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Micah True, *Masters and Students. Jesuit Mission Ethnography in Seventeenth-Century New France*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. xviii+242 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, and index. \$100.00 C.A.D. & U.S.D. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-4512-0; \$32.95 C.A.D. & U.S.D. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7735-4513-7.

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Micah True is an Assistant Professor of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta. Much of his research revolves around the study of French missionaries in New France, particularly the Jesuits and their massive correspondence as contained in the *Jesuit Relations*. In *Masters and Students*, True carefully parses the word “mission,” drawing out the different meanings by which the word can be understood. One might, for example, go on a “moon mission” in order to bring back to earth knowledge about and samples of materials from the moon. Darwin went on a similar “mission” to the Galapagos Islands. In both these instances, the astronauts and Darwin are students, gaining knowledge from moon rocks and finches.

But “mission” might also refer to a journey where a master brings knowledge to another place. Hence, missionaries go on “Christian missions” as masters, possessing the knowledge of Christianity to impart, in their view, to the unknowing and ungodly. But in New France, and pretty much anywhere missionaries planted the cross, they also became, as in the first sense, students, either purposefully, or out of necessity. It is the tension inherent in this master/student existence that True explores in his thought-provoking study. True challenges scholars to consider more closely how “the ethnographic ‘facts’ recorded in the *Relations* were distinctly shaped by the particular nature of the Jesuit approach to their mission—in both senses of the word” (p. 20).

As he explains in his Preface, True is also concerned with “the fraught process of writing about unfamiliar cultures” (p. xiv), in this case as the Jesuits did in the *Relations*. Here again, one is dealing with a two way process. First, how did the Jesuits, often possessing only the most rudimentary proficiency in indigenous languages, come to make sense of the totally alien Amerindian societies among whom they lived? Second, how could they then render that understanding into French for a readership whose worldview more closely resembled their own? Of all the scholarly disciplines, this fraught process most closely resembles the challenges faced by anthropologists, and it is to them that True primarily turns for guidance in framing a conceptual response. One of the great strengths of this book, however, and the source of its universal appeal, is that both of these concerns—the meaning of mission and the fraught process—are, as he himself notes, “questions that might fruitfully be applied in any number of contexts” (p. xiv).

In his first chapter, True discusses how the Jesuits, of all the Roman Catholic orders, had a “profoundly pedagogical orientation” to teach, an instructional mission as masters to spread their own particular worldview. In New France they also “received lessons on indigenous languages and cultures from Amerindian ‘masters.’ At every turn, then, the missionaries found themselves simultaneously masters

and students, by turns powerful and weak, knowledgeable and ignorant” (p. 6). These two simultaneous missions serve as a framework for the study as True reflects on the nature of Jesuit ethnographic writings and how the data contained in these writings has informed later ethno-historical studies of the Amerindian groups among whom the Jesuits lived in New France. After briefly situating the *Relations* among early ethnographic texts, True considers the word “relation” as it might have been understood in seventeenth-century France. At its most basic, “relation” referred to a unidirectional account, or *récit de voyage*, related by a traveller or adventurer of a distant exotic land, culture, war, or event. But the term might also carry the intent of a bidirectional relationship, of a binding together of writer and reader that allowed the reader to “vicariously experience the voyage for themselves” (p. 11).

The missionaries were also addressing their readers as masters, relating “specific lessons about Amerindian cultures and then rhetorically framing them in the *Relations*,” while also addressing the “ideas, controversies, and anxieties” (p. 21) that would have been on their readers’ minds. Finally, True offers an overview of the remaining chapters, arranged roughly according to the order in which the missionaries’ fundamental tasks were realized. That is, after their arrival they first had to learn to communicate in Amerindian languages. Once they had gained some degree of fluency, they began preaching Christianity (as masters), as well as acquiring knowledge (as students) of Amerindian cultures and beliefs. Finally, they wrote their accounts both for the benefit and amusement of their French readers, framing “the Amerindian cultures in ways that responded to intellectual and political conditions” (p. 21) in Europe, while constantly intimating that Amerindian conversion was both possible and imminent.

