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Social Death and Resurrection in the Western Great Lakes

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Slavery is widely reported in the ethnographic and ethnohistoric literature of the western Great Lakes of North America, yet the status and role of slaves, indeed the very nature of slavery itself, seem unclear. For example, Bacqueville de la Potherie's 1722 history of New France repeatedly refers to "slaves" among the indigenous peoples of the western Great Lakes, but the term appears to be used interchangeably with "captive" (see, e.g., Blair 1911 2:37, 49, and footnotes; also Kinietz 1965:205, cf. 255), whereas Nicholas Perrot's somewhat earlier description of the same peoples makes no mention of slaves or slavery (see Figure 10.1).[1] Are these differences due to each author's particular knowledge and perspective? Or is slavery in the western Great Lakes of a sort that these Europeans did not easily recognize or understand? My answer to both questions is yes.

Slavery in the western Great Lakes region seems to have taken a form that appeared unusual, even unique, to the European explorers who first witnessed it, but is common in nonstate societies (as discussed by Cameron in the introduction to this volume and described in the chapters by DeBoer, Habicht-Mauche, and Bowser). In the western Great Lakes the taking of captives was an integral part of indigenous warfare in which captives-*cum*-slaves played a central role. Once captured, an individual no longer existed as a "true" human being: they were alienated from both their own group and that of their captors. Their future depended wholly on the choice their captors made to either sacrifice or adopt them. It is interesting that the captive's time as a slave was very short; captives were either killed or adopted within a few days of their capture. Once killed, they no longer existed, and once adopted, they existed as new individuals, no longer slaves. Perhaps it was this brevity of slavery, and its utter transformation through death or adoption, that confused European observers.

Captives as Slaves

Orlando Patterson (1982) offers a useful discussion of slavery that sheds light on my perspective. Patterson (1982:1–2) argues that slavery relies upon physical and psychological control, but, more significantly, it is rooted in the fact that a slave is completely alienated from his or her kin group and culture. Slaves experience, in a very real sense, social death (Patterson 1982:5–7). They have no genealogical roots and have, as Patterson (1982:6) puts it, "ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community." This is precisely the case for captives in the western Great Lakes.

The following passage provides a useful example of the physical and psychological control placed on captives, and how they became "socially dead." It describes the events that occurred upon the arrival of a war party with captives to an Illinois village in the late seventeenth century (also see Figure 10.2):

> During this time the prisoners are outside the cabin (for it is a maxim with them never to

