

# ***“Hand him over to me and I shall know very well what to do with him”*: The Gender Map and Ritual Native Female Violence in Early America<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*Native North American women occupy a relatively small portion of colonial American and Canadian historiography, and often appear as handmaidens to masculine endeavour in the dynamic age of colonisation and expansion. The construction of their image relied heavily on Euro-American conceptions of recognised femininities but accounts of Native women’s warfare activities challenged these preferred images of exotic temptresses or ‘squaw’ drudges. Much of the evidence now indicates that indigenous peoples recognised a far more complex and nuanced femininity, and such concepts of alternative gendered behaviour present a significant challenge to present historical (mis)constructions of native female identities.*

This article examines ritual violence and torture committed during warfare by native North American women, a subject that presently occupies an ambiguous position in colonial history. Despite numerous primary sources detailing ritualised female violence, the purposes behind it have so far eluded historical explanation and the subject falls into no current categories of analysis: it is perceived as neither a valid part of native warfare, nor as part of the standard package of “typical” or “appropriate” female behaviours. This lacuna can partly be explained by “gender mapping”, an approach that primarily employs western concepts of femininity/masculinity and “maps” them onto historical accounts of native female behaviour, thereby constructing comprehensible Indian identities that can be adequately incorporated into the historical record. However, the gender map’s boundaries exclude unconventional female behaviour and deny the possibility that alternative femininities existed in Early Modern America, evidenced by the presence of ritual torture conducted by women which appeared to be “normal” rather than anomalous. To make sense of ritual violence, then, it is necessary to recognise how and why historians have imposed such mapping.

This paper begins by looking at a rare late seventeenth-century account of white female violence in colonial America and how it is historically assessed in relation to Indian female ritual torture. This illustrates the difficulties facing analysis of native female violence when patriarchally-informed eye-witness interpretations are married to the gender mapping of modern history. The subject will then be broken down in more detail, looking at the attitudes that informed the early reports of native women followed by a discussion of the gendered nature of modern historical inquiry. A closer look at the purposes of torture and its location among native female identities concludes the article. Peeling back these interpretative layers can help bridge the gap between the “imagined” Indian woman and the contrary evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Antoine Maillard, “Lettre a Madame Drucourt”, R. H. Whitehead (ed), *The Old Man Told Us: Excerpts from Mi’kmaq History 1500-1950* (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1991), p. 116.

which indicates that among indigenous North American people radically different views of gender behaviour existed.

This discussion is not intended to suggest that ritual torture happened every time captives were brought back to a village, and neither is it stating that torture was practised by every tribe and by women only. What *is* clear is that almost all tribes used ritual torture that to some degree usually involved female participation, and that there was very often a female-*only* component. This female-only aspect of torture is worthy of examination because the very existence of such a mechanism in Indian societies can help illuminate native female experience in war. Furthermore, it can act as a “gateway” to exploring alternative female roles and interactions with European men that extended far beyond the present historical comfort zones of mother, wife and concubine.

## Constructing the Native American Woman

Innocence, modesty and love appear to a stranger in every action and movement: and these powerful graces she has so artfully played upon her beguiled and vanquished lover ...

William Bartram on a Southeastern Seminole woman.<sup>2</sup>

One sees without wonder young Indian women so chaste and modest as to serve as an example, and to teach those of their sex the love and esteem for which they ought to have for modesty and chastity.

Chrestien Le Clercq on the Mi'kmaq.<sup>3</sup>

The Woman seems to be of that tender Composition, as if they were design'd rather for the Bed then [sic] Bondage...

John Lawson on the Carolina Indians.<sup>4</sup>

So the wretch was handed over at once to the women who, like so many Furies, seized him and tied him to a tree trunk with his legs bound together. They built a very hot fire in front of and very near him and, seizing branches, they applied them to the sole of his feet which they had stretched out to the fire ... taking live coals and putting them on the most sensitive part of his body ... using their knives to cut him deeply ... plunging his charred feet and legs into a cauldron of boiling water, and then scalping him. They were unable to make him suffer more, because he died after the last torture. But they did cut out his tongue, even though he was dead, planning to force another English prisoner ... to eat it.

The Abbé Maillard on the Mi'kmaq, c.1740.<sup>5</sup>

Their punishment is always left to the women .... The victim's arms are fast pinioned, and a strong grape-vine is tied around his neck, to the top of the war pole, allowing him to track around, about fifteen yards. They fix some tough clay on his head, to secure the scalp from the blazing torches .... The women make a furious onset with their burning torches .... But he is sure to be overpowered by numbers, and after some time the fire affects his tender parts. They pour over a quantity of cold water, and allow him a proper time of respite, till his spirits recover and he is capable of suffering new tortures. Then the like cruelties are repeated until he falls down, and happily becomes

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<sup>2</sup> W., Bartram, Waselkov G. A., Holland Braund K. E. (eds), *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians* (Nebraska 2002) p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> C. Le Clercq, *Nouvelle Relation de la Gaspésie* (Paris 1691), p. 417.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lawson, *The History of Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of that Country* (London 1714), p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Maillard, *The Old Man Told Us*, p. 116.

insensible of pain. Now they scalp him... dismember, and carry off all exterior branches of the body (pudendis non exceptis), in shameful and savage triumph.

James Adair on the Chickasaws, c.1744.<sup>6</sup>

They decided to burn the soles of his feet until they were blistered, then to put grains of corn under the skin and to chase him with clubs until they had beaten him to death.

