

# The Desire to Suffer? Asceticism, Piety, and Indigenous Women's Self-Making in Seventeenth-Century *Nouvelle-France*

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## Abstract

In this essay I develop a critical feminist and decolonial rereading of Indigenous women's ascetic practices in seventeenth-century Northeastern Turtle Island (territory claimed by the French Empire as *Nouvelle-France*). Reconstructing these practices within—and against—colonial archival sources, I argue that Indigenous women's ascetic practices show us a creative and productive way of being-in-the-world and being-with-others. These acts, as I will show, point to rupture and displacement, and can challenge colonial domination aimed at disciplining bodies and cultivating desire, showing us how colonial power was both embodied and contested, or rather contested through embodiment. I show that Indigenous women not only disrupted colonial authorities' continuing disciplining of their desire but also indirectly challenged the attempted control of their bodies and flesh. Their body, or rather bodily surface or flesh, became the last frontier—quite literally—and the most contested site of colonization and self-crafting. Through these bodily practices, Indigenous Christian women re-directed their attachments from the objects that the missionaries wanted them to be attached to; and instead sustained embodied attachments and relations to land, their kin, and communities. Examining Indigenous women's ascetic practices in the early period of settler-colonial rule thus reveals much about how Indigenous women crafted their communal selfhood under duress, and how subjectivity was constituted through the formation of particular attachments. I contend that attending to these practices can enrich our understanding of and enable us to rethink desire, subjectivity, and self-making.

**Keywords:** Desire; Subjectivity; Piety; Asceticism; Embodiment.

## Introduction

Recently, scholars have highlighted that quotidian practices both reflect and are shaped by particular forms of desire and attachments and can both reinforce or contest them. There are also considerable differences in their appraisals: that while some see the practices of the colonized and oppressed as reflecting their attachment to their own subjugation, others see them as having the capacity—or at least potential—to disrupt and transform colonial and oppressive relations.<sup>1</sup> Saba

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<sup>1</sup> Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Hagar Kotef, *The Colonizing Self: Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity/Placed-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 69, no.2 (2016), 249-255; T.J. Tallie, *Queering Colonial Natal: Indigeneity and the Violence of Belonging in*

Mahmood and Leanne Simpson in particular draw our attention to women's, or *feminine*, practices that pose challenges to relations of domination. In this essay, I enrich this ongoing conversation by bringing attention to a set of historical practices that emerged in the founding and consolidating period of settler-colonial rule. The missionaries documented that, in seventeenth-century *Nouvelle-France*, many Indigenous women converts took up ascetic practices, specifically self-mortification practices. What can ascetic practices, especially self-mortification practices, tell us about desire and subjectivity, about colonial subjugation and investment in the production of docile and domesticated subjects?

As feminist historian Caroline Bynum observes, scholars have commonly dismissed women's ascetic practices or see them simply as manifestations of either their self-victimization or "false consciousness or evidence of patriarchal oppression. As she puts,

"Late medieval women hated their bodies and their sexuality, we are told, and punished them through fasting and other forms of self-mutilation. They internalized misogyny to which the philosophical, scientific, theological, and folk traditions and the structures of church and society all contributed. Some historians have responded to women's ascetic practices with embarrassment or even anger; others have responded with compassion. Conservative historians of theology have sometimes blamed the women. Historians of medicine or psychiatry have sometimes blamed society. Marxist and feminist historians have often blamed the church."<sup>2</sup>

In response to these rather reductive readings, Bynum urges feminist scholars to examine women's ascetic practices and piety anew, by attending to the historical and political contexts in which they emerged and proliferated, and the simultaneous political and personal significance of such practices. These practices, borne from religious piety, nonetheless hold varied meanings and are often transgressive and disruptive. More recent works in feminist theory and history have followed this

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*Southern Africa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 208-9.

path to attend to the immanent, contextual, and *political* meaning of feminine piety and feminine practices more broadly. They have attended to the contours of feminine piety in specific cultural and historical contexts, and reinterpret piety as a site of feminine (if not feminist) agency and a form of self-fashioning. In early modern Europe and the transatlantic Christian context, for example, many women mystics, including Marie Guyart, who founded the Ursuline order in New France, crafted a space for themselves by inhabiting piety and by doing so both unintentionally *and* necessarily posed challenges to existing norms and church hierarchy by inhabiting piety.

Somewhat in a different vein, Saba Mahmood has explored how (Islamic) feminine piety poses challenges to “Western” feminist ethos and understandings of agency in relation to power and resistance.<sup>3</sup> Mahmood points out that there has been an overwhelming tendency within “Western” feminist scholarship to equate agency with resistance or subversion of norms, which she argues leads them to fail to see agency in religious piety appearing to uphold or comply with (patriarchal) norms, power, and authority. Mahmood contends that the meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance but must “emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity” because “the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific.”<sup>4</sup> To grasp such specificity, she calls on feminist scholars to better attend to embodied capacities and bodily acts through which one “inhabits norms” to “cultivate various forms of desire,” which enables us to “see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms.”<sup>5</sup> Mahmood draws on Butler to argue that “norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted” but “performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 22.

While Mahmood tends to draw an opposition between inhabiting and subverting norms, between challenging and upholding or accepting what she calls “patriarchal assumptions,”<sup>7</sup> her ethnographic work rather shows that Egyptian women who participated in the mosque movement negotiated and redefined the meaning of religious piety, and enacted unique forms of self-making in response to religious mandates. Although Butler does tend to privilege acts that would subvert norms in her earlier work, Mahmood and Butler in fact agree that the possibility of subversion and disruption precisely lies *within* the inhabitation and embodiment of norms and power.<sup>8</sup> Since to inhabit norms rising from particular regimes of power is to continually embody such norms through repetitive bodily acts, the possibility of displacing, disrupting, and exceeding such norms, and therefore challenging existing structures of power and authority, is always immanent to such repetition.<sup>9</sup> Inhabiting piety, for example, entails repetitively performing and embodying piety through various bodily acts. Piety thus embodied through repetition could take many different forms, including ones that could challenge religious—and political—orthodoxy; or, without ostensibly challenging it, those who engage in pious practices could come up with different ways to negotiate the demands of such orthodoxy. Many have explored how religious women disrupted or subverted power hierarchy and norms, and claimed a space for themselves by *enacting* piety in different historical, cultural, and religious contexts.<sup>10</sup> While (European) women mystics in the early modern period often challenged male religious authorities and the evolving hierarchy within the

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185. See also, Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (Dec. 1988), 519-531; Samuel Chambers, “An Incalculable Effect?: Subversions of Heteronormativity,” *Political Studies* 55 (2007), 656-679.

<sup>10</sup> Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confronting the Modern World*; Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); Davis, *Women on the Margins*; Greer and Bilinkoff, eds., *Colonial Saints*; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiment: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, With a New Afterword (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016).

church, indigenous<sup>11</sup> peoples also widely appropriated Christianity in unexpected ways to contest colonial power and gain material and political interests for themselves.<sup>12</sup> As Peggy Brock, among many others, has shown, Christianity rapidly grew out of control of the missionaries and colonial authorities. Many Indigenous and colonized persons became proselytizers and religious intermediaries themselves, threatening to wrestle control over spiritual matters from the missionaries and destabilize the colonial order and hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, recently many have increasingly paid attention to the centrality of gender and the importance of gendered differences in relation to mission and conversion. While women—both settler and indigenous—were largely missing from historical, anthropological, religious studies, as historian Elizabeth Elbourne points out, recently many have especially paid attention to “the importance of a gendered account of religious experience, especially with regard to conversion.”<sup>14</sup> Gender, religion, and power closely intersect in the contexts of civilizing missions, meaning that women’s relation to and experience of Christianity necessarily involves complex processes of negotiation of power. Some have rightfully shown that colonial civilizing efforts severely restrained indigenous women’s possibilities in various ways, such as punishing and disciplining those whom

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<sup>11</sup> I use lower case “indigenous” as an umbrella term to refer to all non-European white population, and “Indigenous” to refer to original inhabitants of lands that had been and still are occupied by European settlers.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002); Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nicholas, eds. *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010); Miles Richardson David, editor, *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Heather J. Sharkey, editor, *Cultural Conversions: Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missions in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013); Tallie, *Queering Colonial Natal*. There is also a vast literature on conversion and Islam that I do not directly engage here.