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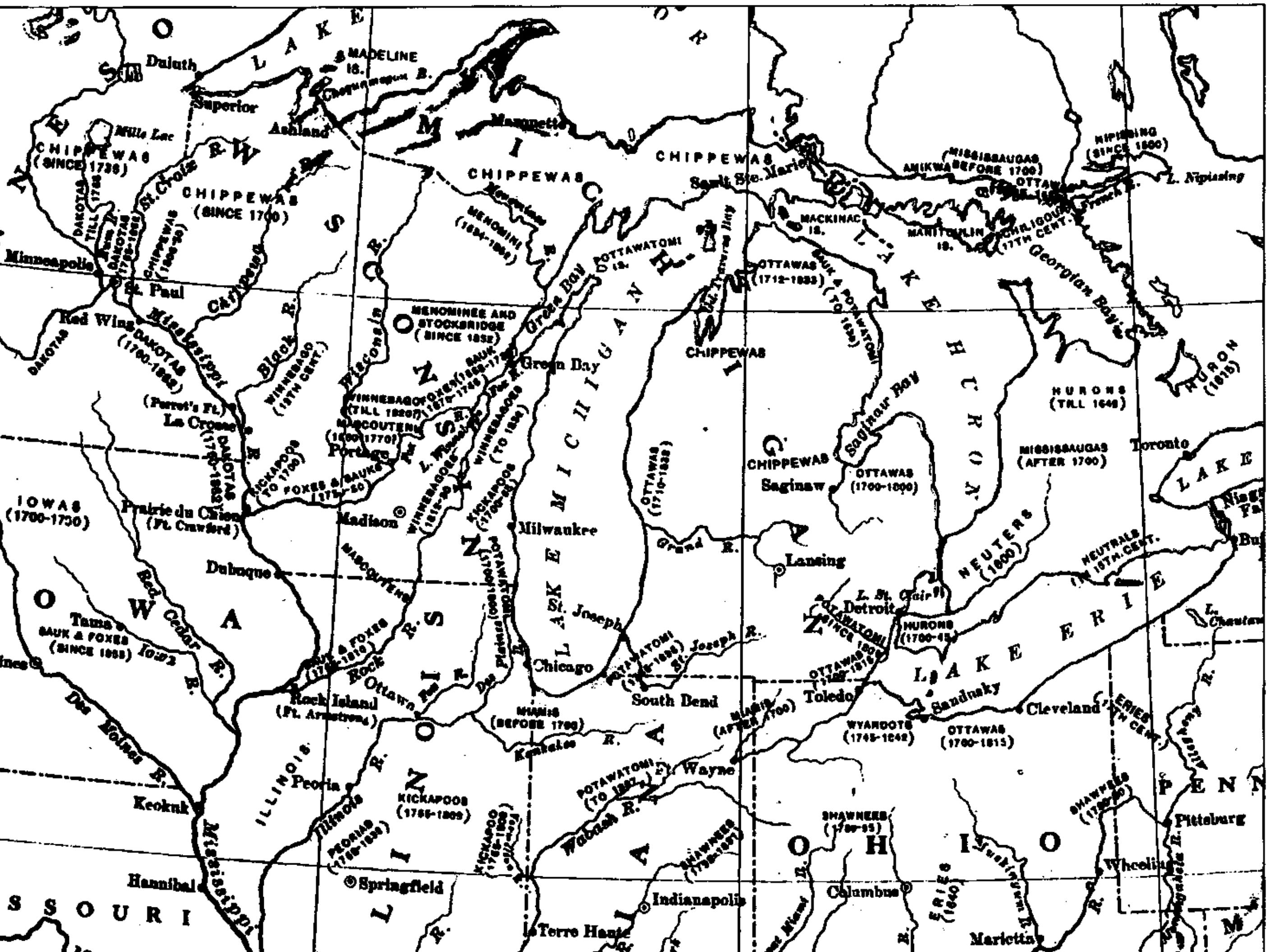

FIGURE 10.1. Map of the western Great Lakes region showing the locations of peoples and places mentioned in text (from Blair 1911).

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FIGURE 10.2. Detail from Francesco Bressani's 1657 map, *Nova Francia Acurata Delineatio*, showing the torture of a captive. Original held by the National Archives of Canada.

> admit slaves into their cabins unless they have been granted their lives). These sing their death song, holding in one hand a stick ten or twelve feet long, filled with feathers from all the kinds of birds that the warriors killed on the road. This is after having them sing at the doors of the cabins of all those who have most recently had relatives killed.

The old men and party leaders assemble and decide to whom these slaves shall be given. This settled, they lead one of them opposite the door of the cabin of the one to whom they give him, and bringing along some merchandise, they enter and say that they are delighted that the young men have brought back some men to replace, if they desire it, those whom the fate of war has taken away. For this offer great thanks are returned. A little later these people assemble and decide what they will do with the prisoner who has been given to them, and whether they wish to give him his life, a thing rarely done among the Illinois. When he is a man, they admit him and send for the principal men of the village who have brought them the prisoners. They thank these and give them some merchandise. When they want him put to death, they bring him back to the cabin of the most considerable of those who have offered him, giving the captive to them, with a kettle and a hatchet which they have colored red to represent blood. From there he is taken to others, and according to their decision he dies or lives. When he is condemned to die, it is always by fire. I have never seen any other kind of torment used by this nation.