James Mooney, Cherokee myth, 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>7</sup>

These accounts are curious, not just because of their vast difference in depictions of native women, but because the latter three descriptions have imposed significantly less gender mapping than the former. The accounts of ritual torture lack “imagined” behaviour and purpose, almost as though the authors are uncertain how to categorise the women’s motivations or intent. In stark contrast, the first three accounts reveal a great deal of imagination and desire, a desire to “create” a woman who can be easily comprehended, both by the writer and his audience, whether she is sexual or chaste. Here, the women display European femininities of submission (Lawson), and where female agency is evident, it is either appropriate (Le Clercq) or sexualised (Bartram), rendering it a less worthy aspect of female behaviour and consequently devaluing her agency. In fact, Bartram had never met the woman in question (White Captain’s Daughter); but, undaunted, he imposed on this allegedly sensuous mercenary a series of personality traits that include deception and emotional manipulation of hapless males. She is challenging, indeed, but it is a feminine challenge which ultimately does not pose any threat to manliness or intrude on masculine arenas.

These are striking yet quite representative examples of gender mapping. Whenever there is a deviation from gender mapping in historical first-hand accounts, it is often to illustrate the “savagery” of Indian life in contrast with civilised white customs, such as the descriptions of Indian women as drudges, slaves or mere “mules”.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the gender map could be modified to suit circumstance but it was usually to accommodate ideas of superior/inferior masculinities and did not necessarily include discussion of femininities. For the most part, however, Indian women were presented in categories that had meaning for westerners, thus establishing channels of trans-Atlantic communication. Favoured categories included the romantic, self-sacrificing Pocahontas or Sacagawea, sexualised exotics, diligent workhorses and even the saintly and pious religious converts. When placed next to wilful torturers, though, the standard western images of the native female seem incongruous, making it extremely hard to position women in Indian-Western discourses of femininity.

Accounts of ritual violence demonstrate a tendency to focus on the lurid acts of torture. The behaviour proved awkward for observers to mould into palatable presentations for western consumption and as a result, there is

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<sup>6</sup> J. Adair, *The History of the American Indians; Particularly Those nations Adjoining to the Mississippi, East and West Florida, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia* (London 1775), p. 390.

<sup>7</sup> J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, From the Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 1897-98, Part I. (1900), p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> W. Wood, *New England’s Prospect*, Vaughan, Alden T (ed), (1634, Massachusetts 1977). F. Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston 1867), p. xxxiii; B. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers, Canada’s “Heroic Age” Reconsidered* (Montreal 1986), p. 30; Lawson, *The History of Carolina*, p. 23.

far less imposition of conventional gendered characteristics on Indian women in such descriptions. Observations of the activities were accounts of *actions* that did little to illuminate the purposes of the acts, or what women were expressing about themselves. Observers' opinions were vague, or even absent, for without the tools to make an assessment, explanations stalled at "madness", "fury" or "savagery", western explanations for female behaviour that stepped outside of conventional and approved boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

For observers it may have been genuinely difficult to comprehend such behaviour as having any direction or rationale, and rarely would such acts have been credited as demonstrating order or as playing an intrinsic part in the native war process.<sup>10</sup> Western intellectual and Protestant thought had removed the image of authoritative females from a large section of European public life, and as the Virgin Mary's influence declined so too did specifically female spiritual power lose its essential place in social relations. And despite a lingering fascination with Amazon warrior myths of antiquity, most of which appeared to express admiration for women performing male roles successfully, any part in the western warfare process was linked to women as supporters and victims of male warfare rather than active participants in their own right. Patriotic femininity was certainly acceptable, such as the proud mother of a warrior/soldier, or a wife encouraging a husband to take up arms, but such behaviour was nonetheless viewed as lacking the male moral imperative. Any female agency existed only as a consequence of, and in relation to, the primary actions of the male.<sup>11</sup>

### **Femininities, Moral Worth and Violent Expression**

James Axtell's 1974 article "The Vengeful Women of Marblehead: Robert Roule's Deposition of 1677" illustrates this point rather well, and shows a number of problems faced by historians when analysing eighteenth-century female violence.<sup>12</sup> Although suffering heavy losses at the hands of Indians, the men of Marblehead, Massachusetts, had sailed home after a daring escape from Indian captivity with two Indian captives of their own. The women of the town had greeted the group then proceeded to attack and kill the captives, "their flesh in a manner pulled from their bones", despite the protestations of the townsmen. Roule's deposition related the colonists' capture, escape and the attack, and his description of the attack revealed a thinly-veiled, masculine disapproval of the women's actions. To Roule, the women's behaviour lacked moral worth. He referred to them as "tumultuous" and complained of attacks on the white men who attempted to rescue the captives. The men of the town had specific plans for these captives which the

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<sup>9</sup> Maillard, *The Old Man Told Us*, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Antoine Maillard, *An Account of the Customs and Manners of the Micmakis and Maricheets Savage Nations* (London 1758), pp. 1, 16, 17; Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, pp. 390-91.

<sup>11</sup> J. B. Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago 1987), pp. 71, 143, 168; G.C. Rothery, "The Amazons of America", *The Amazons*, (London 1910); M. McKeon, "Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (Spring 1995)

<sup>12</sup> J. Axtell, "The Vengeful Women of Marblehead: Robert Roule's Deposition of 1677", *The William and Mary Quarterly* (October 1974)

women, with “their bloody purpose” had failed to fully comprehend. Roule, and perhaps his contemporaries, were uncomfortable with the wanton expression of violence, not because women had adopted “masculine” behaviour, but because they had deviated from the acceptable, supporting, nurturing and empathic “war” role. These white women had disregarded the wishes of the townsmen, their female violent expression wholly inappropriate in context of war.