In chapter two, True examines how the Jesuits in the early 1630s were able to gain a monopoly on missionary work in New France, and then convince French political authorities and the general public that they alone were best suited for the task of Amerindian conversion. Their rivals throughout this period were the Franciscan Recollects who had begun their mission in New France in 1615. The Jesuits first arrived in New France in 1625, but shortly afterwards, both orders were expelled by British privateers who seized the colony in 1629. Following the signing of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1631, England returned the colony to France, and the Jesuits were given exclusive rights to conduct missionary work in New France. The Jesuits maintained these rights, despite the best efforts of the Recollects to return to the colony, by arguing that they alone had established a linguistic beachhead, as it were, and that no other missionaries would be able to attain sufficient knowledge of the notoriously difficult indigenous languages “to gain the kind of access to Amerindian souls that the Jesuits had procured for themselves” (p. 28). This argument of being temporarily weak students learning from their Amerindian masters also worked to the Jesuits’ advantage by defusing “criticisms of the slow pace of conversions in the early years of their mission while simultaneously suggesting that future success was likely” (p. 28).

The early lack of success was also attributed to the colonial environment, where trading companies and sometimes the Crown were often working at cross-purposes with the missionaries. Wherever missions were established, whether Catholic or Protestant, one often finds a kind of apartheid mentality, whereby missionaries conceived of their missions as “closed, ideal religious communities, vice-free counterpoints to licentious European society” (p. 30) and to their converts’ own ungodly people who remained in darkness. Following the return of New France to the French in 1631, the Crown granted exclusive trading rights to the *Compagnie de 100 Associés*. The royal edict establishing the company privileged Catholicism and Amerindian conversion, and required material support for three missionaries at every trading post. Colonial officials, traders, and missionaries now joined forces, further enhancing the Jesuit monopoly at the expense of the Recollects. Thus, political conditions in the early years required the Jesuits to portray themselves as students and metaphorical children. To become masters and fulfill their Christian mission of teaching and converting, however, they needed a “rigorous and complete knowledge” (p. 54) of the Amerindian languages.

In chapter three, then, True looks at the ways the Jesuits went about obtaining this “rigorous and complete knowledge.” First he considers how the Jesuits made sense of the Amerindian languages themselves, and how they described them to their readers in France “in a way that would convince them of the project’s value and likelihood of success” (p. 57). He also explores the on-the-ground process of language learning, and offers a more nuanced discussion of the exceptional and unrivaled grammars and dictionaries the Jesuits produced, which have contributed to their “modern reputation as precocious and gifted scholars of language” (p. 58). These books underpinned a text-based methodology of language learning that “had its roots in longstanding Jesuit pedagogical practice,” (p. 77), and accordingly, in New France, “to learn local languages unavoidably...[entailed] the creation of books” (p. 76). True devotes a number of pages in this chapter to a discussion of what the Jesuits themselves described as the “richness” and “poorness” of the Amerindian languages. That is, “Amerindian languages were beautiful and complex...due to their divine origin, and therefore were not evidence of the radical difference of Amerindian cultures but rather of a link between Worlds Old and New” (p. 57). Here the Jesuits invoked the story of the Tower of Babel, arguing that since God had “deliberately scrambled the world’s languages, differences between them could be understood as beautiful and evidence of God’s work” (p. 65), and “as suitable to effecting spiritual change as any other language” (p. 66).

The recognition and understanding of these differences also provided a central motivation for the Jesuits’ mission in the New World: “the reunification of the groups that had diverged culturally and religiously in the wake of God’s linguistic intervention” (p. 66). Simultaneously, the Jesuits considered the Amerindian languages “poor” because they were lacking the necessary terminology related to Christianity in particular, and spirituality and philosophy in general.

