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The Beaver as Native and as Colonist

La dépouille de cet Animal a jusqu'à présent fourni à la Nouvelle France le principal objet de son Commerce. Il est par lui-même une des merveilles de la nature, & il peut être pour l'Homme une grande leçon de prévoyance, d'industrie, d'adresse, & de constance dans le travail. (Charlevoix, "Journal Historique" 3: 94-95)¹

I cannot refrain from smiling, when I read the accounts of different Authors who have written on the oeconomy of those animals, as there seems to be a contest between them, who shall most exceed in fiction ... little remains to be added to his account of the beaver, beside a vocabulary of their language, a code of their laws, and a sketch of their religion (Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales Fort to the Northern Ocean* 149)

In the literature of New France one finds many brief but colorful descriptions of the beaver. Nearly every colonial travel writer of the seventeenth and eighteenth century included in his text an account of this animal, which, as Charlevoix demonstrates, was as intriguing for its intelligence and social behavior as it was important for its economic value. Much more than an interesting object of natural history, the beaver was to the French in Canada what sugar, tobacco, or spices were to other colonies. Its double status — as a natural and social marvel when alive, and as a valuable commodity when dead — caused representations of the beaver to become overdetermined with strong and often contradictory ascriptions. A small, non-threatening herbivore, the beaver was anthropomorphized, idealized, and sentimentalized in print even as it was killed by the thousands in the forests of North America; its pelts stacked, shipped and traded in the pursuit of profit.

The beaver's function in literary representation is quite different from other animals famous in American literature. While a single whale or bear becomes for Melville or Faulkner symbolic of natural or psychic forces locked in a struggle with Man, the portrayal of the beaver is ethnographic, not dramatic, and plural,

1 "The spoil of this animal has hitherto been the principal article in the commerce of New France. It is itself one of the greatest wonders in nature, and may very well afford many a striking lesson of industry, foresight, dexterity, and perseverance in labor" (1: 151).

not singular. The colonial travellers who wrote of the beaver, such as Lahontan, Charlevoix, and Le Page du Pratz, are all known for their early ethnographies of Native American society, and it is in this context that the accounts of the beaver should be analyzed. The beavers' sociable life was represented in a timeless realm unaltered by man, much as ethnography was written in an achronic "ethnographic present" where the intervention of the colonist or anthropologist is not described. The beaver's body and behavior was dismembered into assimilable pieces, much as ethnography separates life into categories like marriage and sexuality, clothing and ornament, health and subsistence, deflecting attention from the creature and cultural survival of the organic whole. The ethnography of the beaver functioned in much the same way as the many descriptions of the manners and customs of the Indians to rhetorically reconstitute the undisturbed indigenous life which was being destroyed by the invading Europeans. James Clifford has written, "Ethnography's disappearing object is, then, in significant degree, a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: 'salvage ethnography' in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text" (112). By the latter part of the nineteenth century if not sooner, the rhetoric familiar from the trope of the "vanishing Indian" was being applied also to the beaver. "The beaver has gradually disappeared before the spread of civilization, which first settled along the shores of the Mediterranean. As each wave covered more of Europe, the range wherein the beaver existed perceptibly narrowed" (27), wrote Horace T. Martin in the beaver-ethnography *Castorologia*, "North America remains the last stage on which are witnessed the scenes of a doomed culture" (29). Fur traders in the 1600s may not have imagined the beaver becoming extinct as it nearly did in the early twentieth century, but I believe that they did feel some anxiety over their dependence upon a limited resource, an anxiety which fanciful portrayals of the beaver helped to assuage.

Although the technique of ethnography is used for both, there is an important difference in the ideological (or as Clifford would say, "allegorical") function of the representations of the beaver and of the Amerindian. While Native American society was represented as so antithetical to European that it was considered impossible to live in one without rejecting the values of the other, the social life of beavers apparently resembled civilized and particularly colonial society. The cooperative, industrious, and non-nomadic beaver was often held up as a worthy model for colonists to imitate, and in this it resembles only one other animal, also a social creature. Crèvecoeur extolled, "The well-known industry of bees, that excellent government which pervades their habitations, that never-ceasing industry by which they are actuated" (244).²

2 The bee is part of the mythology of the Mormons, who nicknamed Utah "The Beehive State" to characterize their hardworking, communal society. A key difference from the beaver, however, is that the honey bee is believed to be a European introduction to the New World.

François-Marc Gagnon sees in the written and pictorial representations of the beaver in the seventeenth century a measure of the epistemic shift in natural history identified by Michel Foucault, from a discourse of similitude using analogies, such as with the otter, fish, or lamb, to a discourse of representation which isolates the beaver as an autonomous natural object (1984a, 201). Nicolas Denys and Marc Lescarbot were still working in the renaissance *épistème* which preceded natural history as we know it. Rather than an anatomical description of the beaver and an analysis of its niche in a system of nature, we find a presentation close to what Foucault has described as the typical form of histories of plants and animals in the seventeenth century:

les ressemblances qu'on peut lui trouver, les vertus qu'on lui prête, les légendes et les histoires auxquelles il a été mêlé, les blasons où il figure, les médicaments qu'on fabrique avec sa substance, les aliments qu'il fournit, ce que les anciens en rapportent, ce que les voyageurs peuvent en dire. L'histoire d'un être vivant, c'était cet être même, à l'intérieur de tout le réseau sémantique qui le reliant au monde. (140)³

Physical descriptions of the beaver break up the animal into small parts and sort the pieces into some of the categories listed by Foucault. Following its dual status as natural marvel and as commodity, the beaver is seen first through its organs and limbs, analyzed by their resemblance to those of humans or other animals and by their use for the beaver; and second, by its resources, analyzed according to their use for Europeans. Where the beaver transcends Foucault's *épistème* of the science of animals, however, is in the social characteristics that place it alongside contemporary ethnological thought.

European readers might have been familiar with the beaver had it not been hunted to extinction in Western Europe. Since it was so novel, anatomical analogies were needed to relate the beaver to more familiar animals, and thus assimilate it to human uses. Charlevoix reports that "La Tête d'un Castor est à peu près de la figure d'un Rat de Montagne.... Ses Jambes sont courtes, particulièrement celle de devant; elles n'ont guères que quatre ou cinq pouces de long, & ressemblent assez à celles du Bléreau" (3: 96).⁴ Denys writes, in a passage copied almost word for word from Lescarbot (780), "il est à peu près de la longueur et grosseur d'un mouton, les pieds plus courts, ceux de derrière toillés ainsi

3 "the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medications that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said of it. The history of a living thing was that thing itself, within the whole semantic network that connected it to the world" (129).