The article is valuable as it draws attention to colonial female violence and reveals contemporary male attitudes towards such violence. It is also a modern example of historical gender mapping regarding Indian women. Addressing these two themes of feminine violent expression and its place within the gender map can aid the construction of counter-theories regarding native female roles in warfare. The deposition clearly shows the Marblehead women’s agency and determination, but analysis of the women’s participation is secondary to the evidence Axtell gleans from the document regarding native war practices. This is perhaps because the women’s activities occupy only a small portion of the deposition itself. The majority of it describes the attack by Indians and the escape, and although the women’s acts are notable, they are not prioritised. Nonetheless, Axtell has subverted the colonial males’ positioning of women by affording them a higher profile (not least with the title of the article). He has also contextualised the deposition within the colonial environment, and rather than view the incident as an expression of European values being played out in a foreign environment, he has approached it as an Early American event, shaped by particular circumstances and localised pressures. It is interesting, then, that the paragraph in which Axtell addresses the women’s motivations for the attack does not employ this method. Instead, the women’s acts are assessed directly in relation to native female ritual torture. As two groups of women who lived on the same frontier soil, this linking of their behaviours may appear to be a natural step. However, such an analysis does not take account of the varying social customs that gave rise to ritual torture among native peoples, and assumes the two behaviours functioned on the same level and were driven by the same desires: essentially, their behaviour is united by their sex rather than shaped by their respective societies.

The Marblehead women’s actions may not have been commonplace any more than ritual torture by native women was an everyday occurrence. The difference lies in the existence of ritual torture as an acceptable social tool of native warfare, part of a complex social role. In contrast, white men disapproved of mob-like, white female violence, and they did not countenance it as an acceptable cultural expression of femininity. The difference between the two forms of violence may have been more evident through some analysis of the particular environmental pressures and social strains colonial women faced during periods of intense warfare and human loss. For example, where native women clearly had an outlet for grief, how did colonial women normally deal with such loss, and what made Marblehead unique? In this particular case of gender mapping, linking the Marblehead violence to Indian violence confines Indian female acts within a western sphere of comprehension. It denies uniquely Indian explanations and simultaneously designates ritual torture as anomalous, consequently diminishing its perceived historical importance.

Another historian of native peoples has also challenged the significance of ritual torture by native women, suggesting it was exaggerated by observers who had never witnessed women's participation in torture and execution in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Although a perfectly valid viewpoint, this approach suggests that it is not the *existence* of female torture that is noteworthy for this historian, but rather its intensity and severity. In this sense, the problem of the historical placement of ritual violence by native women is dealt with by dismissing it as either unimportant or anomalous. Historian Jeanne Boydston challenges such an approach, illustrating the benefits of exploring historical anomalies rather than questioning or dismissing their validity.

Anomalies are just what ought to interest us as historians – not so we can figure a way to force them to conform to the framework, but because they disrupt the common sense of the framework and may signal that something is being missed or suppressed within it.<sup>14</sup>

Boydston goes on to stress that the “something” is probably local, “the ground of particular historical time and space”. Axtell has drawn attention to this unusual account of female violence in this manner, but the same holds true for accounts of ritual torture, whether exaggerated or not. It is the existence of these actions that is key, and the possible exaggeration of the practices does not diminish the relevance of ritual violence as a valid line of historical inquiry, particularly as regards indigenous women's lives.<sup>15</sup>

Axtell has assessed accounts of women by colonial men, a subject that carries its own set of analytical problems. The historian can only work with the available evidence, and whilst challenging their nineteenth-century predecessors' perceptions of the Native American, the historian must simultaneously attempt to peel back layers of exaggeration and moral disapproval, while trying to gauge and interpret what lies beneath.<sup>16</sup> Such colonial witnesses, influenced by prevailing, enlightened (and pre-Enlightenment) thought on masculine “reason”, feminine “passions” and appropriate gendered behaviour, managed to convey these ideals in their accounts of Indian and white women. To eighteenth-century philosophers, these gendered characteristics were rooted in biology and thus were unalterable, rendering women unfit for rational, political responsibilities. It therefore followed that women's violent expression, even if politically motivated, lacked any real worth: it was simply without masculine form and organisation. Gender theorist Victor Seidler has argued that for men, reason had become synonymous with masculinity, an intrinsic part of the male psyche, and therefore all males, regardless of class, age or race, were

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<sup>13</sup> Axtell, “The Vengeful Women of Marblehead”, p. 650.

<sup>14</sup> J. Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis”, *Gender & History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (November 2008), p. 560.

<sup>15</sup> Axtell, “The Vengeful Women of Marblehead”; Elshtain, *Women and War*, p. 183; C. Cockburn, “The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence” in O. N. Moser and F. C. Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (London 2001), p. 14; P. Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (Hampshire 2002), p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, pp. 7-19. See also F. Jennings, “Francis Parkman: A Brahmin among Untouchables”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July 1985), pp. 306-28, and F. Jennings, “A Vanishing Indian: Francis Parkman Versus His Sources”, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Jul., 1963), pp. 306-23.

