

**“En écrivant à une personne, je parle à plusieurs”:
Responding to Readers in the Jesuit *Relations* from New France**

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It is common in scholarship on the Jesuit *Relations*—reports from French missionaries in what is now eastern Canada that were published annually in Paris from 1632 to 1673 and are now highly valued as source of historical and ethnographic information—to note that the texts reached a large and enthusiastic readership. Allan Greer, for example, characterized their reception this way: “The appearance of each successive volume was eagerly anticipated in some circles, as priests, nuns, and pious laypeople throughout France read them avidly” (14).¹ Readers’ reactions to the texts have generally not, however, been considered among the forces that shaped subsequent instalments in the series. Instead, scholars have tended to emphasize the writerly work of Jesuits on the ground in New France (Pouliot 18; Greer 14), while occasionally acknowledging that editors in Paris could also shape the *Relations* (Wroth 118; Melzer 83). Such factors surely were very important in determining the form and content of the texts, but this article suggests that they do not tell the whole story. Drawing on the available clues about how the missionary authors understood and reacted to their audience, I argue here that the desires of metropolitan French readers—whether expressed or merely presumed by the Jesuits—also ought to be considered a key part of the process that produced the annual *Relations*.

It is beyond doubt that the *Relations* found readers in France in addition to the Jesuit Provincial in Paris to whom they were sent each year, and whom they frequently address directly.² The very fact of their publication suggests a larger readership, and their occasional mention in the writings of non-Jesuits—such as the Ursuline nun Marie de l’Incarnation, prior to her own arrival in Quebec to establish a convent there—confirm that the *Relations* were eagerly awaited and faithfully

¹ For more examples, see Desbarats 51; Dubois 52; McShea 23–24; Rigault and Ouellet 639; Thwaites, vol. 1, 41; and Wroth 114.

² For examples of references to the “Révérend Père” to whom the *Relations* were at least superficially addressed, see MNF 2.406, 485, 538, and 740. For examples of comments directed to “Vostre Révérence,” see MNF 2.411, 578, and 649. All citations of the Jesuit *Relations* in this article are drawn from Lucien Campeau’s *Monumenta Novae Franciae*. This edition is here abbreviated MNF.

read in at least some quarters.³ Scholars have sometimes asserted broadly that the *Relations* were a commercial success, on the basis of the large number of editions and variant printings that have been found in libraries over the last century. Claude Rigault and Réal Ouellet, for example, wrote that “le nombre des exemplaires retrouvés croît au point que les données bibliographiques (quantité de rééditions chez le même éditeur et chez des concurrents ou associés français ou étranger) permettent d’affirmer que les *Relations* sont un succès de librairie” (639).⁴ Although no precise information about the size of the annual print runs has survived, it is clear that at least some of the texts were indeed printed repeatedly to keep up with public demand. The 1649 *Relation*, to cite just one example, includes the harrowing story of the torture and death of two Jesuit missionaries at the hands of Haudenosaunee captors. It immediately appeared in four distinct editions, including a bootleg edition printed in Lille and a Latin translation in Innsbruck. Many others, including the *Relations* for 1632, 1640-1648, 1651-1662, and 1664-1672, initially appeared in just one edition, apparently testifying to a more modest reception.⁵ Although the size of the *Relations*’ readership seems to have varied more than is sometimes acknowledged, it is clear that these annual reports were intended from the beginning to reach an audience beyond the leadership of the Society of Jesus in Paris.

Although the New France Jesuits were far away, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, when each new *Relation* rolled off the press in Paris to find its readers, longstanding Jesuit practices related to the preparation and circulation of edifying letters provide good reason to take seriously the notion that the missionaries were aware of their audience, and that this knowledge influenced their writing choices. From the very founding of the Society of Jesus, long before any of its representatives reached New France, members were expected to report regularly on their activities in letters to the Jesuit leadership. This practice enabled the administration of the Society and was also intended to help promote a sense of unity and coherence among far-flung Jesuits, in addition to the use to which reports from missions could be put in

³ See, to cite just one example, Marie de l’Incarnation’s 1635 letter to her spiritual director (27).