4 "The head of the beaver is very near like that of a mountain rat [i.e., a marmot].... Its legs are short, particularly the forelegs, which are only four or five inches long, like those of the badger" (1: 154).

qu'un oye, ceux de devant en forme des mains" (281).⁵ The Carolina colonist John Lawson writes, "There [sic] Fore-Feet are open, like a Dog's; their Hind-Feet web'd like a Water-Fowl's" (125). Claude Lebeau ventures even further into the barnyard in search of comparisons, "Il a aussi les jouës & le bec d'un Lièvre, la langue & la vessie d'un Pourceau" (1: 316).⁶ The most significant analogy concerns the tail, however, which, due to its scaly covering and the beaver's facility in water, led it to be considered a fish. Charlevoix records that the beaver swims:

avec la même facilité que tout Animal Aquatique. D'ailleurs, par sa Queue il est tout à fait un Poisson, aussi a-t-il été juridiquement déclaré tel par la Faculté de Médecine de Paris, & en conséquence de cette Déclaration, la Faculté de Théologie a décidé qu'on pouvoit manger sa Chair les jours maigres. M. Lemery s'est trompé, quand il a dit que cette décision ne regardoit que le train de derrière du Castor. Il a été mis tout entier au même rang, que la Maquereuse. (3: 96-97)⁷

"Le Castor est un poisson comme le Loutre"⁸ (see note 5) Denys states baldly, extending the misclassification to another mammal. The relatively small beaver was not a common game animal, but this declaration assured that during lent, which came during the Indians' hunting season and when all Canadians relied most on hunting for their subsistence, the beaver was not taboo for the Catholic colonists. Charlevoix's description also demonstrates how the nascent Natural History of the time classified its objects by use and resemblance rather than by anatomical structures or ecological niches. The possibility that the tail might be lenten fare while the rest of the meat was taboo (as the qualifier "all of it" suggests) underscores the process of dismemberment through which the Europeans understood the beaver. Lahontan mocks such self-serving classifications after he learns from the Indians that beavers can live perfectly well away from water: "d'où je conclus que Messieurs les Casuistes ont grand tort de ne pas mettre les Canards, les Oyes, & les Sarcelles au nombre des Amphibies aussi

bien que les Naturalistes" (1: 139).⁹ The tail escapes any discourse of comparative anatomy since it has no correlative among familiar species; it becomes a tool not only for the beaver but indirectly for the French to use to reclassify it as a fish.

Beavers were valuable not only for their pelts but for castoreum, a secretion highly sought after for medicines and cosmetics since the time of Hippocrates. As Charlevoix dissects it, it is "de couleur brune, d'une odeur pénétrante & forte, remplie d'une matière dure, cassante & friable, de même couleur, ou jaunâtre, entrelassées d'une Membrane déliée, & d'un goût âcre" (3: 98).¹⁰ As with the beaver's tail, renaissance naturalists regarded castoreum by reference to humans; not beavers' uses for it, and a history of misreadings and corrections ensued. Not concerned with the beaver's own use of its fur, seventeenth and eighteenth-century observers failed to perceive that these glands served the same purpose that Indians' sweat did when they wore beaver pelts — castoreum kept the beaver's pelt greasy.¹¹ Denys and Raudot/Silvy¹² claim that the source of castoreum is the "rognons" (kidneys). Many earlier observers thought it came from the testicles. Its strong odor recalled musk, and after all, it was patriarchally logical that something of such value to Man might issue from something of value to all men. In reality the castoreum glands are found in both the male and female, and the oil is used to maintain the water-repellent and insulating qualities of the fur. A similar misconception arose about the sperm whale and its ambergris, which is not sperm whale sperm.

"Le castor" and its "seminal" castoreum gave rise to a provocative legend which signals hunters' tendency to dismember the beaver into parts incompatible with its survival. Both Pliny the Elder and Ælianus recorded a legend, frequently

9 "From whence I conclude, that the Casuists are out in not ranging Ducks, Geese, and Teals, in the number of Amphibious Animals, as the Naturalists are wont to do" (1: 106).

10 "a soft, resinous, adhesive matter, mixed with small fibres, greyish without, and yellow within, of a strong disagreeable and penetrating scent, and very inflammable..." (1: 156).

11 Pelts that had been made into robes and worn by humans for long periods were the most valuable, as Charlevoix explained: "le castor gras est celle qui a été portée par les Sauvages... Ils ne la quittent en hiver ni le jour ni la nuit, le grand poil tombe bientôt et le duvet reste et en cet état il est bien plus propre à être mis en œuvre par les chapeliers" (2: 99); "the green [or 'greasy'] beaver as such as have been worn by the Indians.... They never put it off in winter, day or night; the long hair soon falls off, the down remaining and becoming oily, in which condition it is much fitter to be worked up by the hatters" (1: 157).

12 The work in question is *Relation par lettres de l'Amérique septentrionale (Années 1709 et 1710)* first published in Paris in 1904. As late as 1980, when a translation by Ivy Alice Dickson appeared, it was attributed to Father Antoine Silvy, S.J. However, Réal Ouellet, in his 1990 edition of Lahontan, reports that recent discoveries support an attribution to Intendant Antoine-Denis Raudot. Of the 89 short letters which make up the text, the seventh concerns the beaver.

5 "It is not so long. It is almost as long and stout as a Sheep. The feet are short, — the hind ones webbed like a Goose, while those in front are like hands" (363).

6 "He has also the face and snout of a hare, the tongue and bladder of a pig" (my translation).

7 "... with the same ease as any other aquatic animal. Besides, in respect of its tail, it is altogether a fish, having been juridically declared such by the faculty of medicine of Paris, in consequence of which declaration, the faculty of theology have decided that it might be lawfully eaten on meagre days. M. Lemery was mistaken in saying, that this decision regarded only the hinder part of the beaver. It has been placed all of it in the same class with mackerel" (1: 154).

8 "The Beaver is a fish like the Otter" (363).

repeated in bestialities, that when pursued, a (male) beaver would tear or bite off its testicles, leave them for the hunters, and run to safety. Thus the beaver's great intelligence and self-sacrifice served only to enrich its exploiters. "[I] sacrifie tout ce qu'il porte pour sauver sa vie et offre ses biens en guise de rançon."¹³ In Ælianus' economics, the beaver can give up all his wealth and still remain viable, for there is no mention of his subsequent sterility leading to a decline in population. The beaver is portrayed as clever and opportunistic, for Ælianus adds that when cornered, some who still have their testicles hide them inside their body (all beavers' sex organs, as well as the castoreum glands, are hidden beneath the fur) and stand up to show the hunters that their target has already been taken. This misconception was perpetuated through repeated denials, beginning still in classical times. Louis Nicolas wrote, "Il n'est pas ... vray de dire, et on amuze un pecheur par ces agreable meneries quand on dit que le castor se sentant pressé du chasseur, s'arrache les testicules."¹⁴ Lahontan corrects the classical and renaissance writers again and begins to overcome the utilitarian logic when he points out that "la matière que les Medecins appellent *Castoreum* ne réside point là [in the testicles], elle est renfermée dans une certain poche que la Nature semble avoir faite exprès pour ces Animaux" (1: 140).¹⁵ The descriptions again imply that the beaver consists of independent parts, including pelt, castoreum, and tail, and that colonists can take some parts and leave the animal unharmed, like milking a cow or buying an Indian's beaver-pelt robe. Charlevoix points out in regard to the beaver castration myth, "C'est de son Poil, dont il devoit alors se dépouiller, car au prix de sa Toison, le reste est presque compté pour rien" (3: 99).¹⁶ As if the beaver had a choice!

"Le castor," therefore, was not really considered to be an animal any more than the "sauvage" was. It was a unique species set apart from the catalogs of flora and fauna compiled by Lahontan, Charlevoix and Denys. The beaver as an animal, susceptible to comparisons with more familiar animals, was only one axis of representation. More often the beaver was either a commodity resource or a human-like culture. Nicolas Denys, the practical-minded colonist who devotes

13 (Ælianus, *De la nature des animaux*, qtd. in Lahontan 1: 389). "He sacrifices all that he carries to save his life and offers his wealth in the guise of ransom" (my translation).

