*, both the novel and the film, side by side so that they can be compared.

Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*: “These are our Fathers . . . we love them more than our children or ourselves; they are held in very high esteem in France; it is neither hunger nor want that brings them to this country; they do not come to see you for your property or your furs. . . . If you love the French people, as you say you do, then love these Fathers; honor them, and they will teach you the way to Heaven. This is what makes them leave their country, their friends, and their comforts, to instruct you, and especially to teach your children a knowledge so great and so necessary” (251).

Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*: “These are our fathers. . . . We love them more than we love ourselves. The whole French nation honors them. They do not go among you for your furs. They have left their friends and their country to show you the way to heaven. If you love the French, as you say you love them, then love and honor these our fathers” (135).

Black Robe (book [New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1985]): “These are our Fathers. . . . We love them more than we love ourselves. The whole of the French nation loves them. They do not go among them for your furs. They have left their friends and their country to show you the way to heaven. If you love the French as you say you love them, then love and honor these, our Fathers” (19).

Black Robe (film): “These are our Fathers. They are soldiers of heaven. They left their friends and their country to show you the way to paradise.” Then of Father Laforgue: “Love and honor him. Guard him well.”

13. Churchill, *From a Native Son*, 432.

14. Many other events in the story also show Chomina's capabilities. In the encounter with the Mohawks, it is he who perceives their presence and kills two in battle despite an arrow lodged in his back. After their capture, he alone of the prisoners makes it through the gauntlet standing, even remaining upright while all the Mohawks duck for cover when their chief raises a musket. Later, he interprets for the Frenchmen, insists on freeing Laforgue, whom his daughter wants to abandon, and kills a sentinel to guarantee their escape. It may be useful to note how Chomina's impressive abilities contrast with those of Indian characters in other movies of the period. In the 1992 *The Last of the Mohicans*, despite the participation of famous American Indian Movement (AIM) activist Russell Means, other than the bloodthirsty Magua, all Native characters—including the part played by Means—are limited to insignificant roles, overshadowed by the much more capable Euro-American Hawkeye. Similarly, *The Mission* (1986) presents South American Natives as passive victims unable to do virtually anything without Europeans to guide them. Not only do they abandon

their culture to adopt Christianity but also when the settlement is threatened by colonial powers it is a Spanish nobleman played by Robert De Niro who leads resistance, surrounded by a cluster of nameless extras who depend on him to guide them. Other Natives who reject violence as a means of self-defense are equally dependent on white men, blindly (and disastrously) following the priest played by Jeremy Irons, and are also a nameless, powerless crowd. The place of Indians in *Black Robe* stands in sharp contrast to such subservient roles.

15. This is a change from the book, in which she is sleeping with a French fur trader in Quebec when Daniel first meets her. Any suggestion of an Indian tendency to profligacy this might contain is counterbalanced by the fact that a Frenchman, too, is engaging in this free sex despite his claimed adherence to a faith—whether Catholic or Huguenot—that condemns such acts. Furthermore, in another difference from the movie, the novel shows Annuka coming to the Huron village with Daniel some time after Laforgue's arrival, thus showing that the couple have stayed together and intend to continue so. Clearly, they are much more than casual sex partners.

16. Churchill, *From a Native Son*, 431.

17. Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Long House: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 68.

18. *Ibid.*, 67.

19. *Ibid.*, 68.

20. Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 338.

21. Radisson, *Voyages*, 58, 71, 73, 121.

22. Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 239.

23. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

24. Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 339; Richter *The Ordeal of the Long House*, 68; Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 344.

25. Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 339, 347.

26. *Ibid.*, 340.

27. I have not been able to consult Du Creux's original text in Latin and am forced to rely on the English translation. The phrase "thirty of the women," as opposed to "thirty women," suggests a Latin reading *triginta ex feminis*, "thirty out of the women," rather than *triginta feminae*, "thirty women." If this is so, it would unambiguously mean that there were other women who were not spared.