automatically deemed to be more worthy of social inclusion and responsibility than women.<sup>17</sup> If this is true then it would suggest that in the early modern period, women required someone to speak on their behalf. Simply put, without a male to authorise, approve or interpret violent or explosive female behaviour, the acts were relatively inconsequential.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, “Male violence could be *moralized* as a structured activity – war – and thus be depersonalised and idealized.”<sup>19</sup> When it appeared to be personal i.e. female, violence was deemed “unruly”. Marblehead, mob-like behaviour, then, was merely symptomatic of the “natural” female inclination to such passions, and lacking the natural gift of reason, native women’s torture could be viewed as a morbid curiosity rather than a valid representation of indigenous lives.<sup>20</sup>

From the early modern to the modern period, the actions of western women who stepped outside the bounds of womanly behaviour during war were attributed to the displacement that warfare imposed on their lives. Such actions were tolerated by society as a temporary state with the expectation that women would return to “natural” roles when political order had been restored, or when anger had finally been expunged, as shown in “The Vengeful Women of Marblehead”.<sup>21</sup> For example, during the Seven Years’ War the dislocation of warfare made it socially acceptable for white women to pick up arms against Indians, but this model of womanhood was rewritten after this war and the war for independence when nurturing homemakers, rather than valiant heroines, were considered necessary for the success of the New Republic.<sup>22</sup>

Historians, then, must be sensitive to the hidden sub-text in documents that may reveal aspects of female warfare practices. However, whilst many historians have challenged successfully their predecessors’ analyses of native peoples, perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to understanding ritual female violence is how far western, Enlightenment concepts of public/private “spheres” continue to inform current historical conceptions of native lifeways and warfare. This social and gender map favours western warfare styles by emphasising Indian men’s participation, polarising male and female experiences of war, and thereby discouraging investigation of female war

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<sup>17</sup> V. Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity, Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London 1989), pp. 14-18, 44-64; V. Seidler, *Unreasonable Men, Masculinity and Social Theory* (London 1994), p. xi.

<sup>18</sup> J. Lawson, *The History of Carolina*, p. 35; Seidler, *Unreasonable Men*, p. 3; J. F. Traer, *Marriage and the Family in Eighteenth Century France* (Ithaca, London 1980), pp. 48-54.

<sup>19</sup> Elshtain, *Women and War*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Seidler, *Unreasonable Men*, p. 3; C. Montesquieu, Book VII, “Consequences of the Different Principles of the Three Governments with Respect to Sumptuary Laws, Luxury, and the Condition of Women”, *The Spirit of Laws* (1752).

<sup>21</sup> Moser, Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?*, p. 14; Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, pp. 4, 15; Axtell, “The Vengeful Women of Marblehead”; Elshtain, *Women and War*, p. 170; M. Gailus, “Food Riots in Germany in the Late 1840s”, *Past & Present*, No. 145 (November 1994), p. 175; C.A. Bouton, “Gendered Behavior in Subsistence Riots: The French Flour War of 1775”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer, 1990), pp. 735-754.

<sup>22</sup> See J. Namias, *White Captives* (North Carolina 1993) and L. K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (June 1988), and *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (North Carolina 1980).

practices.<sup>23</sup> Gender theory can inform the analysis of historical texts by providing relevant tools to remove layers of obfuscation and allow scrutiny – and removal – of gender mapping.

To eighteenth-century observers, the imposition of the ideal characteristics of western women meant that Indian women could be moulded into something similar and comprehensible. For example, Indian female ownership of her body, and thus her sexuality, could be described as “prostitution” when she used it as a commodity for trade. Moreover, there were precedents for warrior women, often personifying patriotic feminine virtue as the “mother of the nation”, such as Boudica or Joan of Arc. The supposed calming influence of women was often viewed as a nurturing balance to the impulsive acts of the male, perhaps allowing a small degree of white toleration for Indian female political opinion in their capacity as mother and wives.<sup>24</sup> This allowed a historical acknowledgment of the position of Cherokee Chief Nancy Ward as a “mother” of the tribe, and her compassion was lauded when she saved the lives of those destined for torture. When she endorsed the torture of a young boy, however, contemporary comment stalled, unable to find a way of interpreting her actions.<sup>25</sup> Although westerners witnessed guerrilla-style raids on camps by whites and Indians, bringing war into the home area, the contemporary accounts continued to emphasise warfare as having a “field” and armies. A worthy battle required a glorious outcome, a clear winner and numerous slain bodies of the enemy, and perhaps a handful of PoWs for good measure.

For many European travellers, it was natural and appropriate to maintain the strict separation of war and home i.e. male and female spaces. To these men, women’s traditional link with de-prioritised domestic areas rendered the Indian camp a place of non-violence, and it would logically follow that any violence performed by women in this area could not play a significant role in war.<sup>26</sup> Of course, when women performed “male” tasks competently, they could no longer sensibly be called “other”, and so distinctions were maintained within the accounts that supported the status of males, swiftly dismissing such female behaviour as “deviant”. Furthermore, to acknowledge the home camp as an arena of vital and necessary war activity would be to imbue women with unprecedented amounts of agency and will, their violent actions a direct challenge to notions of masculinity.

In the first instance, violence in the Indian village would have been an intrusion of the masculine into the feminine arena: to assert that this was normal war practice would have been to discount the existence of a “female” area. It is unlikely that a combined fe/male war space would have been acknowledged by observers since male and female spaces were considered a

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<sup>23</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, p. 162; Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, p. 30; Lawson, *The History of Carolina*, pp. 35, 199; Parkman, *The Jesuits*, pp. 307-08, 373-7; Bartram, *Southeastern Indians*, p. 113; A. Loudon, *A Selection of some of the Most Interesting Narratives of Outrages Committed by the Indians*, 811, Vol. II (Carlisle 1811).

