Ethnographies of Empire and Resistance: “Wilderness” and the “Vanishing Indian” in Alexis de Tocqueville’s “A Fortnight in the Wilderness” and John Tanner’s “Narrative of Captivity”

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Abstract: Alexis de Tocqueville was critical of the destructive implications of American expansion and this sentiment is articulated most forcefully in his essay “A Fortnight in the Wilderness” written in 1831 during his American travels to Saginaw, Michigan. “Fortnight” is a biographical adventure story and an ethnography of the western-moving American frontier. Because “Fortnight” deals with the themes of the “wilderness” and the “vanishing Indian” of the American and Canadian frontiers, an instructive comparison can be made between “Fortnight” and a text narrated by John Tanner, someone Tocqueville met and interviewed during his travels in 1831 and who became a key source of Tocqueville’s knowledge about the North American Indians. Tanner’s “A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner (US Interpreter at Saut de Ste. Marie) during thirty years of residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America” (1830) is both adventure literature and an ethnography of native life. Tocqueville used Tanner’s “Narrative,” in his work “Democracy in America,” to illustrate what white Indian experts of the time called the “miseries” of “savage” life, or what later commentators would patronizingly call the “pathologies” - alcoholism, internal warfare, disease, loss of territory - that would eventually doom Indians in North America to extinction. Yet there is more to Tanner’s text than this dispiriting message. One of the appeals of Tanner’s narrative today, and one of the reasons why there has been a reassessment of his text, is that it details the survival of native people as they move further westward and adapt to new geographies. Tocqueville is now a canonical figure in the American political imagination, a “prophet” of American democracy. Tanner, if we bother to think of him at all, is remembered as a lost soul, a marginal figure who neither belongs to the native nor to the white culture he sought to rejoin. But when we read their texts together we can, as I have tried to do in my research, see them as documents that belong both to their time and to ours. They make statements, albeit in strikingly different ways, about geographic landscapes and colonial identities, about European imperial fantasies and native struggles for survival, about Canadian and American nation building, and they tell us much about the uses of ethnography, language, and interpretation.

Keywords: Ethnography, Native Studies, Captivity Narratives, Geography and Identity, American, Canadian, Ojibwa People

Introduction

Tocqueville is now a canonical figure in the American political imagination, the “prophet” of American democracy with a large and legendary reputation. Tanner, if we bother to think of him at all, is remembered as a lost soul, a marginal figure who neither belongs to the native nor to the white culture he sought to rejoin. Both
Tocqueville’s *Fortnight in the Wilderness* ([1831] 1938)\(^1\) and Tanner’s *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner (US Interpreter at Saut de Ste. Marie)* during thirty years of residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America (1830) share a common concern with the violent encounter between natives and white civilization and they are often referred to as works of early ethnography that try to capture and explain the manners and beliefs of natives peoples as they face the encroachment of white civilization.

Tocqueville drew from Tanner’s text a theme present in *Fortnight* but later amplified in *Democracy in America* ([vol. 1, 1835 & vol. 2, 1840] 1999) the Indian passion for hunting that made them resist any attempt to be integrated within white civilization and would contribute to their vanquishment as a people. There is more to Tanner’s *Narrative* than this dispiriting message, however. When we read Tocqueville’s *Fortnight* and Tanner’s *Narrative* within a textual-historical context and in counterpoint to each other a more complex picture emerges. In this paper I examine the two texts as ethnographic documents and explore how they are each part of the cultural politics of their times and how the rhetoric in each text reinforces or subverts imperialist discourses about wilderness and the vanishing Indian.

**Fortnight as Ethnography and Imaginative Geography of Empire**

*Fortnight* is a recollective first-person narrative account the tone of which anticipates Tocqueville’s own *Recollections of the 1848 Revolution* (Shiner, 1988). The text provides early evidence of Tocqueville’s exceptional ability as a writer and is an important record of his and Beaumont’s adventurous travels to what they perceived to be the limit of white civilization in order to find there Indian tribes in their “natural state.” American Indians symbolized for Tocqueville the remnants of an aristocratic and archaic past, but they also held a special intellectual fascination because he believed their eventual extinction was predicted by a new social scientific knowledge, a new political science, that uncovered the underlying tensions between the Indian way of life and of white civilization.

Within this short essay, decidedly Romantic and with echoes and conscious subversions of François-René Chateaubriand’s evocations of the American wilderness (Doran, 1976), Tocqueville conveys to the reader an arresting tableau of the Yankee imperial drive for domination and of a native life doomed to vanish “like snow before the sun.” *Fortnight in the Wilderness* is a hybrid text, *belle lettre* mixed with Tocqueville’s attempts at ethnography (Riesman, 1964) and historical-sociological analysis, making it an especially interesting example of what has been called the “imaginary geography of empire.” The phrase is Edward Said’s (1978, 1993) and it refers to the textual references and rhetorical strategies writers use to represent and understand a distant land and its peoples. Tocqueville embodied a French