<sup>13</sup> Donald B. Smith, *Sacred Feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Winona Wheeler, “The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851-1884,” in *Reading beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, ed. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 237-62; Peggy Brock, *The Many Voyages of Arthur Wellington Clah: A Tsimshian Man on the Pacific Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011). See also, Tolly Bradford, *Prophetic Identities: Indigenous Missionaries on British Colonial Frontiers, 1850-78* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, “Gender, Colonialism, and Faith,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25, no.1 (Spring 2013), 184.

they perceived to have threatened the colonial order,<sup>15</sup> or imposing “a restrictive form of femininity.”<sup>16</sup> Many see missions as spaces and processes that subjugated women in particular—in fact many earlier works on New France take this position.<sup>17</sup> The violence and destruction of civilizing efforts notwithstanding, others have paid more attention to how they Indigenous and colonized women struggle to “exploit ambiguities in religious language to negotiate better positions for themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Religion is not “merely a reflection of material power”<sup>19</sup> but is made meaningful to them in their life-world through the creative—and most often un-sanctioned re-deployments. Michael McNally thus has contended that Indigenous use of religion should be understood as meaning-making.<sup>20</sup> Women do not simply use religion strategically; rather, they engage with religion in ways that generate meaning and possibilities.<sup>21</sup> In such contexts of civilizing missions, wherein conversion is simultaneously the means and goal of colonization, religious piety is fraught, ambiguous, and multivalent, and requires careful and contextualized analysis.

Building on and in conversations with theoretical reflections on gendered piety and historical and anthropological reflections on the social and cultural politics of mission and conversion, I look at Indigenous women’s ascetic practices as a creative form of self-making, meaning-making, and world-making,<sup>22</sup> that disrupted and displaced religious orthodoxy and the settler-colonial mandate

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara O. Reyes, *Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of the Californias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Eliza F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (Routledge: New York, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Elbourne, “Gender, Colonialism, and Faith,” 184.

<sup>19</sup> Elbourne, “Gender, Colonialism, and Faith,” 184.

<sup>20</sup> Michael McNally, *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005); Dorothy Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Although I do not elaborate in great detail here, as it is not the purpose of the essay, I’m evoking “world-making” and “life-world” from a specific phenomenological perspective, especially to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In short, the world is the source and condition of possibility of all meaning for “me,” the subject, who is always already bound in an intersubjective field. Merleau-Ponty departs from earlier phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl by underscoring that the world is embodied, that is, we experience the world through our bodies. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Insofar

aimed at domesticating Indigenous peoples into subjects of empire. Locating moments of disruption and forms of meaning-making that go beyond the dictate of biopolitical control, I contend, does not reinforce the assumption that “all human beings have an innate desire for freedom.”<sup>23</sup> Rather, attending to these specific practices helps to reveal that desire is always cultivated and lived in particular historical and political contexts, that it takes shape in concrete relations, and can initiate unexpected forms of self-making and contestation and disruption of colonial power. It shows that the possibility of subversion and disruption to dominant power is *immanent* (rather than innate) to piety, and it is precisely by practicing and inhabiting piety through repetitive bodily acts that coercion and oppression, especially colonial domination, can be challenged or disrupted.

Indigenous feminists have made the point that decolonial feminist theorizing needs to start *from* Indigenous women’s particular experiences that have been uniquely shaped by settler colonialism.<sup>24</sup> Dian Million points out that the segregation and suppression of “feminine” experience, which is labeled as (merely) “polemic, or at worse as not knowledge at all,”<sup>25</sup> masks the profound political and epistemological meaning of such experience and reproduces the colonial epistemological framework that still informs feminist studies. Decolonization, and specifically the decolonization of feminist studies, means that scholars ought to seriously take into account “feminine” experience as thoroughly political, as meaning-making, and knowledge-producing.

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as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world,” *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 408. World-making, in this sense, is to sustain and recreate the horizon that grounds my embodied existence, orients me and generates meaning for me.

<sup>23</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Dian Million, “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no.2. (Fall 2009), 53-76; Lisa Kahaleole Hall, “Navigating Our Own ‘Sea of Islands’: Remapping a Theoretical Space for Hawaiian Women and Indigenous Feminism,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no.2 (Fall 2009), 15-38; Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no.1 (2013), 8-34; Joanne Barker, ed. *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017);

<sup>25</sup> Dian Million, “Felt Theory,” 54-55.

Responding to Million's call, I develop a critical feminist and decolonial rereading of Indigenous women's ascetic practices. Reconstructing these practices within—and against—colonial archival sources, I argue that Indigenous women's ascetic practices show us a creative and productive way of being-in-the-world and being-with-others.

While many historians, anthropologists, and religious studies scholars have examined how Indigenous and colonized women engaged with Christianity and conversion empirically, I bring an explicitly decolonial feminist lens to look at how Indigenous women inhabited religious piety, particularly by engaging with and devising ascetic practices. Doing so in turn enriches feminist theory and understanding of agency, subjectivation, subjectivity, and self-making. I show that Indigenous women not only disrupted colonial authorities' continuing disciplining of their desire but also indirectly challenged the attempted control of their bodies and flesh. Their body, or rather bodily surface or flesh, became the last frontier—quite literally—and the most contested site of colonization and self-crafting. Through these bodily practices, Indigenous Christian women re-directed their attachments from the objects that the missionaries wanted them to be attached to; and instead sustained and cultivated communal relations and attachments to land, kin, and community. Existing discussions of ascetic practices often by default take the individual body and the individual as the proper unit of analysis—notable women mystics such as Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Margery Kempe, Marie Guyart, and best known among Indigenous peoples, “the Mohawk Saint” Catherine Tekakwitha, stand out as exceptional individuals.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, I underscore that

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<sup>26</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confronting the Modern World: Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1997); Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff, eds., *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Jennifer Brown, *Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2019). Aside from historical scholarship, many have paid attention to these women mystics' writings and attempted to recuperate as early women or feminist writers, highlighting their literary self-expression, achievement, and in some cases, political engagement. While this body of work is extremely helpful, and the authors do a great job contextualizing their life and work, it also tends to make these women stand out as exceptional individuals. See, for example, Claudia Rattazzi



Indigenous women engaged in these practices communally, and through them cultivated communal attachments that further grounded their communal sense of self and forged new relations.

Ascetic practices offer us an especially opportune window in illustrating the political salience of desire in relation to self-making under duress for several reasons. First, ascetic practices seem to be premised on self-annihilation and denote a pursuit of self-effacement, hence it seems ironic to speak of these practices as demonstrating a mode of “self-making”—how can a practice premised on self-annihilation be read as self-making? Moreover, historically, such practices have not only been predominantly undertaken by women within different religious and cultural traditions but also are gendered feminine. Women often take them up without and against the sanction of the established order and male authority in order to form direct relation to deity, thus they are often seen as threatening to established social and political hierarchy. These practices thus show us something specific about feminine piety and its political salience. Third, ascetic practices seem to demonstrate attachment to one’s injury *par excellence*. Nietzsche, for instance, takes women’s asceticism as demonstrating what he calls the “desire to suffer.” I will unpack his account shortly and point out the problems when left critics appropriate his critique without paying attention to how it pathologizes women’s embodied practices.

In general, women who engage in ascetic practices appear as self-denying, mad, delusional, and pathological. I contend that it is precisely because these practices are coded as such that a feminist and decolonial reading of them is fruitful. As Bonnie Honig has recently argued,

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Papka, “The Written Woman Writes: Caterina da Siena Between History and Hagiography, Body and Text,” *Annali d’Italianistica* vol.13, *Women Mystic Writers* (1995), 131-149; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translation of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Kerra Gezerro Hanson, “St. Catherine of Siena: Dominican Tertiary, Spiritual Author, and Doctrinal Model,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007; Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017). Colonial historiography—and hagiography—especially tends to glorify Catherine Tekakwitha as an exceptional—saintly—native woman.

*depathologizing* women's acts that are conventionally painted as "mad or deluded" enables us to understand them as *political action* and restore women as political agents.<sup>27</sup> Ascetic practices show us that political action always takes place in a web of relations we do not authorize, and in a world that is not (solely) constituted by our sovereign will. As such, they illuminate the interplay between freedom and servitude, between independence and captivity.

