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Samuel Hearne, Matonabee, and the "Esquimaux Girl": Cultural Subjects, Cultural Objects

The heroizing implicit in the trope of exploration is downplayed, even subverted in Samuel Hearne's *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean...*, a sometimes boring narrative tinged with farce and shaped by anti-climax which often represents the narrator as *passive*. As Bruce Greenfield observes, "Exploration conventionally connoted independence and aggressiveness, the knowledge-gathering process as preparation for outright conquest ... [but] Hearne's narrative, in contrast, is full of situations in which he is a passive dependent of the strangers he is investigating" (60). Hearne's reluctance to theatricalize his self may be related to what critics have seen as "his scrupulous concern for accuracy" (Brown and Bennett 24) which extends from his work "as a significant early naturalist" (Mackinnon 342) to his accounts of native peoples which, "although not free from cultural bias, ... have remained valuable to ethnographers and stand in sharp contrast to earlier portrayals of Indians that idealized them or saw them as irredeemable savages" (Brown and Bennett 24). Hearne, it seems, avoids what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls "the sentimental romance of alterity" (1991, 466). That is not to say that his book does not invite a counter-narrative from a post-colonial perspective: Hearne who writes, "I drew a Map on a large skin of parchment ... but left the interior parts blank, to be filled up during my Journey" (lxxi-ii), is participant in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak delineates as "the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialized was in fact previously unscripted" (1). Or, put more plainly, in *Heart of Darkness* by Marlowe, who, like Hearne, is a troubled narrator-participant in colonialism, "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad 21). But this historical process of aggrandizing ethnocentrism is rarely felt in Hearne's text partly because, as David Spurr argues in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, "the presence of the writer as part of the narrative scene ... conceals the most obvious effects of ideology ... [since] the writer implicitly claims ... authority from the direct encounter with real events" (9).

By contrast, Jeannette Armstrong, in her poem, "History Lesson," a de-colonizing narrative that is at once elegiacal and sarcastic, makes explicit the commercial ideology of the fur trade that induced Hearne's travels:

Pioneers and traders
bring gifts
Smallpox, Seagrams
and Rice Krispies

...
Somewhere among the remains
of skinless animals
is the termination
to a long journey
and unholy search.... (Moses and Goldie 203, 204)

However, Armstrong's counter-narrative, for all its tonal range, possesses a retrospective clarity about colonization and exploitation that likely was less understood and more obscurely felt by the three racial groups on the edge of the Barren Lands before the full impact of a dominant, homogenizing European culture in northern North America. What Hearne's narrative of 1769 to 1772 appears to offer is a trace of what (in another context) Homi K. Bhabha, quoting Frantz Fanon, calls "performative time: 'the fluctuating movement that the people are just giving shape to'" (303). Bhabha goes on to say, again quoting Fanon, that "continual national narratives miss the 'zone of occult instability where the people dwell' ... [and] it is from this *instability* of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities — modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native' ... (303). Hearne's textual mapping of a landscape half-unknowingly inscribes such zones of occult instability, both cultural and psychological. As a partly *unsentient* centre, Hearne tells of an occult shaping of personal identity in an alien geography through the contingency of cultural encounters, amidst shifting patterns of dominance, with a resultant blurring of ethnic monads. In his *A Journey to the Northern Ocean* Hearne explores, as much as the Barren Lands, the fluctuations of his narrating self.

In response to disorienting — and, at times, exhilarating — cultural multiplicity, Hearne records a *lostness* that is more than a matter of cartography — prefiguring the identity crises of immigrants that form much of Canadian literature. As a child of three, Hearne had experienced the death of his father who was "managing engineer of the London Bridge Water works" (Mackinnon 339) and who was buried in a Nonconformist graveyard (Glover vii). At eleven Hearne "joined the Royal Navy ... as a servant to Captain Samuel Hood ... and saw considerable action during the Seven Years' War, including the bombardment of Le Havre, France" (Mackinnon 339). In 1766 Hearne joined the Hudson's Bay Company "as a mate on the sloop Churchill, which was then engaged in the Inuit

trade out of Prince of Wales Fort" (339). Hearne observes that he "had therefore frequent opportunities of observing the miserable manner in which those people live" (102), noting, "they frequently pitch their tents on the ice, and instead of having a fire, which the severity of the climate so much requires, they cut holes in the ice within their tents, and there sit and angle for fish..." (103). The Inuit culture perceived by Hearne was one of "frugality" (177) and "freedom, [with] no one apparently claiming the superiority over, or acknowledging the least subordination to another..." (105). For Hearne, a decade before the American Revolution, accustomed to British social hierarchy, to strict subordination in the navy, and to "gradations of rank" in the Hudson's Bay Company (Warkentin xv), this strangely egalitarian society must have been experienced as culture shock.