14 "It is not ... true to say, and one amuses a fisherman by these entertaining tall tales when one says that the beaver, feeling himself threatened by the hunter, tears out his testicles" (my translation) from *Histoire Naturelle des Indes Occidentales* (circa 1675, folio 119), quoted in Gagnon. Nicolas's manuscript is still unpublished and is conserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. I am indebted to Gagnon's two articles and to Ouellet's notes for information on castoreum and the classical Romans' view of the beaver.

15 "for that which the Physicians call *Castoreum*, is not lodg'd in the Testicles, but in a certain Bag that Nature seems to have form'd on purpose for these Animals..." (1: 107).

16 "It is his fur he ought to strip himself of, in comparison of which all the rest is of little value" (1: 157).

most of his two volumes to an exhaustive description of the maritime fisheries, makes this transition from anatomical to social in his description of the beaver:

c'est là tout ce que l'on peut dire de la peau & de la chair, qui n'est pas ce qu'il y a de plus remarquable en cet animal, mais son naturel laborieux & disciplinable, son industrie & son obéissance dans le travail, en sorte qu'on aura peine à croire ce que j'en vais dire... (283)¹⁷

Thus the reification of the beaver — it cannot be presented as an animal without being turned into a commodity, nor can its behavior be represented ethnographically without being considered for its labor power. I will consider the anthropomorphized beaver first, then move on to how the image of the beaver and the actual trade for beavers competed for the attention of the colonists of New France, and conclude with two scenes of beaver observation which realign the relationships between European writer, Indian trapper, and beaver.

While the idealized portrayal of the beaver resembles that of the Noble Savage in its ideological function — to compensate for or justify its imminent demise — it is quite different in its content, and a similarity between the two societies is rarely proposed by the European writers. Instead, the Indians are said to see themselves in the beaver. Raudot/Silvy reports of the Indians that "Ils croient que ces animaux sont une nation; ils leur voient tant d'esprit, qu'ils ne peuvent s'empêcher de les comparer à eux" (lettre 7).¹⁸ LeClerc too remarks that the Indians believe the beavers are organized in Nations. Thomas Morton, in his *New English Canaan*, recounts asking the Indians "whether they eat of the Beavers, to which they replied Matta, (noe) saying they were almost Beavers Brothers" (237).

The beaver's human qualities are often evoked with a sense of incredulity, such as Denys's "qu'on aura peine à croire." When Dièreville, the early eighteenth-century visitor to Acadia, describes how the beavers drag heavy logs to the water, he admits "Cela n'est pas facile à expliquer, encore moins à comprendre, c'est cependant comme la chose se passe" (135).¹⁹ Lebeau, in comparing the beavers to the dike-building Hollanders, claims the former also appoint *Dyk-Mesters* "pour voir si rien n'y manque, & donner avis à la Société s'il y a quelque chose à refaire. Mes sauvages m'ont assuré qu'ils s'assembloient

17 "That is all that can be said of the skin and the flesh. But these are not the most remarkable things about this animal, which consist rather in its laborious and orderly nature, and its industry and obedience in work. These are such that it will be difficult to believe that I am going to tell..." (1968, 363).

18 "They believe that these animals are a nation. They see so much intelligence in them that they cannot help but compare them to themselves" (lettre 7).

19 "This is not easy to explain, still less to understand; nevertheless, that is the way it is done" (135).

pour cet effet, tenant conférence ensemble.... Je n'ai jamais été témoin de ces sortes d'Assemblés, je voudrais les avoir vûes moi-même pour y ajouter foi" (1: 326-27).²⁰ Finally, Lahontan, in a passage which Lebeau paraphrases, finds such skill in the beaver's work that it cannot be due to instinct:

Il en est qu'on voudroit avoir vû soi-même pour y ajoûter foi, tant elles sont éloignées du bon sens & de la raison. Quoi qu'il en soit, je me hazarde de vous écrire sur ce sujet plusieurs particularitez, qui pourront peut-être vous faire douter de la sincérité de ma narration. Je commencerai par vous assurer que ces Animaux font ensemble une société de cent, qu'ils semblent se parler, & raisonner les uns avec les autres par de certains tons plaintifs non articulés. Les Sauvages disent qu'ils ont un jargon intelligible, par le moyen duquel ils se communiquent leurs sentiments & leurs pensées. Je n'ai jamais été témoin de ces sortes d'Assemblées, mais quantité de Sauvages & de Coureurs de bois, gens dignes de foi, m'ont assuré qu'il n'y avoit rien de plus vrai; ils ajoûtoient que les Castors se consultent entr'eux touchant ce qu'ils doivent faire pour entretenir leurs Cabanes, leurs Diguës & leurs Lacs, et pour tout ce qui regarde la conservation de leur République... (2: 156)²¹

Accounts of the human qualities of the beaver which an author thinks his readers may find hard to believe, or insulting to human vanity, are often attributed to the Indians. As well as affording plausible deniability for improvable facts included in travel narratives which advertise their veracity, this deferral to the Indians enacts a new relation between the ethnographic portrayals of the Indian and of the beaver. Where the Indian serves as informant for the *Mœurs des Castors*, the beaver is constituted at a second remove from the European observer, and for once the Indian assumes the powerful role of ethnographer. European is to Indian as Indian is to beaver. Of course, the text we read is still in French or English and no eighteenth-century Algonquian author has left

20 "to see if anything is lacking, and to give advice to the community if there is anything to repair. My Indians have assured me that they assemble for this reason, holding discussions together... I have never been witness to these sort of Assemblies, I would like to have seen them myself to put faith in it" (my translation).

21 "I mean such things as appear so strange to Sense and Reason, that we cannot give credit to them, unless we have seen them our selves. However, I will venture to write to you many Particulars upon this Subject, which perhaps may make you doubt of the truth of my Narrative. I will begin with assuring you, that these Animals join together in a Society consisting of an Hundred, and that they seem to talk and reason with one another by certain bemoaning inarticulate Sounds. The Sauvages say they have an intelligible Jargon, by means whereof they communicate their Sentiments and Thoughts to one another. I was never eye-witness of this kind of Assemblies, but many *Sauvages* and *Coureurs de Bois*, who are people worthy of Credit, have assur'd me, that there is nothing more true. They add, that they consult among themselves about what things they must do to maintain their Cottages, their Banks and their Lakes, and about every thing that concerns the Preservation of their Commonwealth" (2: 56).

us his written description of the beaver. But in thus doubling the ethnographic gaze, the European texts both extend and undermine the authority of the ethnographic genre. The Indians apparently regard the culture of the beaver through the same epistemological categories which the Europeans use when they describe the Indians. And yet if the Indians' notions of the beaver are wrong, the European's notions of the Indians might be equally faulty.

But the colonial authors, save Samuel Hearne in the passage in the epigraph, do not admit that the portrait of the beaver is fabricated or even exaggerated. Rather, the *Mœurs des Castors* partakes of the value placed on "merveilles" in travel literature and on the paradoxical formula, "strange, therefore true" (McKeon 47-55, 100-128). Deferring to the reports of Indian informants was only sensible because it was the Indians who hunted the beaver and knew its ways. The description of the beaver is intended to be no less accurate than descriptions of the Indians, and when Lahontan says his information will test the credulity of his readers, he intends his text to emerge victorious and strengthened by the challenge.