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\(^1\) *Fortnight* was originally written in 1831 during Tocqueville’s and Gustave de Beaumont’s busy American travels but not published until 1860, shortly after Tocqueville’s death, by his literary executor, Beaumont. The essay, along with personal journals Tocqueville kept during his travels, were first published in English in George W. Pierson’s magisterial work, *Tocqueville in America* (1938), and later updated and corrected in another significant text edited by A.P. Mayer as *Journey to America* (1959). In this paper I rely on Pierson’s translation of *Fortnight.*

I would like to acknowledge the help of the UNBSJ library staff for their assistance in searching and retrieving relevant texts, websites and other information used in this article, most centrally Deborah Eves for her prompt help when things went awry. Many thanks to my historian colleague at UNBSJ, Debra Lindsay, for passing on her books about Canadian geographic exploration and First Nations history. They were indispensable for charting a new research path for me. Last but not least thanks to Miriam Jones for her editorial suggestions, conversations, and support. This work would have been less interesting without her input.
imperial consciousness (Richter, 1963; Mitchell, 1991; Said, 2002; Pitts, 2001, 2006) which enabled him to adopt a sweeping recollective style of writing filled with enormously perceptive observations about American expansion into the wilderness as well as the usual stereotypes about the American forests and their native inhabitants.

The Wilderness and the Indian, like the representations of the Orient that Edward Said analysed so perceptively, are products of the intellectual and cultural energies of Europe’s expansion into foreign territories. Native Americans have long played a role in the European imagination where they exist as less than real historical figures and more as European projections about humans in their natural state, noble savages, natural egalitarians, or more frequently, as demonic savages, ruled by ignorance and superstition, easily subject to a barbaric implacable blood-lust (see Jennings, 1975; Berkhofer, 1978; Dippie, 1982; Axtell; 1992; Trigger, 1985; Francis, 1992; Sayre, 1997). The wilderness too is a particularly pregnant symbol in the American imagination. The Puritan’s “venture into the wilderness” (Miller, 1964) as well as the popular mythology of the western frontier (Turner, 1980) were part of an expansionist ideology predicated on the biblical injunction of humans having dominion over the earth and its animals, the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heaven. Both the Indian and the wilderness would have to be subdued and made fruitful (Pearce, 1965; Slotkin, 1973, 1985) in order for civilization to advance.

The location of *Fortnight in the Wilderness* is Michigan Territory, which at that time included present day Wisconsin and Michigan, as well as parts of Ohio and Minnesota. Michigan Territory was long the geographic centre of the political concerns of three great Empires: British, French, and American. For over two-hundred years in much of this land Indians and whites created a common sphere of mutual understanding, which the historian Richard White (1991) called the “middle ground.” But by the time Tocqueville travelled through the dense forests of this territory in 1831 the world of the “middle-ground” had come to an end and Tocqueville and Beaumont saw only the ghostly remains of a former domain where whites and Indians, who once held the balance of power among contesting European empires, coexisted within a complicated framework of mutual obligations and reciprocities which regulated commerce, diplomacy, warfare and the everyday business of life.

*Fortnight in the Wilderness* is a work of an European ethnographic-literary imagination and by this I mean that Tocqueville infuses into his adventure story his own political interests and visions of empire. He does not merely reproduce this outlying frontier territory and its peoples for the European and American reader; he animates them and enhances their meaning through a symbolic language that shares European and metropolitan sensibilities. He projects into this geography his own visions of an American imperial future. He writes of his own sense of regret over the loss of French imperial colonies once part of this wild geography. He uses discursive hierarchies between western civilization and native culture where Anglo-American settlers are cast as avaricious but unassailably vital, while natives are essentially wild and soon to be erased from history. *Fortnight* is a text where we can see a dynamic exchange between an individual author and the political concerns shaped by three great Empires and within this context Indians and the wilderness becomes important to the imperial mind not for what they are but for what civilization is not and can no longer be.

In a broad sense, the Indian and the wilderness are the poetic, literary, scientific, ethnographic and ethnological constructs of Europe’s expansion into the Americas. This expansion went hand in hand with the production of texts through which Europeans materially and
imaginatively possessed the “new world.” Mapmakers, explorers, scientists, artists, and adventure writers charted the new world (Goetzmann, 1966). Travel writing, ethnology, memoir, missionary literature, and social scientific accounts, much like Tocqueville’s own writing, were designed to make the life and customs of the unfamiliar “other” somehow more transparent and ultimately useful to Europeans. The excessive inquisitiveness into the lives of strange and exotic people played an enormous role in the foundation of modern travel literature and social science ethnography both. Colonial expansion depended on such accounts because they purported to render the mores, habits, and institutions that are taken for granted by the locals as explicable and possibly advantageous to European rulers (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Pratt, 1992; Assad, 1995). These texts constitute a body of knowledge, what Foucault (1982) called a discourse, about native life which allowed Europeans to have knowledge and power over them. Knowledge and power were mutually reinforcing and the task was to make the American wilderness and its aboriginal inhabitants not only transparent to Europeans but, given the imperial context, to position them as vanishing forms whose inherent wilderness makes them unfit for white civilization.