They plant a little tree in the earth, which they make him clasp; they tie his two wrists, and with torches of straw or firebrands they burn him, sometimes for six hours. When they find his strength far gone, they unfasten him and cut his thumbs off, after which they let him, if he wishes, run after those who are throwing stones at him, or who wish to burn him. They even give him sticks which he holds with great difficulty. If he tries to run after anybody, they push him and he falls on his face, at which they hoot. He sometimes furnishes a whole hour's diversion to these barbarians. Finally he succumbs under the strain of his

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torments, and sometimes drops down motionless. The rabble run to get firebrands, which they poke into the most sensitive parts of his body; they trail him over hot embers, which brings him back to life, at which they renew their hooting, as if they had performed some fine exploit. When they are tired of their sport, an old rascal cuts his flesh from the top of the nose to the chin and leaves it hanging, which gives him a horrible appearance. In this state they play a thousand tricks on him, and finally stone him or cut open his stomach. (Deliette 1934:383–386)

It is not difficult to see physical control here given that the captive "slaves" were tied, tortured, and killed by their captors. More interesting is the implicit psychological control. The captives knew that their future was almost certainly death, and they were forced to acknowledge it by singing their "death songs" and carrying staffs that physically recount their journey in captivity. While many seventeenth-century manuscripts note the stoicism of Indian captives facing death, I believe the psychological trauma they underwent must have been severe, perhaps debilitating (hence the appearance of stoicism). Clearly these captive "slaves" were both physically and psychologically controlled by their captors.

The captive "slaves" were also socially dead. Again, they carried staffs to physically identify their journey away from their homes and to the captor's village. More importantly, they were stripped of their humanity. They were treated as chattel, given as gifts, and, if rejected, killed. In torture they were cruelly shown their utter powerlessness, their lack of allies or friends of any kind, and were stripped of the very marks of their humanity: their thumbs and their face. Indeed, more than socially dead, they were made inhuman.

It is not unusual for captives to become slaves, as many of the chapters in this volume discuss. Indeed Patterson (1982:106–115) offers an entire section on captives. However, the situation Patterson describes is quite different from the one that appears to have obtained in the western Great Lakes and, indeed, in many parts of North America (see the chapters by DeBoer and Habicht-Mauche, this volume). He notes that captives typically find themselves subject to "immediate massacre, torture and sacrifice...; ransom; prisoner exchange; temporary imprisonment; serfdom; impressments into the victor's army; colonization; and simple release" (Patterson 1982:106). While the first and second were common (if singular) experiences for captives in the western Great Lakes, there was another common experience not mentioned by Patterson here: adoption.

Patterson (1982:63) argues that while the ethnographic literature does suggest adoption of slaves, "It would be a great mistake...to confuse these fictive kin ties with the claims and obligations of real kinship." I disagree, at least in regard to the indigenous peoples of the western Great Lakes. Captives were not only adopted, but they took on the statuses, roles, and even names of deceased persons. They were, quite literally, resurrected from social death.

Social Death and Resurrection

As the example above makes clear, the rituals of captivity and torture practiced by the peoples of the western Great Lakes had the effect of socially (and, in many cases, physically) killing the captive. Their purpose was to objectify the captive, to destroy his or her humanity, to transform the captive into a being without possession of a personal history, a culture, or even a body they could control. (And this is why torture is so important: not to inflict pain, but to destroy the individual's tie to his or her body). Through rituals of captivity and torture, captives were dispossessed of their history, culture, and bodies, with ownership assumed by the captors, who could then either mold them into a new form or discard them.

One way captors molded captives into a new form was as a replacement for a deceased person. This was possible because the captive no longer existed as an individual and thus could be shaped, through ritual, into another person to replace one who had died. We can see this destruction and reconstruction of the individuality of captives in the following excerpt from Cadillac's memoir on the peoples living around Fort Michilimackinac in the 1690s:

> If they capture any prisoners they pinion them so tightly that the bonds cut into their flesh. Then they travel night and day until they are out of danger and safe from their enemies.

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When they are near their own village they send men ahead to give the news of all that has happened during the campaign, after which preparations are made for welcoming the warriors and haranguing them before they enter the place. At the same time arrangements are made for the entrance of the prisoners, which always begins with from three to four hundred blows with sticks, making them fall flat on their faces a hundred times before they enter the cabin of triumph which has been prepared for them.