This poverty of vocabulary meant that the languages could be used to preach Christianity, but not without missionary intervention. Only through close ethnographic observation and linguistic study could they produce the necessary Amerindian terminology, and thereby justify their efforts and lend credence to their reports. This richness and complexity of structure, grammar, verb tenses, and proper nouns, but poverty of vocabulary, leads True to devote the last few pages of the chapter to a discussion of how the Jesuits considered themselves as much inventors of the Amerindian languages as they were students of it. This came about not only through their creating a whole new vocabulary of religious and philosophical words, and switching master/student roles by teaching them to the Amerindians, but also by putting the languages into written form. True observes that the “act of writing comprehensive grammars and vocabularies, converts a dynamic language from a communicative process into an object that can be possessed, and becomes a point of reference against which actual use of a language is subsequently judged” (p. 78). The Jesuits thus tamed the Amerindian languages through their authorship of grammars and dictionaries, and thereby had control over them. Indeed, True notes that Huron-Wendat children in Canada today learn a version of Huron-Wendat that was not passed down through centuries of oral transmission, but through texts of the language that were originally “perceived, altered, and preserved for posterity by outsiders.” Consequently, “it could be said that the one-time Jesuit students of the Huron-Wendat language have belatedly become masters, with their linguistic work now shaping ongoing efforts to revive and preserve the language” (p. 81).

In chapter four, True makes an intriguing and convincing argument that the extreme violence depicted in the *Relations* “frequently, and perhaps counter-intuitively, constitutes a part of the Jesuits’ affirmation of the rationality of Amerindians, and their capacity for thoughtful conversion” (p. 84). To make his case, True discusses at length the often-cited account of the torture and execution of an Iroquois prisoner in 1637 by the Huron. He notes that previous scholars have concentrated entirely on the gruesome and gory details of the torture of this young Iroquois man that the Jesuits seemingly gratuitously provide, and interpreted these passages solely as examples of the violent behavior and relished cruelty exhibited by Amerindian societies in the New World during their torture rituals. True argues that this myopia has ignored the presence of the Jesuits in witnessing these tortures and executions, and their purpose in, and manner of, describing them as they did. In this case, the Jesuits were present from the first day of the Iroquois man’s capture and spent the days until his death

instructing him in the Christian faith and seeking to convert him, promising him an eternal reward. They baptized him, named him Joseph, and asked him to perform an act of contrition. He expressed his desire to die a Christian and to go to heaven. Joseph is portrayed as being “an attentive and enthusiastic student of Catholicism” (p. 93) before being led away.

True then places the scene in the context of the academic debate in Europe over the nature of the Amerindian. This debate was roughly organized around two general conceptions, “one pessimistic about the prospects for voluntary conversion, and the other optimistic that Amerindians could be convinced through education and evangelization to embrace European customs and religion” (p. 88). The Jesuits took the latter position, and contributed to the “noble savage” image of the French Enlightenment. For True, in this context, the cruelty of the torture scene, “is inextricably and perhaps counter-intuitively linked to a favorable assessment of the capacity of Amerindians to change and to the Jesuits’ own abilities to bring about that change” (p. 92). Joseph is portrayed as having undergone a profound spiritual change, as he reconfirms his faith at least three times as he is being tortured. Joseph’s behavior is equated with that of Christ, and Joseph’s suffering is “more a passion play than a typical scene of Amerindian cruelty” (p. 95). Joseph “was clearly no mere captured wild man...while stoically enduring torture as custom dictated, but a devoted Christian following in the footsteps of Christ” (p. 95).

In chapter five True discusses how Europeans went about making sense of the Amerindian people, from first contact onward. They usually began, as did the Jesuits, from the beginning, that is, with Amerindian origin myths (sacred beliefs about origins). The Jesuits were particularly interested in the creation myth of the Montagnais. True makes the Jesuits’ analysis of this myth, and their subsequent presentation of it to their European readers, the focus of this chapter. He argues that it is necessary to examine the subject of Amerindian origins, as discussed in the *Relations*, from the perspective of the Jesuits’ two simultaneous missions—teaching their Christian creation myth as masters, and studying Amerindian creation myths as students, which acquired knowledge they then transmitted to their European readers. But, True contends, “the Jesuits approached Amerindian creation myths not as proto-ethnographers gathering and shaping information about a unique belief system, but as catechists or pedagogues who already knew the correct answer about the origins of Amerindian people and were seeking signs of that knowledge, as well as its absence, in the belief systems of their potential converts” (p. 114). In this way the Jesuits were not exchanging ideas of equal validity, but using the engagement as a teaching opportunity. By characterizing the exchange in this way, and sharing the knowledge they obtained, with their readers back in Europe, they “would not threaten to invalidate biblical knowledge on the topic” (p. 114). Indeed, such “passages presented to European readers the argument that Amerindians were, in fact, creations of God who had simply strayed somehow from the Old World and forgotten their roots, and that their existence did not pose a challenge to biblical authority” (p. 121).