⁴ See also Wroth 114. For an accounting of the known editions and variant printings, see McCoy’s synoptic table (non-paginated).

⁵ In some cases, variants exist between individual copies of a single edition, mostly consisting of errors that seem to have been noticed and corrected during the printing process. See McCoy’s synoptic table (non-paginated).

attracting public support.⁶ Although initially intended to circulate only among members of the Society, such letters quickly came to be shared with outsiders (Nelles 2). Perhaps understandably, in light of the Jesuits' controversial reputation, the Society's founders soon urged its members to exercise great care in preparing their letters, and to expect that anything they wrote might find its way into the hands of both supporters and adversaries. In a 1542 letter to the Society's co-founder Peter Faber that he indicated would be shared widely among Jesuits, for example, the Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola wrote that "members of the Society should, when they write to us here, write out a *principal* letter which can be shown to others; that is, to anyone at all" (Young 62–63). Another of the Society's co-founders and famous missionary in Asia Francis Xavier gave similar advice in a 1549 letter to his colleague Joam Beira:

Que vos récits soient de telle nature, qu'étant portés en Europe, ils puissent passer de main en main et même être communiqués au public par la voie de l'impression: vous ne devez pas perdre de vue que les mémoires de ce genre, qui proviennent de pays si éloignés, sont curieusement recherchés et lus avidement en Espagne, en Italie et ailleurs; et nous devons, par là même, écrire avec plus d'attention et de réserve, les lettres que nous envoyons.
(116–17)

By the time the New France Jesuits began sending their *Relations* to France in the following century, both this custom of the Society of Jesus and a broader practice, among France's elite, of publicly circulating letters that were at least superficially intended for a single reader were well established.⁷ It is not hard to find signs in the *Relations* that the New France missionaries were keenly aware that they were writing for a potentially large audience of supporters and skeptics alike.

⁶ On this tradition and its various forms over the course of this early history of the Society of Jesus, see Delfosse, "La correspondance jésuite : Communication, union et mémoire : Les enjeux de la formula scribendi" and Friedrich, "On Reading Missionary Correspondence: Jesuit Theologians on the Spiritual Benefits of a New Genre."

⁷ Publication of Jesuit mission reports from around the world began slowly in the mid-1500s, but increased sharply by the beginning of the following century, with dozens of such texts appearing in the first decade of the *Relations*' publication. A good sense of the scale of this phenomenon can be found in Carayon, *Bibliographie historique de la Compagnie de Jésus*. A good overview of seventeenth-century French practices around the writing and circulation of letters can be found in the first chapter of Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: The Sévigné Correspondence*.

Mission Superior Paul Le Jeune's 1634 *Relation*, for example, acknowledged "il est vray que j'écris à une personne" but also referenced "Les autres qui verront cette relation par son entremise" (MNF 2.729). Two years later, in his *Relation* from the mission among the Wendat, Jean de Brébeuf reported having read in a letter from France that "l'ancienne France brusle de très ardents désirs pour la nouvelle" thanks to news that had been sent home by the missionaries (MNF 3.307). The 1640 *Relation*, which was attributed on its title page to then-Superior Barthélemy Vimont but was actually penned at his request by his predecessor, Le Jeune, opens with an explicit acknowledgment of the presumed audience and the value readers apparently found in the *Relations*: "Je croyois qu'estant deschargé du fardeau de la supériorité, je serois ensuite délivré des soins de la Relation que Vostre Révérence exige de nous et qu'une grande partie de la France attend avec quelque passion" (MNF 4.557-58). In these and in other, similar cases throughout the series, it is clear that the New France Jesuits never forgot—or at least not for very long—that their texts were destined to be read by non-Jesuits in France, and that they believed at least some of those people had taken a passionate interest in the progress of their religious mission.⁸