Into the Heart of the Wilderness

Fortnight in the Wilderness begins with a description of the retreat of the wilderness in the face of white encroachment while the Indian is represented with a mixture of fear, disappointment, and melancholy. “Everywhere,” writes Tocqueville, “the forests have fallen, the solitude was coming to life,” and the unstoppable march of the white race proceeds, “bringing with it an unbelievable destruction” (p. 232). Tocqueville and Beaumont travelled over bad roads up the Mohawk River Valley, the setting for James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans ([1826] 2004), but were unable to find any Indians. The Indians, the main characters in Cooper’s story set during the Seven Year War, had disappeared. Indian names marked the territory through which they passed and had an incantatory effect on our travellers, but the Indians had mysteriously vanished. “And what has happened to the Indians? said I. --The Indians answered our host, have gone I don’t know exactly where, beyond the Great Lakes. Their race is dying. They are not made for civilization; it kills them” (p. 232).

Tocqueville and Beaumont finally reached Buffalo and the town was full of Indians who had received money for land they had ceded to the US government. Their first encounter with native people failed to meet their expectations: “I was full of memories of M. de Chateaubriand and of Cooper and in the indigenies of North America,” writes Tocqueville, “I was expecting to see savages on whose faces nature would have left the traces of some of those proud virtues which the spirit of liberty produces.” Instead of noble features and firm bodies developed by hunting and war, the Indians they saw were “thin and un-muscular” and could easily be mistaken for men who belong to “the lowest classes in our great European cities, and yet they are still savages.” They did not carry arms, were covered with European clothes but “added to them the products of savage luxury, feathers, enormous ear rings, and collars of shell. … We had before us, and pity it is to say so, the last remains of the confederation of the Iroquois, which was known for its forceful intelligence no less for its courage, and which long held the balance between the two greatest nations of Europe” (pp. 233-4). The extreme disappointment prompted Tocqueville and Beaumont to take a detour from their travelling plans and visit the wilderness.
The narrative structure of *Fortnight in the Wilderness* involves a series of advances deeper into the heart of the forest in order to experience the American frontier and find the Indians. The story always manages to connect the wilderness periphery with the European metropolitan centre. *Fortnight* is a short picaresque narrative in which a male adventurer and companion are in search of a special dream, in this case finding a pristine wilderness and an “authentic” Indian. In keeping with the literary genre of adventure, *Fortnight* is an overwhelmingly male narrative of travel and danger. The women who appear are marginal creatures who, if they are white, suffer silently the miseries and loneliness pioneer life imposes and if they are natives or “half-breeds,” are subject to the objectifying and exoticizing gaze of the travellers. The narrative fits into the stereotypical representation of the male fantasy of the frontier which has been analysed and criticized brilliantly for its omissions of female work and influence by Annette Kolodny (1984).

The tale is rendered with great complexity, ambivalence, and a melancholy and highly subjective description of emotional moods (Doran, 1976). There is a Romantic dream quality to the story as a good deal of the action takes place at evening twilight. In *Fortnight* Tocqueville searches for the imaginary Indian of romance, but civilization is destroying the “noble savage” in the same way that progress and the convulsions of the democratic revolution are sweeping away the European nobility. The link between the “noble savage” and European nobility adds a personal inflection to the cult of “the vanishing Indian” which James Fenimore Cooper ([1826] 2004) had popularized as a romantic figure of pity. The vanishing Indian represents a type of “vanishing aristocrat” and exemplifies Tocqueville’s own anxiety about the social extinction of the French aristocracy, a theme well noted by commentators such as André Jardin (1988) among others (see also Liebersohn, 1994, 1998; Teale, 1996).

The destruction wrought upon the American wilderness is represented as systematic on the one hand and constitutive on the other, for if one ancient people is being destroyed another race, more vital and life-enhancing, is emerging from the very same forests. Tocqueville is in awe of the relentless western flow of populations and the ways in which roads, steamboats, the mail and newspapers wended their into the forests of the American frontier. He is astonished by how the wilderness has been thoroughly absorbed within the sphere of influence of the metropolis. “The man you left in New York you find again in almost impenetrable solitudes: same clothes, same attitude, same language, same habits, same pleasures. Nothing rustic, nothing naive, nothing which smells of the wilderness.” When you arrive in a village at the outpost of civilization “you will find everything, even to French fashions, the almanac of modes, and the caricature of the boulevards. The merchant of Buffalo and of Detroit is as well stocked with them as he of New York” (p. 237). You enter a “miserable log cabin in the forest and you will find that the owner wears the same clothes as you, he speaks the language of the cities. On his rude table are books and newspapers; he himself hastens to take you aside to learn what is going on in old Europe and to ask you what has struck you in his own country” (p. 237). Much of this description dramatizes what would become a central tableau, the Yankee pioneer drive to gain affluence and the restless urge to build and change the land and move ever deeper into the wilderness. Yankees, in Tocqueville’s characterization, are obsessed, compelling, unstoppable, and completely wrapped up in their own rhetorical justification and sense of destiny.