<sup>24</sup> J. Axtell, (ed), *The Papers of William Johnson, 1758 and 1752*, in *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America* (New York 1981) pp.154-7. See also Loudon, *A Selection of some of the most interesting narratives*, for demonstrations of Indian female “mercy” in warfare.

<sup>25</sup> T. Perdue, *Cherokee Women, Gender, Culture and Change*, (Nebraska 1998) pp. 54, 209. J.G.M. Ramsey, *The Annals of the Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia 1853), pp. 157-8.

<sup>26</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, pp. 15, 18.



vital part of social ordering.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, socially-sanctioned violence performed by women challenged Euro-American ideas of “natural” female characteristics, and were hardly compatible with other descriptions that firmly (and conveniently) placed Indian women alongside their white counterparts. Thirdly, that such violence should display the reason, structure and logic attributed to male violence would have been to place women on a social and intellectual equal footing with Indian males. Finally, violence that had meaning beyond the taking of a life i.e. invoking religious and spiritual powers, would have meant that Indians were fighting a war in a manner that white men could not have easily comprehended. Having a shared concept of the “rules” was necessary to ensure clear winners and losers, and thus, justification for subordination of peoples (or a valid reason for the ejection of whites from Indian soil should they lose).

The Abbé Maillard wrote from Nova Scotia in the 1760s:

If the missionary is wise he will be very careful to say not one word then against these horrors [torture], because not only will he speak in vain, but he will also be in grave danger of suffering the same fate.<sup>28</sup>

The Abbé was stationed among the Mi'kmaq, and his quotation suggests that in some cases, rather than needing protection, native women inspired genuine fear among white men, which may have presented interpretative problems for white observers.<sup>29</sup> The accounts indicate that time was devoted to the preparation of captives for torture. Areas were designated and platforms for the exhibition of the captive were constructed. Captives were examined and selected or rejected by experienced, sharp-eyed women. There was rarely evidence of compassion or “nurture” among these women at this point.<sup>30</sup> Children were trained from an early age to perform such gruesome acts as amputations, encouraged to eat body parts of the victims, and to enjoy their torment. This could take hours or days and unlucky captives were revived after passing out, and sometimes were forced to watch friends suffer before the same violence was inflicted upon themselves. There was no attempt to shield women from the horrors of war, as Euro-American war customs indicated. Instead, women *became* one of the horrors of war for their white, male captives.<sup>31</sup>

Accounts of these horrors appear in Early American narratives yet find no definitive home among histories of women or warfare. Philomena Goodman has argued that such historical marginalisation of women's war

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<sup>27</sup> Elshtain, *Women and War*, pp. 164-5; C. Montesquieu, “Book VII Consequences of the Different Principles of the Three Governments with Respect to Sumptuary Laws, Luxury, and the Condition of Women”, *The Spirit of Laws* (1752).

<sup>28</sup> Maillard, *An Account of the Customs and Manners of the Micmakis and Maricheets*.

<sup>29</sup> Extract from the Journal of Anthony Casteel, in *The Old Man Told Us*; D. Menzies, “A True Relation of the Unheard-of Sufferings of David Menzies, Surgeon, Among the Cherokees, and of His Surprising Deliverance”, *Royal Magazine* (1761) in Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, p. 54, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, p. 391.

<sup>31</sup> Maillard, *An Account of the Customs and Manners of the Micmakis and Maricheets*; Adair, *The History of the American Indians*; Lawson J., *A New Voyage to Carolina* (1709, North Carolina 1984), p. 195; Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*, p. 192; Anderson, K., *Chain Her By One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London, New York 1991), pp. 188, 193-223.

efforts was directly linked to fears that acknowledging female ability in male space undermined manliness.<sup>32</sup> Evidently, male physical and ideological fears were embodied in native female violence. It is therefore little wonder that from the earliest days of contact explorers, using their own European experience, had sought to make sense of values that were so contrary to their own. For the practical purposes of conducting good relations with native peoples in the eighteenth century, it was vital for settlers, travellers and observers to maintain a grasp on shared experiences and similarities. For these men to acknowledge an alternative, viable and effective social structure would have been to undermine the superiority of the western way, whilst simultaneously undermining the ideological foundations of their own masculinity in western cultures. Gender historians and theorists have also suggested that women, located in the domestic arena, were “custodians of the values being fought for”. To reinforce the value of male acts, women *had* to be kept separate from war even when the evidence showed the contrary.<sup>33</sup>

Hampered by patriarchally-informed historical accounts that sidelined female activities in warfare as auxiliary or mildly influential, ritual torture appears to have slipped under the historical radar, relegated to the realms of “unreasonable” acts that had no intrinsic value to the masculine war. For some historians, gender is “the principal articulator of the social order”, and it has often involved inserting native women and men into appropriate boxes for analysis to allow construction of native-white discourses. This approach has produced some work of value regarding native women’s lives, illuminating their worlds as mothers, traders, lovers, wives and matrons, and it shows that the sensitive application of the gender map can be a useful departure point for further inquiry into indigenous societies.<sup>34</sup> However, rather than provide a solid comparative foundation, the map also appears to have led analysis astray on a number of occasions, and instead of acknowledging its own weakness even within western societies, it has been used to help establish some common bond with native peoples.<sup>35</sup> For example, within early modern western societies supposedly separate female space was not, in reality, solely female but was often shared with men and therefore conceded authority to men. Female space was, in fact, male space on loan. On the other hand, women were often present and active in “male” spaces, too, and while there may have been an ideal of gendered space, reality did not always correspond with this.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, among native peoples the only strictly separate spaces