More specific comments throughout the texts suggest that the New France Jesuits had clear ideas about what sorts of people were—and were not—reading their texts. Common are references to readers among the powerful decision makers associated with the French crown or the trading company that was charged with administering the settlement's civic affairs.⁹ The first chapter of the 1637 *Relation*, for example, catalogs powerful figures in France who had demonstrated a keen interest in New France and in the *Relations*, including King Louis XIII, Cardinal Richelieu, the Grand Master of Malta, the Pope, and the French Queen, Anne of Austria (MNF 3.526-32). Also frequently mentioned are the wealthy and socially connected ladies and gentlemen of France's polite society. The missionary authors sometimes appealed directly to such readers for material support for the mission, minimizing the requested outlay by putting it in terms of the ordinary expenditures of their potential donors. Wrote Le Jeune in 1633, for example,

⁸ For more passages in the *Relations* that reflect an awareness of the texts' readers, see Debacq, Dostie, and Pouliot 23–25.

⁹ On the history of Compagnie des Cent Associés and its role in the early settlement of New France, see Havard and Vidal 86–92.

Il y a des dames dans Paris qui emploient tous les ans plus de dix mille francs en leurs menus plaisirs. Si elles en appliquoient une partie pour recueillir les gouttes du sang du Fils de Dieu respandu pour tant d'âmes qui se vont perdant tous les jours faute de secours, elle ne rougiroient pas de honte au jour qu'elles paroistront devant Dieu, pour rendre comte des biens dont il les a fait oeconomes. (MNF 2.430)¹⁰

Finally, it is clear that the authors of the annual *Relations* believed that their words were reaching potential future missionaries. This belief was no doubt rooted both in their pre-existing knowledge of how news circulated throughout the Society of Jesus' network of colleges and mission houses and in the testimony of new colleagues freshly arrived from France. Jesuit colleges, where the New France missionaries had begun their careers as students and typically also as instructors, had long been hubs for the collection, production, and dissemination of news within the Society of Jesus, giving students ample opportunity to learn about distant missions and to fantasize about joining them (Nelles 16). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the 1634 and 1636 *Relations* each include a chapter specifically addressed to the potential future missionaries residing in such institutions. And Lalemant's *Relation* for 1647-1648 confirms that the New France Jesuits were aware of this audience, as it includes an excerpt of a letter from a newly arrived missionary in Trois Rivières who reported having "leu et releu autrefois les *Relations*" before coming to New France (MNF 7.316).

Although the missionary authors frequently mentioned their sympathetic readers, it is also clear from the *Relations* that they did not expect their words to reach everyone in France who may have been interested in them, due to varying literacy rates and access to books across professions and social classes. After describing in the 1636 *Relation* the difficulties that poor people who might want to settle in New France would encounter and offering guidance on how to avoid a ruinous experience, Le Jeune acknowledged that his words would not reach their intended recipients directly: "Mais à qui est-ce que je parle? A des personnes qui n'ont garde de sçavoir rien de ce que j'écris, si plus capables qu'eux ne leur en font le récit" (MNF 3.268). Estate inventories from around this time suggest that even when they could read, artisans

¹⁰ For more examples, see MNF 3.186, 3.564, 4.271, and 4.578.

and merchants were far less likely to own books than members of the clergy, nobility, and legal and medical professions, and that the books they did own were mostly restricted to religious works or texts related to their trades (Chartier 144–52). Leaving aside occasional appeals to potential lay settlers like the one above, the New France Jesuits mostly seem to have understood themselves to be writing for an audience of elites and potential future missionaries, although the *Relations* were among the most modestly priced books printed by Sebastian Cramoisy and therefore at least theoretically widely accessible (Wroth 143).