This essay is structured as follows: first I unpack more fully the political and theoretical problems inherent in Wendy Brown's appropriation of Nietzsche's account of resentment, drawing attention to the fact that Nietzsche's critique is largely built upon his appraisal of asceticism, which has hereby been ignored. Drawing attention to the centrality of flesh to asceticism, I construct an alternative feminist, queer, and Indigenous theoretical repertoire that enables a rereading of ascetic practices. In the next section I then reconstruct the social and political context in which Indigenous women's ascetic practices proliferated. I then draw on the theoretical repertoire I gather in the first section to closely examine such practices as documented by the missionaries to unpack the meaning that the missionaries tried to but ultimately failed to contain. I bring attention to the continuity between pre-contact Indigenous practices of inflicting bodily pain and subsequently developed self-mortification practices. I argue that these practices were both enabled by, and demonstrated, Indigenous women's attachments to kin, community, and homeland. In other words, they enact a form of communal and worldly desire that is lived and cultivated among bodies. Last, I offer some concluding remarks on how this historically-grounded study of ascetic practices can enrich our understanding of and enable us to rethink desire, attachment, subjectivity, and self-making.

### ***Ressentiment, the Desire to Suffer, Flesh***

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<sup>27</sup> Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 2-3, emphasis mine.

Pain. Injury. Suffering. These are usually what to come to mind when people think of asceticism. These are also what have been deemed central to subjectivity and subject formation. In the now classic essay entitled "Wounded Attachments," Wendy Brown elaborates—and critiques—a form of political subjectivity constituted by attachment to one's injury. Brown argues that using one's injury as the rallying point in identity politics makes one purely reactionary to oppression and fixes one onto the past wrongs, therefore unable to move forward or envision an alternative future in which one would no longer be defined by one's injury. Drawing heavily from Nietzsche's critique of (slave) morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Brown argues that being attached to and defined by one's injury "breed[s] a politics of recrimination and rancor, of culturally dispersed paralysis and suffering, a tendency to reproach power rather than aspire to it, to disdain freedom rather than practice it."<sup>28</sup> For Brown, identity politics is rooted in one's *desire* for one's subjugation and suffering. Brown puts forward an account of subject formation through recourse to desire understood as attachment formed in particular relations to power. She foregrounds the centrality of these—non-erotic/sexual—attachments in constituting subjectivities, an insight that I share.

At the same time, Brown's critique has been as influential as controversial. While many continue to draw from her account to critique identity politics and point out its limits, others have questioned it both on theoretical and political grounds. Many feminist, queer, and critical race studies scholars have called into question her troubling use of Nietzsche and argued that her account is effectively victim-blaming.<sup>29</sup> Glen Coulthard differentiates resentment from *ressentiment* as elaborated by Nietzsche, and argues that it is problematic to characterize the emotive and affective

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<sup>28</sup> Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no.3 (August 1993), 390.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015); Glen Coulthard, "Resentment and Indigenous Politics," in *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binaries in Colonial Studies*, ed. Patrick Wolfe (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Centre, 2016), 155-172; C. Heike Schotten, "Nietzsche and Emancipatory Politics: Queer Theory as Anti-Morality," *Critical Sociology* 45, no.2 (2018), 213-226.

state of the colonized as one of *ressentiment*. He suggests that the resentment Indigenous peoples feel towards the settler state is a productive and emancipatory force for decolonization. Schotten, on the other hand, charges Brown for conflating “the cry of the oppressed” with that of the oppressor, thereby eliding “fundamental distinctions between the powerful and powerless, oppressor and oppressed.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, as Weheliye points out, since access to full personhood by those who have been historically excluded from it due to the physical violence they had been subjected to actually requires one to “leave behind physical suffering so as to take on the ghostly semblance of possessing one’s personhood,” what Brown identifies as the problems of identity politics is “less a product of the minority subject’s desire to desperately cling to his or her pain but a consequence of the state’s dogged insistence on suffering as the only price of entry to proper personhood.” Since they do not desire to suffer but are grappling with the effects of suffering, *ressentiment* as theorized by Nietzsche does not appropriately capture their desire vis-a-vie their injury.

In addition to these critical engagements, I want to draw attention to another aspect of Nietzsche’s elaboration of *ressentiment* that neither Brown nor her critics have discussed, namely, the centrality of asceticism to Nietzsche’s articulation of resentment. In her criticism of identity politics, Brown uses identity-based *claims* to demonstrate “wounded attachments.” She sees these claims as not only representing their injury, but also reinscribing it. As illuminated by Nietzsche’s criticism in *Genealogy*, the logic underwriting these claims is one of *ressentiment*—the desire to suffer. The language Nietzsche engages is quite visceral (burn, flagellation) rather than metaphorical or abstract, and the examples he gives focus rather on practices instead of on the claims abstracted from them, more specifically, in corporeal practices and feelings. The body, flesh, senses, and

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<sup>30</sup> Schotten, “Nietzsche and Emancipatory Politics,” 216.

feelings, are all central to Nietzsche's account. To be wounded is primarily a fleshy experience ("be burnt in"),<sup>31</sup> and nowhere does he demonstrate it more clearly in his appraisal of Christian asceticism, which he introduces in the second essay and fully elaborates in the third essay of *Genealogy*. Curiously, neither Brown nor her critics address what Nietzsche says about asceticism, which is the most concrete example of *ressentiment* as self-inflicted injury. Such inattention, I contend, obfuscates the bodily/fleshy nature of any particular wound, and elides the embodied process through which injury is incurred and sustained.

I suggest that only through the elision of both the embodied nature of the wound and the fundamental difference between self-inflicted pain and other-inflicted wounds can Brown read the politics of those who have been wounded only as discursive (or rather linguistic) claim-making that reinscribes a reified identity category through an uncritical (or not thoroughly critical) appropriation of Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment*. Reading identity politics through this Nietzschean lens rather uncritically makes Brown's diagnosis and the critique of identity politics problematic.<sup>32</sup> Brown, and others who either agree with her or critique her, also do not problematize Nietzsche's reading of ascetic practices, which is quite central and in fact the only concrete example he gives in elaborating *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, asceticism epitomizes "the desire to suffer."<sup>33</sup>

While Nietzsche ridicules asceticism in general terms and places the will to nothingness and the desire to suffer at the center of ascetic ideals that define Man and humanity *as such*, he finds women's ascetic practices even more ridiculous. He explicitly states that the meaning of ascetic ideals, for women, is "at best one more seductive charm, a touch of morbidezza in fair flesh, the

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<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Fully unpacking the debates around identity politics is beyond the scope of this essay. While I find some aspects of identity politics troubling, especially in terms of how it is sometimes articulated through reified identity categories, my goal is not to recuperate or redeem identity politics, but to offer a different theoretical lens to read pain—against injury—in relation to desire, subjectivity, and community.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 162.

angelic look of a plump pretty animal.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to lament, “The sick woman especially: no one can excel her in the wiles to dominate, oppress, and tyrannize. The sick woman spares nothing, living or dead; she will dig up the most deeply buried things.”<sup>35</sup> It is also worth noting that Nietzsche reads gendered asceticism as peculiarly fleshy, and as demonstrating a *perverse* relation to power. In Nietzsche’s framework, the will to power is posited as the highest desirable goal. Yet when embodied by women, it becomes the *pathological* will to dominate and tyrannize (presumably men). Since Nietzsche’s verdict on asceticism as such is only the asceticism of modern white European Man (and particular men), which he problematically uses to *stand in* for the human and humanity as such,<sup>36</sup> and his discussion focuses on abstract ascetic ideals rather than actual practices, then it becomes clear that different ascetic practices need to be untethered and salvaged from his general evaluation and dismissal of asceticism.

In contrast to Nietzsche’s dismissal of women’s ascetic practices, recently feminist scholars have carefully attended to them and revealed that instead of being purely nihilistic and a sign of self-victimization, these practices are deeply meaningful. Bynum argues that “the extreme asceticism and literalism of women’s spirituality were not, at the deepest level, masochism or dualism but, rather, efforts to gain power and to give meaning.”<sup>37</sup> Specifically attending to medieval women’s use of food in their ascetic practices, Bynum shows the various ways in which religious women found ways to manipulate their environment to exert power and control over their own lives and those around them in a world in which such power was systemically (and increasingly) denied to them. Other feminist historians such as Marie-Florine Bruneau have similarly looked at how early modern

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 96.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 123.

<sup>36</sup> While outwardly Nietzsche’s work is anti-humanist, as he relentlessly calls into question humanist principles, his discussion of Man as such remains firmly tied to sexist and Eurocentric notions of particular *men* and leaves little room for alterity of the Other. See Kelly Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the “Feminine”* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 208.

women mystics, including Marie Guyart, negotiated the corporeal and spiritual constraints placed upon them by the church and male religious authorities through their bodily (including but not limited to ascetic) practices.<sup>38</sup> Bynum has shown that flesh was both instrumental and monumental in medieval religious (Christian) women's self-making, arguing that religious women's ascetic bodily practices should be interpreted as "elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality."<sup>39</sup> Bynum contends that rather than indicating the denial or renouncement of flesh, religious women deliberately engaged with those practices to enact piety, generate meaning, and craft possibilities for themselves and other women in their communities.

