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“This Countries Ladies”: Gender Negotiations at the Northwest Company, Grand Portage

Andrew E. LaBounty

Abstract: French interactions with Indians during the fur trade were characterized by intermarriage and cultural assimilation. Later, when Canadian traders took over, women were notably present at the Northwest Company's depot at Grand Portage, and participated in its affairs. Although the seasonal workings of Canadian fur trade depots are well-established, gender roles have been typically overlooked in the day-to-day recount of fur trade societies. This paper will thus investigate the aspect of gender at fur trade posts, and particularly at Grand Portage, as a study in cross-cultural negotiations for the fulfillment of gender roles.

In 1731, a Frenchman named Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de la Vérendrye and his Cree guide traversed what would be called the “Grand Portage” or “Great Carrying-Place” in present day Minnesota. Over the next fifty years, the Montreal-based Northwest Company would turn this 8.5-mile canoe portage into a major fur trade depot, staffed year-round by clerks and surrounded seasonally by Ojibwe settlements. Once a year, traders from Montreal met at Grand Portage with the Voyageurs stationed further west during the rendezvous, and at these times, the Northwest Company held glamorous balls for the clerks and their wives, known collectively as “this Countries Ladies”(Gilman 1992:22). This account makes it clear that women were present at the Grand Portage depot, and probably participated in its affairs. Although the seasonal workings of Canadian fur trade depots are well-established (White 2005; Innis 1962), gender roles have been typically overlooked in the day-to-day recount of fur trade societies. This paper will investigate the role of gender during the fur trade, beginning with the identity of the women at Grand Portage and moving to their role in trade. Further, this paper incorporates recent theoretical studies of gender to glimpse how traditional Ojibwe gender roles and the negotiation of Montreal roles may have influenced the fur

trade more generally, and how gender was expressed at Grand Portage particularly.

To move beyond the identification of women and assess their role in the fur trade, it is necessary to provide some of the general context of the fur trade. I rely on an excellent recent synthesis by White (2005), which accurately relates the practical aspects of the fur trade at large, with a special emphasis on Grand Portage. Subsequently, a brief outline of Ojibwe culture will provide a useful comparison of gender roles between the Ojibwe and European traders, and illuminate some overlap and influence between the two groups. Using historical accounts and archeological evidence from the excavated post, it will be possible to reconstruct a little of the complex and gender-dependent society at Grand Portage. In this way, we can determine how Montreal men adapted to their role alongside Ojibwe people in the fur trade, and broaden our understanding of this period in history. Furthermore, examining how Montreal men negotiated with the Ojibwe for the fulfillment of gender roles offers a potentially fruitful area of cross-cultural research. Finally, it will be evident that the fur trade was heavily reliant on gender roles and paralleled traditional Ojibwe culture in significant ways.

The Fur Trade Context

The fur trade was initially undertaken by the French as an economic enterprise into the new world, which was an attitude later assumed by British traders. Primarily concerned with animal pelts for sale back home, French “voyageurs” ventured into the interior of what is today southern Canada, and there encountered a variety of Native groups including the Iroquois, Algonquian, Huron, Ottawa, Dakota and later, the focus of this study, the Ojibwe (Gilman 1992).

From the start, French traders grappled with Native populations over the concepts of generosity and gift-giving before economic exchange. Unprepared for the ceremonial and diplomatic aspects of trade, French traders were baffled by Indians’ reluctance to buy enormous quantities of ‘superior’ goods. According to Gilman (1992), Ojibwe people in particular were not concerned with material wealth, due in large part to their seasonally mobile nature. Furthermore, most Native groups in the area valued generosity in their leaders and shunned avarice (White 2005). For these reasons, the French found that the laws of supply and demand simply failed to predict success among Native populations. Eventually however, French traders realized that an exchange of goods with Native populations in southern Canada was as much diplomacy and ceremony as it was material gain. Indeed, White (2005:8) describes the French fur trade as a “spectrum of reciprocities” rather than any kind of simple bartering system. In this

light, trade should be viewed as an agreement between groups of people; an exchange of friendship and alliances rather than the economic endeavor the French had expected. As Innis (1962:254) put it, "A new organization was under appreciable disadvantage having little knowledge of Indian habitats, language, and economy," simply because profit was not the Indians' only goal. Thus, in spite of their low regard for material wealth, it should not be surprising that the Ojibwe were favorably disposed to trade for at least the diplomatic gains, and did the French a number of favors to maintain their presence and to compete with other Native groups for access to the fur trade.