After three years among the Inuit, Hearne "was selected to command an inland expedition... [by] 'his particular Inclination'" reports one source (Tyrrell 27), and "somewhat to his surprise" contends another (Mackinnon 339). This contradiction might have its origins in the ambiguous Moses Norton, the Chief Factor at Prince of Wales's Fort, who instigated this exploration.¹ Norton, variously described as "Indian" (Hearne 39), "half-breed" (Rich 45), and white, possibly "born of an illicit union when his father was ... in England" (Mackinnon 583), is admired by one editor as possessing "uncommon energy and perception" (Rich 45) and denounced by another as "a very sinister man" (Glover xi). "His apartments were 'not only convenient but elegant'; he imported books from England, and even kept a pet parrot" (Mackinnon 584); however, this image of European refinement is contradicted: "His apartments were ... always crowded with favourite Indians: at night he locked the doors, and put the keys under his pillow; so that in the morning his dining-room was generally, for the want of necessary conveniences, worse than a hog-stye" (Hearne 39). Hearne caricatures

1 If, momentarily, the overarching narrative of colonization is ignored, Moses Norton personifies the fur trade's racial, cultural, and moral variegation. Hearne's hostility towards Norton derives, I infer, from the guilt-laden love apparent in Hearne's "impassioned obituary tribute ... to his country wife, Mary Norton..." (Warkentin xx). After Hearne's voyage to England in the trading-sloop, this daughter of Moses Norton died "in the Winter of the year 1782 ... at which time she was in the twenty-second year of her age" (Hearne 82). Hearne clearly blames the father for her becoming a "martyr": "she was ... suffered to perish by the rigours of cold and hunger, amidst her own relations, at a time when the gripping hand of famine was by no means severely felt by any other member of their company..." (82). Within a footnote Hearne takes palpable delight in revenging himself on Moses Norton: "An inflammation in his bowels occasioned his death on the 29th of December 1773; and though he died in the most excruciating pain, he retained his jealousy to the last; for a few minutes before he expired, happening to see an officer laying hold of the hand of one of his women who was standing by the fire, he bellowed out, in as loud a voice as his situation would admit, 'God d---n you for a b---h, if I live I'll knock out your brains.' A few minutes after making this elegant apostrophe, he expired in the greatest agonies that can possibly be conceived. This I declare to be the real character and manner of life of the late Mr. Moses Norton" (40).

his superior as a melodramatic villain: "He kept for his own use five or six of the finest Indian girls which he could select ... and always kept a box of poison, to administer to those who refused him their wives or daughters" (39). Hearne also claims that Norton was sanctimonious: "With all these bad qualities, no man took more pains to inculcate virtue, morality, and continence on others..." (39). Depicted as megalomaniacally jealous, wishing "to engross every woman in the country to himself" (Hearne 39), Norton refused to allow any women on Hearne's first two journeys, a denial that might be causally linked to their failures. Nevertheless, Norton and the Hudson's Bay Company continued to hope that Hearne in crossing the Barren lands could verify "the long reputed presence of pure copper in the remote northwestern interior ... [and that] the mines would prove large enough to provide 'handy lumps' ... to ballast its supply ships returning from the bay..." (Mackinnon 339). Hearne was also instructed "to report on the navigability of the adjacent river" (Mackinnon 339) and to search for a northwest passage to the Pacific, thereby causing him to replicate in small the delusive centuries-long European quest and mapping that had resulted in the misnaming of Indians.

"His first 2 attempts ended ingloriously, as he was bullied, robbed and deserted by his Indian guides" (Marsh 973). In this context the double-edged word, "guides," points to Hearne's condition of dependency, to the explorer as lost, thus subverting any European claim to agency and discovery. In diarizing the terrain of the Barren Grounds, Hearne's self-representation is uncertain, lurching between singular and plural pronouns. The following passage, from June 1770, illustrates the merging and re-emerging of his individual narrative voice:

Till the tenth, our sledges proved serviceable, particularly in crossing lakes and ponds on the ice; but that mode of travelling now growing dangerous on account of the great thaws, we determined to throw away our sledges, and every one take a load on his back. This I found to be much harder work than the winter carriage, as my part of the luggage consisted of the following articles, viz. the quadrant and its stand, a trunk containing books, papers, &c., a land-compass, and a large bag containing all my wearing apparel; also a hatchet, knives, files, &c., besides several small articles, intended for presents to the natives. (18-19)

