“Une Hiérusalem Bénite de Dieu”: Utopia and Travel in the Jesuit Relations from New France

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From the beginning of their attempts to convert to Christianity the Iroquoian and Algonquian peoples of Eastern Canada in the 17th century, French Jesuit missionaries often described the New France colony in strikingly optimistic terms in their annual Jesuit Relations (1632-1673). As Peter Goddard has remarked, mission superior Paul Le Jeune “represented Canada as a place for the realization of a collective spiritual Utopia, the purified society sought by religious reformers.”¹ At the same time, the texts long have been admired as a prime example of early modern French travel writing, more a source of information about how the authors experienced a real and unfamiliar place than an exercise in imagining an ideal society. For Normand Doiron, to cite just one example, the inaugural installment of the Relations was one of three texts to appear in 1632—along with Gabriel Sagard’s Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons and Samuel de Champlain’s Les Voyages de la Nouvelle France Occidentale—that marked the birth of the relation or récit de voyage as a genre, among the 17th century’s most popular.²


Although neither the utopian traits of the Jesuit Relations nor their importance as travel writing has gone unnoticed by scholars in recent decades, these two aspects of the texts generally have not been examined in parallel. This article aims to do just that. Here I examine how the Jesuits' vision for a perfectly pious religious community was expressed in their annual Relations, and how acknowledgement of that project might inform scholarly readings of the texts as travel writing.

The literary genre that takes its name from Thomas More’s 1516 De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia Libellus Vere Aureus was late to appear in France. Lise Leibacher-Ouvrard pinpoints the anonymous 1616 Royaume d’Antangil as the first of a very small number of utopias published in France prior to the Revolution, the best known of which is Denis Veiras’ 1677-1679 Histoire des Séverambes. Although distinguishable from fantasy by their restriction to the realm of the possible, utopias are fictional, bearing on possible—not actual—worlds, usually islands or similarly isolated places. According to Christian Marouby, “En tant qu’île, l’utopie désigne la perfection comme une totalité close. Elle propose un modèle fondé sur la fermeture, l’autosuffisance et la clôture sur soi.” Describing a fictional, ideal society closed off from the polluting influence of the outside world, a utopia amounts to an experiment in thought, a reflection on a potential reality.

In contrast, travel writing—by far the more successful of the two genres in Early Modern France, with more than 1300 texts in print by the end of the 17th century—has often been understood as a more or less honest attempt to document a traveler’s experience of a real place. Such relations may reveal as much about the traveler and his or her home country as about the foreign places they describe, but authors generally put a premium on the genre’s capacity to convey true information and often explicitly claimed that their accounts were free of invention or literary embellishment.
ment. As Réal Ouellet recently observed, “Par rapport à l’épopée et au roman, la relation de voyage occupe la même position que l’histoire ou la géographie: elle n’a pas pour objectif déclaré le fictionnel et le littéraire. Son pacte avec le lecteur virtuel repose sur la vérité factuelle et l’exactitude objective.”7 Indeed, the frequent use to which travelers’ texts—and the Jesuit Relations in particular—have been put by historians and historical anthropologists confirms that they have often been understood in this spirit, as more or less earnest accounts of an unfamiliar place.

Despite the apparently clear difference between the two genres—that one is rooted in imagination and the other in experience—they were not always so easily distinguished in early modern Europe. The typical utopia of the period describes a “shipwreck or chance landing on the shores of what turns out to be an ideal commonwealth, a return to Europe, and a report on what has been remarked.”8 It is not an accident that this formula closely mirrors the home-destination-return format that was typical—and even recommended—of 17th century travel accounts. As Marouby has observed, “Profitant de l’intérêt pour les récits de voyages qui se répandent en Europe, [l’utopiste] va faire découvrir son île idéale, au détour d’une tempête, par quelque sage voyageur. L’utopie classique […] emprunte aux véritables histoires de voyages un appareil narratif qui lui donne une sorte de caution de réalité.” Not only did the authors of utopias borrow the form of travel accounts as a way to make their texts more credible, the two genres influenced each other’s contents as well, with place-names that were invented by writers of utopias finding their way into serious works of geography, and real places like Egypt, Athens and Rome becoming in turn the subjects of fictional utopias. Perhaps not surprisingly, utopian texts were occasionally mistaken for accounts of real travel.9