Tocqueville and Beaumont finally get their first glance of an “authentic” Indian when mysteriously one appears and follows our travellers as they make their way to Pontiac on a wilderness path. “He was a man of about thirty years of age, tall and admirably proportioned...
as almost all of them are. . . . In his right hand he held a long carbine, and his left two birds he had just killed” (p. 253). The encounter was a mystical apparition as the Indian quietly follows them without speaking to them but smiling broadly and reassuring our travellers of no ill-will. By this time Tocqueville and Beaumont have decided to venture even deeper to the settlement of Saginaw. They had described their plans to a local innkeeper who replied incredulously: “Do you know that Saginaw is the last inhabited place till the Pacific Ocean?” (p. 250). Tocqueville and Beaumont were to learn a week later that Saginaw was not by any means the last outpost. Americans were already settling parts of the Prairies, but our travellers believed that in reaching Saginaw they were literally at the outer-edge of the American frontier where savagery meets civilization.

Getting to Saginaw was a full day’s journey by horse from Pontiac on a forest trail and this required the services of two Indian guides who were procured by a local trader who kept a bear as a watchdog, adding to the general exoticism of frontier life. “What a devilish country is this,” exclaimed Tocqueville, “where they have bears for watchdogs” (p. 259). The Indians guides were of the Chippewa tribe; the French called them Sauteur or Saulteaux, part of the large Ojibwa family. Many of the Saulteaux, noted Tocqueville, were on the way back to Canada to receive annual presents of arms from the English who used the tribes as a way to check American incursion into Canadian territories. As long as aboriginal people were important to the life of the nation as traders or as military allies, as the Saulteaux were in this particular period at the twilight of the “middle ground,” their status was relatively respected and they were assumed to possess, along with their vices, the virtues of the warrior: strength, bravery, cunning, stoicism, and fortitude. And of course it is precisely in these terms that Tocqueville begins to describe his eighteen year old guide, Sagan-Cuisco: “On one side the battle-axe, the celebrated tomahawk; on the other a long sharp knife, with whose aid the savages lift the scalps of the vanquished. . . . As with most of the Indians, his glance was fierce and his smile kindly. Besides him to complete the tableau, walked a dog with straight ears, narrow muzzle, much more like a fox than any other animal, and whose fierce air was in perfect harmony with the countenance of his conductor” (p. 260).

Their journey to Saginaw is a skilfully told tale. The native guides negotiate the terrain with “animal swiftness,” the forest are described by Tocqueville as a vast solitude, a desert, an ocean, offering an unbroken spectacle of the same scenery. When not monotonous, the wilderness is chaotic, fantastic, and incoherent, descriptions consistent with the popular European Romantic notion of the sublimity of nature. As they proceed deeper into the forest they begin to recognize their utter dependence on their native guides: “we felt in their power, we were like children” (p. 262). The sun is setting and they are more than halfway to Saginaw. The guides advise that they rest and pass the night at an abandoned wigwam. Anxious about the natives’ intentions, Tocqueville bribes Sagan-Cuisco with a small bottle that does not break and insists that they go onward. “My gun and my bottle were the only parts of my European accoutrements that seemed to have excited his envy” (p. 266). Sagan-Cuisco utters one of those monosyllabic grunts familiar to the European imaginary Indian, “ouh! ouh!,” and throws himself into the bush running at great speed. Tocqueville and Beaumont follow on horseback and hours later, close to their destination, Sagan-Cuisco is seized by a terrible nosebleed. “We realized too late the justness of the Indian advice, but it is no longer a question of going back” (p. 268).

Tocqueville felt that his famous uncle, François-René de Chateaubriand, had in novellas such as René [1801] and Atala [1802], as well as in the novel Les Natchez [1826], idealized
the American forests, and in *Fortnight* Tocqueville attempts to paint a more “realistic” ethnographic portrait (Brogan, 2006). The usual Romantic pathos before the sublimity of nature is intentionally contrasted with irony. The forest is magnificent but it also overwhelms and disorients him with tormenting mosquitoes and terrifying silences. Tocqueville has found his proud and muscular “authentic Indian” in Sagan-Cuisco, but this paragon is subject to the same physical limitations as the rest of us. When he finally reaches Saginaw, Tocqueville witnesses the interaction of the “four races” that inhabit this sparsely populated hamlet: the Indian, the French-Canadian, the American, and the Bois-Brûlé, or half-breed. He gives a moral portrait of each type and slowly uncovers a hidden resonant meaning. He describes an approaching thunderstorm in Saginaw and identifies with a young Ojibwa native who recognizes in the thunder and “groans of the forest” a sign of the final fate of the native nations as they succumb to American civilization. The easygoing, entertaining French-Canadian feels at home in the wilderness but forgets his civilizing roots: “[This] most civilized European,” he writes “has become the adorer of the savage life” (p. 272). The American pioneer, driven by greed and a dream of achieving affluence, is joyless and never satisfied, while the half-breed is confused and trapped by the contradictions of his two cultures. The use of irony no doubt tempers chateaubriandesque exuberance and helps to return the reader to “reality,” yet despite his attempt to curb the rhetoric the whole tone of *Fortnight* is inescapably Romantic.