The missionary authors were also keenly aware of the hostility toward the Society of Jesus in some quarters that might have caused some readers to find fault in the *Relations* instead of appreciating them as intended. Jesuits were famously suspected of involvement in the assassinations of Kings Henri III and IV in 1589 and 1610, and found themselves expelled from France for a time after the first of these events. Later, after 1640, the Society faced constant criticism in France from Jansenists (Worcester 106, 112).¹¹ As Éric Debaq has recently shown, Le Jeune's *Relations* in particular seem to reflect an awareness of the Jesuits' adversaries in France, and take special care to "Répondre aux critiques formulées" and "imaginer celles qui pourraient être faites" (3). To cite just one example, Le Jeune began a chapter of his 1636 *Relation* dedicated to explaining the mission's prospects by addressing head-on an unspecified reader's criticism of the Jesuits' apparent failure to that point to achieve the widespread conversion of the land's Indigenous people: "Entre quelques propositions qu'on m'a fait de l'ancienne France, quelqu'un me demande d'où vient qu'en tant d'années, on a baptisé si peu de personnes. Il me semble qu'il faudroit renverser la proposition et dire: d'où vient qu'en si peu d'années, on a baptisé tant de personnes?" (MNF 3.236). Although they commented frequently on the enthusiasm or fervor with which they believed some readers—powerful decision makers, well-heeled potential financial backers, and would-be future missionaries—were awaiting their words, the Jesuits responsible for compiling the annual *Relations* clearly also understood that some of their readers were unlikely to be supportive of the mission.

It is not always possible to know exactly how the attention of this socially and ideologically heterogenous audience may have influenced

¹¹ A concise overview of the forces opposing the Jesuits in France around this time can be found in Nelson, "The Historiography of the Pre-Suppression Jesuit Mission in France."

the form and contents of the *Relations*, because the Jesuit authors did not often explain their writing choices, but there are nonetheless tantalizing clues that the missionaries' awareness of their readers could be an important factor. Le Jeune closed his 1634 *Relation*, for example, by reporting that he would have written much more were it not for his recognition of a readership beyond his official correspondent: "Mon coeur a plus parlé que mes lèvres et n'estoit la pensée que j'ay, qu'en escrivant à une personne, je parle à plusieurs, il se respandroit bien davantage" (MNF 2.739). Several years later, it became clear that this impulse toward brevity for readers' sake was wise. Gaston d'Orléans, brother of King Louis XIII and first in line for the throne in the absence of an heir, complained to Jesuit officials that he found the *Relation* for 1637 far too long and repetitive. This criticism is mentioned in a brief 1638 letter from Jesuit General Mutius Vitelleschi to Paris Provincial Etienne Binet that is now held in the Jesuit archives in Rome and reproduced in Lucien Campeau's edition of material related to the mission (MNF 4.72–73). Vitelleschi's letter urged Binet to take serious care to remedy the problem identified by Gaston d'Orléans, lest this powerful ally and benefactor of the Jesuit college in Blois be angered. It is little wonder, then, that the following year's *Relation* was extremely concise in comparison to the text that had drawn complaints from such a well-placed critic. It was less than one hundred and fifty pages long, approximately one-fourth the length of the 1637 *Relation*, and is riddled with comments reflecting a new concern for brevity.¹² The opening letter, for example, explains that "On est dèsjà si remply des façons de faire de nos sauvages et de nos petits travaux en leur endroit que j'apprehende le dégoût. C'est pourquoy je diray peu de beaucoup, omettant des chapitres entiers, de peur d'estre accusé de longueur" (MNF 4.76–77).¹³ The striking differences between the 1637 and 1638 *Relations* in length and detail attest to the influence powerful readers in France could exert over the published annual reports.

This incident appears to have made a lasting impression on the Jesuit Superiors who were charged with preparing each year's text, who never again wrote such a long report, even when detailing particularly sensational or tragic events such as the capture and torture of missionaries or the dissolution of the Wendat mission at the hands of

¹² For details on the publication of the two texts including their length, see Campeau's prefaces: MNF 3.520 and 4.73–4. See also True 150.

¹³ For an additional example from the 1638 text expressing a new concern for brevity, see MNF 4.132.