9 Marouby 16; Manuel and Manuel 22-23 and 367.
Although both usually involve travel—whether real or imaginary—the two genres take a wide range of forms, making their boundaries somewhat unclear. Manuel and Manuel decline to offer a precise definition of utopian writing in their survey of the subject, noting that a variety of texts aside from those that resemble More’s *Utopia* envision potential ideal realities and therefore could be considered to participate in the genre: moon-travelers’ reports, ideal constitutions and advice to heads of state, novels, architectural plans, etc.\(^{10}\) Similarly, Marie Christine Pioffet has observed that travel writing “résiste à toute définition développée,” and can include everything from shipboard logs and pilgrimage accounts to botanical treatises and ethnographic descriptions.\(^{11}\) Given their thematic similarities and hazy boundaries, it may be more productive to examine the two concepts together than to attempt to classify complex texts like the *Jesuit Relations* as one or the other. I aim here to profit from the fluid nature of the two genres to investigate how the *Jesuit Relations* might simultaneously constitute an optimistic vision for a utopian religious colony and a valuable account of the beginnings of French colonization of the New World. The interplay between the two aspects of the *Relations* can, as I hope to show, bring nuance to scholarly understandings of both genres.

One clear site of intersection between utopian thought and actual experience of the world outside of Europe is the various attempts that were made to build perfect and isolated societies on the model of the ideal worlds described in fiction.\(^{12}\) Such places also are referred to as Utopias, here capitalized to distinguish physical places from the literary genre that inspired them. Jesuit missions in Paraguay often have been cited as a prime example of this phenomenon. For Michel Foucault, such missions were “[…] colonies merveilleuses, absolument réglées, dans lesquelles la perfection humaine était effectivement accomplie.” Jesuits in South America pushed natives to settle in *reducciones*—European-style villages that were perfectly planned around a central space flanked by church, cemetery and school. Families lived in orderly cabins arranged around two central axes that intersected at a right angle, making entire mission settlements resemble giant crucifixes in their layout. Daily life was perfectly regulated by the clock, with fixed times for meals, work, prayer, and even, for married couples, conjugal duties.\(^{13}\) Jesuits in New France created five communities

\(^{10}\) Manuel and Manuel 7.

\(^{11}\) Pioffet 1-2.

\(^{12}\) For a brief discussion of attempts to put utopian thought into practice, see Manuel and Manuel 8-9.

modelled on the Paraguayan *reducciones* between 1638 and 1676, but they quickly realized that such a strategy would not work for converting the area’s nomadic Amerindian groups. “Réductions” ceased to be a primary mission strategy relatively early in the Jesuit tenure in New France, due to nearly a decade of hard work and less-than-satisfying results. The missionaries instead took to following potential converts in their seasonal migrations, making the missionary enterprise in New France less like the isolated, closed and reputedly perfect Paraguayan communities than a group of Christians scattered throughout—and surrounded by—the wilderness. 14

Although scholars have sometimes seen 17th century Jesuit missions in the New World as an attempt to put utopian thought into practice, the order and harmony ascribed to the Paraguayan *reducciones* is a more complicated fit for New France’s haphazard and shifting Catholic settlements.

In spite of the practical difficulties that prevented the New France Jesuits from enacting religious Utopia on the model of their South American brethren, the missionary authors nonetheless described the budding colony in terms that reflected their hopes for its future as an ideal society. Although it would certainly be an exaggeration to say that the *Jesuit Relations* are fictional utopias in the tradition of Thomas More, it is clear that the New World was not, for the Jesuits, merely a curiosity to be described for Europe’s entertainment or intellectual enrichment. New France is often depicted in the texts as a place that would eventually, if not immediately, reflect a perfect devotion to religion and unimpeachable virtue among its French and Amerindian inhabitants, truly a new and improved France carved out of the surrounding wilderness. Upon attending mass at a newly constructed church in New France in 1636, Le Jeune—the single most prolific of the New France Jesuits and the author from whom I draw most of my examples—remarked that religious practice there was a reflection of the Old Country at its best:

Il me sembloit qu’une église bien reiglée, où Dieu est servy avec amour et respect, avoir traversé la mer; ou que je me trouvois tout d’un coup dans nostre France, après avoir passé quelques années au païs des sauvages. Ce qui vous est commun en l’ancienne France et qui ne touche que les âmes les

