

Of Mimicry and the Savage
Aspects of Canadian colonialism



"We have a hunger for something like authenticity, but are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile."

George Orwell, c. 1949

The main aim of this essay is to demonstrate how various aspects of colonization operate in what may be called Canada's 19th and 20th century reality, as well as in the textual "reality" of Canada during this period. Two milestone works belonging to the post-colonial discourse shall be of special importance in such an attempt: Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha's *Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, as they propose concepts vital to any analysis of colonial practice. Although these important works represent slightly different aspects of the issue, yet the problem discussed remains the same and taking advantage of these texts can only broaden the understanding of colonialism in all its dimensions.

It may seem strange for a work on Orientalism to be applied to the situation of non-oriental British subjects, yet Said himself states that "to say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism. (...)"¹ This seems to apply to all forms of colonialism provided that Orientalism is perceived as only a singular manifestation of a broader tendency in Western culture. Although the term is mainly used to describe events from the perspective of the colonized, it is clear that the earlier "colonial experience" of the colonizer determined the situation of Canadian Natives, with "different parts of the machine"² already tested and perfected in the Oriental East. The distinction between the Orient and the Occident in fact determined the colonial attitude in all situations each time the "Western man" is confronted with Otherness. This "fact" of Otherness is far more important than merely geo-political distinctions, therefore it authorizes the West to treat the Cree or Ojibwa in the same manner as Egyptian Arabs. Consequently, the aim of this work is also to describe the ways in which the native population of Canada was treated similarly to the inhabitants of India, Japan and Egypt.

It is highly ironic that Columbus' supposed mistake in naming Native Americans "Indians" should have such a curious meaning five hundred years later, after the colonization of India and Northern America. Although performed unintentionally, from post-colonial perspective this gesture may serve as a symbol of depriving the "Indians" of their unique identity, replacing the unknown with the at least partially familiar. Also, he coincidentally places the Native Americans in the Oriental sphere of influence. It is crucial that Columbus *found what he was looking for* and imposed what he thought was true - and what was familiar - on Native Americans. Vast amounts of texts concerning the life in the colonies and

¹ Edward Said, "Orientalism", in: *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 879.

² Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, *Political and Literary Essays, 1908-1913* (1913; reprint edn Freeport, NY, 1969), p. 35.

American “savages” continued this line of dealing with the Other, sometimes openly admitting Oriental connotations when describing the

attitude, which is that of the Eastern nations; the dress, dark hair and eyes, the olive complexion, heightened colour, and meek expression of face, would have formed a study for a painter. (...) the air of deep reverence that sat on the faces of the elders of the Indian family, as they listened to the voices of their children singing praise and glory to the God and Saviour they had learned to fear and love.³

I shall analyze some aspects of John Smith’s story of *Pocahontas*, the classic material for post-colonial studies of Canada, for it constitutes a work of Western colonialism *par excellence*, where a reader familiar with the concepts introduced in the mentioned works of postcolonial discourse may find invaluable material for critical study. Also Catharine Parr Traill’s *Backwoods of Canada*, although surely not designed as an ideological text (a Marxist interpretation would nevertheless claim the existence of ideology in any text), reveals similar patterns of thinking and perception once it is possible to puncture its surface.

One of the main features of *Pocahontas* is a paradoxical, subjective authenticity, which lies in Smith’s inability to transgress the western perception of the world, thus making the story authentic and non-authentic at the same time. Although it may be assumed that the events described in the story are “actual events”, the text itself is ideologically marked to such an extent, that it may be questioned as a whole. It constitutes a clear example of imposing the author’s knowledge⁴ on a reality not corresponding to Western norms. As a soldier of the British crown, Smith cannot define the social position of Matoaka/Pocahontas without using concepts derived from the tradition of Western monarchy, that is, the concept of a heiress, a princess. He is only able to do that after assuming and therefore imposing a hierarchical structure of Indian society.

The problem seems to derive from the blending of what may be accepted as facts (authenticity) with their interpretations (denial of *full* authenticity to the text). The author’s attitude is also revealed through what Said calls “strategic location” – “the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text”⁵. Many stories based on Smith’s account present a romanticized vision, making the story gradually even more improbable. The romantic convention functions as a set of rules that constrain the actions of Pocahontas as a personage in the story, therefore

³ Catherine Parr Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Project Gutenberg e-book edition <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13559/13559.txt>>, Letter XIII

⁴ and therefore, according to the study of this issue by Michel Foucault, imposing his worldview and power relations of his society.

