Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632–1650. By Carole Blackburn (McGill-Queens University Press, 2000) 167 pp. \$60.00

Blackburn proposes a new reading of the encounter between Jesuit and Indian in seventeenth-century New France. A work of historical anthropology driven by the insights and agenda of colonial discourse studies, *Harvest of Souls* sets out to show how the Jesuit missionary reports (transcribed, translated, and published between 1896 and 1901 by Reuben G. Thwaites as *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*) were implicated in the practice of colonialism. Her method is to “examine the intent, effect, and meaning of the texts in their entirety” (as opposed to more narrowly focused ethnographic or historical readings), searching for and exposing the “sedimented meanings that inhabit the Jesuit texts” in order to “situate these meanings in relation to the politics of colonialism and conversion” (8, 11). The *Relations* were not “just the byproducts of a political process,” they were “a more integral component of the politics of colonialism, because they expressed the themes, ideas and ideologies that served domination and justified the colonial endeavour” (9).

Blackburn elaborates this thesis by examining three arenas in which Jesuit texts subtly naturalized structures of colonial domination through the production of texts. Successive chapters evoke and critique the Jesuit vision of the New World—the barren, savage wilderness that Jesuits wrote into existence, aided by Old World, Christian tropes (Chapter 3); the resident, lawless savages in need of the rod of Christian civility

(Chapter 4); and the resulting crop of Christian souls raised up for the harvest/conquest (Chapter 5). The story that emerges is one of Jesuit missionaries blinded by their cultural baggage to the humanity of their missionary subjects, seeking to rewrite native peoples' history and future. But the Indians (whether consciously or not is unclear—Blackburn steers away from this question) resisted, fought, and ultimately lost the war to control the signs, though they won minor battles along the way by “deflecting and decentering” the Jesuit commitment to a universal truth (53, 103, 111, 113).

The perils (like the rewards) of interdisciplinary study are well known: A scholarly edifice drawing on the tools and media of many trades may fail to meet the building codes of any. Blackburn's book is likely to disappoint historians and ethnographers, while tantalizing cultural theorists with unfulfilled promise. Historians will find that the work offers little in the way of new research or novel interpretation of the oft-mined *Relations*. First, Blackburn makes too much of her unveiling of textual biases, implying that historians read sources “straight up” without much thought about their biases. Further, except for Chapter 2, which provides the historical background, scant attention is given to historical context and change over time. Readers looking for ethnographic detail and analysis of Huron life would do well to consult the classic works of Trigger and Tooker.¹ This is not to say that Blackburn ought to have written another Huron ethnography, but only to suggest that her theory-driven argument would have been better served with more ethnographic detail supporting it.

Despite decades of trying to have the best of both worlds, devoted interdisciplinarians still end up privileging either the particular or the systemic in the final analysis. Some of my reservations about *Harvest of Souls* can be chalked up to the fact that, if forced to jump, Blackburn and I would land on opposite sides of the fence. Also on Blackburn's side would be the Comaroffs (to take one prominent example), anthropologists whose work on southern Africa has arguably changed (or should change) the way that historians think by exposing the subtler forms of colonial power that rest in the seemingly mundane from architecture to agriculture.² More evidence from seventeenth-century sources would be needed, however, for *Harvest of Souls* to be a profitable application of Comaroffian insight and method.

The real losers in Blackburn's book are native Christians. Rather than ask how some Hurons indigenized Christianity, Blackburn assumes that Indians could not have found anything worthwhile in the religion of their oppressors. For Blackburn, native engagement with Christianity

1 Elisabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615–1649* (Washington, D.C., 1964); Bruce Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North* (New York, 1969); *idem*, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal, 1976), 2v.

2 Of greatest relevance in this context is Jean and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), 2v.

can be understood only as subversive resistance or as evidence of a colonized consciousness. This is not a criticism of Blackburn's work alone, but one that could be made more broadly of historical and anthropological scholarship of recent decades that has rightly sought to expose and remedy the biases of earlier, triumphalist literature. Ironically, the scholarly neglect of native Christianity stands as evidence of imperialism's long shadow by accepting missionary claims to exclusive rights to define Christianity.

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