First, Ojibwe women were extremely welcoming of French men; second, French traders were willing (and expected by the Ojibwe) to marry into the population (Gilman 1992). This was in part because many Ojibwe women considered the fur trade such a boon that they were willing to be sexually 'diplomatic' (Warren 1974), but was also appealing to the traders for purposes of aid and provisioning in that Ojibwe women were responsible for gathering much of the family's food. As Warren (1974:381), an Ojibwe métis, states in his manuscript, "these early pioneer traders all intermarried in the tribe." It is unclear how much of the fur traders' food came directly from Ojibwe women, but fur traders evidently required supplemental subsistence, even after erecting and staffing trading posts at which traders were minimally provisioned with flour and corn (White 2005). After all, food was expensive to import from Europe (later Montreal) and whatever arrived was, ultimately, for sale. As one Northwest Company employee noted, the Ojibwe saw the Northwest traders "as poor, pitiful creatures who could neither supply themselves nor the Indians"(Masson 1960 in Bishop 1974:229). Traders required help in other ways as well. At Osnaburgh House, a Hudson's Bay Company post, Bishop (1974:233) reports that "Indian women, frequently traders' wives, were paid 'for netting snowshoes, making & mending the appointees clothes and washing for them...', and also to make nets from twine"(quoting Innis 1962).

These instances of Ojibwe women providing help and food to fur traders show the various ways in which Indians accommodated traders and supported the fur trade, but besides food and the tasks listed above, local Ojibwe were also contracted to build replacement canoes, which were typically too expensive to import (White 2005; Gilman 1992). In effect, the Indians, and the women in particular, had a substantial and active role in maintaining the fur trade, which would have quickly collapsed without their support. It is also worth noting that agriculture was impractical at Grand Portage, and has not been intensively adopted there even today. Because of the difficult environment, fur traders were all the more dependent on Indian assistance, and were unable to more intensively settle the area. In other

words, the environment limited the European presence at Grand Portage, and facilitated a longer period of cultural interaction than was experienced elsewhere, with a greater degree of dependence upon Native populations (Cooper 2007).

Native trappers also worked the practical processes of the fur trade to their advantage. From the beginnings of the fur trade in the East, the French had learned to begin trade with gifts of friendship, considering the diplomatic undertones of trade in the region. As the fur trade moved west and began to essentially “employ” Native hunters on a seasonal basis, a system developed whereby traders gave goods on credit in the winter, and expected to be repaid when the Indians returned in the summer with skins according to their traditional seasonal round (White 2005). In this way, the Indians were able to get all they needed for the season ahead and reinforce their diplomatic trust relationship with the posts. The “spectrum of reciprocities” described by White is simplified in this: “A variety of services and material goods including food was necessary to maintain post employees. The post in turn issued trade goods now needed by Indians for hunting and trapping”(Bishop 1974:229). Given that “these early pioneer traders all intermarried in the tribe”(Warren 1974:381), the fur traders were not only conducting business, but were essentially provisioning their own families for the winter. Taking a gendered view of the fur trade suggests that this ubiquitous fur trade development—credit in the winter and repayment in the summer—paralleled the role of good Ojibwe husbands providing for their wives as women provided supplemental foods.

Grand Portage

As the fur trade moved westward, it elaborated on the extensive river transportation network through a series of portages, and eventually needed new routes to take canoes laden with goods further inland (Innis 1962:243). In 1731, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de la Vérendrye set out to discover such a route, and was guided by a Cree man named Auchagah through the “Grand Portage,” an eight-and-a-half mile portage from the west shore of Lake Superior to the Pigeon River in the northwest, which bypassed the impossibly difficult terrain that characterized the eastern portion of the Pigeon River (White 2005; Gilman 1992). When the French were eventually forced out of the fur trade, British companies such as the Montreal-based Northwest Company took over operations at Grand Portage, and constructed their primary post there in 1784 (Gilman 1992). From that point onward, although frequently fluctuating in population, Grand Portage was home to traders and Indians alike who negotiated the practical aspects of the fur trade through cultural adaptations and intermarriage.

The clerks who staffed the Grand Portage depot year-round were typically young men in an entry-level position. They lived in dormitory-style housing, and were newly “freed from the shackles of a Strict parent”(Gilman 1992:14). In other words, the depot at Grand Portage had much in common, socially speaking, with a college fraternity (see Wilkie 2006). Nevertheless, these young men were expected to contend with rather meager living arrangements in a harsh environment. Without looking to gender, it is unclear how they cared for themselves or how they viewed this task. The fact that many of them took Ojibwe wives leads to important questions about intercultural gender negotiations, and will be the focus of the following sections that begin by discussing traditional Ojibwe society.