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<sup>32</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, p. 98

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> S. Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men, Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Massachusetts 2001); S. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties, Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Oklahoma 1980); J. S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood, Fur Trade Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, London 1980); C. Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Several modern historians have drawn attention to women’s resistance to “separate spheres”, examining the expanding nature of domestic, feminine roles or suggesting that the spheres were as productive for women as they were restrictive. Others have challenged the historical interpretations of the spheres and demonstrated how women constructed meaning within their spheres to establish substantial counter-currents to masculine “dominance”. See N. F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England 1780-1835* (Connecticut 1977); L.K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” and *Women of the Republic*; K. Warren, “Separate Spheres:

appear to have been the menstruation huts and the warrior huts, and even then, males (and possibly females) were able to enter such spaces without fear by the use of specific herbs, potions and other permissions that negated the dangerous effects of intruding in such spaces.<sup>37</sup> Most other areas were shared and any evidence of exclusion was based not necessarily on sex, but on the occasion or based on earning the right to enter sacred spaces by one's contribution to the tribe. The *type* of contribution was sometimes determined by sex, however.<sup>38</sup> Since the gender map bears only some resemblance to European social dynamics and is a reflection of ideals, its function as an explanatory tool is particularly undermined when addressing native groups.

Other problems can also arise when historians subconsciously retain elements of western social/gender mapping within their analysis.

Often women's activities and experiences are devalued because they are not traditionally located in the public sphere. When this gendered fluidity of time and space is made a focus of attention, this reveals the ever-blurred boundaries of the public and private.<sup>39</sup>

Although referring to female experiences in the twentieth century, this comment holds equally true for analysis of eighteenth-century colonial warfare. In her discussion of women's attempts to locate themselves within warfare, Goodman argued that,

There were challenges to the polarity of masculinity/femininity mirrored in the dualism of battleground/home front, foreign/local imagery that historically maintain gender difference.<sup>40</sup>

By the nineteenth century, these ideals of fe/male spaces, or private/public spaces had been refined into a more substantial ideology and were evident in Western social and familial structures, and encoded in law and working practices.<sup>41</sup> Challenging the employment of these values in interpretations of native societies certainly means revisiting concepts of Indian masculinities as well as femininities, seeking elements that do not correspond to western stereotypes. However, the construction of Indian women (both historical and modern) has partly depended on Indian men who appeared to conform to most western gender and social stereotypes. These included the warrior, hunter, chief, politician, shaman and diplomat, and also depended on Indian customs that appeared to mirror aspects of western life. Therefore, traditional (non)views of female violent expression during war go some way to explaining why most examples of female rituals have been limited to those related to menstruation, and discussions of violence have been restricted to male

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Analytical Persistence in United States Women's History", *History Compass* 5, Issue 1 (2007).

<sup>37</sup> Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> E. B. Gonzalez, "An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Micmac Male and Female Roles", *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 29 (Spring 1982); Maillard, *The Old Man Told Us*, pp. 105, 115-19.

<sup>39</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, p. 162.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>41</sup> M. J. D. Roberts, "Feminism and the State in Later Victorian England", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 1 (March 1995); R. L. Griswold, "Law, Sex, Cruelty, and Divorce in Victorian America, 1840-1900", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (Winter 1986); G. Best, *Mid Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London 1988), p. 119.

actions symbolically supported by women.<sup>42</sup> However, the extent of ritual violence by women sits awkwardly between these two: the purpose here is to find its position within native female lives.

## War and Power in Female Spaces

Indian women, then, appear to have been kept physically, ideologically and historically separated from warfare by modern analysis that has been unwittingly informed by “separate spheres” ideology. One historian of the Iroquois described women as having a “dominant voice” in matters of welfare and community, while men were tasked with activities outside the community including war and “public business and dealings with other groups”.<sup>43</sup> Although the historian may be relying on sources that interpret native customs in the context of gendered space, the analytical language conveys and reinforces this ideology of fe/male spaces, and sharply separates women from war and public business. It raises the question, then, of how far women’s engineering of political marriages, social encounters and ritual violence could be considered participation in the public realm, since they often involved outsiders.

This is made more puzzling by the accounts of William Johnston, Superintendent of Indian Affairs and extremely familiar with Iroquoian customs (he was married to a Mohawk), who in 1762 found himself faced with the dilemma of how to *exclude* Iroquoian women from political and (presumably) public affairs.<sup>44</sup> The women met with Johnston in 1758, and although their words were spoken by a male delegate, their level of public participation was evident. Not only had they travelled beyond their camps and engaged in political dialogue with non-native persons, but their own perceived war authority was quite clear:

We flatter ourselves you will look upon this speech, and take the same notice of it as all our men do, who, when they are addressed by the women, and desired to desist from any rash enterprise, they immediately give way, when, before, every body else tried to dissuade them from it, and could not prevail.<sup>45</sup>

This contradicts the idea of a non-public role for Indian women (although warfare certainly could come under the banner of “welfare”). Essentially, historical analysis has maintained the inappropriate application of gendered spaces and has polarised male and female participation within war and diplomacy. Of course, the lack of direct female testimony to contradict these beliefs does not provide substantial alternatives for historians to grapple with

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<sup>42</sup> E. Crouch Zelman, “Reproduction, Ritual and Power”, *American Ethnologist* (Nov. 1977), p. 716; D. Tedlock, “Torture in the Archives: Mayans Meet Europeans”, *American Anthropologist*, (March 1993), pp. 139-52; M. Taussig, “Culture of Terror - Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (July 1984), pp. 467-97; N. Knowles, “The Torture of Captives by the Indians of Eastern North America”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (March 1940).