Flesh, we see, is both central and particular to women's embodiment, desire, and subjectivity. Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers has accentuated the necessity of distinguishing "flesh" from "body," and argues that this distinction is "the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions."<sup>40</sup> The Atlantic slave trade, she points out, transformed black bodies into flesh. As she puts, poignantly,

"Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh', that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies...we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding."<sup>41</sup>

In this paragraph that has been widely cited to denounce the cruelty and damage of the slave trade, the flesh appears as the last front of dehumanization, the sign of ultimate objectivation and abjection. To be reduced to pure flesh is to be completely objectified, to be evacuated of all

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<sup>38</sup> Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confronting the Modern World*; Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes*; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins*.

<sup>39</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (Summer 1987), 67.

<sup>41</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67, emphasis original.

meaning, to cease to be a body.<sup>42</sup> Black (African) women are robbed of their names, gender and or any signs of singularity. Spillers elaborates,

“The flesh is the concentration of ‘ethnicity’ that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this ‘flesh and blood’ entity, in the vestibule (or ‘pre-view’) of a colonized North America, that is essentially ejected from ‘The Female Body in Western Culture,’ but it makes good theory, or commemorative ‘herstory’ to want to ‘forget,’ or to have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind,—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males... This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”<sup>43</sup>

Yet it is precisely because flesh has been a site of disgendering and dehumanization that it ought to be—but has not been—taken up as a critical analytic of power, if we were to come to terms with such power. Paradoxically, that the objectification of flesh *disgenders* enslaved black female bodies precisely testifies to flesh as a gendered and gendering, racialized and racializing, mechanism. Spillers is rather ambiguous on this account, for while she laments the damage of being reduced to pure flesh, she also contends that “th[e] materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”<sup>44</sup> Her ambiguity probably testifies to the extremely fraught nature of flesh as both materiality and as a concept. As Amber Musser contends, “flesh occupies a fraught position within studies of difference. It oscillates between being a symptom of abjection and objectification and a territory ripe for reclamation.”<sup>45</sup> Precisely because the flesh is “fraught,” it is an

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<sup>42</sup> Saidiya Hartman discuss this poignantly in “Venus in Two Acts,” *small axe* 26 (June 2008), 1-14.

<sup>43</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 67-8.

<sup>44</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 68.

<sup>45</sup> Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 20.



important space to think about and theorize differences and power, as “flesh connects bodies to the external world by emphasizing the various conditions that make bodies visible in particular ways.”<sup>46</sup>

I propose that flesh can be read not as the opposite of the body, but as the most intense and dense transfer point of power, the locus wherein external violence and self-making simultaneously are sensed and felt. As such, I understand flesh to specifically denote bodily surface, demarcating the porous boundary between the inside and the outside but also functioning as the contact point between the two. Flesh is the place wherein corporeality and desire most intensely manifests. It is not (only) a sign of pure negation or destruction but also a place that different potentialities clash, where the effects of colonization are most intensely imposed on and felt, but also where alternative—decolonial and anti-colonial—meanings can be generated.

Fanon’s account of the lived reality under colonial occupation also calls attention to bodily surface. While Fanon’s account is often read through as a psychological or psychoanalytic one that explores how the colonized internalizes colonial ideology, and he does occasionally evoke the psyche, I contend that Fanon’s account is more productively read as showing how colonization demarcates the bodies and produces affect that is written on the bodily surface and takes shape in the world. Fanon writes that in the colonial world, “the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of the skin like an open sore which flinches from the caustic agent.”<sup>47</sup> Even the breathing of the colonized is “an observed, an occupied breathing.”<sup>48</sup> Oliver suggests that Fanon shows that the colonized “do not internalize but rather *epidermalize* racial ideology.”<sup>49</sup> The bodily surface—flesh-

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<sup>46</sup> Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 19. While I find Musser's account of the flesh helpful, it is worth noting that she develops it through an investigation of masochist desire and practices, which I contend is quite distinct from asceticism. Though some might read ascetic practices as masochist "deep down," I contend with Bynum and Allan Greer that such reading is too reductive and does not adequately attend to the specific meaning of ascetic practices.

<sup>47</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), trans. Richard Philcox, 56.

<sup>48</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 51, emphasis mine. Though Oliver overall is interested in mapping the colonization of psychic space, as the title of the book suggests, both her account and her reading of Fanon emphasize the colonization of bodily surface.

-operates as the plastic and porous surface through which power and desire are transmitted, materialized, and take concrete shape in the world and shape the world in turn. In a paradoxical way, it is almost as if the psyche is externalized: it does not rest in the metaphysical and metaphorical space deep within the individual, but rather is enacted on the bodily surface. In Fanon's words, "the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself and finds outlet in muscular demonstrations."<sup>50</sup> Colonization shapes subjectivity and forms desire by marking the contours of the body, imprinting on bodily surface, and conditioning the texture of embodied lived experience.

The violence of slavery and colonization that was actualized through the flesh, or turning body into flesh, can only start to be accounted for once the flesh is accounted for. Flesh, as a dense site of transmission of both power and affect, is a site where different sets of desire clash. Yet at the same time, flesh is the last frontier of gender, racial and colonial domination, and abjection, denoting the effacement of humanity; yet on the other hand, perhaps because of this, it is also a site of self-making. Through sensing, feeling, and desiring, one could manipulate and transform one's relation to the world and others. In seventeenth-century Indigenous-French interactions, a world characterized by war, epidemics, displacement, and growing colonial encroachment, flesh was a contested

### **Contextualizing Conversion**

As many scholars have noted, in moments of profound unrest and catastrophes often produced by colonization in the first place, conversion can seem a viable or even desirable option not only because it can offer spiritual solace, but perhaps importantly, material security and access. In seventeenth-century *Nouvelle-France*, conversion to Christianity as a process offered new social and economic opportunities to many Indigenous women. As historian Kathryn Labelle notes, after the

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<sup>50</sup> Fanon, *Wretched*, 56.

dispersal of the Wendat, “Christianity was a source of power for the Wendat in general, but for Wendat women in particular.”<sup>51</sup> Christian Wendat women took on many new roles such as “teachers, interpreters, seminarists, hospital nuns, and Ursuline Sisters.”<sup>52</sup> By doing so they renewed and even increased their power within the diasporic Wendat communities. While many Indigenous seminarists saw confinement as a form of deprivation and punishment, the cloistered life offered some safety and stability that they desired in a period of upheaval. For example, Cecile Arenhatsi, a twenty-three-year-old Christian Wendat widow, brought her daughter, Marie, who was six or seven years old to the Ursulines. She voluntarily engaged herself as a servant of the Ursulines and put her daughter in the seminary.<sup>53</sup> While the missionaries interpreted her choice as solely motivated by her devotion and will to “satisfy God,” it is not hard to discern that the seminary life primarily allowed her to escape from warfare and potential captivity, make an independent living, and allowed her daughter to receive an education.<sup>54</sup>

There were at least hundreds of Wendat and Algonquians who, just like Atenhatsi, sought refuge with the French during the Iroquois attacks. For those displaced and endangered by war, particularly Wendat and Algonquian refugees and later on Haudenosaunee women who were forced to leave their villages due to ongoing conflict and disarray, conversion and alliance with the French provided them with economic and social opportunities and stability, while Christianity offered spiritual consolation as well. The Jesuits themselves were fully aware of the social condition that drove many to the French and embrace Christianity. As Superior Ragueneau lays bare in the 1652 *Relations*,

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<sup>51</sup> Kathryn Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Wendat People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 175.

<sup>52</sup> Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 175.

<sup>53</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland: Burrows Bros., 1896-1901), hereafter JR, 36, 213.

<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the convent in Canada served a similar purpose in Europe—housing the poor and the displaced, and offering basic education to girls.