The aspect of beaver life most subject to exaggeration is the scale of the dam and lodge projects they undertake and the organization which this entails. Lebeau claims that some dams are five hundred feet long, the product of the work of one hundred beavers during six months. Denys claims that "pour ce travail, ils s'assemblent jusques à deux, trois, & quatre cens castors & plus, tant grands que petits" (285).²² Charlevoix agrees: "ils sont quelquefois trois ou quatre cent ensemble, formant une Bourgade, qu'on pourroit appeller une *petite Venise*" (3: 100; italics in original).²³ The notion of so many animals working together reveals a strong desire among the writers, especially when one considers that in New France labor was in short supply and public works projects employing four hundred were not possible. Through the system of *seigneuries*, the French colonial government granted land in a basically feudal system, but, since land was plentiful in Canada and labor scarce,

les immense seigneuries ne sont pas mis en valeur. Les propriétaires hésitent à entreprendre des investissements coûteux, moulins ou chemins praticables, et les colons répugnent à l'harassant labeur du défrichement, "très difficile à cause des gros arbres dont les forêts sont remplies." (Jacquin 110)²⁴

22 "For this work they assemble together as many as two, three, or four hundred Beavers, and more, as well large as small" (363-64).

23 "there are sometimes three or four hundred of them together in one place, forming a town which might properly be called a little Venice" (1: 159).

24 "the large seigneuries are not improved. The proprietors hesitate to undertake costly investments, such as mills or roads, and the colonists recoil from the hard labor of clearing land, very difficult on account of the large trees with which the forests are filled" (my translation; the quote is from Bougainville's memoir of the Seven Years War).

Jacquin writes that it took twenty men a year to clear thirty arpents of land. The beaver was uniquely equipped to clear land, and not only were its abilities exaggerated, but its methods were reported to resemble those of humans. Denys's account continues: "Pour mettre tous ces ouvriers en besogne, & bien faire leur travail, il leur faut un architecte & des commandans" (286).²⁵ This architect is said to be an elite specialist who travels from one project to another as his skills are needed! The praise of beaver architecture reaches an apogee in Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amérique* (1827). As one might expect from an ardent admirer of antiquities and classical civilizations, the beaver lodges become "Les palais de la Venise" (736)²⁶ complete with porticos, baths, and ten to twelve apartments on four stories.

Labor power and organization are thus a key component of the fabulous accounts of the beaver, myths designed by and for the imagination of colonists. While Indians living outside the colony tempt settlers to "go savage," to abandon civilization for an exotic and primitive form of life, beavers, though they too live in the forest, live in a manner which French writers admire and want colonists to imitate. The idealized Indian or "Noble Savage" is attractive for qualities suppressed by or alternative to those of the dominant classes of European society, and therefore appeals to the individual who desires to escape it. The "Noble Beaver," on the other hand, represents dominant European values of work, planning, loyalty, and hierarchy. Charlevoix, addressing his correspondent, the Duchess of Lesdiguières, writes "Voilà, Madame, tout ce que les Castors peuvent procurer d'avantages à cette Colonie pour son Commerce: leur industrie, leur prévoyance, le concert & la subordination, qu'on admire en eux..." (3: 100).²⁷ Note that Charlevoix says "Commerce" and not simply "Vie" or even "Prosperité"; he lays bare the *raison d'être* of the colony. But the fur trade, ironically, encouraged subversive behavior which mimicked the Indians as it destroyed beavers, since the "coureurs de bois" had to seek out and adopt the life of the Indians in order to obtain the most high quality pelts. Philippe Jacquin, in his excellent history of French-Indian relations in the fur trade, describes the impulse to freedom which colonists and authorities experienced in Canada as: "le goût de vagabondage enraciné dans les comportements populaires, que la déchéance de l'immigration et la confrontation avec la société indigène conduisent à réactiver" (111).²⁸

25 "To place all these workmen at their business, and to make them do their work well, there is need of an architect and commanders" (1968, 364).

26 "this Venice of the Wilderness" (1966, 71; possibly copied from Charlevoix, who also evoked Venice in a passage quoted above).

27 "These, Madam, are all the advantages the beavers are capable of affording the commerce of this colony: their foresight, their unanimity, and that wonderful subordination we so admire in them..." (1: 158).

28 "the taste for wandering rooted in the populace, which the torn bonds of immigration and the confrontation with native society served to reactivate" (my translation).

Several scholars have suggested that European colonists expected the Indians to live as the poorest did in Europe, and despised them all the more when their way of life did not conform to these expectations (see, for instance, Jennings, chap. 5). Indian tribes wandered as poor beggars did in Europe, the colonial writers claimed, though they did not need to beg because they shared willingly among each other and with the newly-arrived Europeans. Amerindian men hunted as only the rich were able to do in Europe (the enormous differences in the techniques and purposes of hunting were ignored), and like them they enjoyed a great deal of leisure when not hunting. The women tended to crops, but Europeans often overlooked this too when they denounced the Indians' refusal to settle down to a peasant-like agricultural subsistence. Europeans tried to view the Indians as serfs, for then they might be controlled as serfs were. Jennings has also shown (46, 312) how the English colonists' rationale for attacking the Indians resembled that used against the Irish peasants during the same period.

In all these respects, the beaver offered a corrective to the anarchy of the colonial setting and the threatening vices of the Indians. Beavers built sturdy homes where they lived year-round and which sheltered their children from enemies and from the elements. Unlike the Indians who were thought to be gluttons, never saving food for lean times, Denys reports that,

Le logement fait, ils font leur provision d'Hiver, car le castor ne mange point de poisson, il vit d'écorce de tremble qui est un bois fort léger; il abat un arbre, le coupe par tronçons de longueur pour ranger en son logis ... aussi proprement que sont les bûches de bois flotté dans un chantier. (294-95)²⁹

According to Raudot/Silvy and Charlevoix, the Indians believed that the quantity of these stores was an accurate indicator of the severity of the coming winter. Though they could not practice agriculture, beavers did exploit a vegetable resource, timber, which the Canadian colonists were thought to be under-exploiting. Charlevoix wrote, "Le Canada peut faire, & fait quelquefois avec les Isles de l'Amérique un Commerce assez considérable.... Comme il n'y a peut-être pas un monde de Pays, qui porte de plus de sortes de Bois, ni de meilleure espèce" (3: 91).³⁰ Beavers were even thought to have more virtuous sexual practices than the Indians and than many colonists. Dièreville reported in one of his verse passages:

29 "The house having been built, they make their provision for the winter. For the Beaver does not eat fish. It lives on the bark of the Aspen, which is very light wood. He fells a tree [and] cuts it into sticks of a length to pile in his dwelling. ... They arrange it as precisely as the logs of wood are floated in a lumber-yard" (367).

30 "Canada is capable of furnishing many articles for a trade with the West-India islands.... As there is, perhaps, no other country in the whole world, which produces more sorts of wood nor better kinds" (1: 145).