The Ojibwe Context

As noted above, the Ojibwe encountered the French at Sault Ste. Marie, and both groups eventually lived side-by-side at Grand Portage in present-day northern Minnesota, along the west bank of Lake Superior. According to oral histories compiled and published by a métis named William Warren in 1853, the Ojibwe came to Grand Portage and points further west from as far as the Atlantic Ocean. By 1783, the Ojibwe occupied nearly all of northern Minnesota, driving out groups such as the Hurons, Ottawas, and the Sioux (Warren 1974:450). Birk and Richner (2004) confirm this archeologically, finding evidence of the fur trade associated almost exclusively with the Bois Forte Ojibwe within the Voyageurs National Park area in northern Minnesota.

Ojibwe society was based on loosely affiliated, exogamous bands identified by patrilineal totems, and was characterized by a low population density and dispersed populations (Richner 2002). Indeed, the name ‘Ojibwe’ itself is “an umbrella term for many different bands”(Richner 2002:7), but because the bands were exogamous by nature, all Ojibwe readily considered themselves related. The bands present at Grand Portage were characteristically small, and were organized during the fur trade under ‘chiefs’ that were largely appointed by European traders for negotiation purposes (White 2005). More accurately, however, Ojibwe chiefs were held in a position of respect, if not actual authority, over many patrilineally related bands that were widely dispersed (Richner 2002). The clans present at Grand Portage were most likely the Moose, Caribou, and Pike. Other Ojibwe groups, including the Crane, Bear, Catfish, and Loon, traveled further west to become the Bois Forte bands in present-day Voyageurs National Park (Richner 2002). While the Grand Portage bands and the Bois Forte were the same people socially speaking, and would have certainly married into one another’s bands, the Bois Forte differed from the

bands at Grand Portage in their subsistence activities. While the Bois Forte had access to an enormous array of plants, fish, and game in the Voyageurs area (Richner 2002), the Grand Portage bands relied primarily on fish from Lake Superior, which were more difficult to catch (White 2005). Thus, the Grand Portage Ojibwe relied heavily on a seasonal round that took them inland to hunt during the winter, away from the portage and the fur trade post (White 2005). During the summer, according to a casual survey reported by Northwest Company official Alexander Mackenzie, 150 Ojibwe families lived near Grand Portage on the shore of Lake Superior. Later, and likely more accurate estimates suggest that 150-200 Ojibwe lived in the Grand Portage area at the time of the fur trade (White 2005:146).

As the fur trade picked up, traders attempted to bypass the Grand Portage Ojibwe and trade with bands further inland. Not satisfied with merely being intermediaries, and unwilling to be left out of the trade completely, the Grand Portage Ojibwe took on the role of “gatekeepers” and attempted to stop traders from continuing north without trading along the way (White 2005). Indeed, this eagerness to trade coupled with an abundance of beaver in the area purportedly influenced French traders to erect a fur trade post at Grand Portage, although such a post would predate the Northwest Company depot and has not been archeologically substantiated (Warren 1974:137). A similar story illustrating the eagerness of Indians to trade is found among the Cree during La Vérendrye’s journey westward; prior to his arrival, the Cree had selected a spot for the construction of Fort St. Charles according to their needs and desires more than the planning of the French government (Gilman 1992).

By the late eighteenth century, the system of credit and repayment developed by fur traders had left Indians in reliance upon guns at hatchets for use in the winter hunts, constituting another reason the Ojibwe fought to retain trading rights (Bishop 1974). It should be noted, however, that although Bishop recognizes an Indian “need” for European technology, Gilman reports that the cessation of the fur trade did not bring ruin to the Grand Portage Ojibwe—indeed, “Ojibwe life went on as usual”(Gilman 1992:93) after the removal of the Northwest Company’s presence in spite of the disappointed protests of the Ojibwe in 1803 (Warren 1974:292). This ‘cultural tenacity’ is characteristic of Ojibwe to the west as well, where the Bois Forte continued their traditional lifestyles well after their land had been ceded in treaties with the American government (Richner 2007). In sum, the Ojibwe were a seasonally mobile people who made use of fur trade goods according to their cultural needs, but also maintained their own traditions where practical. Through food and other accommodations, they invited the French, and later the British, to trade at Grand Portage and incorporated the post into their seasonal round.