Haudenosaunee raiders. Indeed, the longest *Relation* to appear in the decade following the royal complaint about the length of the 1637 *Relation* came in 1644. It was 404 pages long, nearly two hundred pages shorter than the report that drew the ire of Gaston d'Orléans. Years after this incident, missionary authors still shied away from comprehensive accounts of even their most important evangelical work, reporting that they feared a negative reaction from unspecified readers. Barthélémy Vimont's 1645 *Relation*, for example, recorded his own concern for brevity in strikingly emotional terms, highlighting both a fear of repeating himself and the danger of alienating his readers by giving too much information that was not particularly new: "Nous ne parlerons point en particulier des diverses résidences ny des diverses missions de nostre Compagnie, de peur d'user de redites. Les choses qui se passent de nouveau ont tant de raport avec celles qui ont dèsjà esté escrites que le danger du dégoût nous rendra succints de plus en plus" (MNF 6.328).¹⁴

The *Relations* themselves also record numerous cases in which reader feedback, in the form of questions or comments in letters received in the colony from unspecified readers in France, influenced the texts' contents. At least according to the *Relations*' own testimony, the merchant ships that arrived from France each spring bore letters from a wide array of correspondents.¹⁵ Such frequent feedback no doubt furnished evidence for the missionaries' above-mentioned belief that their words were reaching a large and varied audience on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, but also alerted them to aspects of life in New France, Indigenous cultures, or the Jesuits' own evangelical work about which readers were hungry for more information. Le Jeune's 1636 *Relation* devoted an entire chapter to answering a variety of questions received from readers in France, ranging from the colony's agricultural prospects and whether Spaniards were present to navigational information and what goods the land might offer for export (MNF 3.256–66). In the 1639 *Relation*, Jérôme Lalemant justified expanding on his earlier discussion of the geography of the Wendat territory, where he was then leading the Jesuits' mission, by explaining that someone had asked to know more:

Mon dessein n'est pas de redire icy ce qui se peut trouver dans les précédentes *Relations* ou dans les autres livres qui ont dèsjà traicté de ce sujet, mais seulement de

¹⁴ See also MNF 7.421.

¹⁵ See, for example, MNF 6.56.

suppléer au défaut de certaines circonstances sur lesquelles j'ay reconnu qu'on désiroit quelque satisfaction. (MNF 4.353–4)

And three years later, Lalemant responded to the “désir de quelques personnes qui nous ont demandé quelque observation des éclipses que nous remarquons en ce païs” by sharing the Jesuits’ notes on a lunar eclipse that took place on April 14, 1642 (MNF 5.535). The missionary authors sometimes also acknowledged readers’ questions, but declined to answer them, as in Le Jeune’s 1637 response to a reader who had requested “quelque esclaircissement en ce qu’on peut espérer d’establissement de la religion chrestienne et en suite de communication avec les païs attenans aux sauvages, leurs frontières et aboutissemens” (MNF 3.669). Le Jeune answered the first of these questions, but decided that “Pour la communication avec les païs voisins, on a pleinement satisfait dans les autres *Relations*” (MNF 3.670).¹⁶

In addition to cases like those discussed above, in which one can directly observe how readers sometimes shaped the texts by complaining or posing questions, there are also signs that the Jesuits’ mere awareness of their readers could influence their writing choices, even in the absence of specific feedback. One example of this influence is the material in the texts that was specifically addressed to the potential missionaries who were apparently avid readers of the texts, such as the two above-mentioned chapters. Le Jeune’s 1634 *Relation* contains an entire chapter dedicated to those “à qui Dieu donne les pensées et les désirs de passer les mers pour venir chercher et instruire les sauvages.” The chapter is full of practical information intended as “armes nécessaires pour le combat” in which newly arrived missionaries would be expected to engage (MNF 2.651). It explains in detail the hardships such men would likely encounter if they found themselves wintering with the Innu, as Le Jeune himself had just done, including the discomforts of makeshift shelters, unappealing or scarce food, the behavior of those hostile to the faith—in Le Jeune’s case, a particularly antagonistic Innu spiritual leader whom the Jesuit referred to as a “sorcier”—and other difficulties. Two years later, Brébeuf’s 1636 *Relation* from the Wendat mission also included an entire chapter addressed to such fervent readers, filled with descriptions of the mission’s particular difficulties, such as the miserable state of the Jesuits’ accommodations, the constant threat to missionaries