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mieux disposées nous réjouit jusques au fond du cœur dans nos petites églises basties de bois étranger.\footnote{Lucien Campeau, ed. \textit{Monumenta Novaee Franciae}, 9 vols (Romae: Institutum Historicum Soc. Iesu, 1967-2003) Vol 3, 225. Future references to the \textit{Relations} in this article will be made in the body of the text (eg Campeau 3.255).}

Attending mass in New France was, for the priest, like attending one of France’s best-run churches filled only with the Old Country’s most pious believers. And a religion that was taken for granted in Europe could be truly appreciated in New France. Wrote Le Jeune the following year: “Ah! Qu’on faict peu d’estat du don de la foy dans l’Europe. Il semble que ce soit une chose connaturelle de croire en Dieu. O quel présent! Grand Dieu, quelle faveur! C’est icy qu’on voit quel thrésor c’est que de croire en Jésus-Christ” (Campeau 3.571). As described in Le Jeune’s text, at least, New France was—or was becoming—a perfected version of Catholic France, a separate but related place that celebrated and affirmed the best aspects of religious life in the Old Country while also improving on its example.\footnote{More examples of characterizations of the colony as religious Utopia can be found in the \textit{Relations}. In addition to the examples examined here, see Le Jeune’s 1636 description of the missionary project as the construction of a “Hiérusalem Céleste” (Campeau 3.237).}

Aspects of the Jesuits’ descriptions of their New World religious haven also diverged in revealing ways from early modern utopian thought. Unlike the isolated, ideal societies envisioned by typical practitioners of the genre, the Jesuits’ vision for New France explicitly required continuous contributions from the Old World. Wrote Le Jeune in 1635,

\begin{quote}
Si néantmoins ceux qui tiendront les resnes du gouvernement en main sont zélez pour la gloire de nostre bon Dieu, suivant les désirs et les intentions de Messieurs les directeurs et associez de la compangie, il se dressera icy une Hiérusalem bénite de Dieu, composée de citoyens destinez pour le ciel. Il est bien aisé dans un pays nouveau, où les familles arrivent toutes disposées à recevoir les loix qu’on y establira, de bannir les méchantes coutumes de quelques endrois de l’ancienne France, et d’en introduire de meilleures (Campeau 3.51).
\end{quote}

The way Le Jeune prefaced his vision for a religious colony in the New World suggests that he knew that his goal could not be achieved without the cooperation of French governmental and commercial interests. Indeed, this dependence was set out in the 1627 charter of the Compagnie de Cent Associés, holder of a monopoly on commercial activity in New France. The charter, signed by Richelieu, ordered the trading company to populate the colony exclusively with French Catholic men and women, who would
receive financial enticements from the Crown in return for agreeing to practice their trades for at least six years in New France. The charter also required the company to transport at least three missionaries for each settlement they established, and to provide lodging and other unspecified material support to them. With the trading company wielding such responsibility over colonial affairs—including the Jesuits’ access to and material comfort in New France—it is little wonder that Le Jeune described the “Blessed Jerusalem” he was hoping for as contingent on the participation of Old World actors.

Perhaps in acknowledgement of this situation, Le Jeune’s characterizations of the colony tend to emphasize the fact that New France’s status as a utopian improvement on the Old Country depended not only on what could be created in isolation in the colony, but also on what could be borrowed from France. Wrote Le Jeune in 1637:

C’est à mon avis par sa [Christ] faveur et par ses mérites que les habitans de la Nouvelle France, demeurans sur les rives du grand fleuve Saint-Laurens, ont résolu de recevoir toutes les bonnes coustumes de l’ancienne et de refuser l’entrée aux mauvaises (Campeau 3.536).

The inspiration for this pious colony reportedly came from Christ, but its attributes would have, by Le Jeune’s admission, an Old World source. The expressions “recevoir” and “refuser l’entrée” suggest some degree of control over what would and would not be part of colonial life, but also imply an exterior source and a degree of passivity on the part of the colonists and missionaries. Le Jeune’s comment suggests a stream of Old World customs crossing the Atlantic, with residents of New France merely deciding which to accept and which to reject rather than generating new customs and behavioral norms from within.