There is an exquisite dramatic arc to the narrative, beginning with Tocqueville’s entry into the American wilderness full of curiosity, romance and wonder and ending with his reflection on the disappearance of the “noble Indian” and his fear of his own banishment by a European revolution. The narrative closes with a personal reflection on the day, July 29, which happens to be the anniversary of the 1830 revolution and his own 26th birthday. “The cries and smoke of combat, the sound of cannon, the still more horrible tolling of the tocsin,”(p. 282) flood his thoughts and in the solitude of the forest he quietly contemplates the events that lead him away from Paris and towards America. *Fortnight* is an illuminating account, filled with the emphases, inflections, and deliberate inclusions and exclusions of any work of art, but it is ultimately a consolidating story of conquest and of the anxiety of cultural disappearance. Tocqueville’s arch definition of “Indians,” peoples who have various traditions and histories, are in *Fortnight* reduced to an undifferentiated race and subjected to an unchanging fate. On the way to Saginaw, Tocqueville and Beaumont have a chance encounter with a pioneer living alone in a log cabin, the kind of man “we have since often met on the edge of settlement.” Tocqueville asks him about Indian hunting skills and the pioneer responds with a language which Tocqueville would later repeat to represent the dissolution of native tribes: “Oh! said he, there is nothing happier than the Indian in regions whence we have not yet made game flee; but large animals scent us at more than three hundred miles and in withdrawing they make before us a sort of desert where the poor Indian can no longer live, if they do not cultivate the earth” (p. 255). Images of animals retreating at the mere smell of the white race, as well as the Indian’s proud refusal to cultivate the land, are part of the rhetorical language used to represent the vanishing Indian. Tocqueville employed this language again in *Democracy* when he declares: “It is therefore not, properly speaking, the European who chase the natives from America, it is famine” (vol. 1, p. 310). The tableau of native tribes disintegrating and atomizing in the face of a destructive starvation which eventually breaks the tribes’ weakened social bonds and leaves them isolated and lost disguises the many sided truths of native lived experiences. We can draw out some
of the details of native life by examining John Tanner’s text which offers a counter-narrative to Tocqueville’s consolidating rhetoric of the vanishing Indian.

John Tanner’s Narrative

John Tanner (1780-1847) was in his fifties and working as an interpreter for the American ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft when he first met Tocqueville in 1831 and sold him a copy of his Narrative. Tanner, also known as Sha-shaw-wa-ne-ba-se or the Falcon, narrated the tale of his early life to American army surgeon, Edwin James, who edited and filtered the account which was published in 1830. Tanner’s Narrative was an important source, as Tocqueville himself admits in the first volume of Democracy in America, of his knowledge of North American natives: “I myself encountered Tanner at the entrance of Lake Superior. He appears to me still to resemble a savage much more than a civilized man. In the work of Tanner one finds neither order nor taste; but without knowing it, the author makes a lively painting of the prejudices, the passions, and above all the miseries of those in whose midst he lived” (vol. 1, p. 318). Tanner, writes Tocqueville, “shows us tribes without chiefs, families without nations, isolated men, mutilated wreckage of powerful tribes, wandering haphazardly amid ice fields and among the desolate solitudes of Canada” (p. 317).

The year of Tanner’s American publication was the beginning of President Andrew Jackson’s policy of “Indian Removal” whereby natives living in the Eastern sections of the U. S. were forced, bribed and cajoled into moving to lands west of the Mississippi. It is difficult to establish reliable figures on how many Indians were removed to the west. One source suggests that in 1830 there were roughly 125,000 Indians in the eastern states and territories and seventy-five percent of these were subject to government removal projects. By 1844 less than 30,000 Indians remained in the east, mostly in the Lake Superior district (Rogin, 1995).

During the politics of “Indian Removal” a broader public debate emerged aimed at swaying public sentiment away from a Romantic notion of the “noble savage” towards a more Hobbesian view of the “savage state.” Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the first Federal Indian agent in Michigan Territory, who had a long and contentious relationship with John Tanner and was a leading ethnologist of the Ojibwa, characterized the Indian as too proud to submit to the habits and manners of civilized life. Yet he feared that “removal” would merely preserve and renew the warlike habits and nomadic lifestyle of the Indian tribes. Schoolcraft (1829) believed that missionary and governmental school would be able to “Christianize” and integrate the Indian into white civilization. Lewis Cass, who had earlier been Governor of Michigan Territory and was to become a supporter of “Indian Removal” and Secretary of War under Andrew Jackson, had met and interviewed John Tanner. He drew the conclusion that Indians had too much savagery to survive within white civilization. Cass cast the Indians as firmly committed to a wandering life of hunting and warfare, were ferociously independent and unwilling to accept the “arts of civilization” and settlement. Despite their differences, both Cass and Schoolcraft were supporters of the supremacy of white civilization and Tanner’s text illustrated in dramatic fashion what white Indian experts of the time called the “miseries” of savage life, or what later commentators called the “pathologies” -- alcoholism, internal warfare, disease, loss of territory -- that would eventually doom Indians in North America to extinction (Dippie, 1982).
A similar interpretive reception occurred in Europe. Tanner’s book was translated into French by Ernest Blosseville (1835), an expert and supporter of the Australian penal system and a young aristocratic magistrate well known to both Tocqueville and Beaumont (Jardin, 1988). Blosseville had borrowed Tocqueville’s copy of Tanner’s book for his French translation and discusses Tanner’s story as a refutation of the “noble savage” ideology of the eighteenth century. His interpretation was to influence profoundly Tocqueville’s comparison between Indians and the European aristocracy (Liebersohn, 1998). Blosseville thought that Tanner’s account of his life among the Ojibwa contradicted the myth of Montesquieu, Buffon, Montaigne and Rousseau of a happy state of nature in which “savages” were free from wants. According to Blosseville, American Indians are similar to Gauls or Franks on the border of the Roman Empire as described in Tacitus Germania. Indians were like the ancient Teutonic peoples: warriors, hunters, natural aristocrats and defenders of their native liberty from state authority. Tocqueville echoes Blosseville as well as Cass in Democracy in America. Tocqueville recognized that “Indian Removal” was an hypocritical land-grab, but he did not believe that a slow process of cultural assimilation would ensure native integration and survival. A tremendous cultural and civilization divide separated the two races and this gulf was in his mind both unbridgeable and historically tragic.

