

# SETTLERS, SAVAGES, AND LESAGE

## Relations of Reciprocity in New France

*Abstract: Historians have been less inclined than literary critics to use French utopian writing as sources for studying colonialism. Thus, this paper historicizes Alain-René Lesage's (1668 – 1747) *Beauchêne* (1732) in its settler colonial context. *Beauchêne* shows how French settlers and Native Americans formed, negotiated, and contested reciprocal relationships in New France. Relationships depended on intermediaries who adopted differing cultural elements or formed kinship ties. While the work neglects the conflicts that broke out between settlers and natives, *Beauchêne* masterfully synthesizes colonial developments with contemporary literary traditions. Future studies can examine how similar novels reflect the blurred lines between settlers and “savages.”*

Wen Li Teng  
University of Chicago

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In 1732, Alain-René Lesage published *Les Aventures de Monsieur Robert Chevalier, dit de Beauchêne, capitaine de flibustiers dans la Nouvelle-France* (“The Adventures of Robert Chevalier, call’d de Beauchene, Captain of a Privateer in New France” in the 1745 English translation). This novel, combining picaresque, romantic, and utopian themes, concerns the lives of three characters: Beauchêne, Monneville, and Mlle Duclos in both France and in the French settler colonies. While purportedly based on the memoirs of the real Beauchêne, Lesage’s work comprises tales invented by the novelist.<sup>1</sup> Literary critics and scholars have contributed much to our understanding of how the novel is a representative piece of French writing from the eighteenth century. However, the text not only synthesizes different literary trends in Europe, but also those political, social, and economic developments far away from the metropole. The latter necessitates a more historicist approach to the text and a reading of the volume as a whole.

With the above concerns in mind, this article seeks to demonstrate how Lesage’s *Beauchêne* provides a remarkably accurate insight into how New France was not only a site for the exploitation of native peoples by imperial powers, or for the displacement of these indigenes by settlers from the Western world. Rather, the novel demonstrates that New France was a space for the formation, negotiation, and contestation of reciprocal relationships between French (and English) settlers and the Iroquois, Algonquin, and Huron Indians of Northeast America. The most basic of these relationships depended on intermediaries, either European or Native, who were willing to accept, to varying extents, aspects of cultural identity that were not their own. Stronger relationships, however, depended on the formation of kinship ties established through marriage or adoption into the community, either as children or as leaders. These relationships brought happiness and fulfillment to the

individuals who engaged in them, as well as peace and material prosperity to the societies that were involved.

### SETTLER COLONIALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In the context of the time in New France, reciprocal relationships emerged in circumstances that were often unfavorable to any form of cooperation between the European settlers and native peoples. The “middle ground,” as Richard White has termed it, was one where any negotiations were highly vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> The stakes were high, given that the survival of both Canadian and Native people was at risk.<sup>3</sup> Lesage, given his access to the works of such explorers as Lahontan, Hennepin, Lafitau, and Labat, would have known of such difficulties and chosen to play them down.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to imagine how the Natives would have felt comfortable approaching the French if their lives had been badly disrupted by the Europeans’ presence. Lesage tells us of Monneville’s penchant of taking captives from the Amerindian tribes. In one attack, Monneville captures several Iroquois women and a great number of children to enslave them.<sup>5</sup> In another instance, Monneville discovers a large habitation of Iroquois in the woodlands. He launches a surprise attack on the “great Number of old Men and Children” there, and leaves with a booty prize of nearly two hundred children and women.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the French went beyond taking captives; some of the actions of the French can only be described as genocidal. To demonstrate the power of the French, Governor-General Beauharnois vowed to decimate the Fox people, ordering his subordinates to “kill them without thinking of making a single prisoner, so as not to leave one of the race alive in the upper country.”<sup>7</sup> With lives lost and displaced in the face of overwhelming French military superiority, certain Native peoples never had the option of fostering close relations with the French, or were disinclined to do so.