The Ojibwe had well-defined traditional gender roles, some of which can be readily observed archeologically. Ojibwe women were responsible for much of the production of food, primarily through berries and maple sugar, which was a major part of the reason their role was indispensable to fur traders (White 2005). After the appearance of the fur trade in the early seventeenth century, these foodstuffs were gathered in copper kettles supplied by traders, which are well preserved and documented archeologically (Woolworth 1970, 1975, n.d.). Men, meanwhile, were responsible for the fishing and hunting, and thus typically conducted the actual trade of furs (though not always; a discussion of an Ojibwe businesswoman will follow). The production of canoes, already cited as a necessity for fur traders, was particularly gender-oriented. While men designed canoes and supervised their construction, it was traditionally Ojibwe women who stitched them together and did the practical work of production (White 2005). Even after marriage into the fur trade, Ojibwe women would have maintained these roles in their own society, and would have incorporated their European husbands into their duties as well. Recall that "Indian women, frequently traders' wives, were paid 'for netting snowshoes, making & mending the appointees clothes and washing for them...', and also to make nets from twine"(Bishop 1974:233, quoting Innis 1962). Thus, marriage into the fur trade altered traditional Ojibwe gender roles by adding tasks required by Montreal men, but did *not* eliminate traditional roles, as the post at large also required traditional food-gathering and canoe production.

Gender in Historical Archeology

In 1991, Purser called for historical archeology to incorporate gender as a fundamental area of research. She suggests that archeology is "not just looking *for* women, but looking *through* gender"(Purser 1991:13), and this serves as the guiding theoretical principle of this paper. Nevertheless, at Grand Portage, "looking *for* women" is a legitimate place to begin, and asks necessary questions regarding the identity and role of women at Grand Portage. Archeologically, women are seen and quantified in the number of goods marketed to them by the fur traders. Brass kettles, beads, cloth, and other goods all point to women and have been documented historically and recovered archeologically. As discussed above, their identity is Ojibwe, but they are often simultaneously acting as a trader's wife.

Another part of the theoretical perspective taken in this paper derives from Wilkie's (2006) discussion of a college fraternity. In her study, the members of Zeta Psi created their environment to facilitate group identity, and adapted their own gender roles to survive (Wilkie 2006:25-32). Much like a fraternity, the Grand Portage depot was

home to young men forced to fulfill gender roles in any way they could. This leads to questions of negotiation and adaptation with the local environment, and in this case, meant marriage to Ojibwe women and adaptation of male gender roles to Ojibwe society—i.e. fur traders provided for their Ojibwe families at the start of winter. Thus, some of the important questions to be asked at Grand Portage deal with how Ojibwe women interacted with and influenced the fur trade, and how the fur traders responded to new gender roles. To address the topic of gender at Grand Portage, I will first “look *for* women” through fur trade inventories and material goods excavated by Woolworth (1968, 1970, 1975, n.d.), then suggest ways archeologists can “look *through* gender” at the impact of the negotiations between women and men on the fur trade at large, following Purser’s (1991) suggestion.

Discussion: Gender at Grand Portage

Women were indispensable to the fur trade. As discussed above, women provided for the physical existence of the fur trade through food production, and made it possible for Montreal fur traders to survive in an area where agriculture still remains impossible, and where food was too expensive to import (Cooper 2007; White 2005). Archeologically, evidence for female provisioning of the fur trade comes in the form of modified and repaired brass kettles used for gathering, as well as beads and broken stone pipes in the kitchen that suggest the presence of women living or serving at the post (Woolworth 1970, 1975, n.d.). Further, Woolworth (1975) recovered a wooden net shuttle in the depot kitchen, and helps substantiate that Ojibwe women repaired traders’ nets as Bishop (1974:229) suggests. At first glance, the archeology of Grand Portage would suggest that Ojibwe women were assimilated into the post in a unidirectional acculturation process in which Ojibwe women merely became Montreal wives. They mended clothes, did the wash, and cooked the food, archeologically indistinguishable from a white woman. This is an oversimplification, however, when historic Ojibwe gender roles are also considered.

In addition to providing food and mundane services to fur traders as their wives, Ojibwe women clearly also maintained their own cultural traditions. As the fur trade required more canoes, Ojibwe women continued to participate in their traditional construction, in which an Ojibwe man designed canoes while women stitched them together (White 2005). Further, the ubiquity of brass kettles despite their cost suggests that women continued to make use of their traditional environment by harvesting berries and sap as they always had. Thus, Ojibwe women did not simply become Montreal wives—on the contrary, they remained very much traditional Ojibwe, but they also ‘made cultural room’ for the traders.