Migration, Transculturation, Captivity and Amanuensis

One of the appeals of Tanner’s narrative today, and one of the reasons why there has been a reassessment of his text, is that it conveys the experiences of a “transculturated” person, to use the Cuban historian Fernando Ortiz’s ([1947] 1995) lapidary term. Tanner was part of a new cultural category of “White Indian” (Hallowell, 1963; Axtell, 2001) and thus subject to all the interpersonal conflict and contradictions born out of larger social processes and political struggles. Tanner was recognized by his contemporaries as being on the border of two cultures (Bryce, 1988; Steere, 1899). His experiences furthermore overlap with the gradual breakdown of the culture of the region around the Great Lakes that the French called pays d’es haut, or back country. Between 1615 and 1815 Europeans and Indians had constructed a commonly comprehensible world of accommodations and exchanges, a middle ground, that has been profitably studied by historian Richard White. By the late eighteenth-century this creative, practical recognition between Indian and white civilizations was coming to an end, disrupted by a series of cataclysmic events: the impact of diseases-- smallpox, whooping cough, measles-- along with the loss of large game animals, the dwindling supply of fur-bearing animals, extreme competition between fur-trading outposts in the US and Canada, imperial realignments, and the gradual encroachment of white settlers (Danziger, 1979). The cumulative effects of these developing conditions profoundly transformed the pays d’es haut and forced some Ojibwa to migrate from the forests around western Lake Superior to the prairies of Manitoba.

Tanner’s narrative corresponds roughly to this period of migration (Fierst, 2002). His father, Reverend John Tanner, a clergyman from Virginia, was following the westward movement of the times and had settled on the Ohio river near its confluence with the Miami, not far from what is now Cincinnati. It was there in the Spring of 1789 that nine year old John Tanner was captured and lived rather miserably for the first two years with the Shawnee band that had abducted him. His situation improved tremendously and he settled agreeably into his life as an Indian when he was sold to and adopted by Net-no-kwa, a charismatic
woman, chief of a band of Ottawa natives, who was an influential player in the fur trade and had herself lost a son of Tanner’s age (Bosswfield, 1957). Tanner moved first to Saginaw Bay in the Michigan Territory and eventually, when he was thirteen, to the Red River country in Manitoba where he lived and hunted among the Sauteaux, a nomadic Ojibwa people, for the better part of thirty years. By moving westward the Sauteaux and Ottawa bands that travelled with Tanner put new pressures on the Dakotas (or Sioux) natives already living there (Woodcock, 1988). The Ojibwa’s skills as hunters, trappers and navigators of rivers and lakes also made them valuable to the Red River fur trade and they gradually became, along with Métis, French voyageurs, and competing fur companies, part of a Canadian “middle ground” which functioned uneasily until the birth of Canadian Confederation in 1867 and was effectively ended by Louis Riel and the Red River Rebellion of 1869.

Ethnohistorian Laura Peers (1994), in her resourceful book *The Ojibwa of Western Canada 1780-1870*, uses Tanner’s narrative, along with fur-traders’ journals, letters, and reminiscences, to reconstruct this period of migration and render a remarkable story of adaptation to the prairie ecology and the creative survival of native identity. Tanner’s account of living among the Indians between 1790-1825 is among one of the best sources of ethnographic information available on the subject. Tanner’s narrative of a native world on the eve of transformation is valuable because of his status as an “insider.” He had matured during the hey-day of the Red River fur trade to become a well recognized hunter and guide, much in demand by the fur traders. Tanner’s retentive oral memory gives an unique, detailed account of the Red River fur trade at its most fractious period when the Hudson Bay Company was being challenged by the upstart North West Company.

The narrative lacks the panoramic sweep of the territory Tocqueville provides in *Fortnight*, but it nonetheless evokes it through a massive accumulation of details about trees, wildlife and other native cultures, giving the reader an eloquent sense of a place subjected to incredible stress. Events in Tanner’s narrative unfold naturally, fitfully, and episodically. Tanner is frank about the effects of alcoholism. A drinker known to drink to excess, he recounts how drink impoverished his band and led “to much foolishness.” At the same time, he notes the rise of new prophets and religious cults—of which he was scathingly critical—which for brief periods provided a new moral leadership calling for new norms and injunctions against drink, unruly behaviour and internal warfare.