As soon as they are within, they are told to dance and chant their death song. The chant is both proud and mournful; they recite what they have done during their lives, especially the number of persons they have killed, with their names and the names of their tribes, the place and how they did the deed. Sometimes they are made to sit and sometimes to get up and always to chant, especially when anyone of importance comes into the cabin to see them. But while they are singing in this way one man pulls out a finger-nail, another puts one of their fingers in the pipe he is smoking; at intervals a firebrand is held to their flesh, which is burned down to the bone; some cut off pieces of their flesh, which they cook and eat immediately, sucking their fingers afterward as if they had eaten something exquisite. Thus they amuse themselves for two or three days, after which the old men, the war chiefs, and the principal men of the village assemble to determine the life or death of these unfortunates.

Their death or life generally depends upon the women, for this reason. Some of them have lost a husband or sons in the war, and if seeing a handsome prisoner, or more often actuated merely by whim or caprice they ask for them to replace the dead, the council never refuses them. As soon as they are declared free they are unbound and the women or girls who have saved them lead them to their cabins. They wash their wounds, oil them, and make them look as well as they can; and a few days later a feast is given in the cabin at which the strangers are adopted as children of the house, as brothers, sons-in-law, or other relatives.

From this time they are treated kindly and no one insults them any more. But the most surprising thing is that they are the first to go to war against their own tribe, and kill or take prisoners their father, uncles, or other relatives indifferently, as if they were nothing at all to them, thinking more of the second life which has been given them than of the life they received from their fathers and mothers, whom they often see burned and torn in pieces because they were hard-hearted enough not to set them at liberty after capturing them; for, as I have already said, the life or death of the slaves depends either on the council or the women. The council gives some of them to the French commandant and others to various tribes, to confirm and ratify their alliances. As soon as they have handed them over they cease to have control of them, and their life or death depends on their new masters or the tribe to which they are presented. (Cadillac 1962:28–30)

The destruction and reconstruction of the captive's persona is clear here, a transformation that I refer to as the captive's social death and resurrection. The first paragraph describes the captive's flight from his or her home village, and the beginning of the "discipline" (see Foucault 1977) used to transform the captive into a malleable being.[2] In the second paragraph we read that the captive was forced to tell his or her personal history while being tortured. Here the captive's past and present were simultaneously destroyed. Their past deeds and present body were both the subject of torture, and both were physically consumed by their captors (either eaten or smoked). One can imagine that, after two or three days of this torture, the captive would surely be dehumanized and socially dead. He or she would no longer exist as an individual with a past and a present, but only as an object for the "amusement" of his or her captors.

The third and fourth paragraphs describe what I call the captive's social resurrection. If chosen for adoption, the torture ended, the captive's physical wounds were healed, and, in a few days, a ceremony of adoption was held. In this ceremony the captive's psychological wounds were healed, and he or she was given a new persona and a new

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history—that of a person in the captor's society who has died. The captive became, quite literally, the dead person resurrected. This was made possible by all that had gone before. Through torture, the captive was stripped of his or her humanity, and through adoption humanity was restored, but in a new form, a form once possessed by a person now dead. In a very real sense, the captive was resurrected into a new being.

The Purpose of Social Resurrection

What is the purpose of this social resurrection, and how can we explain its ubiquity among the peoples of the western Great Lakes? Even a cursory survey of the literature on slavery will show that most scholars view slavery's primary purpose as economic (e.g., Finley 1968). In this sense, social resurrection would replace lost labor. When an individual dies, their value to society as labor to produce resources dies with them. Through adoption, the deceased person's labor could be replaced. It is a simple calculus, perhaps too simple for anthropologists who recognize the complexity of "stone age" economics (Sahlins 1972).

A more nuanced approach, such as that put forward by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers (1972:56), posits that slaves were "adopted" into a society for a range of purposes: "Acquired persons were valuable as economic, social, and political capital, as a type of wealth that could be easily converted from one use to another and that had the incomparable advantage of being also self-supporting and self-reproducing." Kopytoff and Miers see slavery primarily as a continuum of "rights-in-persons," and adoption itself as a continuum of more complete incorporation into the captor society, often taking place over several generations. From this perspective (and echoing Patterson's caution about slave adoption mentioned above), understanding slave-taking and use must focus on the particular local conditions within which it occurs (Kopytoff and Miers 1972:61–66). Within a kin-based society, however, Kopytoff and Miers (1972:29) suggest that "adopted" slaves were most valuable as producers of more kin-group members. Certainly this must have been the case among the peoples of the western Great Lakes. Labor would have always been valuable, and therefore acquiring labor through a captive to replace labor lost through a death seems not only logical but necessary to sustain the society. Yet such a cold calculus does not seem to explain the many rituals and the profound impact social resurrection seems to have had on the individuals and societies involved. What else might have been going on?