"When the Hurons were in affluence, and the Algonquians in prosperity, they mocked at the Gospel, and tried to murder those who proclaimed it in their country,--accusing them of being sorcerers, who made them lose their lives by secret means, spoiled their gran, and caused drouths and inclement weathers, and regarding them as traitors, who held communication with their enemies to sell their country (*leur pays*). As soon as the Iroquois had cast them into the abyss where they still are, these poor people came to throw themselves into our arms,--asking shelter and protection from those whom they had regarded as traitors; seeking the friendship of those whom they had tried to murder as sorcerers....The Algonquians, the Hurons, and numerous other nations whom we have instructed, would have been lost if they had not been ruined; that the greater part of those who came in quest of baptism in affliction, would never have found it in prosperity..."<sup>55</sup>

In a time of turmoil and when one's life was threatened, it is most reasonable to assume that outward manifestation of piety was not exclusively motivated by religious reasons alone. The Jesuits and Ursulines, however, most often disavowed the earthly—social and political—conditions that made conversion attractive or even necessary and interpreted the pious acts of the converts as exclusively spiritual. But it is not hard to grapple with the fact that conversion and pledging to French colonial authorities offered these converts social stability and economic security.

This external world was nothing short of hostile to Indigenous peoples, and especially had adverse effects on Indigenous women and put new challenges upon them, as they were the ones who traditionally took care of the household and communal affairs. As Greer comments,

"people who had lived through—and were continuing to live through—the epidemics, wars, and dislocation occasioned by colonization were purposely adding to their pain. To all appearances, they sought not only to invest their suffering with meaning... they...waged covert struggles, with one another perhaps, but certainly, as the missionaries' correspondence makes abundantly clear, with the clergy."<sup>56</sup>

It was in this particular context that some Indigenous women integrated Catholicism into their world, and some also took up ascetic practices. This gendered practice enables Indigenous women

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<sup>55</sup> JR 38, 45-47.

<sup>56</sup> Allan Greer, *Mobanck Saint*, 123.

to pursue a particular form of self-making and community-building without waging a direct revolt against the colonial authorities.

### **Contested Bodily Frontier and Gendered Self-Making**

Before contact with the Jesuits and before Christianity made an impact on Indigenous communities, self-inflicted bodily modification that was painful was already a common practice that, although sharing some similarities with medieval and early modern Christian ascetic practices, grew out of Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions. Jesuit Bressani observed that in Canada, many “paint their faces in various styles” and “their whole bodies,--some superficially and temporarily, others permanently.”<sup>57</sup> Those who “paint themselves permanently do so with extreme pain, --using, for this purpose, needles, sharp awls, or piercing thorns, with which they perforate or have others perforate, the skin.”<sup>58</sup> In some nations, this practice was so common that Bressani knew “not whether a single individual was found, who was not painted in this manner, on some part of the body.”<sup>59</sup> He saw this practice as dangerous as it had caused death. Bressani referred to the one who died because he had practiced bodily modification as “a martyr to vanity and a fantastic caprice.”<sup>60</sup> This observation is notable as it shows that for many Indigenous peoples, self-inflicted corporeal pain was a traditional and common practice that constituted their Indigenous selfhood. Although it seemed extreme and unnecessary to the Jesuits, it had a particular meaning attached to it. While for the Jesuits, corporeal pain was essentially associated with punishment and specifically religious penance, such association did not exist for Indigenous peoples. Many Indigenous peoples also believed that bodily ailment was caused by evil spirits being attached to their bodies, which could only be driven out by violent means that caused considerable pain.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes by themselves,

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<sup>57</sup> JR 58, 250.

<sup>58</sup> JR 58, 251.

<sup>59</sup> JR 58, 251.

<sup>60</sup> JR 58 251.

<sup>61</sup> JR 50, 293.

sometimes being instructed by medicine men and women, they would impose painful measures such as walking “barefoot over the live embers.”<sup>62</sup>

The Jesuits had also recorded other incidents of the Haudenosaunee inflicting pain and discomfort on their bodies before Christianity had any real impact on their communities. In one incident, during the 1655 mid winter festival at Onondaga, the Jesuits observed that “men, women, and children, running like maniacs through the streets and cabins...naked; they seemed insensible to the cold which is nearly unbearable even to those who are warmly clothed.”<sup>63</sup> In another one, after a man of the (Cayuga) town of Oiogouen had a vision, he recounted his dream to his friends, and immediately they acted out his vision: they “went to the river and pierced the ice, making two holes fifteen paces apart. The divers stripped. The first man led the way, jumping into one of the holes and emerging, most, fortunately, from the other one. The second man followed suit and then the others, until the tenth, who paid the price for all the rest: he could not find his way out and perished miserably under the ice.”<sup>64</sup> These practices formed the everyday fabric of Indigenous village life and were also spiritual in nature. Indigenous peoples engaged with them to communicate with the spiritual and sacred realm and to strengthen attachment to their kin and community.

Though there are some similarities between these (older) Indigenous practices and Counter-Reformation Christian ascetic practices, Indigenous peoples also practiced a particular form of bodily mortification that the missionaries had never heard of and were shocked by: burning of the flesh. Gabriel Sagard noted in his travelogue to the Wendat country that seventeenth-century Wendat (a Haudenosaunee people) routinely used fire in their curing rituals. The shamans would

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<sup>62</sup> JR 50, 293.

<sup>63</sup> JR 42, 156-7.

<sup>64</sup> JR 42, 152-3.

plunge their hands into the fire and bring out burning coals and ashes with their burning hands.<sup>65</sup> During ceremonial preparations for war, the Haudenosaunee also widely deployed fire in anticipation that warriors would likely be captured by their enemies, whereas women and children would be taken as captives.<sup>66</sup> A Jesuit observed that "Sometimes, to show that they have courage, a Savage will bind his bare arm to that of another; then putting between the two arms, upon the flesh, a piece of lighted tinder, they leave it until it is entirely consumed, burning themselves to the bone. The man who withdraws his arm and shakes off the fire is considered lacking in courage."<sup>67</sup> The same Jesuit also specifically mentioned that he heard a Frenchman, who was among the Wendat, almost lost his arm "in trying to play at this fine game with a Savage."<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, the Jesuits' reaction to extreme bodily mortification practices was not very different from their reaction to body piercing and tattooing—both deeply troubled them. Bressani's evocation of the native man who (allegedly) died because of his bodily piercings brings the similarity between the two sets of bodily practices to the fore.

If Indigenous self-mortification practices proved hard to understand and were met with the missionaries' disapproval, the situation did not change much when Indigenous neophytes took up ascetic practices after baptism to practice and embody piety. While the Jesuits hailed them as exceptionally pious, their anxiety and confusion were palpable in their discussion of these practices. Somewhat ironically, another major source of Indigenous Christian converts' ascetic practices were saintly stories and examples of penance—including the suffering of Jesus Christ—that were

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<sup>65</sup> Gabriel Sagard, *The Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, ed. G. M. Wrong, trans. H. H. Langton (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1939), 200-1. See also William N. Fenton, *The False Faces of the Iroquois* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 73.

<sup>66</sup> JR 42, 171.

<sup>67</sup> JR 5, 130-33; Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. & trans. William Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, 2 vols (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 2: 158; 160-1.

<sup>68</sup> JR 5, 133.

introduced by the missionaries.<sup>69</sup> While these examples were introduced to cultivate obedience and piety among the Indigenous neophytes, these neophytes took them to a different level and to places that thoroughly surprised the missionaries. It is worth noting that since the days of Loyola, the founder of the society, the Jesuits not only did not practice self-mortification but also frowned upon them.<sup>70</sup> Loyola himself, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, regards the health of the body as the precondition of cultivating true faith and did not see complete renunciation of bodily pleasure, certainly not through mortification, as a hindrance to attaining it.<sup>71</sup> Subsequent Jesuit education followed suit and the Jesuits who went to Canada did not practice self-mortification (though celibacy was seen as a form of asceticism). It thus seems that though Indigenous women learned about the suffering of Christ and other saints from the Jesuits, the means they developed were thoroughly Indigenous, and as we can see, were consistent with the bodily modification they already practiced before being introduced to Christianity.

Some Indigenous women observed the ascetic practices of hospital nuns. Marie Skarichions, a native woman who went to settle in Kahnawá:ke in 1678, told other Indigenous women that while she was being nursed at the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, she witnessed the sisters there using iron girdles and hair shirts to mortify their flesh in private.<sup>72</sup> Many Indigenous women were also likely to have heard of the saintly stories of the hospital nuns, such as Catherine de St. Augustine, known for her extreme ascetic practices.<sup>73</sup> Others had either seen or heard of the ascetic practices of hospital nuns at the hospital in Montréal.<sup>74</sup> Marie Guyart also engaged in self-mortification practices, such as

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<sup>69</sup> JR 27, 191.

<sup>70</sup> John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>71</sup> David Fleming, *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

<sup>72</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 135.

<sup>73</sup> JR 52, "Lettre Circulaire de la mort de la Révérende Mère Catherine de saint Augustin, Religieuse Hospitalière de Québec, décédé le 8. May 1668," 56-79; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 1: 607-10.