Tanner’s story is a realistic survival narrative which dramatizes his and his band’s all-absorbing struggle to stay alive. He is casual about the hardships of hunting and trapping, a life whose balance is easily upset by the demands of the fur companies for large number of pelts. There is, moreover, no self-congratulatory mythological fantasy of the lone hunter seeking renewal and self-creation through acts of violence, as in the Daniel Boone and David Crocket literature. In these narratives, hunting is part of the myth of what Richard Slotkin (1973) calls, “regeneration through violence” where the white hunter’s perpetual mobility is associated with individuality, freedom, and democracy, and linked to the image of Americans as a “new race of people” with an unstoppable will to dominate nature. Hunting for Tanner has none of these mythological references and implies in fact an entirely different system of meaning. There is very little sense that Tanner stands as an individual but as part of a social group. Hunting and trapping are skills that provides status within the band and assure pleasure and survival.

Unlike Tocqueville’s searching for a native untouched by European contact, Tanner presents an aboriginal life the very existence of which is dependent of such contacts. Hunting
and trapping were for Tanner a pleasure and a business the global economic implication of which were dimly understood but the consequences of which impacted deeply on his life. Like many North American tribes, the Ojibwa were integrated within the European and North American trade network. Tanner is candid about his relations with traders of the Hudson Bay, North West and American trading companies. He writes of the exploitation and alcoholism that are linked to the trading companies but there is also equanimity and he writes of deep friendships with traders he respects and values.

The Narrative is a deeply problematic text which requires readers to think critically about issues of mediation (Fierst, 1996; Sayre, 1999). The original Narrative includes an introduction by the American medical doctor, botanist, and ethnologist, Edwin James, who recorded Tanner’s story. James (1830) reveals little about his role in the narrative expect to say that Tanner gave the whole story “...as it stands, without hints, suggestions, leading questions, or advice of any kind...” The only liberty he took, claims James, was to “retrench or altogether to omit many details of hunting adventures, of travelling, and other events...” (p. xix). It is no longer possible to tell how much “retrenching” James did or how much was omitted in the telling of the story and this makes the Narrative an unusually complex text in that there is little sense of John Tanner’s unmediated voice speaking directly of his experiences; rather, we have an oral tale originally spoken in a mixture of dialect English and Ojibwa then translated into standard English by James, and so, as with so many native autobiographical stories, subject to the mediation both of the translation and the amanuensis (Brumble, 1988; Fierst 1996). The Narrative was further marketed to a predominantly white male reading audience and makes the usual appeals to the exoticism and romance of the wild frontier typical of nineteenth-century adventure writings.

The result is a tale which aspires to be part of conventional literary genres but is so idiosyncratic and eccentric that it is difficult to domesticate it within existing genres of adventure, the captivity narrative, or autobiography. Tocqueville found Tanner’s Narrative to have “neither order nor taste,” and the text is indeed difficult to classify because of the clash of sensibilities and expectations between Tanner and James. In his American Indian Autobiography David Brumble (1988), helps us to make a distinction between the work of editors and the stories of Indian autobiographers that is useful in understanding the James/Tanner collaboration. Brumble outlines a few of the ways in which editors and Amanuensis intervene in the telling and writing of the story. The most obvious strategy is that of the Absent Editor who edits in such a way as to create a fiction that the narrative is solely Tanner’s own. James provides an extensive introduction which describes some of the ways in which he worked with Tanner. Once the narrative gets started the fiction is that Tanner speaks without mediation. James, as an absent editor, fulfills the expectations and formulas of western autobiography. Chronological order is imposed even though the narrator shows little concern with such time-sequences. James retrenches and re-arranges the material despite an explicit awareness that in doing so he is removing Tanner’s own habits of mind. The central concern of modern autobiography – the self, its uniqueness and how it changes and develops—are not a concern of pre-literate Indians nor of ancient and tribal people in general.

When published Tanner’s book was promoted as a captivity tale but it has none of the incendiary language about Indians typical of the genre (Venderbeets, 1983). Captivity tales were immensely popular and can be described as documents of the conflicted cultural expressions of white civilization’s various imperial errands into the wilderness (Slotkin, 1973; Strong, 1999). Roy Harvey Pearce (1947), in his path-breaking study of captivity narratives,
notes that between 1813 and 1873 there were over forty narratives published in the U.S. which drew from real life experiences but which had been “worked up into something terrible and strange. Their language is most often that of a hack writer gone wild” (p.16). The frightful descriptions of the barbarous and cruel Indian, the basic point of these stories (Pearce, 1965; Berkhoff, 1978; Axtell, 1981; Kolodny, 1993), are incorporated into a narrative arc that begins with the trauma of capture, moves to the temptation by the wilderness and by natives, and finally culminates in a redemptive return to white culture. Tanner’s narrative does not fit neatly into this model. Trauma and terror are inherent in the saga of captivity (Demos, 1995) and Tanner describes vividly the shock of a nine year old who realizes he stands no chance of escaping from his captives and quickly becomes aware of the inadequacy of his skills for surviving among them. Tanner’s later adventures hunting, trapping and travelling with the band of his adoptive mother as it migrates to Red River Manitoba are often gothic tales of hunger and extraordinary feats of survival in the wilderness. He reports tribes decimated by devastating diseases and starvation and bears witness to tribal rebuilding as the remnants of tribes regroup in a new a prairie environment.