In a careful examination of captive-taking and adoption among the Seneca, Anthony Wallace (1969) suggests that social resurrection eased the trauma of loss. As he puts it, "Death aroused the most violent reactions, [which] could only be forestalled by replacing the lost object with an adopted substitute" (Wallace 1969:76–77). Indeed Wallace (1969:102) suggests that the primary aim of warfare between the Seneca and neighbors in the Ohio Basin and Great Lakes region was to obtain prisoners to replace the dead. There appear to be two primary purposes here. First, as Wallace argues, is a psychological one: to ease the pain of loss. And Wallace provides several excellent examples described by the Seneca in their own words (e.g., Wallace 1969:31–32).

There also seems to have been a religious basis to captive adoption. Robert Hall (1997) has argued that captive adoption is part of a larger religious complex involving ceremonies of "soul release." For example, Hall (1997:42–43) describes a series of rituals among the Fox and Sauk in which the soul of a dead person is released from its bonds with other kin through the substitution of another soul in its place: the soul of a captive.

Perhaps a better way of viewing captive adoption is through the lens of alliance theory, by which I mean both the rather narrow perspective of Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1969), where the incest prohibition is seen to force individuals to marry outside their immediate kin group and thereby form alliances with other kin groups, and also the broader application of alliance theory in structural anthropology as a whole (e.g., Hage and Harary 1984). The broader application of alliance theory sees society as a web of relationships based on kinship, gift-giving (e.g., Mauss 1954), association memberships, and the like. Each individual has a key role within this web, as they are essentially nodes that link other members of the society to one another. Death takes away that individual's node and thus severs links, perhaps unique or otherwise important ones.

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From the perspective of alliance theory, death is a key problem faced by all human societies, and societies have developed a wide range of mechanisms to deal with it. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the widespread practice of holding "feasts of the dead" in which the belongings of deceased individuals are given as gifts to relatives, friends, and allies of the deceased is seen as one mechanism through which social links severed by death were reestablished (e.g., Trigger 1976). Hall (1997) describes a wide range of similar mourning rituals that served a similar purpose among peoples of the Mississippi Valley. I suggest that the adoption of captives into the roles of deceased persons—social resurrection—also served to reestablish a social node taken away by death.

What, then, was the purpose of social resurrection? Its basic purpose appears have been to maintain society in a time of crisis caused by death. Captive-taking, torture, and resurrection eased psychological traumas and maintained essential labor but, more importantly, reestablished bonds that were severed through death. I believe the case studies in this volume support my assertion, and one of the overall themes I see in the volume's chapters is that captive-taking occurs most frequently where there is a labor bottleneck, as in seasonal needs for fish-processing on the Northwest Coast discussed by Ames, or where there has been a dramatic population decline or movement, as discussed by several authors here, particularly Bowser. Both conditions obtained in the western Great Lakes. Captive-taking also appears to have been common where there was political fragmentation or competition, and where political authority was rooted in the control of people rather than land. This is discussed in some detail by Robertshaw and Junker. Again, these conditions also obtained in the western Great Lakes.

In 1649 the Iroquois Confederacy, led by the Seneca, attacked and effectively annihilated the Huron, their primary economic rivals in the fur trade. The destruction of the Huron created a crisis in the western Great Lakes. Refugee Hurons and Algonquians (e.g., Ottawa and Potawatomi) from western Ontario and Michigan fled to the lee side of Lake Michigan, into what is today Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the state of Wisconsin, to escape Iroquois raiding parties. Here polities were fragmented, and labor, not land, was the key to political power. Captives provided an influx of valuable labor that was used not only for agriculture and hunting, but also for procuring valuable animal furs and for participating in long-distance trade expeditions. Just as Europeans quickly realized that neither slavery nor wage labor was well suited to the capture and trade of fur-bearing animals (see, e.g., Kardulias 1990), so the peoples of the western Great Lakes may have realized that slavery would not provide an effective labor force for the fur trade.