⁵ Said, “Orientalism,” p. 874.

depriving it of any authenticity. As it is defined by Chieko Mulhern, “in the romantic convention the woman is expected to be beautiful and high-born within the context of her own society, even if the hero is a mere fur trapper or a stranded sailor.”⁶ The convention also introduces a serious “advantage” – the possibility of a better understanding by a Western reader. Very similarly to the situation described by Said, the interest is not focused on real actions, but on the reflection of differences and, through Rousseau and Sentimentalism, Western desires of the mythical “harmonizing with nature” embodied in the 18th century concept of the “noble savage”, whose primal innocence is (somewhat paradoxically) additionally underlined by the newly introduced Christian faith.

Although it would be tendentious to suggest any ill will on the side the Church, it is certain that it has nevertheless become one of the most effective elements of the colonial machinery. “In the backwoods”, the role of priests has undergone a significant augmentation – the priest becomes the source of not only divine knowledge, but also the practical one (botany, herbalism etc.) and, last but not least, information about other towns and gossip⁷. Apart from these important social functions, among the usually simple pioneers the clergymen were the refuge of British culture – through religion and education. According to Michel Foucault’s detailed study of the problem, it is possible to analyze the problem in terms of the priests’ taking an important part not only in the reinforcement of colonial power, but also in the more general and complex relation between knowledge and power as “the production of knowledge and the exercise of administrative power intertwine, and each begins to enhance the other.”⁸ It is a relation from which an entire network of such roles as the priests’ derives. Marxist theories – which have had some (later - negative) influence on many of Foucault’s works, possibly through his mentor in The École Normale Supérieure, Louis Althusser – have long explored the ways in which the ruling class attempts to achieve the “naturalization” of the values that maintain the status quo of the society. Especially the Anglican Church⁹, with its basic tradition of deep interrelations with the monarch seems to be in great risk of being a perfect tool in conveying the ideology related not only with monarchy, but generally with the right of the British to colonize and rule.

⁶ Henry Smith, ed. *Learning from Shogun* (New York: Japan Society Gallery, 1975), p. 63 (available at: www.columbia.edu/~hds2/learning/Learning_from_shogun_txt.pdf)

⁷ Catharine Parr Traill mentions at least two stories told by priests, one of which – the story of an Indian who sneaked into a house in full military equipment – is particularly interesting (Letter XIII).

⁸ Allen, Barry. "Power/Knowledge," in: *Critical Essays on Michel Foucault*, ed. Karlis Racevskis (New York: G.K. Hall & CO, 1999), p. 70.

⁹ The first Anglican clergyman is believed to reach Canada as early as 1497 (John Cabot’s expedition)

The great role of the Church in the power/knowledge relation becomes clear when one accepts the role of the Church's teachings as the way of obtaining the highest knowledge of salvation. The role of the Church and Christianity as an "form of social control" was sometimes affirmed inadvertently by some colonial statesmen, as pointed out by Bhabha:

(Charles) Grant's dream of an evangelical system of mission education (...) was partly a belief in political reform along Christian lines and partly an awareness that the expansion of company rule in India required a system of subject formation - a reform of manners, as Grant put it - that would provide the colonial with "a sense of personal identity as we know it."¹⁰

What seems obvious is that in the holy mission spreading of the Word, the priests communicated not only Christian faith, but also Western *logos* and the entire value system built on its basis. Therefore, the role of the clergy cannot be underestimated if one considers the fact that the residential schools not only spread Christianity, but also provided standard education. Traces of this enterprise and its profound influence are scattered throughout various fragments of *Backwoods of Canada*:

The Rice Lake and Mud Lake Indians belong, I am told, to the Chippewas; but the traits of cunning and warlike ferocity that formerly marked this singular people seem to have disappeared beneath the milder influence of Christianity.¹¹

This supposed effect of Christianization is substantial, to such an extent that it disappoints the expectations of some pioneers about the character of the Indians. As a friend of the author puts it,

*The only beings in which I take any interest are the Indians, and they want the warlike character and intelligence that I had pictured to myself they would possess.*¹²

This kind of reaction may be a result of what Said defines as a "textual attitude", the "tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity."¹³ As a result of this tendency, certain texts (not to mention their authors) gain and "accumulate" authority, possibly at some point creating with other texts "strategic formations" – "groups of texts" that "acquire mass, density and referential power

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," in: *The Location of Culture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92.

(available at <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/mimicry.html>)

¹¹ Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Letter V.

¹² Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Letter X.