28. *Ibid.*, 380.

29. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 52–53.

30. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 66.

31. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 39: 74–77.

32. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 317–18.

33. Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 118.

34. Mark Q. Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003), 308.

35. Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 7.

36. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 60. See also White, *The Middle Ground*, 1.

37. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 50: 60–61. See also Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 113.

38. Kenneth M. Morrison, *The Solidarity of Kin: Ethnohistory, Religious Studies, and*

the *Algonkian-French Religious Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 95; Moogk, *La Nouvelle France*, 34.

39. Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 319.

40. William N. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 10.

41. *Ibid.*, 9.

42. *Ibid.*, 302.

43. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 42–43.

44. *Ibid.*, 30, 32, 34, 38, 44, 48, 50 (*ils*); 40, 44, 46, 48, 50 (*on*).

45. *Ibid.*, 34–35, 46–47.

46. *Ibid.*, 48–49.

47. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

48. *Ibid.*, 50–53.

49. *Ibid.*, 39: 62–67.

50. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

51. *Ibid.*, 74–76. I am indebted to Professor Ada Giusti of Montana State University–Bozeman for confirming the specifically masculine nature of the passages cited in Italian.

52. Radisson, *Voyages*, 38.

53. *Ibid.*, 51.

54. *Ibid.*, 52.

55. *Ibid.*, 121.

56. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 68.

57. See Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 30–33, 38, 46; 39: 63; 50: 58–59; Radisson, *Voyages*, 38, 49–50, 77; Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 80, 113; Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 339, 345–46, 393; Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 312; Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 67; Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 319.

58. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 30–33.

59. See Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 38–39; Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 312, which recounts the same event.

60. Radisson, *Voyages*, 49, 55. See also Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 18: 30; 39: 59, 63, 65, 76; 50: 60–61; Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages en Nouvelle-France: Explorations de l'Acadie, de la vallée du Saint-Laurent, rencontres avec les autochtones et fondation de Québec, 1604–1611* (Paris: Cosmopole, 2001), 170; Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 113; Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 103, 105, 339, 348, 393; Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 349; Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 67. Du Creux reports that Jogues sang Catholic religious songs, exactly as Laforgue does in *Black Robe* (348).

61. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 44–45. Parkman reports the same incident (*The Jesuits in North America*, 316) and another case in which a seashell was used (344); Du Creux recounts the same story as his predecessors (*History of Canada*, 339) and tells of yet another Frenchman whose finger was severed with a shell (348). For other cases of mutilation of prisoners' fingers, see Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 18: 30–31; 31: 32–33, 38–39, 42–43, 48–51; 39: 64–71, 74–75; 50: 58–59; Radisson, *Voyages*, 47–49, 53–56, 114; Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 241, 243; Champlain, *Voyages en Nouvelle-France*, 170, 188; Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 80, 109; Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 339, 347–48, 393; Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 306; Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 66–67.

62. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 39: 18–19.

63. *Ibid.*, 31: 42–43. It is evidently as an echo of this language that Jogues also uses the term *caress* in his own description of the torment of prisoners; see the continuation of the passage in Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 42–43, 48–49. The *Jesuit Relation* of 1640 also cites the term indirectly when it states that an Indian “is charged with caressing the prisoner” [est chargé de caresser le prisonnier] (18: 30–31).

64. *Ibid.*, 39: 64–65.

65. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 36.

66. Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 241. Sagard’s description continues: “and afterwards they put fire and hot coals on it, or drip a certain melted gum on it,” [et après ils y mettent du feu et des cendres chaudes, ou y font dégoutter d’une certaine gomme fondue] (241). The close correlation of language suggests that he may have taken this passage from Champlain’s account: “they skinned the top of his head and dripped onto it a certain very hot gum” [ils lui écorchèrent le haut de la tête et lui firent dégoutter dessus une certaine gomme tout chaude] (*Voyages en Nouvelle-France*, 170).

67. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 18: 30–31.