Elsewhere in the Relations, the colony is portrayed as dependant on France even for ideas on how to improve on the Old Country’s example. Jean de Brébeuf’s 1635 Relation contains the following comment, reportedly made by an anonymous New France missionary:

[…] à quoy servent tant d’exercises, tant de méditations ferventes, tant de désirs bouillans? Tout cela n’est que du vent, si on ne les met en pratique; tellement que la vieille France est bonne pour concevoir de bons désirs, mais la nouvelle est propre pour l’exécution. Ce qu’on désire en l’ancienne France, c’est ce qu’on fait dans la nouvelle (Campeau 3.124).

In this formulation, New France would be no more than the site where Old World ideas were put into practice, as if the colony were a foot soldier carrying out the orders of a distant officer. The Jesuits’ texts are indeed rife with suggestions that the colony could be—and was becoming—a utopian improvement on the Old Country, like Jesuit missions elsewhere in the New World. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the Jesuits had no expectation that their ideal colony would be impenetrable by the Old World. The isolation and self-sufficiency that was typical of early modern utopias was simply not part of the Jesuits’ vision for their Christian colony.

Perhaps not surprisingly, New France’s lack of complete isolation from Old World commercial and governmental interests occasionally resulted in complaints of less than ideal outcomes in the Jesuits’ annual texts. Ships carrying goods to and from the colony crossed the Atlantic annually, sometimes allowing licentious Old France to disembark and temporarily sully New France. Wrote Le Jeune in 1637:

J’aurais ici une prière à faire à tous ceux qui veulent porter jugement de l’estat de nostre peuplade: c’est de fermer les yeux pendant que les navires sont à l’ancre à nos ports et de les ouvrir à leur départ, ou quelque temps après. Dans la douce veue de nos compatriotes, on se veut resjouir et on tombe dans l’excez. […] Ceux qui arrivent de nouveau et qui ont leu dans la Relation que tout procédoit icy dans un bon ordre, voyans quelques dissolutions, nous condamnent aisément et peut-être couchent encor dans les lettres qu’ils envoient en France l’arrest de notre condamnation, ayans en effect quelque sujet d’improuver un mal auquel il est assez difficile de remédiier. Mais quand la flotte est partie, que les visites cessent, que l’hyver commance à nous rallier, qu’on preste l’oreille à la parole de Dieu et que ceux qui se sont émancipez recoignissent leurs fautes […] (Campeau 3. 537).

Le Jeune’s observation that the departure of merchant ships for the Old Country coincided with New France’s return to its pious character suggests that occasional setbacks were not proof of any deficiency in the moral fiber of the colony. Instead, such incidents ultimately underscored the new community’s normal superiority to France, despite its continued reliance on the Old Country and occasional susceptibility to its faults. In the priest’s estimation, when New France was bad it was only due to the corrupting but necessary influence of Old France, which was soon enough rectified by the shipping schedule.

It also is telling that Le Jeune finds it necessary to ask his readers to disregard the atypically bad behavior of colonists while French ships are at port, and the unflattering portraits that visitors may have been sending back to France. Le Jeune’s alertness to how the colony was perceived in Europe is
surely a symptom of the practical factors that ensured that New France could never be as isolated and self-sufficient as the fictional ideal societies described in utopias. Jesuit missions spanning the globe were expected to support themselves by attracting “[…] gifts of land, goods, and money from churches and individuals, from the state, and from converts in the field,” and the *Relations* were an indispensable tool in attracting support for the New France mission. Negative aspects of colonial life, if left unexplained, would constitute a threat to the resources the missionaries would need to build their religious community. In addition to depending on the trading company, the authors of the *Relations* relied on the good will and financial support of readers, a situation that rendered the colony even less isolated and self-sufficient, and that is reflected in the way Le Jeune sought to place on outsiders the blame for less-than-ideal aspects of life in the colony.

Even without the sometimes corrupting influence of the Old Country and the pressures that accompanied the mission’s reliance on outside donations, the Jesuits found much in the New World that at first glance would seem to complicate their efforts to build a pious religious community there. As George Healy remarked in an oft-cited article, the texts contain innumerable negative depictions of the Amerindians that the missionaries encountered. Wrote Healy,

> The documents do contain some remarkably laudatory comments on the Indian; but they are much more copiously filled, and especially in the early accounts, with tediously detailed descriptions of the cruelty, lust, gluttony, thievery, polygamy, sodomy, cannibalism, filth, superstition, lying, blasphemy, and general barbarity of the Jesuits’ reluctant neophytes.