<sup>43</sup> Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> G. M. Bataille, (ed), *Native American Women, A Biographical Dictionary* (New York, London 1993), pp. 36-7.

<sup>45</sup> J. Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America* (New York 1981) p. 155

and analyse. But as Goodman has pointed out, “Gender cannot be mapped directly onto the dichotomy of the public-private sphere because this dualism is not rigid”.<sup>46</sup> Lacking ideological similarities with western gendered spaces, the application of these ideals is particularly damaging for analysis of native women because such structures reinforce the masculine nature of war, and subsequently deny native women an active performance within all aspects of it. The example of the Iroquoian women suggests that either the foundations for analysis are flawed or historians must abandon the gender map and widen concepts of war and public/political activities to include female participation, thus accommodating what would otherwise appear to be inconsistencies and anomalies.<sup>47</sup> By so doing, the anomalous loses its status as “unusual” and becomes evidence for alternative theories on women and war.

As demonstrated by some of the accounts in this paper, warfare did not “displace” Indian women as it did Euro-American women, and neither was ritual torture a temporary response to colonial war. It was an act often performed independently of men; it did not require the permission of men; and it was not a masculine expression of war simply appropriated by women. Ritual torture was a social mechanism built into native lifeways and customs. It provided a specifically female expression, no matter how “unfeminine” that may have appeared, and it was not a war role designed around an extension of female, domestic duties such as preparing food and moccasins, or expressing dis/approval of war.

The evidence clearly points to a chasm between native and western concepts of homefront, battlefield and gendered space, and analysis of ritual torture and violence by women must begin with the deconstruction of the western concept of appropriate gender spaces. When this is challenged, the notion of western masculine supremacy, often premised on the ideals of separate spaces, is also weakened and Indian lifeways begin to lose resemblance to western social structures. Political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain has suggested that,

Women are designated non-combatants because of the part they play in the reproductive process; because women have been linked symbolically to images of succouring non-violence.<sup>48</sup>

But this is a Euro-American perspective and in native lives, there was no apparent discord or incompatibility between female bodies and propensity for violence. And neither were expressions of physical anger viewed as incongruous with nurturing skills. It therefore follows that a departure from analyses premised upon ideas of Euro-American gendered spaces and roles has the potential to reveal further dimensions of the native woman’s world. Viewed in this light, the position of ritual violence as Indian female war expression begins to take on the characteristics of a representation of an alternative gender structure.

Had ritual torture been a very minor part of native lives, then perhaps traditional historical approaches to it would be understandable. However, the purposes of ritual torture, and the time and care devoted to preparation for the

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<sup>46</sup> Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, p. 159.

<sup>47</sup> Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis”, pp. 560-61.

<sup>48</sup> Elshtain, *Women and War*, p. 183.

event, indicate that it held a great deal of significance for native peoples, and was considered a vital part of warfare. By extension, this suggests that the roles of native women were far more complex than presently believed, and that status, authority and power were to be found in places that colonists had never thought to look.

After removing Euro-American ideologies and interpretive constructs, and examining native violence on its own terms, the foundations and reasons for such activities start to become apparent. Native people were expected to appease the deceased who had been lost in combat, both male and female, and to seek retribution on their behalf. Many believed that without such actions these angry spirits would have plagued the tribe, for the deceased had as great a right to retribution as the living. For many native groups in early North America, punishment involved not just deceased relatives, but appeasement of the gods and spirits. For example, the North Carolinian Saponi believed that failure to torture prisoners could result in supernatural punishments, such a major storm or a crop failure, and invested with the blessing of the tribe and the power of the gods, women inflicting violence were obliged to make torments as unpleasant as possible for the captive and for the benefit of the people.<sup>49</sup> Among the Iroquoian people, human sacrifices were made during war as offerings to the Sun and God of war, and appeared to be a two-part process, with men performing the initial and “private” torments while the public role was reserved for the women.<sup>50</sup> This shows that although personal vengeance may have formed part of their violent purposes (and would correspond with the Marblehead women’s behaviour), there were also more lofty considerations, too. Evidence suggests there may well have been an element of pleasure in torture – it was one of the spoils of war and fulfilled a social release for people through expressions of rage and grief. One observer said women took their time in their violent ministrations in order, “that their death might be slower, their pain more exquisite, and the rejoicing more noted and of longer duration”.<sup>51</sup> For women who committed such acts, it was necessary to embody tribal emotions in their performance, a public display for the benefit of onlookers and participants alike.

For tribes who practiced cannibalism, torture provided purification for such purposes. One Algonquian Indian told the Jesuit Jacques Buteaux that the flesh of the enemy was “not good for eating”. Burning, torturing, roasting and renaming of the victim into a relative, purified the enemy, and only then would he or she make acceptable eating. Other tribes cannibalised to absorb the enemy’s power, or to show contempt, and another traveller recorded children being fed the still-warm blood of captives, while Huron women would feed enemy fingers to eager children.<sup>52</sup>

Torture established a psychological power over one’s enemy and many Native American groups feared those who practiced the worst abuses through torture. Iroquois and Cherokee acts were legendary, and added to their power and mystique: the more creative or extreme one’s practices were, the greater

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<sup>49</sup> Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Knowles, “The Torture of Captives”.