¹³ Said, "Orientalism," p. 876.

among themselves”¹⁴. Said perceives this process as one of the basic factors that contributed to the formation of what may be called an “Oriental tradition”:

Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself.¹⁵

This cultural phenomenon of unquestioned authority seems to have some traces of perhaps its most extreme example, *auctoritas patrum* (in medieval theology, the assumption that the arguments from the authority of the Church Fathers should be treated as equal to arguments of reason [*ratio*]). In the situation presented by Said, the successive authors can allege the authority of their predecessors or rely on arguments of reason granted by (not always available) personal experience. The “textual attitude” favors the former over the latter and enables the texts to create “reality”, rather than simply describe it. Finally, even the personal experience may – and usually *is* - shaped by what was earlier written on the subject.

Other passages from Traill’s letters often show a certain split when speaking of the Indian’s status as younger brothers in faith and civilization:

(...) beyond the Indian village the missionaries have a school for the education and instruction of the Indian children. Many of them can both read and write fluently, and are greatly improved in their moral and religious conduct. They are well and comfortably clothed, and have houses to live in. *But they are still too much attached to their wandering habits to become good and industrious settlers* (...) Certain it is that the introduction of the Christian religion is the first greatest step towards civilization and improvement; its very tendency being to break down the strong-holds of prejudice and ignorance, and unite mankind in one bond of social brotherhood. I have been told that for some time drunkenness was unknown, and even the moderate use of spirits was religiously abstained from by all the converts. This abstinence is still practised by some families; but of late the love of ardent spirits has again crept in among them, bringing discredit upon their faith. It is indeed hardly to be wondered at, when the Indian sees those around him that call themselves Christians, and who are better educated, and enjoy the advantages of civilized society, indulging to excess in this degrading vice, that he should suffer his *natural* inclination to overcome his Christian duty, which might in some have taken no deep root. I have been surprised and disgusted by the censures passed on the erring Indian by persons who were foremost in indulgence at the table and the tavern; as if the crime of drunkenness were more excusable in the man of education than in the half-reclaimed savage.¹⁶

This passage must be quoted almost in its full length, as the more or less subtle incoherencies are shuffled throughout the text. As it may easily be seen, although the author is well-disposed to the Natives, a lot of emphasis is put here on the incompleteness of the

¹⁴ Said, “Orientalism,” p. 874.

¹⁵ Said, “Orientalism,” pp. 874-875

¹⁶ Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Letter V.

civilizing process. This split may be a result of the author's inability to create a stable point of reference, therefore the entire text is torn between contradictory ideas concerning the status of Natives¹⁷. The purity and simplicity of what was left of the pre-colonial life, including the ways of hunting, the Indian craftsmanship, the beauty of the language (paradoxically mentioned when the Indians are singing psalms) – all this is subject to constant praise. It is also difficult to ignore statements that are marked with some regret concerning the colonial encounter (“Indians never give since they have learned to trade with white men.”¹⁸). The conflict is formed between the will to maintain the purity of a noble savage (in *Letter X*, a Indian squaw is even compared with Virgin Mary) and to carry the mission of bringing Christianity, civilization and the English language to the “new-caught, sullen peoples¹⁹” - the “white man's burden”, as it was described 60 years later.

These self-contradictory viewpoints bring us to the area governed by the laws of mimicry. In *Of Mimicry and Man*, Homi Bhabha explores the colonial relations not as unilateral relation, but as a more complex system of mutual influences. Mimicry, as it is often emphasized in his essay, does not describe a means of harmonizing with the background, but rather a camouflage – “not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.”²⁰ Catharine Parr Traill's idealistic vision of the unity in “social brotherhood” enabled by the introduction of Christianity and the consequent Anglicization is confronted by Bhabha's observation that “to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English.”²¹

“The desire for a reformed, recognizable Other”, as colonial mimicry is partially defined, involves a process that is deliberately planned as incomplete and imperfect. Charles Grant, mentioned earlier, proposes a “*partial* diffusion of Christianity, and the *partial* influence of moral improvements which will construct a particularly appropriate form of colonial subjectivity.”²² The subject must be naturalized enough for the colonial machinery to be effective, but at the same time a safe cultural distance must be kept so as to maintain the stability of the colonizer's identity. As Sir Edward Cust puts it, the colonial subject “has no earthly claim to so exalted a position.”²³ This is the key characteristic of mimicry (*almost the same, but not quite*) – its ambivalence. The ideas concerning “the mimic man” are similarly

¹⁷ it is interesting to note that when Traill writes of “native Americans”, she refers the “Yankees” – itself a derivative of an Indian word (Letter VI)

¹⁸ Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Letter XIII.

¹⁹ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man's Burden.” *McClure's Magazine* 12 (Feb. 1899).

²⁰ Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man.”