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At the same time, many settlers were hesitant to approach the Amerindian peoples. The term “les sauvages” at the time may have had more to do with the idea of wild forest people than with their supposed attributes of ferocity or cruelty.<sup>8</sup> However, it was still common to view Native peoples as subhuman and unworthy of any partnership. French settlers were frightened by the attacks that Native peoples made on their communities. Lesage describes how the people of Chambly and Montreal dreaded the Iroquois and their “terrible mortal” chief, Black-Kettle, who was so frightful that there were public prayers where “the People begg’d of God to deliver them” from his attacks.<sup>9</sup> Most notably, Lesage reports on the real-life incident of Madeleine de Verchères, who fended off a troop of Iroquois who had made an incursion upon her fort, which was located some distance from Montreal.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Lesage writes of the unfavorable impressions that the missions of New France had of the Huron:

[T]hey have endeavoured to represent [the Hurons] as an inconstant Nation, perfidious and barbarous, only for having conducted themselves according to those Customs of their Nation, received from their Ancestors. The Hurons, say they, have killed, have eat [sic] the Prisoners ... They are therefore the most barbarous Savages, they are Anthropophages, they are Monsters.<sup>11</sup>

With these attacks and atrocities, Lesage provides some reason why French settlers may have been reluctant to approach Native peoples, let alone to develop deep relationships with them.

The picture that Lesage provides us accords with reality. Indeed, in their private correspondence, French officials and priests vented their frustrations at, and even contempt for, Native peoples.<sup>12</sup> One Canadian governor described the Iroquois as not only untrustworthy, but also highly dangerous:

They are everywhere. They will stay hidden behind a stump for ten days, existing on nothing but a handful of corn, waiting to kill a man, or a woman ... They are not content to burn the houses, they also burn the prisoners they take, and give them death only after torturing them continually in the most cruel manner they can devise.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, war was one of the main forms of interaction between settlers and natives. It is telling that Beauchêne’s first interactions with the natives come about when the Iroquois travel up to the gates of Montreal, pillaging and setting fire to villages and scalping those they had killed.<sup>14</sup> Lesage’s description of such events mirrors actual events in North America. For example, in 1689, the Iroquois destroyed the westernmost settlement of the French, La Chine, destroying fifty out of seventy-seven houses, killing and taking prisoners, and reportedly feasting on the flesh of five captive children.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to fathom how harmonious relations could develop if the settlers felt threatened by the Natives.



Alain-René Lesage engraving, 18th century  
Source: Anonymous, *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*  
(*Wikimedia Commons*)

Yet, the reality was that the most negative and the most positive attitudes towards the natives could coexist in New France. Attitudes varied from person to person, depending on whether they had benefits to gain from interacting with the other side. Those who did were more willing to be open-minded about a different culture and to initiate a reciprocal relationship on more or less equal terms. Among the French, these included anyone from traders who were hungry for pelts, to officials who wanted to forge military or political alliances, to captives who were fearful for their lives. On the Indian side, these were tribesmen who wanted iron goods, chiefs who wanted protection from rivals, and even women who wanted husbands who might treat them better than the men in their tribe. This does mean that patronizing attitudes were completely absent. Of the chieftains who accompany Mlle Duclos, Monneville remarks that their long robes of beaver skins “add[ed] a new Ridicule to their strange and grotesque figures” and goes on to comment that “We should have sooner have imagined them to be old Baboons, than Kings.”<sup>16</sup> Natives, conversely, giped at any white newcomers who failed to demonstrate sufficiently their strength or resilience in running or wrestling competitions.<sup>17</sup> Thus, settlers and natives might have found each other strange or even amusing, but in many instances there was not enough ill-will between them to eliminate all possibility of cooperation.

### BEYOND CULTURAL TRANSVESTISM

One of the most basic ways that settlers and natives acknowledged each other's common humanity was by adopting each other's clothes, as Lesage describes throughout the novel, blurring the lines between separate cultures. Nathan Brown argues in "Curious Savages" that *Beauchêne* depicts New France as a privileged space for the problematizing of the ancien régime's traditional hierarchies – either gender or ethnically based.<sup>18</sup> New France, according to Brown, was a place where identities could be constructed, transgressed, disputed, and negotiated, a site of cultural transvestism, cross-dressing, and sartorial transgressions.<sup>19</sup> But the characters of *Beauchêne*, like the real-life counterparts, were never interested in vestimentary choices for their own sake. The decisions to wear Native clothing or partake in other Native folkways occurred within institutions – marriage, family, and tribal leadership – that made these necessary.