<sup>74</sup> "Letter of Father Claude Chauchetière, 14 October 1682," in Allan Greer, ed., *Jesuit Relations*, 150.



bleeding herself, fasting, and smelling of infected wounds, both before and after her arrival in Canada.<sup>75</sup> While it was unclear to what extent the Ursuline seminaries learned and witnessed such practices from her, it was evident that self-mortification practices particularly appealed to Indigenous converts and provided them guidance in their spiritual pursuit in a time of extreme turmoil and duress. Different from medieval and early modern women mystics, especially saints, who practiced asceticism in imitation of the suffering of Jesus in their ascetic practices,<sup>76</sup> Indigenous women neither aspired to nor imitated Jesus or European women they had observed and heard about in Canada. Instead, they explored their spiritual path by blending aspects of Christian mysticism and Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions. They developed self-mortification practices that were distinctly Indigenous.

At Tadoussac, a mission wherein native converts from several different nations gathered, for example, after learning about the penitential practices from the mission Jesuit, they collectively decided to impose greater penance on themselves, though they had already done public penance for committing a "somewhat pardonable offense."<sup>77</sup> They "made a great discipline of heavy cords, full of large knots, which they tied to the end of the stick, to serve as a handle."<sup>78</sup> They then voluntarily took turns to be wiped by this device to perform their penance, "some asked to be given twenty blows, others ten,--some more, some less."<sup>79</sup> Even the children were not spared from being whipped. The Jesuit at the Mission was surprised "at the sight of this new devotion" and had to step in to ensure that "it did not go beyond the bounds of prudence, and that there were no excesses."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Davis, *Women on the Margins*, 132-3.

<sup>76</sup> Ellen Ross, "She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain: Suffering, the Spiritual Journal, and Women's Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, edited by Ulrike Wiethasu, 47-48; Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 255-258.

<sup>77</sup> JR 27, 191.

<sup>78</sup> JR 27, 193.

<sup>79</sup> JR 27, 195-7.

<sup>80</sup> JR 27, 197.

The Jesuits observed such practices in many missions. Aside from Tadoussac, ascetic practices were also common in Lorette and the Wendat Country. In Wendat Country, Jesuit Ragueneau remarked that there were numerous pious Christians who had “applied to upon their bodies coals and burning brands.” He also gave a specific example of a young man who “ran into a neighboring wood, stripped himself quite naked, threw himself into the snows, and rolled in them a long time” until his body was dejected and he scarcely had enough strength to return to the village.<sup>81</sup> Though Ragueneau did not comment on these practices, we know from other sources of the same period that the use of fire in the mortification of the flesh was extremely disturbing to the Jesuits, and he very likely would try to stop such practices. Native converts incorporated this Indigenous practice into their Christian penances, though it is safe to speculate that their understanding of sin and penance was different from how the Jesuits wanted them to internalize. In the *Relation of 1663-64*, Lalemant wrote that at the Wendat Church at Québec, “a good Huron woman” urged her companion to “scourge each other,” just like Jesus had been scourged, and offered her shoulders first. While the others refused because the Jesuit Father had not given his permission, she resolved to carry the action out herself. Alone in her cabin, she became the ‘master’ of her own body and soul, bypassing the approval of the Jesuits, taking “the discipline with such severity that the marks of it remained for a long time engraven on her shoulders.”<sup>82</sup> Her zeal affected many others, and the Wendat community in Québec was presented as imbued with a general pious atmosphere. Another widow, “who, “suffering from a violent toothache that caused her much pain, refused a remedy offered her for her relief, saying that she was glad to endure the suffering.”<sup>83</sup>

Nowhere were such practices more prominent than in Kahnawá:ke (Sault St. Louis), a primarily Haudenosaunee settlement. This village became well-known because it was the place where

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<sup>81</sup> JR 30, 39.

<sup>82</sup> JR 30, 77.

<sup>83</sup> JR 38, 36.

the renowned Mohawk Saint, Catherine Tekakwitha, spent her final years, roughly from 1677 to 1680. Tekakwitha practiced extreme self-mortification in those last years of her short life, with a circle of Indigenous women who all took vows of chastity and engaged in ascetic practices together. Though she seemed exceptional to the Jesuits in many ways, especially her two seventeenth-century biographers who took pains trying to get her canonized, both her selfhood and embodied being-in-the-world were shaped by the Haudenosaunee Catholic community. Before her arrival, Jesuit Chauchetière already noticed that there was a close circle of women who led lives that involved “the avoidance of the pleasures of the body and the mortification of the flesh” to what in his opinion was great excess.<sup>84</sup> The one who initiated the ascetic practices in Kahnawá:ke “went to the foot of a large cross that stands beside our cemetery, took off her clothes, and exposed herself to the air. This was during a snowstorm and she was pregnant at the time, and the snow falling on her back caused her so much suffering that she nearly died from it.”<sup>85</sup>

In the *Relations* of 1682, Jesuit Claude Chauchetière gave an account of Tekakwitha’s bodily practices. In the harsh weather of Canadian winter, when “the snow was falling,” Tekakwitha, in order to do “penance for her sins,” “divested herself of her clothing, and exposed herself to the air at the foot of a large Cross that stands beside our Cemetery,” and she almost died afterward.<sup>86</sup> Along with her close friend Tegaiaguenta, Tekakwitha practiced extreme flagellation. They took turns to flagellate each other until one’s shoulders were covered in blood, then it would be the other person’s turn. Pierre Cholenec, the other Jesuit who interacted closely with Tekawitha, found out that such “bloody disciplines” consisted of between one thousand and twelve hundred blows at each session.<sup>87</sup> Tekakwitha’s use of fire especially disturbed the Jesuits. Chauchetière wrote that she burned herself

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<sup>84</sup> JR 38, 115.

<sup>85</sup> JR 38, 116.

<sup>86</sup> JR 62, 175.

<sup>87</sup> Pierre Cholenec, “Lettre du Pere Cholenec, Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jesus...Procureur des Missions du Canada, 1715,” 131, accessed at William Clements Library, Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 2022.

with brands from the fire, starting at the toes and continuing up to her knees. One time, she burned herself with a burning coal in a "dare" with Tegaiguenta. The next day Tegaiguenta saw that there was a large black hole in the flesh of her foot.<sup>88</sup>

The other women in Tekakwitha's circle, Chauchetière noted, were "in her fervor" and imitated her. Two of them "made a hole in the ice, in the depth of winter, and threw themselves into the water, where they remained during the time that it would take to say a Rosary slowly and sedately. One of the two, who feared that she would be found out, did not venture to warm herself when she returned to her cabin but lay down on her mat with lumps of ice adhering to her shoulders."<sup>89</sup> These invented mortification practices constituted "their usual exercises of penance" that the Jesuits had to tell them to stop.<sup>90</sup> Cholenec also mentioned a woman who not only practiced flagellation but also would freeze herself by rolling in the snow and then cut herself with a knife. Her behavior was so extreme that Cholenec tried to stop it, but she would go into the woods "where these Christian women believed that anything was permitted."<sup>91</sup> He imagined her saying to herself "At least in the woods I shall be mistress of my own body."<sup>92</sup> In the lifeworld of her village, Kahnawá:ke, devoted women converts quite commonly practiced such bodily mortifications. Religious piety, we see, characterized the social milieu of the whole community. These women were portrayed as embodying "the desire to suffer" in the extremist form.

Worried about the implications of such excess, the missionaries tried to introduce more moderate means of penance, including whips, irritating hair shirts, and iron girdles, but to their dismay, native women only added these measures to the practices they were already engaged in, thereby defeating their purpose. Unable to fully discipline Indigenous women's bodily practices and

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<sup>88</sup> Cholenec, "Lettre du Pere Cholenec," 132.

<sup>89</sup> JR 62, 177.

<sup>90</sup> JR 62, 177.

<sup>91</sup> JR 62 123.

<sup>92</sup> JR 62, 123.

their bodies more generally, the Jesuits had to resort to disciplining the meaning of such practices in their texts, extolling these women as exceptionally pious. In their words, these practices showed "an ardent desire to suffer in expiation of their sins."<sup>93</sup> Yet since the Jesuits did not practice self-mortification nor see it as a necessary way of demonstrating piety, the extreme self-mortification practices Indigenous women took up, we could imagine, must be perplexing and somewhat disturbing to the Jesuits. Their attempt at interpreting—and representing—the meaning of these distinct Indigenous practices within the parameters of Catholic orthodoxy only shows their anxiety in (failing to) containing, as both the forms of these practices and their excesses challenged such interpretation. We see that for Indigenous women, self-mortification practices did not affirm religious and colonial authority. They were a means to express their piety and penance directly to God, without the mediation of the missionaries. Several Jesuits mentioned their unease learning that Indigenous women had been engaging in self-mortification practices without their knowledge and their control. Some, like Cholenc, saw the women at Kahnawá:ke as engaging in a power struggle against him and challenging his control over their bodies.