Further, women did not just keep the fur trade in operation by feeding the traders. Evidently, women also made the fur trade an economic success by being European traders' best customers. According to Northwest Company inventories, the most popular trade items at Grand Portage were cloth, beads, needles, awls, ribbons, jewelry, and other goods marketed to women, not the guns and axes commonly associated with European goods (Gilman 1992). This trend suggests that, at Grand Portage at least, Ojibwe women were the fur trade's most influential consumers even though they did not traditionally hunt or trade furs. Archeologically, these inventories are corroborated by the thousands of beads that have been recovered, as well as lead bale seals used to secure and mark bundles of cloth goods, and of course, brass kettles (Woolworth 1968, 1970, 1975, n.d.). These goods were all marketed to women and would have been the primary means of profit for traders, despite the fact that men did most of the actual trading. But even the act of trading was not universally a male role, and eventually, an entirely new gender role was introduced by the fur trade.

Net-no-kwa was an Ojibwe woman well-respected by both Ojibwe and the fur traders. As one white man observed, "I have never met with an Indian, either man or woman, who had so much authority as Net-no-kwa. She could accomplish whatever she pleased, either with the traders or the Indians"(White 2005:80). Interestingly, when Net-no-kwa traveled with her family to Mackinac, she did so intending to sell her sons' furs. She took pains to keep the furs from traders, refusing to use their carts or to take the "trader's road" across the portage (White 2005:81). For various reasons, she ultimately chose to sell the furs at Grand Portage, but broke with tradition by selling the furs for a due bill—in other words, in spite of her mistrust of traders, she took credit from the Northwest Company (White 2005:82). This indicates that Net-no-kwa was not only a highly respected woman, but was a shrewd businesswoman as well, not concerned with immediate return as much as with getting the full value for her goods. As evidenced by this example, the fur trade appears to have developed among some Ojibwe as an economic opportunity as well as a diplomatic one, and the opportunity was certainly not lost on women like Net-no-kwa.

The preceding archeological and historical data help us to see women at a fur trade post, and to surmise what their roles may have been, but how can a study that focuses on the fur trade from a gendered perspective more fully reconstruct a past culture? Understanding the complex negotiations that took place between European men and Ojibwe women goes beyond merely cataloguing artifacts ostensibly associated with women. Every aspect of the fur trade was driven by negotiations between Europeans and Native Americans, buyers and

sellers, men and women, clerks and voyageurs—the list goes on—and a gendered perspective provides just one powerful and basic approach to this complex web. Moving from an understanding of kettle fragments to an understanding of cross-cultural gender negotiations is only possible when these myriad interactions are considered through other lines of evidence, such as oral history and historical documents. When archeologists consider these lines of evidence, using gender as a jumping-off point for the exploration of the fur trade, new patterns emerge, such as the parallel development of the fur trade with traditional gender roles.

Conclusions

The Canadian fur trade was a time of intense and widespread cultural contact and negotiation. Both European fur traders and Native Ojibwe people adapted to one another's presence, and made conscious decisions regarding how they would interact. For Ojibwe women, this primarily meant intermarriage with Montreal men, and incorporation of new gender roles and fur trade goods into their traditional food-gathering roles. Archeologically, this is evident in the variety of goods marketed to and used by women. For fur traders, the development of negotiated gender roles included providing for Ojibwe families in the winter. Indeed, the ubiquitous system of debt and repayment seems to parallel Ojibwe gender roles, and was likely subtly fashioned through the fur trade by Native groups who expected traders to live up to their position as husbands in the tribe.

Clearly women were present at Grand Portage, and developed a uniquely blended cultural identity. In taking on new gender roles, they not only made trading posts physically tenable, but helped make the fur trade itself an economic success, and ultimately influenced its most wide-ranging practical developments. Far from merely "looking *for* women," it seems that the fur trade well-deserves a more complex theoretical approach that examines the processes of trade and negotiation "*through gender*" (Purser 1991). This avenue of research can more accurately depict the cultural influences and interactions of the fur trade at more posts than Grand Portage, but should not be solely limited to women, as I have tended toward here. Rather, a truly complete study of gender would require a careful study of how men's gender roles began to change as fur traders provided luxuries for the price of furs. Rather than producing all his tools and clothes, for example, a man need only trade skins to provide such goods for his entire family. The effects of this economic shift should be widespread and archeologically visible as well, and will tell a new and gendered story as much as a study of women.

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