At the very least, even if they did not wear each other's clothes, settlers and Natives were willing to accept a degree of cultural difference. Not all French settlers had as unfavorable a view of the natives as some of the missionaries and government officials had. Even as Monneville finds distasteful the dish of dog meat presented at the feast he attends, he still finds "very much to [his] taste" the sagamite

Slightly stronger relations could be formed when both parties extended their tolerance of other cultures to attempts at assimilation. The French fur traders were experts at this.<sup>24</sup> They wore Indian dress, travelled like Indians, ate the same foods, spoke Indian languages, made war as the Indians did, lived off the land, and endured privation with the same fortitude as the Natives.<sup>25</sup> In so doing, they became closely integrated into the native tribes they lived with. Natives, too, were sometimes willing to adapt to the cultural practices of the French settlers, as illustrated by Mlle Duclos's account of her tribe:

I even remark continually, that they contrive every thing that may give me Pleasure; and to conform themselves to my Manner of Behaviour, throw off their own. It was, for Example, a Custom established amongst them, to go into each other's Huts, and sit down in the first Place they come to, without saying a word, or using the least Civility; now, they salute one another by bowing the Head a little, and smiling.<sup>26</sup>

In making these and other efforts to make their guest feel welcome, the fictional Huron tribe earned an ardent supporter of their cause. Lesage has Mlle Duclos deliver a poignant monologue, where she asks Monneville to consider what it would be like to be a Frenchman whose land is colonized

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that the Hurons serve him.<sup>20</sup> After spending some time with the Hurons, he concludes that they are a "humane people," even if he still considers their customs strange.<sup>21</sup> Outside the world of Lesage's fictional Huron village, the French missionaries and colonial authorities, to be sure, tolerated some native practices. But unlike Monneville, they did not do so because they enjoyed native practices or their interactions with the Indians. Rather, they did so when it was a matter of expediency and of not sullyng the relations they had with compliant Native peoples. In the case of the mission Indians, missionaries were willing to tolerate native customs and rituals that did not contradict Catholic worship.<sup>22</sup> Officials also turned a blind eye to instances where a mission Indian accidentally killed a Frenchman while drunk. Instead of arresting and putting to trial the Native person responsible, the French would permit the native ceremony of "covering the grave," where the Indians would deliver presents to the relatives of the deceased to settle the murder.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the acceptance of some Native practices allowed provided the basis for the most superficial of reciprocal relations between French and Amerindian people.

by the Huron and whose religion is deemed by the invaders to be illegitimate.<sup>27</sup> Empathy, or so Lesage suggests, may develop if there were sufficient opportunities for members of each group to assimilate into one another's culture.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERACTION

As such, it is not surprising that relationships of reciprocity were often established when Frenchmen were taken prisoner. Captives--if they were not tortured and killed--were given full recognition as a member of a clan, since the Huron, Iroquois, and other tribes viewed this as a means of gaining additional kindred after lives had been lost in war, a way of renewing their human and spiritual potential through the ritual process of integration.<sup>28</sup> White children who had been captured young quickly became indianized, and often struggled later to abandon what had become their native lifestyle and language.<sup>29</sup> Lesage evinces these processes in the episode where the Iroquois capture the child *Beauchêne* during a raid on Montreal. *Beauchêne* is adopted by a woman who had lost her husband in the conflict, and who subsequently married another.<sup>30</sup> Soon, *Beauchêne* learns how to hunt and fight like the Iroquois, and comes to see his adoptive family

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Map of Iroquois Five Nations and Mission Sites 1656-1684 (1879)

Source: John S. Clark, *Early Chapters of Cayuga History: Jesuit Missions In Goi-O-Gouen, 1656-1684* (Wikimedia Commons)

as equal to his birth relations, for he comments that “I could not think I had lost any thing, since I saw that I had still a Father, a Mother, Brothers, and Companions.”<sup>31</sup> However, Lesage then shows Beauchêne experiencing no difficulty at all when he eventually reconnects with his birth parents and rejoins French colonial society.<sup>32</sup> Still, Lesage’s imagination of quasi-familial ties between French captives and Native captors is not too far off from reality.

Adoption was not the only way by which French settlers and Amerindians connected on fairly equal terms, for they also became blood relations. Without too much fear of miscegenation, both sides married and produced offspring that helped solidify bonds of alliance. While they were not necessarily settlers, French traders often married Indian women to access their kin networks, which provided excellent security in the native world and afforded the traders some protection from having their goods stolen or from being killed.<sup>33</sup> Those who had been captured in war were also forced to take wives or face death.<sup>34</sup> Lesage appears

to have been aware of these partnerships, for he visualizes Mlle Duclos urging Monneville to encourage his men to marry some of her tribeswomen, on the grounds that the tribe would view this favorably as an effort to strengthen ties between the French and natives:

I cannot, however, conceal from you, that the Chiefs of my Council are to conjure you not to disdain to take for Wives, during your Residence here, those who are most agreeable to you; if you grant them that Favour, you will see those whom you chuse [sic] respected, beloved, and called the Supporters of the Nation.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, one of the minor characters of the story, the Baron de St. Castin (who may be a fictionalized version of a real member of the de Saint-Castin family) is described as “the son of a French Baron and a Savage woman, whom his Father had married when he was a Prisoner among the Savages.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Lesage’s depiction of marriage as a means of consolidating relationships, which had been initiated

through French interactions with native tribes, is fairly accurate as well.