<sup>51</sup> Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, p. 390.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*; J. Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (1876), p. 54; Knowles, “The Torture of Captives”, p. 189.

the fear one could instill in the enemy.<sup>53</sup> Torture was a spiritual battle of wills between captor and captive, and women who challenged enemies in this arena were the conduits of the tribe's true source of power – the spiritual realm. Torture established tribal superiority over the enemy, tested their spiritual worth and ultimately, furnished the means to break the power of the enemy. How the captive behaved during these events was a strong indication of the spiritual resources the enemy could command – break the will, the spirit and the bodies of enemy captives and the tribe could feel secure in the next encounter with them. Historian Greg Dowd summarised an account of one such battle where a captive pleaded for his life with native women: “The women of Itsati demonstrated Cherokee power, power ratified in the ultimate victory over the Shawnees”. The warriors had done well to capture such an enemy, but the *real* victory came when the women broke the Shawnee warrior.<sup>54</sup>

It would thus appear that warfare was brought back to the camp and that ritual torture was a continuation of that war until the final blow was administered, effectively signalling the death of the enemy. In this sense, what historians have most often viewed at the “private” arena took prominence over the “public”. Among matri/patrilines, there was strong evidence of egalitarianism when it came to war, a recognition that women were affected by it as much as men, and not necessarily as hapless victims pleading for a cessation of hostilities – often the reverse was true. Women felt rage and loss as keenly as males, and therefore had the right to seek retribution and to physically engage with the enemy just as males did. Rage was expressed in a socially-sanctioned display of ritualised violence and sadism, encouraged from an early age, and in this way, violence and femininity were inextricably linked. Female responsibilities to families and the continuation of the tribe were also enhanced by expressions of violence. Contrary to Euro-American beliefs, life-taking was as natural as life-giving and may even have been the reason women were endowed with such responsibility. One did not preclude the other, unlike Euro-American beliefs which polarised the male-female relationship with life i.e. women give life, men take it.

Furthermore, the involvement of children at such an early age indicates that violent tribal customs, passed from parent to child, were not predicated on biological assumptions and dichotomies at first, but were evenly divided until adulthood and the separation of violent “duties”. This most likely took place around adolescence when youths began to seek out their own powers and interpret their dreams. Women were directly and physically linked with the enemy as part of their social responsibility not only to adult members of the tribe, but to the education of children, too.

By performing cleansing rites, applying torture and practicing amputation, the *type* of violence inflicted on the enemy may have been distinctly feminine but its significance remained. Social status was often achieved through spiritual power, and warriors followed those they believed commanded superior spiritual powers: it was the means to secure victory over an enemy whilst ensuring your own survival.<sup>55</sup> Such power was available to

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<sup>53</sup> Taussig, “Culture of Terror”; Knowles, “The Torture of Captives”, pp. 7, 15.

<sup>54</sup> G. E. Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore, London 1992), p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Bartram, *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, pp. 66-9.

women as much as to men, and from an early age they were encouraged to develop their spiritual prowess, sometimes adapting and adopting newer “powers” from missionaries and acting as shamans and healers.<sup>56</sup>

For women, captives also provided other choices, and occasionally husbands were selected from the group, showing a type of agency in marital choices that has rarely been acknowledged. Typical Euro-American explanations for Indian women’s choice of white over red ranged from the superior “vigour” of white men, their desirable trade goods, and the greater status that white men could confer on native women.<sup>57</sup> However, such marital choices look decidedly different in the light of ritual violence, and women’s attitudes to captives can show less admiration for white men than the latter may have wished for. One Shawnee woman had praised warriors after a raid for bringing in “good meat”. By comparing the white man to the produce of a hunt, she at once confers praise on the Indian males for a job well done whilst depersonalising the captive, turning him into something less than human with a status far beneath her own. Far from being greeted by eyelash-batting dusky maidens, a male captive may have felt a significant amount of trepidation on hearing himself described as meat.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary accounts often describe white males who clearly felt disturbed during their “examination” as potential husbands and many felt uncomfortable at the prospect of being married to an Indian woman.<sup>59</sup>

For these women ritual violence was a separate, female communication with the gods in the form of human sacrifice; a communication with the deceased to appease their wrath; it was a communication with the living through their performance for the willing crowd; and it was a communication with the captives themselves as the women assessed the strengths of the enemy, and sought to undermine and destroy them, thereby revealing the strengths of their own tribe. It was an irony that colonial wars, rather than further submerge native female identities, were often able to provide them with continuing opportunities to express their spirituality and tribal status. At the very least there appear to be significant undercurrents, or counter-currents, to the belief that wars were demonstrations of masculine prowess, and this process of ritual torture, the end of the native battle, allowed women to articulate *their* powers within the realm of colonial warfare.

Familial, social, political and spiritual responsibilities were evident in ritual violence. By creating an alternative theory that encompasses these acts, other behaviours that confounded observers may become more comprehensible, such as sexually boastful young girls, disrespectful brides and mercenary alcohol traffickers. Such actions can be located within this spectrum, which provides an appropriate gendered language with which to articulate indigenous women’s femininities and relationships with white men,

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<sup>56</sup> R. Conkling, “Legitimacy and Conversion in Social Change: The Case of the French Missionaries and the Northeastern Algonkian”, *Ethnohistory* (Winter 1974).

<sup>57</sup> Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, pp. 167, 168.

<sup>58</sup> Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, p. 12; Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations*.

<sup>59</sup> Loudon, *A Selection of some of the most interesting narratives of outrages committed by the Indians*, p. 100.



while allowing deeper, more nuanced insights into colonial gender behaviours and Euro-American masculinities.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*, p. 78; Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, p. 128; Bartram, *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, p. 65.

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