²¹ *ibidem*

²² *ibidem*

²³ Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man.”

torn between “closeness” and “distance” as Traill’s Indians are – between “the ideal” and “the savage.”:

’Tis sweet to hear the Indians singing their hymns of a Sunday night; their rich soft voices rising in the still evening air. I have often listened to this little choir praising the Lord’s name in the *simplicity* and fervour of their hearts, and have felt it was a reproach that these poor *half-civilized* wanderers should alone be found to gather together to give glory to God in the wilderness. (...) Gentleness and good humour appear distinguishing traits in the tempers of the female Indians; whether this be natural to their characters, the savage state, or the softening effects of Christianity, *I cannot determine*.

Nevertheless, as if ignoring her doubts stated a sentence before, she states that:

Certainly in no instance does the Christian religion appear more lovely than when, *untainted by the doubts and infidelity of modern sceptics*, it is displayed in the conduct of the *reclaimed* Indian breaking down the strong-holds of idolatry and *natural evil*, and bringing forth the fruits of holiness and *morality*. They may be said to receive the truths of the Gospel as little children, with simplicity of heart and *unclouded faith*.²⁴

In this way, Traill admits the innocence of the savages, but immediately contradicts herself by accusing them of idolatry and *natural evil*, therefore inadvertently undermining the clear-cut opposition of innocence and guilt in her text²⁵. Catharine Parr Traill was not among the important figures of British colonialism, of course. However, she has still taken part in the process as an “active observer”. Her comments show the inconsistency of the ideas of the “noble savage”, as opposed to the need to civilize, and the colonial desire for otherness.

Mimicry stresses the power of the dominant culture to convert the Other, but at the same time makes the dominant safe from questioning its identity by retaining some part of otherness – a “striking feature” that “betrays their descent.”²⁶ The specificity of the colonial relations achieved through mimicry lies in the necessity to “make them in our image and our likeness” in order to (be able to) command the subjects while retaining their otherness so as to mark them as potential enemies, both in the cultural and literal, military sense. The military element is also present Northrop Frye’s concept of “garrison mentality” as “a relation between something which is inside and something which is outside” with “the focus on the border sustaining the relation”²⁷. To follow a military example, even on the most basic level, a military commander knows that it is easier to order the soldiers to take control of revolting “savages” (anglicized or not) than to order them to fight against fully acknowledged British subjects – the risk of the soldiers joining the “enemy” in the latter situation is usually not

²⁴ Traill, *Backwoods of Canada*, Letter X.

²⁵ This opposition is a point of interest in Michel Foucault’s work (especially in *Discipline and Punish*) and is also mentioned in the discussion available at <http://foucault.info/weblog/000028.html>.

²⁶ Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man.”

²⁷ from an interview with Prof. Ian Angus, a Canadian political writer– text available at <http://www.ianangus.ca/nations.htm>

worth taking. The British army during the American Revolution had to stress the otherness of the former British subjects as rebels against the rule of King George III. Such actions were certainly not necessary when fighting Zulus in Africa. It is possible also to speak of cultural “morale” in a very similar sense.

The issue of maintaining the “morale” may also be the reason why in 1616 Pocahontas was brought to England and received by King James I. How little Pocahontas has in common with the *real* Matoaka is best represented by the change that occurs in her portraits. It is highly probable that Simon van de Passe’s 1616 portrait²⁸, the only one made during her life, manages to retain some of the characteristics of the actual person. In contrast, over a century later, a portrait by an unknown author²⁹ is free of the necessity to bear at least some resemblance to the original. This leads to a conclusion that the process of cultural assimilation was far from being over even after Matoaka’s death. The second portrait is so dissimilar to its predecessor, not to mention – as it is possible to imagine – the real person, that it may be analyzed in terms of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of Simulacrum as a representation which finally has superseded what was real, denying access to any traces of the original and, eventually, replacing it completely³⁰.

Pocahontas had become an icon of Britain’s colonial power, a role that is still current four centuries later. Her story encompasses many problems of Western colonialism: violence, objectification, Christianization, mimicry – and many others. Although Matoaka does not survive, her cultural representation, the mimic Pocahontas, “lives on” with all its westernized aspects. In this way Matoaka, daughter of Powhatan and *princess* Pocahontas will remain forever split as a mark of the more or less objective truth and the cultural representation, both corresponding to each other no more than the “real” Orient corresponds to its Orientalist creation.



²⁸ full-size version available at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/97/Pocahontas_original.jpg

²⁹ <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/ca/Pocahontas001.jpg>

³⁰ the question of Simulacrum and its relation to post-colonial studies is surely worth the attention of a critical reader, yet the issue seems too broad to be included in this “attempt”.

NOTES:

The front cover shows an illustration of the battle of Isandlwana, available at <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/3/38/Isandlwana.jpg>