But Frenchmen did not have to be adopted by a Native family, or married to a Native woman, in order to enjoy familial relations. If they were acknowledged as parental figures by native communities, and if they provided sufficient benefit to their tribe, they too could gain respect, loyalty and protection. Mlle Duclos fulfills this role by encouraging the Hurons to become increasingly dependent on her by introducing the products of civilization to them.<sup>37</sup> First, she teaches them how to use the household utensils that they have traded their furs for.<sup>38</sup> Then, she instructs the daughters of one of the most important Huron leaders in European manners, before going on to re-organize the entire agricultural and housing systems of the village.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the Hurons' love for their leader was so strong that when she dies, the natives decided to sacrifice all twenty-five of the French prisoners upon her grave, and began performing a ceremony where they would smoke at her grave and ask, with "zeal and affection," "if she stands in need of anything."<sup>40</sup> In life and in death, Mlle Duclos was inseparable from her adoptive people.

Lesage's depiction of the natives as almost the adoring children of a French settler who takes care of them is not entirely hyperbolic, even if it is fictional. Native peoples welcomed, or at least pretended to welcome, the paternal role that French interlopers attempted to assume. Because of their matrilineal kinship systems, mothers had far more authority than fathers.<sup>41</sup> It was acceptable to some tribes to refer to the French as "fathers" with the expectation that they would be as indulgent, generous, and weak as Indian fathers were.<sup>42</sup> Such a mindset explains the attitude that the Iroquois had when they received Governor Frontenac in 1673. He declared to them:

If Your Father can come so far, with so great a force, through such dangerous rapids, merely to make you a visit of pleasure and friendship, what would he do, if you should awaken his anger, and make it necessary for him to punish his disobedient children?<sup>43</sup>

The Iroquois responded that they were pleased that he, calling himself Onontio, had presumed to address them as his children, and that they rejoiced at meeting a real Father.<sup>44</sup> One might question the sincerity of this gesture, especially since the Iroquois were likely to have been wary of the fort that the French were building on Lake Ontario. Nevertheless, the Natives were willing to consider the Europeans as kin, even if only in name. The pleasantries that the Iroquois extended might have convinced Frontenac, years later, to defend the Iroquois by saying he did not believe that they "had all the evil designs that were being trumpeted forth, because for the past ten years they had always shown their good will and been very compliant."<sup>45</sup> This might not be quite a quid pro quo arrangement, but Frontenac's statement evinces his concern about reciprocating the Iroquois's compliance in a paternal way.

## REAPING THE REWARDS OF COOPERATION

Having solidified their relationships through foster families, intermarriage, and leadership arrangements, the Natives and the settlers derived much benefit from their alliances. Military advantages were arguably the most significant. Beauchêne depicts numerous instances where the French work with one group of Amerindians to defeat the English and their Native allies, or vice versa. At the start of the volume, Lesage describes how the Canadians and Algonquin ambushed the Iroquois in one attack.<sup>46</sup> In one interesting episode, Beauchêne leads an Algonquin troop to launch an attack on the Iroquois, only to have the latter respond that they were not interested in attacking the French, but the English.<sup>47</sup> Later in the volume, Lesage tells his readers about Captain Baptiste, a Canadian who relied on a group of "only forty savages" to parry off the attacks that the English were making from the coast.<sup>48</sup> On the other side of the conflict, the English persuaded the Iroquois to make an attempt to take Governor de Frontenac prisoner, as Lesage reports.<sup>49</sup> With the British and other Indian tribes threatening access to land and resources, the French and their Native allies were willing to assist one another when it was expedient to do so.