In chapter six True investigates the production and circulation of the *Relations*, and their role in the collecting and preserving of information about the Amerindian groups, which he believes has not received the attention it deserves from the scholarly community. The chapter’s title, “Travelling Texts: Toward a Decentred Reading of Jesuit Mission Ethnography,” reflects his argument here (p. 140). He posits that understanding these editorial processes “is absolutely critical to a clear understanding of Jesuit mission ethnography because in these processes—as in the missionaries’ interactions with the Amerindian groups—the Jesuits were students as much as they were masters” (p. 141). Jesuits were students because the information that crossed the Atlantic was not unidirectional. They received lessons in return from Europe in many forms, such as in letters from readers and benefactors, and in the edited and published versions of the *Relations* themselves. In seeking to understand how the *Relations* were affected in the yearly bi-directional exchange, True hopes to “shed light on the relationship of the texts both to the textual genre of travel writing, and to ethnography” (p. 141). He contends that the Jesuits were sensitive to the queries, complaints, criticisms, and suggestions from readers in France, and that these could be used to justify amplification or silence on any given topic. Thus, a question about the territory of the Huron might result in a long, detailed account of it in the following edition of the

Relations. But it might also result in more concise writing, when, for example, King Louis XIII's brother, Gaston d'Orléans, complained of the ponderousness and repetitiveness of a volume.

True also discusses the importance of the Jesuit library at the Jesuit college in Quebec, which, he notes, has received little attention from scholars, and the probable presence at the time (but no longer since many have since been lost) on the library's shelves of every volume of the published *Relations*. He considers this important because it seems that each published volume was sent to New France soon after publication and consequently, that the Jesuits could immediately consider what editing had been done on their original manuscript and how this editing had changed or revised the meaning of their original text. True shows that, by comparing an original manuscript with the published version, and then looking at the subsequent year's volume, it appears that the Jesuits took the editorial changes to heart, and modified their writing according to what they thought their superiors and editors wanted. The extensive library, which was supplemented each year with new publications from Europe, particularly volumes from publisher of the *Relations*, also allowed the Jesuits' writings "to be sufficiently different from those already published to be worth committing to paper, and yet not so different as to strain credibility or invalidate previous years' work" (p. 156).

In his Conclusion, True reflects on the continued importance of the *Relations* for Amerindian ethnography, and notes that Jesuit ideas about Amerindian cultures are now "more accessible and potentially influential than ever" (p. 172) because of modern published editions and on-line scanned editions of these and the seventeenth-century originals. In this way, the "Jesuits spoke and continue to speak on behalf of the Amerindian cultural masters and religious students in ways that tend to erase rather than mark cultural difference" (p. 173), for they superimposed on Amerindian cultures lessons that were politically useful or reassuring to their French readers at home. He argues then, that students of Amerindian cultures must take into account the Jesuits' dual roles as masters and students and how those roles may have influenced their representations of these cultures. Jesuit "mission ethnography was more the practice of redirecting information gleaned from Amerindians to the Jesuits' own ends than careful study and faithful transmission of lessons learned..." It is the "voices of their Amerindian interlocutors that have been silenced, or at least represented in such a way that they no longer can be distinguished easily from the voices of the Jesuit mission ethnographers" (p. 176).

True has written a well-researched and evocative (re)examination of the *Jesuit Relations*, and the significance of the Jesuits' roles as both masters and students while writing them. There are many threads here that might be taken up by future scholars to expand on True's work. *Masters and Servants* should be on the shelves of all research libraries, and will be required reading for anyone interested in Jesuits missions, New France, ethnography, early travel writings, and conceptions of the Other in the seventeenth century.

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