

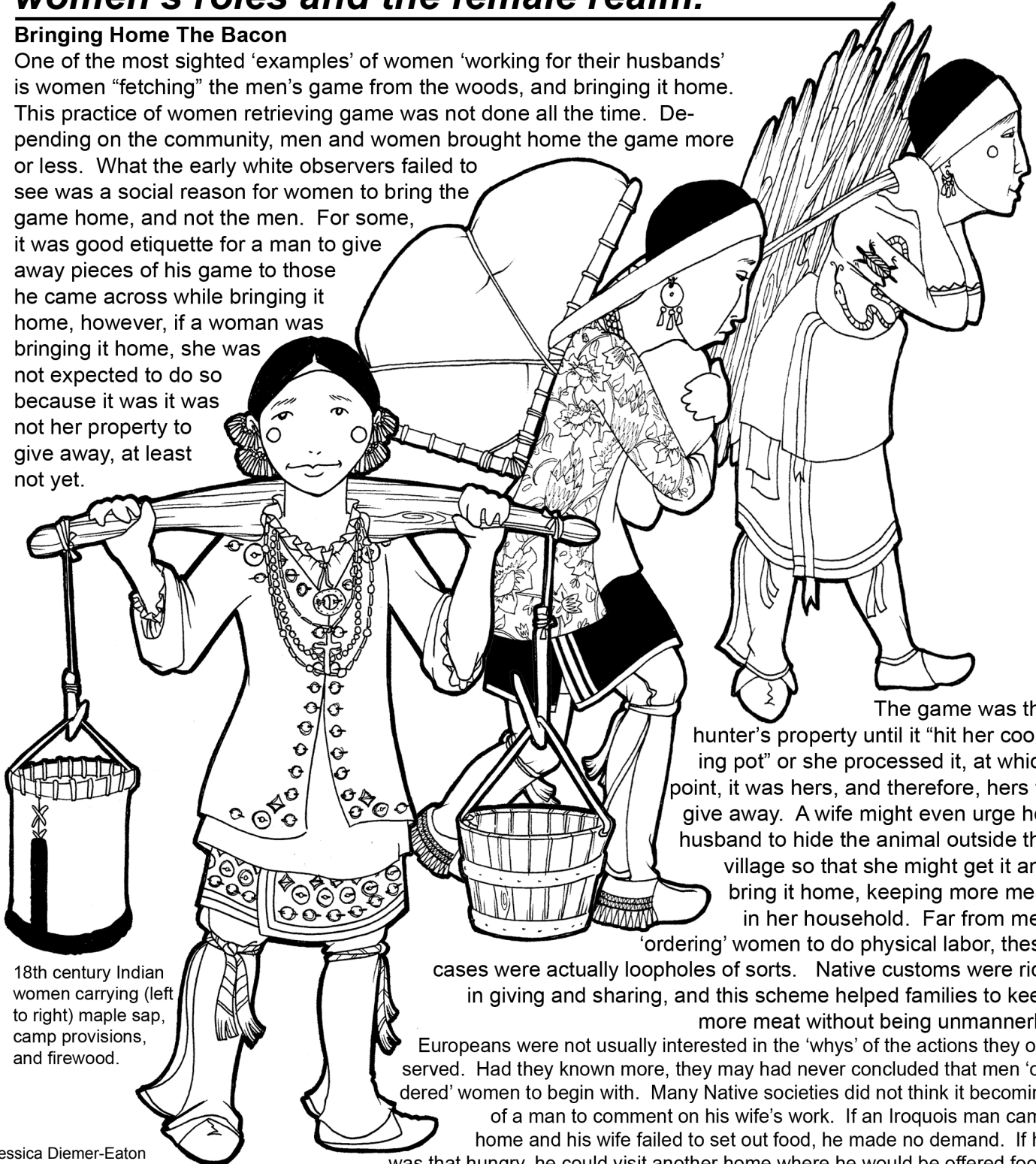
Interpretive Troubleshooting: Cultural Barriers/Native Women
Native Women's Work - As Misinterpreted By Early Europeans

What was observed in history was not always translated correctly. This was especially true in the case of misunderstood Native women's statuses. Early Europeans knew little of the intricacies of the male-female gender dynamic. Often when women were observed working, they were judged on European standards, which usually meant that 'a man must have ordered her to do so.' Beware of many historic observations. Just because they witnessed it does not mean they understood it.

History makes little attempt to understand Native women's roles and the female realm.

Bringing Home The Bacon

One of the most sighted 'examples' of women 'working for their husbands' is women "fetching" the men's game from the woods, and bringing it home. This practice of women retrieving game was not done all the time. Depending on the community, men and women brought home the game more or less. What the early white observers failed to see was a social reason for women to bring the game home, and not the men. For some, it was good etiquette for a man to give away pieces of his game to those he came across while bringing it home, however, if a woman was bringing it home, she was not expected to do so because it was not her property to give away, at least not yet.



18th century Indian women carrying (left to right) maple sap, camp provisions, and firewood.

The game was the hunter's property until it "hit her cooking pot" or she processed it, at which point, it was hers, and therefore, hers to give away. A wife might even urge her husband to hide the animal outside the village so that she might get it and bring it home, keeping more meat in her household. Far from men 'ordering' women to do physical labor, these cases were actually loopholes of sorts. Native customs were rich in giving and sharing, and this scheme helped families to keep more meat without being unmannerly.

Europeans were not usually interested in the 'whys' of the actions they observed. Had they known more, they may have never concluded that men 'ordered' women to begin with. Many Native societies did not think it becoming of a man to comment on his wife's work. If an Iroquois man came home and his wife failed to set out food, he made no demand. If he was that hungry, he could visit another home where he would be offered food.