Drawing from both Indigenous and Christian traditions, Indigenous women developed these practices dynamically. They pointed to a creative way of self-crafting and meaning-making that subverted without directly waging wars against colonial mandates. Rather than displaying complete obedience, which the missionaries intended to cultivate, Indigenous women converts' bodily mortification practices contained more complex forms of desire and meaning. The female body, while being a target of disciplinary control and colonial transformation, was also a crucial site for practicing Indigeneity. In particular, it is the incalculable subversive of the flesh that makes disruption possible. The experiential, sensing, feeling, and affected bodily surface is the venue

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<sup>93</sup> JR 38, 36.

through which pleasure and freedom can be experienced in unpredictable ways. Feminist philosopher Johanna Oksala, drawing on Foucault's account of the body, argues that "The experiential body is the locus of resistance in the sense that it is the possibility of an unpredictable event. The experiential body materializes in power/knowledge networks, but the limits of its experiences can never be firmly set because they can never be fully defined and articulated. It can multiply, distort, and overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences."<sup>94</sup>

The subversive power of the body always takes shape immanently in the field of politics, within concrete relations of power. The flesh, or bodily surface, as the most contested 'frontier' that both demarcates the self and connects it to the world, further testifies to the incalculable power of subversion. Flesh, as "both the cornerstone and potential ruin of the world of Man,"<sup>95</sup> to use Weheliye's phrase, is the sensing and relational surface through which power and affect are transmitted, through which a boundary is tentatively established and unmade at once through communal relations and the locus of desire and self-making and self-fashioning. Instead of demarcating stringent bodily boundaries that enclosed the self and isolated it from others, the self that was being crafted through these practices was fundamentally constituted and rooted in communal existence.

### **So the Community Will Survive**

Under the ascending settler-colonial order, while the body was an intense target of biopolitical control, it was also the medium through which one experienced the world and formed kinship and communal relations with others. Though the missionaries tend to portray these practices as individualistic pursuits, such a portrayal belies their own ideological background than reflecting

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<sup>94</sup> Johanna Oksala, "Anarchic Bodies: Foucault and the Feminist Question of Experience," *Hypatia* 19, no.4 (2004), 114.

<sup>95</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 44.

the nature of these practices. When read against the grain, we see that these practices were not only developed and practiced communally, but also enabled Indigenous women to maintain pre-existing attachments to land, their bodily being, and their kin and communities.

If the porous body was a space for the cultivation of desire and self-making, so was the physical space of mission settlement. Mission settlements were established near French colonies with the explicit goal of severing Indigenous kinship ties and inchoating French *mœurs* and manners through imitation.<sup>96</sup> Yet both Le Mercier and Lamberville acknowledged that separating Indigenous children from their parents and communities was very difficult. Lamberville stated that the strong bonds Indigenous peoples had to their communities and kin as part of their “natural affection that they have for their country (*leur patrie*)” was the biggest ‘obstacle’ to conversion.<sup>97</sup> The existence of strong communal bonds made resettlement difficult and unappealing, which was precisely why it was deemed by the Jesuits to be necessary to make them pious and ‘civilized.’ Indigenous bodies that embodied such bonds and were disposed towards their communities needed to be redispersed towards Christian piety and loyalty towards the colonial religious authorities. Those who migrated to these missions were interpreted by the Jesuits as having “forsak[en] their country, their relatives and friends, their lands, and the few goods and conveniences that they possessed in their country, to leave their country, to come into a strange land, to live there for the most part in poverty, and stripped of everything, in the hope of securing their faith.”<sup>98</sup>

However, the Jesuits failed to understand, or at least to acknowledge, that many maintained their kinship ties and commitment to their family and communities after they resettled, and resettlement also enabled the converts to cultivate new communities and affective attachments that were thoroughly Indigenous. Indigenous women almost always practiced self-mortification

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<sup>96</sup> JR 52, 47; JR 57,61.

<sup>97</sup> JR 57, 71.

<sup>98</sup> JR 61, 167.

collectively, with other Indigenous women converts, both from their own nation and other nations. Tekakwitha herself, as her biographers note, was called on by an “older sister by adoption”, who had resettled to Kahnawá:ke a few years before and sent her husband to convince Catherine to join the other Mohawks.<sup>99</sup> A Haudenosaunee warrior, who resettled in the Wendat Colony, “returned to his own country, and brought back all his relatives to procure The blessing of the faith for Them.”<sup>100</sup> Marie Tsaouente, a Haudenosaunee woman, who was “the most notable of those” and came to the Wendat Colony near Québec, wrote to her father in her village to join her and asked a Haudenosaunee Catechumen to bring "a thousand porcelain beads" to attract her father to bring his whole family to the Colony so that "they might be instructed and baptized all together."<sup>101</sup> We see that kinship and family ties still held great importance even for the converts who resettled. While the Jesuits saw resettlement as breaking of the strong bonds to their native country and kin, resettlement also enabled many to preserve the integrity of their family, when Indigenous village and domestic life were disrupted gravely due to social chaos and political turmoil caused by settler colonialism. It is also telling that many Indigenous women who were extolled as exceptionally pious individuals, were also active community members who undertook significant communal and social responsibility. The aforementioned Wendat woman who scourged herself to manifest her penance and piety also took great pains to visit the sick and take care of them, shelter orphans, while also taking great care of her children. As Jesuit Lalemant put it, she "acts as father, mother, and even spiritual father."<sup>102</sup> Inhabiting piety, we see, enables her to both cultivate her Wendat selfhood and (re)build her Wendat community during war and dislocation from Wendake, Wendat homeland.

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<sup>99</sup> Choleneq, “Letter du Pere Choleneq,” 127.

<sup>100</sup> JR 57, 75.

<sup>101</sup> JR 57, 55.

<sup>102</sup> JR 49, 77.



At Kahnawá:ke, a settlement of primarily Haudenosaunee converts, resettlement of Indigenous converts from various nations and communities also enabled Catherine to maintain close relationships with other Christian Indigenous women, including her closest friend, Marie-Thérèse Tegaiaguenta, a young Oneida widow. It is to them, especially Tegaiaguenta, not the Jesuit authorities, that she regularly confessed and with whom she discussed spiritual matters and confided in.<sup>103</sup> Their group consisted of several other Indigenous women. Cholenec also mentioned a woman named Anastasie, “a fervent Christian with whom she spoke with and with whom she had established a very close friendship.”<sup>104</sup> These Indigenous women oversaw each others' mortification practices and encouraged each other. The Christian community, in other words, was Indigenous through and through. Indigenous women converts remained attached to other natives and forged alternative native communities. The community, rather than the individual, was the proper unit of practicing piety. The settler-colonial cultivation of desire, perhaps ironically, enabled them to form a different kind of community and generated a form of communal embodied existence that was thoroughly Indigenous in nature. These women, while engaging in behavior that made the Jesuits hail them as the most devoted Christians, also continued to take part in Indigenous village life, including going hunting and preparing feasts.<sup>105</sup> These women found their own ways, in a world hostile to their existence and selfhood, to navigate their spiritual commitments, community obligations, and practice and embody Indigeneity.

While many Indigenous women cultivated close ties with those in their mission community, others worked as agents of conversion both within their own nation and among other Indigenous peoples. Along with engaging in extreme forms of bodily mortifications, pious women converts were also eager to convert people of their own and other nations. For example, the Jesuits remarked

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<sup>103</sup> Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 133; 144.

<sup>104</sup> Cholenec, “Lettre du Pere Cholenec,” 157.