When Tanner returns east to the Great Lakes after contributing to Lord Selkirk’s military opposition to the expansionist North West Company in the Red River Settlement (Selkirk, 1819; Ross, 1856; Bumstead, 1999), he finds that civilized white culture has little appeal. By this time the pays d’es haut had been thoroughly incorporated within the American Republic as part of the Michigan Territory. Natives were no longer seen as an important military ally, nor as sexual or trading partners; they were recast as “the other” to facilitate their removal, while captives, métis and other transcultured figures who occupied a key role in the ‘middle ground’ lost much of their importance and became mere exotic curiosities. There was for Tanner no palatable re-incorporation into white society. His several attempts to meet and make contact with his white family left him physically sick and unhappy and determined to reunite with the children of his first marriage whom he had left behind in Manitoba (Fierst, 1986). White culture offered him a role as a curiosity so he tried to fashion for himself a more dignified identity as a hunter, trapper, interpreter and a father. The concluding chapters of his Narrative tell a story of estrangement and of a person desperately trying to bring his fractured family together. The Narrative ends with a note of hope about restoring his family: “Three of my children are still among the Indians in the north. The two daughters would, as I am informed, gladly join me, if it were in their power to escape. The son is older, and is attached to the life he has so long led as a hunter. I have some hope that I may be able to go and make another effort to bring away my daughters” (p. 280). His disappearance and tragic death (Benson, 1970; Neufeld, 1975) as well as the unfounded accusations levelled against him as the murderer of the brother of the famous American ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1851) only confirmed Tanner’s status as a troublesome and troubled outsider, a “Caliban” as Schoolcraft called him, within white civilization.

Conclusion

Tocqueville’s Fortnight and Tanner’s Narrative each speak to, from and about their cultural moments and the complexities and contradictions found in each have much to do with their participation in the literature, ethnography, culture and imperial politics of the nineteenth-century. Tocqueville’s tableau of the Indian and the wilderness sets into place events within a richly interpretive context that would be easily understood by the metropolitan European
reader. His romantic representations have strong European resonances and confirm established discourses. In his conviction that the aboriginal people were disappearing, victims of disease, starvation, alcohol, and the depredations of civilization, Tocqueville was completely representative of his age. The vanishing Indian was in fact a powerful and well established device because it appealed to the white guilty conscience while comfortably affirming that nothing could be done about it. Tocqueville is not insensitive to the plight of natives but his interpretative framework produces the imperialist ideas of disappearance prevalent at the time. Tanner’s narrative subtly disputes such claims. Native culture, while subject to enormous stress and pressures, continues to adapt. Tocqueville freezes the Indian in a tableau of a natural world where they are not allowed to change, while Tanner’s narrative is about change. Change brought about by the collective disintegration of the Ojibwa tribes due to starvation and the disappearance of animals of the **pays d’es haut**, as well as survival, his and theirs, in the face of such privation. The native did not melt away like the snows exposed to the midday rays of sun, but adapted and resisted.

Reading these texts today offer new challenges. The interpretations we ultimately create out of texts such as *Fortnight in the Wilderness* and Tanner’s *Narrative of Captivity* reveal the political and intellectual concerns of readers and their own times: how representations of the “noble savage” or the “savage state” of nature are used in political discourses, how imaginative geographies and portraits of the “other” are embedded within adventure literature and ethnography, and how transculturated identities rise and fall in historical significance. Tocqueville’s ethnographic-literary narrative points to the vanquishment of a natural aristocratic people who were being removed from the land with what he called “the solemnity of a providential event.” In painting this particular scenario Tocqueville sadly misses the contributions that native people made to American and Canadian democracy.

Tanner’s narrative offers the perspective of a transculturated man about native dislocation and survival and it includes an important ethnography of what was lost and of personal estrangement. In its disorganization, repetitiveness and absence of religious moralizing Tanner’s text manages to evade at least in part the typical hierarchies of power found in captivity tales. But given the problems of translation and the use of amanuensis contemporary readers should be aware of what is hidden between the lines and behind the words of Tanner’s *Narrative*.

**References**


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2 African- and Native-Americans represented to Tocqueville the extremes of liberty and servitude. Both had participated in their own exclusion from democratic politics, the American slaves by, in his view, becoming accustomed to their servitude, and the Native-Americans by “disdaining” any attempt at integration. Tocqueville’s tableau of America ultimately lacks vital tensions about class, race, gender, religion and regional differences (Highman, 1959, 1962; Smith, 1993), and no democratic society is truly understandable without an account of its social and political strains and the provocations of its dissenting voices.


An on line version is available at: http://www.canadiana.org. See also the 1994 Penguin edition with an introduction by Louise Erdrich but without the original introduction by Edwin James.


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