Vacillation between positive and negative depictions of Amerindian cultures is common in early modern travel accounts, and has sometimes been

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19 One does not have to look hard for clues that feedback from readers influenced the content of the *Relations*. To cite just one example, the 1637 *Relation* was among the longest and most detailed of the series, drawing a critical letter from Gaston d’Orléans, King Louis XIII’s brother, who apparently found it too ponderous and repetitive (a letter from a Jesuit official recounting the Duc’s complaint is reproduced as document 51 in Campeau’s 4th volume. Campeau 4.73 note). The following year’s *Relation* is much shorter than its predecessor and is riddled with comments reflecting a new concern for brevity. Wrote Le Jeune in the opening letter of his 1638 *Relation*, “[…] je diray peu de beaucoup, omettant des chapitres entiers, de peur d’estre accusé de longueur” (Campeau 4.77).

attributed to the difference between travelers’ hopes and the realities encountered in the New World.\textsuperscript{21} Appearing in texts that sometimes are noted for their optimism and high hopes for the religious future of the colony, negativity of the kind described by Healy poses a potentially vexing question: how could a religious Utopia in the New World be populated by lawless, violent, and promiscuous wild men?

Closer examination of such passages, however, suggests that the positive and negative accounts of Amerindian behavior in the \textit{Relations} are linked to the status of the land that the Jesuits were attempting to transform into a new and improved France. In contrast to their favorable descriptions of and predictions for colonial life, the missionary authors often characterized the New World itself as a wilderness, a place not only lacking civilization but also loaded with religious significance. As Carole Blackburn has observed, “The wilderness appears in the Old Testament as both the site and the state of sin; it is that which prevails when the blessing of the Lord is withdrawn, leaving both the person and place in a no man’s land of cursedness.” The word that Jesuits used to designate the inhabitants of this place—\textit{les sauvages}—derives from the Latin term \textit{silvaticus}, which refers to those who dwell in the forest. The name not only points to where unconverted Amerindians lived, but also conflates their location with their religious status: as inhabitants of a literal and figurative wilderness, \textit{les sauvages} were wild men who did not know God.\textsuperscript{22} But as Sara Melzer has pointed out, the label does not necessarily suggest a permanent condition. Unlike “\textit{barbares},” a term that evokes the more irreconcilable distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks, the forest-dwellers known as “\textit{les sauvages}” could, in the Jesuits’ estimation, be educated and eventually converted.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{23} Melzer 81-82.
Indeed, favorable depictions of Amerindian behavior in the Jesuit Relations generally refer not to men lost in the literal and figurative wilderness, but to natives who had been persuaded to convert to Christianity. As Healy observed, “The passages in the Relations truly favorable to the Indian [...] usually turn out to be descriptions of converts whose excellence, in the Jesuit understanding of it, came largely from their faith and not their savage simplicity.”\(^{24}\) An Amerindian convert’s embrace of Christianity also entailed a change in political status. According to the terms of the trading company’s charter, Amerindians who accepted conversion were automatically made subjects of France, and therefore members of the fledgling colony rather than inhabitants of a wilderness awaiting transformation.\(^{25}\) The alternating positive and negative depictions in the Relations of the New World and its inhabitants represent not the Jesuits’ ambivalence or disillusionment about their project to build a pious and vice-free counterpoint to Europe’s ills, but a distinction between the land as they found it—wild, uncultivated and full of wildmen who did not know God—and the ideal religious colony for which they hoped. The contrast between negative descriptions of wild and unconverted Amerindians and portraits of thoughtful and devout new converts would send a clear message to readers about the natural deficiencies of the New World, its potential future as an improved version of France, and the necessary means for bringing change. In illustrating to potential donors the results of missionary intervention and the need for more of the same, such alternating depictions can be understood—even at their most distasteful and unflattering—to constitute a contribution to the ongoing Jesuit project of transforming the New World wilderness into a religious Utopia.

At least superficially, the Jesuits’ account of their attempts to build a religious colony in the New World would seem to cast doubt on the status of their texts as travel writing. From the 17th century to the present day, travel has generally been understood as a circular phenomenon, a feature that distinguishes it from other forms of physical displacement such as vagabondage and permanent relocation. Travelers leave home for the purpose of spiritual, material, or intellectual enrichment, experience a foreign place, and then return home to share what has been gained during the voyage and to reintegrate themselves into their communities.\(^{26}\) The authors of the Jesuit Relations

\(^{24}\) Healy 149. See also Goddard 195.


