

# 2018 Fellowship Recipient

**Dr. Eric MacPhail**

*No Word for God*

When French explorers and missionaries arrived in Canada in the course of the 17th century, they were impressed by the commercial, evangelical, and ethnographic potential of this new world. The only thing missing from such a promising landscape was the notion of God. “The only thing they’re missing is the knowledge of God,” reports the Jesuit Julien Perrault in 1635 about the native peoples of Cap Breton, designated as Gaspésiens. “We can’t find a trace of Him in what we know of their language.” Other travelers would repeat, contest, or reformulate this basic observation of an ungodly deficit in the native languages of North America, which forced European thinkers to reexamine their own most cherished preconceptions. The initial shock of the linguistic encounter between Europeans and Amerindians had profound ramifications for the modern understanding of human nature and human culture elaborated in the masterpieces of anthropological thought, and religious polemic, of the European Enlightenment. Thinkers as diverse as Locke, Bayle, Fabricius, Lafitau, Hume, and Holbach appealed to the missionaries to confirm or deny the ambitions of Christian apologetics and to found a new psychology of religion. Before the French went to Canada, such luminaries as José de Acosta and Jean de Léry had struggled with the elusive presence and absence of religion among the peoples of South America without attempting any formal study of the languages spoken there. The Jesuits initiated an ambitious study of North American languages as a part of their comprehensive ethnographic campaign waged across the territories of New France in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is these ethnographic and ethnolinguistic reports, of which the Newberry has an extensive collection of original editions, that form the corpus which I propose to study during the course of a short-term fellowship.

Dr. MacPhail is a professor of French at Indiana University Bloomington.