This excerpt delineates a paradox that eluded Margaret Atwood in *Survival*, that is, in the Barren Lands "cold," "winter," and "ice" meant ease and safety of movement, since "warmth" and "thaw" impeded travel and, on lakes, threatened death by drowning. Of specific cultural interest here is Hearne's inventory signifying his European identity (and imperialist project), notably through the quadrant, the surveying instrument that would later become broken, and necessitate a return to the Hudson's Bay's fort. The meta-narrative presence of "books, papers, &c.," the means of producing both his text and the inscribing self being

read, takes on an ambivalence of burden through the metaphor of "luggage." The shifting, evasive pronouns register not only Hearne's psychological luggage, which includes the dutiful recording of impending failure, but also his half-conscious drift into multi-cultural flux. The repeated shared possessive of "our sledges" and the collective decision specified by the first person plural, "we determined," becomes detachedly generalized through the third person singular, "one," before becoming, at sentence end, segmented into the singular observed other, "his," which now in alienated fashion includes the observing self of Hearne. An isolate "I" emerges, focused on "my part of the luggage." From this self-regarding vantage point follows the third person plural estrangement of "the natives," a formal and emotional transposition from the earlier collectivity of "our."

Hearne's inconsistencies in point of view show his cultural doubleness, and his simultaneous resistance to this duality. Often, the ambiguous effect created by shifts in his pronoun usage from "we" to "I" to "they" blends empathy with irony:

We have fasted ... near seven days, during which we tasted not a mouthful of any thing, except a few cranberries, water, scraps of old leather, and burnt bones. On those pressing occasions I have frequently seen the Indians examine their wardrobe, which consisted chiefly of skin-clothing, and consider what part could best be spared; sometimes a piece of an old, half-rotten deer skin, and at others a pair of old shoes, were sacrificed to alleviate severe hunger.... They are frequently driven to the necessity of eating one another. (21-22)

It is perhaps an appropriate time to quote from John Newlove's poem, "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime":

It is a romantic world
to readers of journeys
to the Northern Ocean —

especially if their houses are heated. (84)

From a twentieth-century, cinema-inflected perspective Hearne's Chaplinesque detail of eating old shoes, linked to the verb choice, "sacrifice," creates laughter out of pathos; however, Hearne simply might have been grateful for sustenance. For the view that there exists a "general European predisposition for finding 'cannibalism' in all non-European parts of the world" as part of "the implicit violence of colonialist discourse" (81), see Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters*, and the subsequent debate in *Critical Inquiry* with Myra Jehlen. Hearne's usually dispassionate tone when narrating indigenous social practices — such as polygamy — that are incommensurable with the social construction of Christianized Europe, while exploitable within colonial and neo-colonial discourse, seems more

Not only did Hearne choose to assimilate himself temporarily to native patterns, but also, as E.E. Rich asserts, "not Hearne but Matonabee was in command" (53). At one point, when two hundred Indians arrive from different quarters, Hearne acknowledges his dependency on Matonabee: "as I was under the protection of a principal man, no one offered to molest me..." (Hearne 63). Rich suggests, "perhaps it was as well that Hearne had learned to be complaisant and to tolerate not only Indian food but Indian manners; for, as he frequently remarked, he was completely in their hands..." (53). On one occasion Hearne protests against a plan by this large party of Indians "to murder the Esquimaux" who frequented the Coppermine River, but is mocked into acquiescence, rationalizing, "I saw evidently that it was the highest folly for an individual like me, and in my situation, to attempt to turn the current of a national prejudice which had subsisted between those two nations from the earliest periods..." (74-75). Hearne also reports himself as being reduced to a bizarre object of perception, lacking even human status:

It was curious to see how they flocked about me, and expressed as much desire to examine me from top to toe, as an European Naturalist would a non-descript animal. They, however, found and pronounced me to be a perfect human being, except in the colour of my hair and eyes: the former, they said, was like the stained hair of a buffalo's tail, and the latter, being light, were like those of a gull. The whiteness of my skin also was, in their opinion, no ornament, as they said it resembled meat which had been sodden in water till all the blood was extracted. (78)

In July 1771, under Matonabee's expert guidance, Hearne, in his own words, "arrived at that long wished-for spot, the Coppermine River" (93), which, ironically, turned out to be "useless as a trade route," unnavigable, and without riches (yielding "only a single lump of copper") (Marsh 973). It was also the site of cross-cultural trauma.