Après qu'ils ont mis tout leur soin,
 A former ainsi leur demeure,
 Ils occupent chacun leur coin
 Sans jamais se quitter que l'un des deux ne meure.
 Ils gardent, dit-on, même au-delà du trépas
 Une fidélité si belle,
 Si le mâle perd sa femelle,
 Avec une nouvelle il ne s'accouple pas (131)³¹

While the Indian was thought to live "sans loi, ni roi" in an anarchic equality, the beavers maintained a hierarchical social order. Since industry was so valued by the beavers, there had to be some means of correcting indolence. Lahontan and many others observed some beavers living not in island lodges, but in holes in the ground, and he called them "terriens."³²

Ils les appellent des paresseux qui ont été chassés de quelques Cabanes dans lesquelles ces animaux habitent jusqu'au nombre de 80.... Ces animaux faineants ne voulant pas travailler sont chassés par les autres, comme les Guespes par les Abeilles, & ils en sont maltraités si violemment qu'ils sont obligés d'abandonner les Cabanes que la bonne race construit elle-même sur les Etangs. (1: 140)³³

Raudot/Silvy, Denys and Dièreville all describe this punishment as the responsibility of the work chief, who from skilled architect can be thus transfigured into an overseer. Denys: "s'il manquent il les chastie, les bat, se jette dessus & les mord pour les mettre à leurs devoirs" (288).³⁴ Dièreville concurs, again in verse:

En traînant dans les Bois les arbres qu'ils abattent
 Si quelqu'un par malice agit trop foiblement,
 Les autres quittent prise, & vigoureusement
 Se jettent dessus & le battent. (133)³⁵

31 "After they have devoted all their care / To building thus their home, each occupies / A corner, and they never separate / Until one, or the other, dies. / 'Tis said that ever after they maintain / This beautiful fidelity, and if / The male should lose his mate, he does not with / Another then unite himself" (136).

32 Ouellet, in his edition of Lahontan (1: n.439), observes that this is probably a misprint for "terriers" as Charlevoix writes. In either spelling, it refers to the land ("terre") dwelling as opposed to the usual pond lodge.

33 "They are likewise call'd by the Savages, the lazy or idle kind, as being expell'd by the other Beavers from the Kennels in which these Animals are lodg'd, to the number of 80... the idle sort being unwilling to work, are expell'd by the others, just as Wasps are by Bees; and are so teas'd by 'em, that they are forc'd to quit the Kennels, which the better and more industrious Race huddles up to themselves in the Fens" (1: 106-07).

34 "If they are neglectful of their duty he chastises them, beats them, throws himself on them, and bites them to keep them at their duty" (1968, 365).

35 "In dragging through the Forests trees which have / Been felled, the rest let go their hold, to fall / Upon him lustily, & beat him well" (137).

Given the condition of laborers around 1700, this treatment does not necessarily detract from the positive image Dièreville gives to the beaver. Instead, it may represent the dream of a French nobleman who had witnessed the difficulties of ordering work in labor-poor Acadia. Dièreville continues by underlining the degraded existence of these "lazy beavers": "Il est de certains Castors que l'on appelle Fuiards, & que l'on trouve par tout errans sans cabanner comme les autres, & ces Castors ne sont ainsi vagabonds, que parce que ne voulant pas travailler, ils ont été battus & chassés par les sédentaires" (135).³⁶

Dièreville uses the beaver to elaborate a vision of colonial society with all the hierarchy and social control of France. Not only are beavers not indolent like Indians, but they maintain private property. A pond's inhabitants will use force to keep out other beavers, which lends the community the characteristics of a nation-state:

Sous le toit bouzillé de sa loge aquatique,
 Chacun a son département;
 Ils forment tous séparément
 Une espèce de République. (135)³⁷

The early New England promoter William Wood described a somewhat more charitable treatment of outsiders. They are adopted as servants: "he is made a drudge so long as he lives there, to carry at the greater end of the logge" (28). If Dièreville uses terms which anticipate the French Republic, Chateaubriand applies the militaristic romanticism of the Napoleonic era to the beaver. By his account, disputes between neighboring sovereignties lead to strong punitive measures:

La guerre n'est malheureusement point inconnue aux castors: il s'élève quelquefois entre eux des discordes civiles, indépendamment des contestations étrangères qu'ils ont avec les rats musqués. Les Indiens racontent que si un castor est surpris en maraude sur le territoire d'une tribu que n'est pas la sienne, il est conduit devant le chef de cette tribu, et puni correctionnellement; à la récidive, on lui coupe cette utile queue... Quelquefois le différend est vidé par un duel entre les deux chefs des deux troupes, ou par un combat singu-

36 "There are certain Beavers, called vagabonds, to be found everywhere, roaming about without making huts like the others, & these Beavers only became wanderers like this, because they were unwilling to work, & had therefore, been beaten & driven out, by those who were established" (138).

37 "Under the roof of clay, in his / Aquatic lodge, each has his own / Department separate, though all / Join in a kind of Commonwealth" (138).

lier de trois contre trois, de trente contre trente, comme le combat des Curiaces et des Horaces, ou des trente Bretons contre les trente Anglais. (739)³⁸

Today beaver-watchers know that the "castors terriers" are not the exiled misfits of a workaholic society, nor a separate species as Lahontan and Raudot/Silvy suggest. Beavers build lodges in ponds for the safety they afford, and if predators do not threaten, a beaver colony will live in a burrow on the bank. Most lodge-dwellers also maintain dens on the shore, and kits more than a year old often live in these for the summer when their mother refuses to continue to accommodate them in the main lodge. The French observers probably saw some of these yearlings and called them vagabonds.

When Charlevoix published his semi-official *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* (which includes his travel narrative, the *Journal Historique*) in 1744 he was concerned to identify ways to improve the colony's productivity, and he had most of the other texts I have cited as sources. Therefore it is not surprising that he draws the most pointed lessons from the phenomenon of the lazy beaver:

Ces prétendus Exilés sont apparemment ceux, qu'on appelle *Castors Terriers*, qui en effet vivent séparés des autres, ne travaillent point, & se logent sous Terre.... On les connoît au peu de Poil, qu'ils ont sur le Dos, ce qui vient sans doute de ce qu'ils se frottent continuellement contre la Terre. Avec cela, ils sont maigres; c'est le fruit de leur Paresse. On en trouve beaucoup plus dans les Pays Chauds, que dans les Pays Froids. (3: 103-04)³⁹

Charlevoix transfers from humans to beavers the popular climatic racist theory that inhabitants of warm or bountiful lands are less hard-working than those of cold sterile places.⁴⁰ In beaver society even more easily than in human, these Southerners can be classed as undesirable. The "small quantity of fur on their backs" would of course make their pelts less valuable. Because of their indolent, anti-social, subterranean life, these lazy beavers reduce both the profit value of their pelts and their didactic value as a model for colonists.

38 "Sometimes there arises among them civil discord, independent of the foreign entanglements they have with the muskrats. The Indians say that if a beaver is surprised marauding in the territory of a tribe other than his own, he is brought before the chief of that tribe and punished for the purpose of rehabilitation; for a second offense, they cut off his useful tail.... Sometimes the quarrel is settled by a duel between the chiefs of the two troops, or by single combat, 3 against 3, 30 against 30, as in the combat of the Curiatii and the Horatii, or the 30 Bretons against the 30 Englishmen" (72).