68. Churchill, *From a Native Son*, 431–32. Because Churchill alleges historical inaccuracies in the film, it is perhaps justified to note that he makes mistakes of his own in his essay, the most obvious of which is the spelling of the main character’s name. Laforgue, with the *u* before the final *e*, is the correct spelling, not *LaForge* without the *u* and with a capital *f*, as Churchill calls him. The *u*, although silent, changes the pronunciation of the preceding *g* from a *zh* sound as in *measure* to a sound like *g* in English *gun*. Perhaps it should also be noted that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an infamous work of anti-Semitism to which he compares *Black Robe*, was originally written not in Tsarist Russia as he claims but in France during the time of Napoleon III, from where it was later copied by the Tsarist police. Despite his eagerness to point out the faults of European civilization, Churchill seems less than completely knowledgeable about it.

69. Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 156–71; Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 29, 108–11, 180–81.

70. *Ibid.*, 180. It can also be argued that Mestigoit’s status as a dwarf actually serves to show something positive about Native culture. Rather than being scorned or neglected as a person unable to hunt game or fight enemies like other adult males, Mestigoit is given a place of honor. This shows how his civilization finds a constructive role for all its members. I am indebted to the staff of *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* for this observation.

71. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 39: 18–19.

72. Champlain, *Voyages en Nouvelle-France*, 141. See also Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 94–95. Modern scholars have noted this belief; see Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 25; Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 310.

73. See Morrison, *The Solidarity of Kin*, 108, 123, 125.

74. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 177.

75. Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 258, 261.

76. Georges E. Sioui, *Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle*, trans. Jane Brierley (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 136. In a similar vein, Allan Greer observes in *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) that despite admiration for some traits of Indians, “the Jesuits still tended to see Native culture as fundamentally an affront to God’s law, and this attitude pervades their

writings" (80). Interestingly, in the passage quoted, Sioui says that the Récollets were distinctly less condescending and more appreciative of Native culture. Thus just as *Black Robe* does not show the worst of Iroquois violence to prisoners, so it also declines to portray the most benevolent among European missionaries, limiting its priests to the most fanatical and intolerant group. By limiting its depiction of Indian misdeeds and showing fully the faults of Europeans, the film is far removed from the anti-Indian propaganda Churchill sees in it.

77. Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 140. In another passage, he claims: "the savages are still human enough . . . even more than are many more refined and less savage individuals" [les sauvages soient toutefois assez humains . . . voire plus que ne sont beaucoup de personnes plus polies et moins sauvages] (124).

78. *Ibid.*, 189.

79. Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 138.

80. Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, 157.

81. Sutton, *Introduction to Native North America*, 36.

82. Churchill, *From a Native Son*, 431.

83. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* 31: 36–37.

84. *Ibid.*, 39: 56–57.

85. Radisson, *Voyages*, 130–31.

86. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 130–31. In other passages he states: "a fervor more intense, a self-abnegation more complete, a self-devotion more constant and enduring will scarcely find its record on the page of human history" (172). Even the laymen who accompanied these missionaries, he claims, were motivated by the same noble intentions: "There is abundant evidence that a large proportion of them acted from motives wholly disinterested" (465).

87. Churchill, *From a Native Son*, 429–30.

88. For the accusation, see Radisson, *Voyages*, 93–94; Du Creux, *History of Canada*, 7, 37; Sioui, *Huron-Wendat*, 170–71; Greer, *The People of New France*, 77, 84. For rebuttals, see Sagard, *Le grand voyage*, 155, 244. The introduction to Du Creux mentions both the sincere and the ulterior motives of French missionary action (*History of Canada*, xvii), as does Moogk, *La Nouvelle France*, 23.

89. Ellis Cose, *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 231.

90. Chief Luther Standing Bear made exactly this point in his autobiography: "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness,'" quoted in Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 90.

91. François-René de Chateaubriand, *Atala. René* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1992), back cover.

92. Wilma Mankiller, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 1993), 37–38.