Captives also offered the possibility, through adoption, of establishing or reestablishing bonds of alliance between kin groups disrupted by death and flight. In this context the social death and resurrection of captives make perfect sense, as does the apparent reciprocal nature of captive-taking. While I cannot say from where the captives were being obtained, it seems clear that they were not from distant societies, but rather places within a few days' walk of captors' villages. The villages from which captives were taken likely took captives in return, in a reciprocal exchange of violence and people.[3] This seems similar to what Habicht-Mauche describes as taking place between Pueblos and Plains peoples in the Southwest. And, as she describes, it seems that bonds of alliance, forged through captives, are one purpose behind the violence.

Such reciprocal violence must surely change the societies involved in it, and this seems to have been the case in the western Great Lakes. Already disrupted at the time of their first ethnographic description, the peoples of the western Great Lakes continued to fragment, both socially and politically. By the late 1600s, for example, villages in the Fox River valley of Wisconsin are described as being multilingual and multiethnic (e.g., Thwaites 1896–1901, 55:199–201). They were palisaded, and residents are described as living in perpetual fear of attack. Despite the efforts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century leaders such as Tecumseh and Black Hawk, stabilization of the social fabric and reunification of indigenous polities never occurred. Captive-taking appears to have developed into full-scale slave trading by the early 1800s (see, for example, Blair 1911, 2:197), and reciprocal raiding into endemic warfare

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(Blair 1911, 2:184). By the 1830s, the peoples of the western Great Lakes effectively had become dependents of the U.S. government. In this case, social death and resurrection did not provide a solution to social disruption, but seem only to have perpetuated it.

The Archaeology of Social Death and Resurrection

One of the key questions addressed by this volume is how we might identify and do research on slavery through the archaeological record. As can be seen the excerpts provided above, the ethnohistoric record provides an imperfect picture of social death and resurrection in the western Great Lakes. Might the archaeological record improve this picture? Might it allow us to trace the origins and evolution of these interesting social practices? Sadly, I believe the answer to both questions is no.

A primary quandary concerns what material evidence of social death and resurrection we might expect to find. Social death occurs in the context of capture and torture. Evidence for these practices might be present in the archaeological record, and Alt provides some striking examples from Mississippian sites in her contribution to this volume. Another example is the thirteenth-century site of Aztalan, located west of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which has midden deposits containing a large number of fragmented human remains. These have been interpreted as the material residue of cannibalistic feasts (Barrett 1933). One might interpret this to be evidence for the cannibalistic practices associated with the captive torture and sacrifice described in the ethnohistoric literature (e.g., Goldstein and Freeman 1997:239–240). Nevertheless, scholars are divided on the interpretation of cannibalism at Aztalan, and even whether the fragmentary remains represent secondary burial treatment rather than cannibalism. And one might reasonably question whether an interpretation based on ethnographic descriptions of cultures three hundred years removed from the archaeological deposits are appropriate in the absence of strong linking data. Here such data are lacking, as they are for Cahokia and other Middle Mississippian sites.

Physical markers of captive status are unlikely. Captives in the western Great Lakes remained so only briefly, and the ethnographic literature provides no mention of archaeologically recoverable markers of captivity. DeBoer suggests in his contribution to this volume that restraints or special ropes for binding and transporting captives might be recoverable, but despite the ethnographic descriptions and depictions of such objects, I know of none recovered from the archaeological record. Resurrection would surely be invisible archaeologically because the captive who replaced a deceased member of the society would have taken on their status, role, and material possessions. The captive and the deceased would appear identical archaeologically. However, the captive and the deceased would not be identical physically, and this is one area that might provide archaeological evidence of social death and resurrection.