39 "Those pretended exiles are such as are probably called land beavers, who actually live separate from the others, never work, and live under-ground.... They are known by the small quantity of fur on their backs, proceeding, without doubt from their rubbing themselves continually against the ground. And besides, they are lean, which is the consequence of their laziness; they are found in much greater plenty in warm than in cold countries" (1: 163).

40 See Montesquieu liv. XVIII, chap. 4 and liv. XIX, chap. 4.

In Letter IV of his *Journal Historique*, the one preceeding that about the beaver, Charlevoix outlines, as the title states, "Ce qui a empêché le progrès de la colonie Française de Canada."⁴¹ The description of the beaver may then be read as a prescription for improved colonial behavior. Many of the weaknesses of the colonists, some of which resemble the perceived vices of the savages, are answered by virtues of the beavers. Of the colonists, Charlevoix writes, "Premièrement on a été un tems infini sans se fixer; on défrichoit un Terrain, sans l'avoir auparavant bien examiné, on l'enseménçoit, on y élevoit des Batiments, puis, sans trop sçavoir pourquoi, le plus souvent on l'abandonnoit, et on alloit se placer ailleurs" (3: 86).⁴² In this the colonists resemble both the Indians, whose agricultural technique involved cultivating fields for only a few years until the soil was depleted, and the "castors terriers" or lazy beavers who'd been thrown out of the lodge. By contrast, the obedient and conformist beaver is deliberate and even democratic in the selection of sites for settlement, highly skilled in the clearing of trees, and tireless in bringing the land and the water under his control. The beaver is the ideal for the industrious and permanent settler who was so slow to establish himself in New France.

In his diagnosis of the social and economic ills of the colony, Charlevoix blames the beaver trade, as many colonial officials had done for nearly a century. The institution of the system of "congrés" or trading permits for furs in 1681 aimed to keep more colonists tied to the land and out of the woods, but had the unintended effect of increasing illicit traffic to the English colonies. Lahontan identifies the problem in his eighth letter, where he writes, "Car il faut que vous sçachiez que le Canada ne subsiste que par le grand Commerce de Pelleteries, dont les trois quarts viennent des Peuples qui habitent aux environs des grands Lacs"(1: 69).⁴³ Charlevoix is less matter-of-fact than Lahontan; the language he uses resembles the portrait of the lazy beaver. When a glut in the pelt supply drove prices down and drove traders to the enemy English merchants in New York,

les Vagabonds, qui avoient pris du goût pour la liberté d'une vie errante & pour l'indépendance, resterent parmi les Sauvages, dont on ne les distinguoit plus, que par leurs vices.... Ainsi une partie de la Jeunesse est continuellement en course ... elle y perd au

41 "The causes which have prevented the progress of the French colony of Canada."

42 "In the first place, they were a very long time in fixing themselves; they cleared lands without having well examined them, they sowed them, and built houses on them, and afterwards frequently deserted them, without knowing why, and went to settle elsewhere" (1: 122).

43 "for you must know, that Canada subsists only upon the Trade of Skins or Furs, three fourths of which come from the People that live round the great Lakes" (1: 53).

moins le goût de travail, elle y éprouve les forces, elle y devient incapable de la moindre contrainte.... (3: 89)⁴⁴

Each one of these vices is answered in the next letter by a virtue of the beaver: constancy, industry, prodigious strength, and a firm social order. In reality, the "coureurs de bois" worked extremely hard, and the beaver actually enjoys a great deal of leisure once his dam is built. Charlevoix praises the beaver for its labor in felling trees, but John Lawson comments that the beaver could be a pest on a farm for the same reason, "If you take them young, they become very tame and domestick, but are very mischievous in spoiling Orchards, by breaking the Trees, and blocking up your Doors in the Night, with the Sticks and Wood they bring thither" (125).

Out of the beaver was fashioned a comprehensive ideology which both encouraged behavior desired by colonial officials and warned of the dangers of vagabondage. Hunting beaver pelts was subversive not only for the contacts it necessitated among the Savages, but also for the great profits it could bring. Bourgeois merchants took most of this profit, but entrepreneurial "coureurs de bois" could make huge sums as well, which posed a threat to the class structure of the colony.⁴⁵ The corrupt Indian whom the fur traders so resembled had also been corrupted by the beaver trade, as many colonial writers recognized. Before contact with the "coureurs de bois" (always to be distinguished from contact with missionaries) the hypostatized Noble Savages had no *rien et mien*, did not code status in wealth, were generous, did not overhunt game, and did not find any great value in Beaver pelts, (did not even wear them, says Charlevoix). Now they drive a hard bargain for the pelts and trade them for liquor.

Descriptions of methods of hunting beaver are included both in the ethnographies of Amerindians and in the *Moeurs des Castors*. One ingenious technique is the winter method of cutting holes in the ice and rigging nets beneath it to trap the beavers as they came to the holes to breathe. Significantly, the techniques are credited to the Indians, underlining the fact that "coureurs de bois" were more often fur traders than fur trappers. Ethnohistorians such as James Axtell (1981, 260) believe furthermore that hunting for beaver and other fur-bearing animals disrupted the ecological balance of the forest and took up time previously spent

44 "the vagabonds, who had acquired a taste for a wandering and independent life, remained among the savages or Indians, from whom they were no longer distinguishable but by their vices ... it infects them with a habit of libertinism, of which they never entirely get rid; at least, it gives them a distaste for labor, it exhausts their strength, they become incapable of the least constraint..." (1: 126-27).

45 Jacquin comments that a fur trader could make twice the wages of a laborer in Quebec (127, 154-63).

at war or hunting for food. But colonial writers do not concede that the pelt trade has changed the forest economy; beaver hunting is presented as an ethnological fact of Indian life in its "natural" state. French colonial writers rarely describe hunting beaver themselves.

We have seen sensational facts about the beaver attributed to the Indians, but what did Canadian native peoples really think of the beaver and its importance for their lives? Was there a Native American mythology of the beaver as an animal with a spiritual or social lesson for humans? The Iroquois cosmogony tells of a beaver (though in some versions it is an otter) who dives from the turtle's back to the bottom of the primordial sea to bring up the dirt from which land is made. *Castorologia* infers that these myths document the existence of a species of Giant Beaver in the past and cites Micmac and Algonquin legends of teeth six inches across to corroborate fossil evidence of the huge *Castoroides ohioensis*. Beyond the accounts we have surveyed in which Indians claim that Beavers live in Nations as they do, there is little information on Native beliefs about the beaver published before 1800.