\(^{26}\) On the circular nature of travel as opposed to other forms of displacement, see Paolo Carile, *Le Regard Entravé: Littérature et Anthropologie dans les Premiers Textes sur la Nouvelle-France* (Sillery: Septention, 2000) introduction and chapter 1. See also James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*
Relations, in contrast, generally did not return to France after visiting the colony, instead hoping to die in New France while working for its transformation. According to Carol Blackburn “Many Jesuits thought that martyrdom was necessary in order to plant the faith in New France. [...] the ‘Blood of the Martyrs’ was ‘the seed and germ of Christians,’ not least because the Jesuits believed that their willingness to die would impress people with the truth of their teaching.” Indeed, it seems that a return to France was simply not part of the missionary project as envisioned by its participants. Wrote Le Jeune in 1634, “Je ne souhaitterois maintenant que cinq ou six de nos pères en chaqu’une de ces nations et cependant je n’oserai les demander, quoi que pour un qu’on désire, il s’en présente dix tout prets de mourir dans ces travaux” (Campeau 2.736). The missionaries—more or less permanently settled in the New World—were focused more on building a new home there than on finding their way back to Europe.

And yet, it cannot be denied that the Relations in some ways more resemble travel accounts than utopias. Far from imaginary accounts of a fictional society, the texts were, after all, descriptions of a real place, one of which Europe had been at least vaguely aware for a century by the time the Jesuits began writing about it. Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano, who in 1524 undertook France’s first official voyage to America on commission by François I, is widely credited with having dubbed the area that is today eastern Canada “New France,” or, more precisely, “Nova Gallia.” Although the area received scant attention during France’s long preoccupation with the Wars of Religion, it undeniably existed as a real place in Early Modern Europe’s understanding of the world, as its presence on world maps of the time attests.

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28 Brazeau 12; Havard and Vidal 22.

29 Even rapid perusal of an historical atlas of Canada reveals that “Nouvelle France” or its equivalent in other languages appeared on many maps of America in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, including Italian and English maps. To judge from this evidence, the early modern period saw a clear European consensus that there was a place called “New France” on the other side of the ocean. See, for example, Derek Hayes, Historical Atlas of Canada: Canada’s History Illustrated with Original Maps (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).
Although New France was understood to be real, there seems to have been no consensus as to its precise location in the 17th century. The charter of the Compagnie des Cent Associés included a large swath of the continent as belonging to “New France”:

Sa Majesté donnera à perpétuité aux dits cents associés, leurs hoirs [héritiers] et ayants cause, en toute propriété, justice et seigneurie, le fort et habitation du Québec, avec tout ledit pays de la Nouvelle-France, dite Canada, tant le long des côtes depuis la Floride, que les prédécesseurs de Sa Majesté ont fait habiter, en rangeant les côtes de la mer jusqu’au Cercle arctique pour latitude, et de longitude depuis l’île de Terre-Neuve, tirant à l’ouest, jusqu’au grand lac dit la mer douce, et au-delà que dedans les terres et le long des rivières qui y passent, et se déchargent dans le fleuve appelé Saint-Laurent, autrement la grande rivière de Canada, et dans tous les autres fleuves qui les portent à la mer […]. 30

The definition offered by the trading company charter extends the borders of New France into unknown lands along unnamed rivers, and suggests in its vagueness that although vast in theory, the contours of the territory were generally unknown. The Jesuits, in contrast, seem to have had a more limited definition in mind when they used the term “New France” to describe their new home. Le Jeune’s 1636 Relation contains a chapter titled “De l’estat présent de la Nouvelle-France, sur le grand fleuve de Saint-Laurens.” The title restricts New France to the area surrounding the St. Lawrence River, a definition that is reinforced in the chapter itself. 31 The Crown and trading company, understandably eager to claim as much of the New World as possible for future exploitation, defined the area in terms that made it seem to encompass the entire continent, including as yet unknown parts of it. Le Jeune’s more limited definition corresponds to the area that he and his colleagues were actively attempting to transform into a utopian religious community. Although New France was indisputably a real place and a destination for travelers during the 17th century, the vagueness of its borders may be one factor that enabled utopian visions of the colony. As Brian Brazeau and Cornelius Jaenen have suggested, “New France” was by