¹⁶ For additional examples, see MNF 3.236 and 7.711.

posed by Indigenous enemies of the Wendat, and the inescapable torments of insects during the summer months. Wrote Brébeuf, explaining the inclusion of this material in his *Relation*,

Nous avons appris que le salut de tant d'ames innocentes, lavées et blanchies dans le sang du Fils de Dieu, touche bien sensiblement le coeur de plusieurs et y allume de nouveaux desirs de quitter l'ancienne France, pour se transporter en la Nouvelle. (MNF 3.334)

Neither chapter bears any hint that its appearance in the *Relation* was prompted by specific questions from readers, but it is clear in both cases that the general interest in the mission expressed by potential missionaries shaped how the Jesuits described their own experiences. Le Jeune and Brébeuf each tried to warn the future missionaries who they believed would read their words to expect a difficult experience, but also, crucially, attempted to reassure them that the mission's hardships were worth the trouble. Of the periods without enough food that he had to endure while working among the Innu, for example, Le Jeune hastened to add that he found a comforting spiritual abundance in the notion of his own possible death, "afin que ceux qui liront ce chapitre n'apprehendent point de nous venir secourir" (MNF 2.657). He concluded the chapter by again seeking to allay any fears his graphic descriptions of the conditions he had endured might inspire in potential colleagues, and by appealing to the religious fervor that had attracted their attention to New France in the first place:

Cecy ne doit épouvanter personne. Les bons soldats s'animent à la veue de leur sang et de leurs playes. Dieu est plus grand que nostre coeur. On ne tombe pas tousjours dans la famine; on ne rencontre pas tousjours des sorciers ou des jongleurs de l'humeur de celui-cy. (MNF 2.663)

Brébeuf adopted a different rhetorical strategy, imagining a conversation with a would-be missionary and putting brave words in the fictional man's mouth, as if to acknowledge the fear that his fellow Jesuits may have felt at the prospect of joining a dangerous and difficult mission while also modeling for them a way of channeling their anxiety into renewed determination:

Pensez-vous par vos raisons avoir jetté de l'eau sur le feu qui me brûle et diminué tant soit peu le zèle que j'ay pour la conversion de ces peuples? Je vous déclare que cela n'a servy qu'à me confirmer davantage dans ma vocation. (MNF 3.337)

The preoccupation on display in these chapters with warning would-be colleagues of the mission's hardships while also reassuring them shows that the Jesuit authors were concerned with more than simply reporting events in New France or touting the progress they were making in inducing Indigenous people to convert to Christianity. They also could consider the anticipated feelings of their readers, and seek to address them in their texts.

This sensitivity to readers on the part of the New France Jesuits raises the prospect that some material that otherwise might have been included was omitted to avoid unduly frightening or offending anyone. Indeed, the same above-cited instructions from the founders of the Society of Jesus that said its members should write their annual reports with the understanding that they might be widely read further specified that anything that might cause offense should be omitted. In his letter to Joam Beira, for example, Xavier told his colleague to be careful about what he included in any reports that might find their way to the reading public:

Dans ces lettres, vous devez apporter un discernement et un choix dans les faits, qui passent sous silence tout ce qui peut atteindre indirectement les personnes, ou les offenser par une allusion téméraire. (116)

Xavier sent a similar message to the missionary Gaspard Barzée in a 1549 letter, urging him to include only things that inspired praise of God:

Que rien n'y paraisse qui puisse justement offenser personne, rien dont la lecture ne doive inspirer, à la première vue, la pensée de glorifier Dieu et de tout entreprendre pour son service. (51)

There are signs in the *Relations* that the missionary authors took to heart these longstanding guidelines, set by the Society's earliest missionaries, and sometimes chose not to include material that they

feared would be objectionable to their audience. Although whatever the New France Jesuits chose to leave out of their texts is, by definition, invisible to modern observers, there are a number of cases in which they explicitly signaled that they had omitted something to avoid upsetting readers. In 1644, for example, Vimont reported that a concern for propriety had caused him to forego a detailed description of some particularly shocking torture practices he had observed: “Sept jours se passèrent de la sorte et y adjoustèrent de nouveaux tourmens, car ils le firent souffrir en des lieux et en des façons que la bienséance ne permet pas d’écrire” (MNF 6.131). And Jérôme Lalemant’s *Relation* for 1659-1660 similarly reported that the Jesuits had learned new information about Indigenous behavior toward captured enemies, but declined to describe them lest readers be too badly affected:

On en a parlé de vrai dans les autres Relations, mais ce que nous en avons appris de nouveau est si estrange que tout ce qu’on en a dit n’est rien. Je les passe, non seulement parce que ma plume n’a pas d’ancre assez noire pour les décrire, mais bien plus de peur de faire horreur par la lecture de certaines cruauitez dont les siècles passez n’ont jamais entendu parler. (MNF 9.463-4)

Even simple discretion could, by the missionary authors’ own account, cause them to say less on certain subjects than they otherwise might have, if addressing Jesuit authorities alone. In 1640, for example, Le Jeune lamented the death of the Jesuits’ supporter François Fouquet, who was then serving as an interim but unofficial administrator of the colony’s trading company, writing “Je ne doute point que la perte d’un homme si utile à l’estat et dont les actions ont mérité une approbation si universelle n’ayt esté extraordinairement sensible à l’ancienne France, mais elle me permettra de dire qu’elle ne l’a pas moins esté à la nouvelle.” He stopped himself from saying more, however, explaining that “La crainte que j’ay de faire souffrir la modestie des vivans et de violer le secret dont l’obligation dure mesme après la mort ne me permettra pas d’en dire davantage” (MNF 4.623).

The Jesuits’ explanations for the omission of material in these instances—propriety and discretion—certainly aligns with the well-established policies of the Society of Jesus mentioned above, and may well reflect the missionaries’ true motivations. But it is also true that the New France missionaries on other occasions seem to have intentionally

signaled and then withheld their knowledge on particular topics, as a way of reminding readers and potential competitors in France that the Jesuits possessed unique knowledge of Indigenous people and events in the French settlement that no one else was in a position to obtain. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that the New France Jesuits touted their own growing knowledge of Indigenous languages, while declining to share it in detail, as a way of highlighting their own privileged access to Indigenous people and rhetorically closing the door on any other religious groups who may have wished to establish their own missions in New France, such as the Franciscan Recollets who had worked in New France from 1615 to 1629 and who sought unsuccessfully to return after 1632 (True 27–54). It is possible that the authors of the *Relations* mentioned their knowledge in the above-cited cases without choosing to share it for similar reasons, to enhance their own reputations as uniquely knowledgeable. Whether motivated by such concerns or by the longstanding norms of the Society of Jesus, the New France Jesuits' awareness of readers clearly led them to omit information from the *Relations* that otherwise might have merited inclusion in an account of a year's events.

In the absence of consistent explanations of writing choices on the part of the various authors of the Jesuit *Relations*, it is impossible to account comprehensively for how their awareness of and interactions with readers shaped the published texts. But the clues assembled here certainly suggest that this apparently engaged readership in France ought to be considered among the factors that shaped the annual *Relations*. Whether sympathetic to the mission or less so, readers could at least sometimes influence the contents of subsequent volumes in the series or even their form by complaining or asking questions. And the Jesuits' very awareness of their pious, refined, and powerful readers could also lead them to omit or moderate their comments on certain aspects of their experiences in New France, apparently even absent a specific request that they do so. Although French readers' interest in the texts is well known, it has generally been cited only as a sign of their curiosity about New France, its Indigenous inhabitants, and the Jesuit mission, or of the texts' potential to shape France's understanding of its relationship to the rest of the world (Greer 14–15). The Jesuits' own frequent recognition of their readers and the signs traced here of how awareness of their desires could influence subsequent texts in the series suggest that scholars would do well to think of the texts not only as a rich account of life in the colony and the land's Indigenous people that reflects the point of view of

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the missionaries, but also as the result of an ongoing conversation between interlocutors at home on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

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