However, one modern scholar of Native American responses to the fur trade, Calvin T. Martin, proposes a provocative and controversial theory of the despiritualization of Indian life amidst the cataclysms of the European invasion, a process in which the beaver plays an important role. Martin argues that when whites urged the Indians to hunt beaver and other fur-bearers in numbers far greater than before and far more than populations could sustain, Indians of the Canadian Shield rationalized their depredations through a modification of traditional beliefs about an epic battle between Man, Bear and Beaver. In times of legend, "mankind was intimidated by the continual encroachment of this animal upon his domain — dry land" (108). Martin cites the *Narrative* of David Thompson, a Hudson's Bay Company employee who travelled central and western Canada for thirty years in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thompson relates a story told by Cree near Lake Winnipeg that in the past, "the Beavers had been an ancient People, and then lived on the dry land; they were always Beavers, not Men, they were wise and powerful, and neither Man, nor any animal made war on them." Later the Great Spirit "ordered Weesaukejauk (the flatterer) to drive them all from the dry land into the water, and they became and continue very numerous; but the Great Spirit has been, and now is, very angry with them and they are now all to be destroyed" (155). Martin's analysis, though based on local data, suggests an ideological system linking colonizer, colonized, and exploited resource; the beaver was ennobled by those who profited from it and despised by those who were employed to kill it. Thompson's account continues by identifying the discovery of the technique of using castoreum as a bait in steel traps, and shows an awareness of the danger of destroying beaver populations:

About ten winters ago Weesaukejauk showed to our brethren the Neppissings and the Algonquins the secret of their destruction; that all of them were infatuated with the love of the castoreum of their own species, and more fond of it than we are of fire water. We are now killing the beaver without any labour; we are now rich, but shall soon be poor, for when the beaver are destroyed we have nothing to depend on to purchase what we want for our families; strangers now overrun our country with their iron traps, and we and they will soon be poor. (qtd. in H. Martin 50)

If white traders were still not concerned about the devastation of beaver populations, native trappers were, and this late eighteenth-century account connects the tragic fate of beavers with that of Native Americans.

There are two exceptional beaver anecdotes from the mid-eighteenth century which break down the prohibition which ethnographic descriptions of the beaver had established against narrations of Europeans hunting the animal. An analysis of these scenes in Lebeau and Le Page du Pratz can demonstrate how the ethnographic mode could become reflexive and the notion of Amerindians and beavers "naturally" cooperating to provide the colonists with commodities could be strained to the verge of irony.

Le Page du Pratz tells of his observations of the beaver in a section of the *Histoire de la Louisiane* which consists of an odd sort of travel narrative, a utopian excursion intended "pour faire des découvertes dont personne ne parloit; pour trouver aussi s'il étoit possible, des choses que personne ne recherchoit" (1: 213).⁴⁶ He thus posits an originary space ideal for ethnography, since it is undisturbed by prior colonial invasion. Yet his desire to observe and describe the beaver leads blithely to violence and destruction. When his party first finds a beaver dam, "Nous nous cabanâmes à portée de la retraite des Castors, assez loin seulement pour qu'ils ne puissent voir notre feu: j'avertis mes gens de ne point faire de bruit ni de tirer, de peur d'affaroucher ces animaux" (1: 244).⁴⁷ He forbids his Native guides from carrying their guns as they go into a blind to observe the beavers at work. He induces an observation, however, by cutting a small trench through the dam to force the beavers to repair it, which they do in a well-organized team:

nous étions à la juste distance qu'il falloit pour n'être point apperçus, & pour pouvoir les considérer: les uns faisoient de mortier, les autres le charioient sur leurs queues ... sur la

46 "to make discoveries not mentioned by others ... because I travelled in order to discover what no one before could inform me about" (133). The 1774 English translation of Le Page du Pratz, still the only one published, is abridged and rearranged. I will cite the passages which most closely resemble the original.

47 "We set up our hut within reach of this retreat, or village of beavers, but at such a distance, as that they could not observe our fire. I put my people on their guard against making any sort of noise, or firing their pieces, for fear of scaring those animals..." (142).

levée où d'autres restoient pour le prendre, le mettoient dans la rigole & l'affermissoient à grands coups de queue. (1: 246-47)⁴⁸

His first experiment a success, Le Page nevertheless continues, "J'avois envie de tuer un, mais j'attendie au lendemain, parce que je leur préparois bien plus l'ouvrage que celui de la nuit & qui satisferoit plu parfaitement ma curiosité."⁴⁹ He makes a larger breach in the dam to drive the beavers out of the lodge, whereupon "nous quittâmes la breche, & allâmes nous caché tout autour de l'Etang pour en tuer un seulement, afin de l'examiner de près" (1: 248).⁵⁰ He takes care however not to kill "l'Inspecteur des travaux" (1: 249) — "the overseer of the works" — but instead a common laborer. With no apparent awareness of perverting his good intentions, Le Page allows his urge for encyclopedic observation to lead him from a blind which kept the animals unaware of any human presence to killing one and finally to breaking apart the lodge, "Je fis défaire le toit sans rien casser" (1: 251).⁵¹ The episode demonstrates how the gaze of ethnographic observation insists rhetorically on its innocence and non-intervention and yet entails the disruption of natural processes. While elsewhere in his *Histoire* Le Page du Pratz speculates on the best means for maintaining French control of Louisiana and in one episode ruthlessly puts down a slave rebellion, in the encounter with the beavers he dons the cap of disinterested scientific inquiry that Mary Louise Pratt has termed the "anti-conquest," "a utopian image of a European bourgeois subject simultaneously innocent and imperial, asserting a harmless hegemonic vision that installs no apparatus of domination" (33-34).

In his novel *Avantures de Sieur Lebeau où Voyage Curieux et Nouveau*, Lebeau weaves his observations of the beaver, which are largely copied from Lahontan, into a tale of observing its life and violent death. His sentimental anecdote reinforces the ideological portrayal of the animal as it shifts the blame for the extermination of beavers from the entrepreneurial French to the laboring Indians.

At the opening of the chapter, both narrative and travel are interrupted by a beaver dam. The river had been carrying Lebeau and his companions very quickly, "desorte que nous eussions pu faire facilement quarante lieues dans un seul jour, si nous ne nous fussions souvent arrêtés par des Dignes de Castors, que

48 "Some made mortar, others carried it on their tails ... quite to the dam, where others remained to take it, put it into the gutter, and rammed it with blows of their tails" (1975, 143).

49 "longed to satisfy my curiosity about these creatures" (143).

50 "went to conceal ourselves all round the pond, in order to kill only one, the more narrowly to examine it" (144).

51 "I caused to undo the roof without breaking any thing" (145).

nous rencontres de tems en tems" (1: 315).⁵² They float on in silence (for the dams apparently have not completely stopped the current), looking out for beavers. One of his guides, Nicolas, shoots at one and injures it, but he cannot recover it and the shot serves as a warning for many others to take cover underwater. The men disembark to lie in wait for their prey to resurface. Lebeau, intrigued by his literary pre-conceptions, goes into the woods, "dans l'esperance d'y voir peut-être travailler quelques Castors... j'avançai doucement ventre à terre, pour voir sans être vu ces beaux Architectes nés, dont j'avois entendu dire tant de merveilles" (1: 319).⁵³ With such stealth, Lebeau the adventurer places himself in the rhetorical position of the ethnographer, who sees without being seen. He even suggests that to actually witness the beavers is exceptional, while second-hand accounts from "informants" are the norm:

Car au moindre cri que font ces Sentinelles à l'approche des Hommes & des Bêtes, tous ces Travailleurs se jettent à l'eau & se sauvent en plongeant jusqu'au leurs Cabanes. J'avance ce fait pour l'avoir vu, ayant eu beaucoup de peine à le croire moi-même sur le rapport que l'on m'en avoir déjà fait, & si j'ai été, pendant un bon quart d'heure, assez proche d'eux sans être aperçu, il faut avouer que c'est un bonheur pour moi, ou un pur effet du hazard. (1: 322)⁵⁴

Again five pages later, when Lebeau believes he hears the beavers talking, the fictional scene of encounter confirms the incredible pre-conception only by overcoming a strategic incredulity in the travel writer.