Captives resurrected into a role in a foreign society may appear as biological isolates within that society. This, of course, would depend on the degree of interaction, especially intermarriage, between the captive and captor's societies. However, a captive would likely display at least some physical markers of his or her origin, even where intermarriage is common. One set of markers might be stable isotopes, particularly if captives were born in communities where a very different diet was consumed. In the western Great Lakes this might occur between groups whose diets included large amounts of fish or shellfish, and those whose diets included large amounts of maize. It is interesting that Alt (this volume) reports on these differences among those sacrificed in Mound 72 at Cahokia and other unusual burials at Mississippian sites (also see Price et al. 2007 for similar findings at Aztalan). The other set of markers might be genetic, identifiable both as unique physical traits and discrete variations in the individual's nuclear or mitochondrial DNA. Martin's chapter in this volume shows the potential value of this approach. Unfortunately, few stable isotope or DNA studies have been performed on skeletal collections from the western Great Lakes (e.g., Thurston Myster and O'Connell 1997:246–276), and given the current sociopolitical climate in which indigenous groups predominantly oppose such studies, they are unlikely to occur in the near future.

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Conclusions

It seems clear from ethnohistoric documents that slavery was ubiquitous among the indigenous peoples of the western Great Lakes, but it seems equally clear that archaeological evidence for slavery is scant. The relative paucity of archaeological evidence is, in part, due to the form slavery took in the prehistoric and early historic western Great Lakes, a form which included the adoption of slaves into the captor's society. Adoption, which I have here called social resurrection, transformed captives into full members of the captor's society, thus making captives indistinguishable from other members of the society, at least in terms of the material remains they might contribute to the archaeological record. We have an interesting irony here. Slavery was ubiquitous in the western Great Lakes, but the form it takes makes it almost impossible to recognize archaeologically.

Although we may not be able to easily recognize social death and resurrection in the archaeological record, its very ubiquity serves as a valuable lesson for us as archaeologists. Because kin relations structured the indigenous societies of the western Great Lakes, death caused significant disruptions to the social fabric. Resurrection through a substitute not only allowed the social fabric to be repaired but provided the additional benefits of easing both the labor shortage and psychological trauma that death caused. Slavery is certainly rooted in power and power relations, but I think it is important to note that as archaeologists trying to understand slavery in non-state societies, we ignore kinship at our peril. Slavery among the peoples of the western Great Lakes was as much about kinship and social relations as it was about economics and power relations. Social death and resurrection in eastern North America took place in the context of kin relations, and we must understand them in that context if we hope to understand them at all.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Cathy Cameron for inviting me to the Snowbird conference on slavery, from which this chapter and volume derived, and for her unwavering support and encouragement. Her comments have been insightful and valuable, and this is a much better chapter because of her efforts. I also wish to thank the other participants at the conference, as well as Jim Skibo, Dave Anderson, and Alf Hornborg, for their suggestions and efforts in support of this volume. Thanks to you all.

Notes

1. The peoples of the western Great Lakes include Algonquian-speaking groups such as the Fox/Sauk, Illinois, Kickapoo, Menominee, Miami, Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ottawa, and Potawatomi; the Siouan-speaking Ho-chunk (Winnebago); and the Iroquoian-speaking Huron. I refer to these peoples in generic terms as "peoples of the western Great Lakes" throughout much of the chapter. This is because in the early contact period these peoples lived in fluid and often multiethnic communities. In addition, descriptions of Native life given by early European explorers are often either generic or imprecise about the particular group or groups involved. Thus, one often cannot tell for sure which particular group is being described. Where an attribution seems clear, I include it in the text.
2. It is interesting to note that the capture and torture of both men and women are described in the ethnographic literature (e.g., Blair 1911, 3:197; Kinietz 1965:85), and it appears that both men and women were adopted. Whether either sex was adopted or killed with greater frequency than the other is impossible to gauge from the existing narratives. Children are also sometimes mentioned as captives, but I have found no descriptions of their torture or killing. Indeed Gabriel Sagard, who lived among the Huron in 1623–1624, notes that children "they rarely kill, but save them and keep them for themselves, or make presents of them to others who have previously lost some of theirs in war and think as much of the substitutes as if they were their own children" (Kinietz 1965:85).
3. It should be noted that this reciprocal exchange only obtained among the peoples of the western Great Lakes. Elsewhere, for example in areas within range of Iroquoian raiders, the exchange was purely one-sided, with the Iroquois taking far more captives than the Erie, Huron, or Potawatomi peoples within their reach. Thus the image of captive-taking in the western Great Lakes is one generated from within what might be called

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a "periphery" of the larger Iroquoian or colonial American world.

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