31 Wrote Le Jeune, “Je donne à cognoistre par l’inscription de ce chapitre que je ne parle point de ce qui se passe ou de ce qui se rencontre dans toute l’étendue de la Nouvelle-France; comme par exemple de l’Acadie, ny de la résidence de Sainte-Anne au cap Breton, ny de l’habitation de Saint-Charles en l’isle de Saint-Louis à Miscou” (Campeau 3.251). It is telling that Le Jeune apparently considered the “full extent” of New France to include Acadia and Cape Breton, but not English and Spanish settlements in Florida and Virginia which, at least according to the trading company’s charter, could have been considered part of New France.
its very name linked to France, but also sufficiently ill defined to allow early modern writers to see in it practically whatever they pleased.32

In describing a real, if unclearly delimited place, the Jesuit Relations nonetheless functioned more as travel writing than as utopias. One distinguishing feature of the extremely heterogeneous genre is its role in informing readers of the world outside of Europe. The typical early modern traveler’s text transported knowledge about the world outside Europe back to the home country, allowing its readers and thinkers to adjust their understanding of the world to account for the exotic cultures and places described by the traveler.33 In this, the Relations appear to have excelled. The multiple 17th century editions of most of the texts attest that they were eagerly awaited and widely read in France, and they were the Old World’s single most important source of information about the colony and its inhabitants for about 40 years during the 17th century.34 Their importance in this role continues today. As historian Alain Beaulieu has remarked, “L’intérêt de ces Relations pour l’histoire des débuts de la colonization de la Nouvelle-France n’est plus à souligner. Elles constituent, et de loin, la plus importante source d’information sur cette époque.”35 Although the texts may have offered readers an optimistic vision of New France’s future as a religious Utopia, they also are widely and justifiably recognized as a more or less trustworthy source of information about a real place.

My purpose here has been not to settle the relatively mundane question of how to classify the Jesuit Relations by genre, but rather to investigate how the utopian and documentary qualities of the texts might be understood in light of each other. As I have shown here, the Jesuit Relations can be and have been read as both utopian and experience-based accounts of New France, and the two aspects of the texts influence each other in ways that bring nuance to scholarly understandings of both literary traditions. Although they unquestionably had real experience of the New World that was worth passing along, the Jesuits often rhetorically positioned themselves

32 See Brazeau’s introduction. And for a concise account of the various ways European writers and thinkers conceived of New France, see Cornelius Jaenen, “The Image of New France.”


34 Wroth 114.

less as travelers seeing the sights and gathering facts to share with their countrymen than as permanently relocated Europeans who were imagining and attempting to create something new and better in the New World. The typical utopian features of isolation and self-sufficiency do not align with the Jesuits’ own descriptions of their project in the New World, but it is unclear that this deviation from the norm makes the texts any less a part of the tradition inaugurated by More. Indeed, the continual circulation of people and information between colony and Old Country can be understood as a fundamental element of the New France Jesuits’ particular brand of Utopia, since the realization of their vision for a pious religious colony in the New World depended on the support of both trading company and readers at home in France. Writing about the transformation of wilderness into colony was not only an exercise in imagining a potential future, but also an attempt to show progress to readers and to enlist their help in continuing the project.

Without necessarily invalidating the Relations’ well-established value as travel writing and a source of information on colonial contact, this utopian project makes it possible to read certain aspects of the texts, like descriptions of startlingly impious Amerindian behavior and customs, in a new light. Though such passages may initially appear to be the fruits of a traveler’s experiences in the New World, I have argued here that they also can be seen as a contribution to a distinction the authors sought to make between the embryonic ideal Christian colony of New France and the surrounding wilderness, an observation that should give pause to ethnohistorians who use the Relations as a source of information on Amerindian customs and beliefs at the time of contact with the Jesuits. For those more interested in the literary aspects of the texts, the interplay between experience and aspiration that I have traced here points to a need, already signaled in some quarters, to further explore the potentially productive intersection between utopia and travel writing. Indeed, the case of the Jesuit Relations suggests that the line between the two genres is not always easily drawn, and that it may in fact be productive to not draw it at all.

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36 The close relationship between the two genres leads Jean-Michel Racault, for example, to suggest grouping them together under the heading “littératures viatiques” (294). In introducing his edition of a travel guide to the holy land that Petrarch wrote without having made the journey himself, Ted Cachey called in a similar vein for a reconsideration of the distinction between real and imaginary travel. Ted Cachey, ed., Petrarch’s Guide to the Holy Land (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) introduction.