While author Lebeau digresses into the *Mœurs des Castors* borrowed from Lahontan, character Lebeau lies on the ground observing, unaware that he is in turn being watched by his Huron guides. They too advance "ventre à terre," and are considerate of the writer's needs for a while: "Ces Sauvages voyant que j'étois si attentif à regarder ces Animaux voulurent bien, pendant quelque-temps, me laisser jouir de ce plaisir" (1: 331).⁵⁵ But eventually they become impatient and fire at the beavers over Lebeau's prone body. The relationship outlined

52 "so that we could easily have made forty leagues in a single day, if we had not been halted by some beaver dams, that we encountered from time to time" (this and all quotations from Lebeau are my translations).

53 "in the hope of perhaps seeing some beavers working there... I advanced slowly on my belly to see these gorgeous natural-born architects, of which I had heard so many marvels."

54 "Because at the least cry which the sentinels make at the approach of men or beasts, all the workers throw themselves into the water and seek safety by diving down to their lodges. I state this from having seen it, having been at pains to believe it myself on the reports that already been made to me, and if I was, during a good fifteen minutes, close enough to them without being seen, I must admit that it was luck, or a pure matter of chance."

55 "The Indians, seeing that I was so taken with watching the animals, wanted to leave me to enjoy this pleasure for a while..."

above, where Indian described beaver as European described Indian, is here reversed. Lebeau cuts in front of the Indian informant to observe the Beaver first hand, and this puts him in the line of fire of the Indians who, driven by European traders, are out to kill the beavers. Motives of observation and exploitation are set in conflict in this scene, whereas the typical representation of the beaver put observation in the service of exploitation, describing the parts of the beaver according to their value and use for Europeans. Caught in the cross-fire, Lebeau casts himself as an innocent observer not implicated in the fur trade, and sentimentally deplores his guides for crimes against beaverdom. His guides, frustrated by an unsuccessful hunt, set about destroying a beaver lodge with their hatchets:

Si d'un côté j'étois ravi de cette expedition qui satisfait la curiosité que j'avois de voir le dedans de ces maisonnettes, d'un autre je fus extrêmement chagrin de voir la cruauté de mes sauvages, qui ayant trouvé trois petits Castors, pas plus gros que le poing dans un de ces Gîtes, froissèrent rudement le corps de deux de ces Petits contre la muraille de leur propre nid. (1: 335)⁵⁶

Here we have a scene enacting the post-modern ethnographer's remorse at the violence his penetrating gaze entails for its object. In this case, however, the perpetrator is the ethnographic object of the seventeenth-century colonists and the Jesuit *Relations*, the Hurons, and the victim is the second-degree object, the beaver. Lebeau therefore excuses himself from any of the ill conscience that anthropologists have felt at least since Michel Leiris.

Lebeau's scene erodes the separation between colonist, "savage" and beaver, even as his entire work, an action-packed tall tale which is nevertheless more geographically and ethnologically accurate than contemporary romances by Prévost and Lesage, erodes the separation between ethnography, travel narrative and novel. The scene of Lebeau with the beavers is one of ethnographic observation, not of hunting. A great fictional narrative of psychological reflection and spiritual pursuit of the beaver, the novel that would place the beaver in the same class as the whale and the bear, was not possible because the beaver was an ally, not a barrier to colonization. The beaver of course continued to be one of Canada's most valuable resources into the nineteenth century, but as the bulk of the trade shifted into English hands and north to the inhospitable shores of Hudson Bay, the significance of the beaver for the ideology of settlement lessened.

56 "If on the one hand I was delighted with this episode which had satisfied the curiosity that I had to see the inside of these little cabins, on the other hand I was extremely mortified to see the cruelty of my Indians, who having found in one of these lodges three little beavers, no larger than your fist, rudely crushed the bodies of two of these little ones against the wall of their own nest."

The legends about the beaver survived, however. In the nineteenth century at least two books were published which continued the range of discourses, from natural history to mythology and anthropology, which we have seen in the literature of New France. By emphasizing folklore, these books revive the renaissance *epistème* which predated natural history. Horace T. Martin's *Castorologia*, quoted above, was one, and the other was by Lewis Henry Morgan, who published *The American Beaver and his Works* in 1868. One of the founders of anthropology and also a wealthy lawyer for railroad interests, Morgan writes of observing the beaver during business trips to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He explains the "lazy beaver" as those who have failed to find mates and are punished as "slave beavers" (135). By this time the fur trapper was as marginal a figure in the United States as the Indian, and his behavior and mythology was included in Morgan's work. The motive for Morgan's interest in the beaver can be found in his chapter on "Animal Psychology" where he explains that the beaver's profound intelligence is not a myth nor a marvel, that "The popular mind has always been in advance of the metaphysicians with reference to the mental endowments of animals" (248). Morgan preferred to call animals "mutes" and believed that they were endowed with reason and the possibility of cultural evolution, such as the beaver's development of canals and perfection in the design of lodges. The stage theories which pervaded Morgan's and all anthropological theory in the nineteenth century were also applied to the beaver. Moreover, Morgan provides a new justification for representing the beaver more as a culture than as an animal, and for studying these representations within a history of ethnography as well as of natural history. The beaver demands attention from post-colonial theory, because the growth of colonial New France came at the expense of native American cultures, and one of these cultures was that of the beaver, a kind, furry creature which, ironically, was believed to mimic the values of the colonists.

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What Use Is Ethnicity to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada?

I want to begin by analysing my own title, a self-reflexive move that I hope is still fashionable, rather than irritating. In doing so I want to try to situate this paper in a larger project: attempting to come to terms with both the discourse of ethnicity/race and one of its most brutal subsets, racist discourse. Both discourses are central to my fields of specialization in literary studies, Canadian literatures and Commonwealth/post-colonial literatures. To talk about the use of race/ethnicity is an attempt to talk about it as something that is constructed and once constructed, deployed, by both minority and majority groups, for both liberatory and repressive ends. It exists in some cultures in very static forms and in others in very fluid forms: Canada is one country where these discourses are undergoing rapid modification, sometimes in directions that will lead to greater equality and sometimes not. It is precisely for this reason that it is crucial to try to think and talk about the ways in which ethnicity/race is constructed and deployed, rather than seeing it as simply something we either have or do not have. This is increasingly a world where so-called "mixed relationships" produce children who are nonetheless constrained by the dominant discourse to conform to concepts of racial/ethnic purity and authenticity. Simply to condemn ideas of purity, however, is to risk discounting people's experiences in the world, where their families and their social, geographical, and national locations have written them into positions that they cannot simply abandon even if they wished to. As with gender, it is one thing to talk about it as a construct and another thing to decide to abandon one's gender identity. Nonetheless, like gender, ethnicity/race can be downplayed or spotlighted in particular circumstances; at some moments it is useful to be a woman, at others it is not. Similarly, one's race or ethnicity can be useful at some times and places, and at others is something to be concealed, if at all possible. Obviously, the ability and power to control how one's race/ethnicity is perceived is unevenly distributed in society: power is often, after all, distributed so that one ethnic group is markedly less powerful than another.

Probably my use of the expression "race/ethnicity" has already highlighted a problem that can only be touched on here. How are these two terms connected? Race is usually seen as a broader category than ethnicity. Ethnicity is usually tied to political, linguistic and cultural markers, rather than to biological and physical ones. Race is often thought to be something that is self-evidently apparent, while