Lesage's description of such forms of cooperation mirror developments on a larger strategic level. There were greater benefits to be reaped if the French and Indians were willing to engage in reciprocal diplomacy. Sometimes, one party was less willing than the other. For example, the Iroquois took advantage of the fact that Governor Joseph-Antoine de La Barre was deathly ill and pressed him into protracted negotiations in the 1680s.<sup>50</sup> Be that as it may, the French and Iroquois also made agreements that were more beneficial to both sides. After the 1701 Peace Treaty between the French and Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy, the French were extremely careful not to do anything that might cause Five Nations to abandon their neutrality, and the Iroquois honored their treaty obligation to be neutral when Anglo-French hostilities broke out again.<sup>51</sup> Whether or not they were actually related by blood, the French and the Amerindians occasionally found ways to converge on military issues.

Even if they were not waging war together, settlers and natives brought material benefits to one another. For one, they could count on each other's support in non-combat situations. Lesage describes how Beauchêne enlists the help of three Algonquin men to join him in the search for two deserters from the colonial forces, and were together rewarded by the governor with brandy and provisions.<sup>52</sup> More significantly, exchanges of gifts allowed both parties to receive goods that they desired. After visiting Mlle Duclos's Huron village, Monneville's delegation receives canoes laden with animal skins from the Huron, which they reciprocate with gifts of wine, brandy, and other presents.<sup>53</sup> In return for their efforts in fighting the Canadians and Algonquin, the adoptive Iroquois parents receive gifts of arms, cutlery, and brandy from the English.<sup>54</sup> The English, after all, had gained "several

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cantons of the Iroquois” in this manner.<sup>55</sup> It seems that it was a win-win situation when French and Indian groups could agree on how these exchanges should take place and what goods or services should be traded.

As with the case of other eighteenth-century writers who idealized Native American societies, Lesage’s presentation of these exchanges is admittedly much more pleasant than was the case in reality.<sup>56</sup> The barter trade of furs and alcohol had disastrous effects for the Indians, as observed by missionaries in the New France of the late seventeenth century. According to their report, kegs of brandy transformed one village into a vision of hell: terrible fights broke out between Indians and acts of infanticide and incest took place.<sup>57</sup> The French were also bad traders at times, such as when they failed to bring a sufficient amount of goods during the spring to trade for the Indian furs acquired over the winter, and raised prices on their goods for no apparent reason.<sup>58</sup> Some were not even interested in making legitimate deals with the Natives. In one case, four *coureurs des bois* reveled one night with the Iroquois, then murdered a family in the tribe to seize their pelts.<sup>59</sup> These unfortunate incidents aside, the natives found useful many of the other gifts that the French bestowed them. The French courted the Indians as assiduously as Lesage suggests, entertained them extravagantly when they visited Montreal or Quebec, and sent some of their chiefs to France to marvel at the splendors of Paris and Versailles.<sup>60</sup> Reciprocal relationships were difficult to negotiate, but could have great payoffs if managed correctly.

### CONCLUSION

Reciprocal relationships went awry in a great number of ways that Lesage does not address in his work. The aforementioned barter trade in furs and alcohol, if not the large-scale territorial wars fought in North America, is only one example among many of how Natives and settlers clashed over competing interests. It would be interesting

to examine other eighteenth-century picaresque, utopian, and romance novels that heretofore have been approached solely from the perspectives of their literary genres. In these texts, one is likely to find differing representations of mutual agreements between Indian tribes and French settlers. Since colonial knowledge in the eighteenth century was almost exclusively a product of European authorship, these texts might have had some impact on how the metropole shaped its colonial policy.<sup>61</sup>

This is an important question to resolve, for as their colonial possessions increased over North America, the French gained more power to decide whether these relationships should be initiated. Depending on how valuable they were as trading or military partners, the French could choose to work with specific Amerindian tribes, but not others. Beauchêne is arguably more useful in demonstrating instances where the interests of settlers and natives converged, than in illustrating the major territorial conflicts which broke out between French forces and Indian tribes as New France expanded. Reciprocal relationships were exclusionary and unavailable in situations of the latter category.

Nevertheless, this multi-layered novel offers a representative and synoptic view of the attitudes of Canadians towards the Native peoples they encountered, as well as several insights on how Native peoples might have perceived the Frenchmen who entered their communities. It also shows that cultural identity was not fixed in New France. Over time, more and more individuals crossed over from one community to another, as prisoners, foster children, leaders, and traders. Adopting practices that were not their own, Native and French individuals came to resemble each other in their increasing ways. After all, they had myriad incentives to become more alike. With a rich storyline that contends with the above issues, Lesage evinces how the line between settlers and savages had essentially been blurred by the early eighteenth century. 🏰

## Endnotes

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