Earlier, the male bonding between Hearne and Matonabee had corresponded to Leslie A. Fiedler's analysis in *Love and Death in the American Novel* of cross-racial masculine friendship, but with the news "that five tents of Esquimaux were on the west side of the river," Hearne writes, "no farther attendance or attention was paid to my survey ... their whole thoughts were immediately engaged in planning the best method of attack, and how they might steal on the poor Esquimaux the ensuing night, and kill them all while asleep" (96). Hearne experiences an isolating sense of his cultural difference: "all were united in the general cause, and as ready to follow where Matonabee led..." (97). So, Hearne himself follows, believing "the Esquimaux ... not knowing me from an enemy ... would probably proceed to violence against me when no person was near to assist.... One of ... [the Indians] immediately fixed me a spear, and another leant me a broad bayonet for my protection" (98). In the next passage, first person

anthropological than colonizing, that is, *recognizing* cultural difference rather than *imposing* colonizable difference. In a remarkable act of identification, Hearne moves beyond a great European taboo, and interrogates himself through the eyes of a "cannibal": "Why do you despise me for my misfortunes? the period is probably not far distant, when you may be driven to the like necessity!" (22). As in a mirror, Hearne acknowledges his potentially shared inhumanity. His overt empathy with such an outcast emphasizes, by contrast, Hearne's later cultural bewilderment at an incident involving a young Inuit female, which occurs during the successful third journey, with Matonabee as guide.

Born at Prince of Wales Fort, "Matonabee was familiar with Europeans and the fur trade from his youth; his mother, formerly a captive of a Cree band, had married one of Churchill's hunters after company traders bought her freedom" (Gillespie 523). Becoming in some sense trilingual, Matonabee typified what Germaine Warkentin in *Canadian Exploration Literature* describes as the fur traders' "flourishing multi-lingual environment" (xviii). Because Matonabee could speak Cree and Chipewyan as well as some English, he "was chosen by the company to serve as an ambassador" to resolve a conflict between native groups living near Lake Athabasca that disrupted trade (Gillespie 523). His family "contained 5 wives, 7 of Matonabee's own children and 2 adopted orphans, all dependent on one man's hunting" (Hearne 45). Most importantly for the Hudson's Bay Company and Hearne, Matonabee had already, in the 1750's, "made at least one trip to the Coppermine R[iver]" (Lee 1316), and had brought "a rude sketch, drawn with charcoal on a deer's skin, of a map of the country" (Glover xiii).

Hearne writes that in meeting Matonabee, "the courteous behaviour of this stranger struck me very sensibly" (34). Although "readings of the European discourse that seek nonetheless to restore the presence of the native inhabitants by exposing the process of their effacement" are, as Myra Jehlen terms it, "unavoidably parochial" ("History" 685), at least in *A Journey to the Northern Ocean* Matonabee has a dialogic presence:

Not taking any women with us on this [second] journey, was, he said, the principal thing that occasioned all our wants: "for, said he, when all the men are heavy laden, they can ... [not] hunt.... Women," added he, "were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night..." (Hearne 35)

Against the strong wishes of Moses Norton, several native women accompanied Matonabee and Hearne on the third journey that succeeded "by patiently following the seasonal movements of buffalo and caribou, their only source of food. Hearne's adaptation to ... [the Indians'] way of life and movement" (Mackinnon 340) was previously implied by his determination "not to take any Europeans" with him (Hearne lxxi).

pronouns oscillate between "we" and "I," alongside the narrative disclaimers of "they," as Hearne feels compelled to cultural imitation:

While we lay in ambush, the Indians ... to prevent their hair from blowing into their eyes, ... tied [it] The next thing they considered was to make themselves as light as possible for running; which they did, by pulling off their stockings.... Fearing I might have occasion to run with the rest, I thought it also advisable to pull off my stockings and cap, and to tie my hair as close up as possible. (98-99)

Despite this preliminary cultural adaptation, Hearne states that

when they ... began the bloody massacre, ... I stood neuter in the rear.... The shrieks and groans of the poor expiring wretches were truly dreadful; and my horror was much increased at seeing a young girl ... killed so near me, that when the first spear was stuck into her side she fell down at my feet, and twisted round my legs, so that it was with difficulty that I could disengage myself from her dying grasps. As two Indian men pursued this unfortunate victim, I solicited very hard for her life; but the murderers made no reply till they had stuck both their spears through her body, and transfixed her to the ground. They then looked me sternly in the face, and began to ridicule me, by asking if I wanted an Esquimaux wife; and paid not the smallest regard to the shrieks and agony of the poor wretch, who was twining round their spears like an eel! ... My situation and the terror of my mind at beholding this butchery, cannot easily be conceived, much less described.... (99-100)

Retrospectively, from London, Hearne writes, "even at this hour I cannot reflect on the transactions of that horrid day without shedding tears" (100). In an interesting essay, Ian S. MacLaren argues that a study of Hearne's field notes opens out "the possibility that ... *all* the sublime Gothicism of the book's account has been added..." (36). The massacre, itself, "is still recalled with horror by the Inuit today" (Warkentin 111), an emotion separate from that alluded to in Hearne's phrase, "the terror of my mind," which centres not on his fear of victimization, but on his trauma over partial cultural assimilation.