<sup>105</sup> JR 62, 175.

that the Kiskakous Christian neophytes at the Outaouais Mission “fulfilled the duties of apostles in their own country, with such glory and such profit.”<sup>106</sup> They also noted that very commonly, those who were baptized first through their contact with the Jesuits went back to their communities to “spread the gospel.”<sup>107</sup> As early as 1643, in a letter to her son, Guyart mentioned a "Christian woman" who traveled to a quite distant nation to catechize those who lived there. She succeeded so well that she led them all here, where they were baptized. Guyart commended her for having had “apostolic courage to face the dangers to which she was exposed for the purpose of thus serving our Lord (un courage Apostolique pour courir les dangers où elle s’est exposée afin de rendre ce service à Notre Seigneur).”<sup>108</sup> Such fervor, as Guyart observed, can often be seen “among our good neophytes.”<sup>109</sup> A few years later, Guyart again noted that the Attikameks, for example, were not only “converted and live[d] extraordinarily innocent lives,” but also converted a great number of pious Algonkin women, and left the seminary to preach to her relatives and friends at Sillery and women of her tribe at Trois-Rivières.<sup>110</sup> The Jesuits, similarly, gave many examples of native converts converting others of their own nation. In the *Relations* of 1663-64, they mentioned a "noble spirited" Wendat woman (who also engaged in self-mortification practices) who was "very zealous for the conversion of her compatriots, instructing them, exhorting them, and confounding them with her gentleness, to reclaim them for sin; and her charity makes her so eloquent that she *penetrates the most rebellious hearts* to make of them hearts wholly Christian.”<sup>111</sup> What is implied is that this woman was more capable than the Jesuits themselves to convert her fellow Wendat. For her country people, it

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<sup>106</sup> JR 61, 63.

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, JR 54, 55, 56, 57, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Marie Guyart, Lettre LXXIII (30 septembre 1643), 201.

<sup>109</sup> Guyart, Lettre LXXIII (30 septembre 1643), 201.

<sup>110</sup> JR 49, 101.

<sup>111</sup> JR 49, emphasis mine.

was she, not the Jesuits, who held spiritual authority. Even conversion, in other words, had become an Indigenous endeavor, a means to bind her community together.

It could be said that these women's exceptional piety and apostolic ambition aided the civilizing mission to some extent. Yet it is quite apparent that both the means of and reasonings they would have given for conversion and the communities they thus built were thoroughly Indigenous. Since there were only at most a couple of Jesuits at each mission and their presence was quite sporadic, while the Ursulines were confined in Québec, most of the time it was Indigenous women who acted as authorities over religious and spiritual matters. This again was the continuation of an Indigenous tradition. Though Guyart and the Jesuits might be intended to make them appear as blind yet fervent followers of religious instructions that simply reproduced the dictates of colonial religious authorities, putting into context, it is not hard to see that these women were drawing on Christianity and the resources provided by the missionaries, both material and spiritual, to remake and sustain their communities, which had been wrecked by wars, epidemics, forced migration, and colonial interventions in all aspects of their lives. Moreover, Indigenous women who made long arduous trips to convert others certainly could not be said to be passive or blindly following the religious teachings. What was interpreted as religious piety that was supposed to re-dispose them to the settler-colonial order rather allowed them to maintain kinship ties to their communities, and brought them in contact with distant foreign Indigenous nations. It could thus be seen as instrumental in forging international relations and forming new Indigenous communities. More importantly, though Guyart and the Jesuits did not explicitly put in writing, these women's apostolic ambition challenged the mandate of being cloistered. While the missionaries regarded cloistered life as indispensable to female piety, many Indigenous girls and women refused to be cloistered. Even after conversion, they still enjoyed mobility and freedom and maintained considerable influence and authority within their own communities. At the same time, by acting as active proselytizers,

Indigenous women also effectively wrestled power from the missionaries and by doing so challenged colonial hierarchy that the missionaries took for granted.

While the missionaries imagined that embodying religious piety would indoctrinate Indigenous converts to colonial authorities, thereby replacing their attachment to their families and communities, native converts refused such association and practiced piety in their ways to craft a distinct religious subjectivity that was Indigenous through and through. Though resettling in mission communities and converting one's country people could be said to serve the missionaries' intended goals and the settler colonial order, it also enabled Indigenous women to form a different kind of Indigenous community that disrupted the individualizing and civilizing (Frenchifying) effects that missionaries pursued. The settler-colonial cultivation of desire enabled Indigenous women to practice Indigeneity in creative ways and forge new Indigenous communities. Specifically, ascetic and bodily mortification practices became a means that they engaged with to exert control over their own lives and bodies. Indigenous bodies remained *disposed* towards and attached to their kin and communities, and Indigenous women converts continued to embody such ties in their existence. Flesh became the most arrested site of colonial contestation, between self and power, freedom and obedience.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued that ascetic practices and the mode of subjectivity and desire constituted by them enabled Indigenous women to negotiate the various disciplines and domination imposed on them both made their own lives meaningful and enabled them to create new communities and sustain Indigenous kinship. Indigenous women maintained and recreated attachments that disrupted and displaced settler-colonial cultivation of desire, and re-directed the energy invested in shaping their nature and disposition to alternative ends that enabled them to practice Indigeneity in new and unexpected ways. The disruptive force and creative ways of self-

making via desire, I contend, is what makes subjectification a complex process that inevitably escapes the dictates of power that seeks to dominant and pacify.

Through a feminist and decolonial reading of Indigenous women's ascetic practices, I have made the case that desire is not a deeply ingrained psychic attribute internal to the individual subject, but is cultivated, lived, and moves among bodies, and takes shape and shapes the world. While pain is integral to wound, pain itself does not necessarily indicate injury or wounded attachment. I suggest that self-inflicted pain can serve as sensing and feeling circuits that are ripe with possibilities, openings, and desire. Their self-mortification practices, in particular, instead of displaying the desire to suffer, were engaged by Indigenous women to create ways of desiring to escape the mandate of settler-colonial biopolitics and to pursue their self-making under duress. Ascetic–fleshy, embodied–practices, when engaged by the oppressed and colonized, could generate productive vitality, rather than making one purely reactionary; can give rise to positive affects rather than only producing rancor; can serve emancipatory purposes and challenge hierarchical power relations rather than reinscribing one's oppression and upholding oppressive power relations; can lead one to *experience* freedom rather than impotence.

Examining Indigenous women's ascetic practices in the early period of settler-colonial rule thus reveals much about how Indigenous women crafted their communal selfhood under duress, and how subjectivity was constituted through the formation of particular attachments. While the practices I examined here are peculiar to a specific historical and geopolitical context, thinking about the self-making and world-making capacity of practices that are often deemed “pathological” or simply “mad” has much broader political implications. For those who live in a world of severely circumscribed possibilities—a condition that unironically perfectly describes political life in late-modernity just as in early-modernity, pain can be taken up, both in embodied practices and political claims (the two of course most often go hand in hand), to cope with and work through injury and

domination. Perhaps paradoxically, what is inherent in self-annihilation practices is the desire to live, to thrive, to ground one's existence in the world and in relation to others. Such attachments, in other words, can bind communities together. Looking at these feminine pious practices has much broader implications for other feminine practices and gendered desires that might be labeled as upholding and perpetuating patriarchal structures and norms. Only by immanently examining how these practices and desires take shape in specific contexts and concrete relations of power, I contend, can we begin to understand their meaning, both for the agents themselves, and for feminist political theory. The fact that these practices and their experiences of them that we have access to are entirely mediated by colonial discourses the goals of which are never to properly present these practices present considerable challenges for us to access their meaning. I want to again emphasize that I am not claiming that I--or we—can recover how those who engaged in them subjectively. Rather, I sought to unearth their political meaning and efficacy in context.

Feminine piety and feminine practices more broadly speaking, have meaning-making, self-making, and world-making capacities that greatly broaden our understanding of feminist agency and subjectivity. Likewise, these practices demonstrate why settler colonialism as a political project will always be incomplete, as the intense investment in the cultivation of desire nonetheless gives rise to, or rather fails to sever, alternative forms of desire and the communal sense of self that is sustained by it. How such desire is sustained through embodied practices under tremendous duress, I suggest, compels us to rethink what *counts* as (meaningful) political action, and how they give rise to particular forms of political subjectivity. These practices and actions themselves, and attachments cultivated through them, demonstrate a different account of subjectivity, one that does not rest on reified identity categories but is articulated and sustained through desire and its enactment. Moreover, while communal relations are instrumental in giving rise to this mode of subjectivity, it does not presume exclusionary community boundaries but rather enact communal attachments and thus constantly

redraw the very contour of community through the very embodied practices themselves. What coheres community and communal relations is not metaphysical attachment to one's injury or subjugation, but rather concrete and embodied attachments to the very substance of community, such as (home)land and kin. These attachments, in turn, are world-making in the sense that they help sustain the world within which these attachments could thrive. They continue to provide the condition of possibility of Indigenous community survivance and the horizon that generates anti-colonial and de-colonial meaning.