At his return to the Fort in 1772, Hearne wrote, "my discoveries are not likely to prove of any material advantage to the Nation at large, or indeed to the Hudson's Bay Company" (195), which, having previously designated Matonabee a "Captain" (Hearne lxvii), now made him "head of all the Northern Indian nation..." (227). As intermediaries between cultures, Matonabee and Hearne were counterparts. If Hearne had "gone Indian" during his journey, Matonabee, in becoming bound to the fur trade, had become Europeanized: "he was remarkably fond of Spanish wines, though he never drank to excess" (225). In appearance Matonabee likely wore "a semi-military, red-coated uniform" that the Hudson's Bay Company used "to flatter" (Glover xiv) influential Indian leaders. Hearne characterized his friend as partly European, having "the vivacity of a Frenchman, and the sincerity of an Englishman..." (Hearne 225).

In 1782, Hearne, as Chief of Prince of Wales Fort, surrendered to an overwhelming French naval force. The explorer, David Thompson accused Hearne of "cowardice" (Warkentin 196), but others, such as Richard Glover, judge that Hearne was merely "capable of recognizing hopeless odds when he saw them" (Glover xxxiii). Hearne then sailed directly home to England in one of the fort's trading-sloops. Matonabee, when he heard of the fort's destruction, hung himself. Hearne writes, "This is the more to be wondered at, as he is the only northern Indian who, that I ever heard, put an end to his own existence" (228), but Warkentin argues the opposite: "His action is not surprising from a member of what ethnographers call an 'honour society,' that is, a society which places a high value on public honour and esteem" (141). Matonabee's motivation for suicide remains obscure, but "bound to the fortunes of the fur trade" (Lee 1316) and personalizing it through his relationship with Hearne, he might have been unknowing of the continental market forces that made for alternatives such as the Montreal pedlars. As a consequence of Matonabee's death, "six of his wives, and four children ... were starved to death the same Winter" (Hearne 228).

Both Hearne and Matonabee discovered, traumatically, that they were no longer agents but dependent objects in their friend's culture. What they exemplify might be the inherent danger in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes as "the messy affair of cultural variegation" (1993, 11). If cultures shape the world in some distinct ways, while their shared humanity offers a look of mutual transparency, then it is possible that both Hearne and Matonabee comprehended the other's culture less well than they had once believed. Also, if societies construct reality in partly incommensurable ways, someone trying to inhabit two cultures at once would glimpse two incompatible but simultaneous realities, and might feel "terror of mind," or what could be called epistemological dissonance. An impulse to avoid such traumatizing doubleness might be a powerful inducement to forming cultural monads — Hearne believed that those Indians who had the least to do with the Factories were "by far the happiest" (52). What Northrop Frye names as particular to the Canadian literary imagination, "a garrison mentality," might have developed *not* primarily by confronting "a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (546), but by repressing the uninterpretable "other" whose sentence already inhabited that land, posing an incommensurable reality. If Hearne is representative, a functional — and sometimes attractive — non-European ordering of the world was adapted to, then reacted against. But Hearne's account (and the polyglot experience of the fur trade) also indicates no frontier immigrant community could be unvariegated.

Cultural isolation was possible for neither Hearne nor Matonabee nor the Esquimaux girl; in the twentieth century, it is possible for no one, but — despite cross-cultural lives — epistemological dread continues, most evidently in the death sentence against Salman Rushdie. Such pursuit of cultural purity presages the ultimate Barren Land of nuclear winter. In Canada, a nation of incipient

decolonization and of persisting multiculturalism, we need intermediaries, but in those flawed human models, Hearne and Matonabee, we can perceive the risk of interpreting what may be untranslatable cross-culturally. Without such interpretive lives, however, we would not even have the possibility of what Frank Kermode calls the "consoling plot" which is, according to Jerome Bruner, "not the comfort of a happy ending but the comprehension of plight that, by being made interpretable, becomes bearable" (16).

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