“A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Mary Jemison” and “A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner”: Early Native American Tribal Ritual, Identity and Interaction

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The ability to construct a tale of experience is one of the most fascinating, and important abilities humans possess. Worldwide, narratives of travel and capture are considered to be important historical artifacts, as well as being intriguing and entertaining. Early American texts give contemporary readers the ability to get a glimpse of life during a vastly different time; such texts also give clues as to the interactions between different cultures. In exploring the early Native American – European contact, texts such as “A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Mary Jemison” and “A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner,” of the early American period, roughly starting with the Declaration of Independence in 1787, allow for the analysis of interactions between Native tribes, and interactions between Natives and Europeans, from intriguingly unique viewpoints. Since the two texts are told in retrospect, and the events and conversations were not transcribed verbatim, and translated from native languages into English, descriptions of intra and extra-cultural life, as well as interactions between tribes and between Natives and Europeans is still valid and useful in understanding the historical period, as well as the personal lives these texts reveal. “A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Mary Jemison” and “A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner”, recount the lives of Mary Jemison and John Tanner after being captured by Native Americans. Both tales reveal interesting aspects of Native life from the inside, as seen through a settler’s point of view. Jemison and Tanner’s narratives evidence many Native customs, including tribal dynamics, family and religion. Further, contextualizing the readings allows for generalization and classification of Jemison and Tanner’s experiences as typical in some ways and unusual in others.

Mary Jemison was born c. 1743 to Scottish-Irish parents and was captured by a tribe of Seneca Indians when she was about fifteen years old. Her narrative recounts her life and choice

to stay within Native society. Jemison's narrative was so popular that there were twenty-nine editions, as Richard Vanderbeets states in his article, "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual,". A similar narrative is that of John Tanner, born c. 1780 to a family of emigrants from Virginia, who settled on the mouth of the Big Miami River. Tanner was nine years old when he was captured by a tribe of Shawneese Indians, and later lived with the Chippewa and Ottowa. His narrative was transcribed when he was about fifty, and progresses in many ways parallel to Jemison's, with an initial description of his capture, induction into society, his learning about native life and marriage. Unlike Jemison's narrative, since Tanner is male, he serves a very different purpose within the tribe, and his work as a hunter and fur trader, in part for the Hudson's Bay Fur Company, is a most prevalent aspect of his narrative. The last segment of his narrative focuses on his work as an interpreter at the Saut de Ste. Marie, where he worked as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company starting around 1817. Tanner eventually disappeared from white society, and assumedly return to the Natives. It is of interest that these two narratives managed to get published, and were so well recorded historically that, Vanderbeets states, "The immense popularity of the Indian captivity narratives in their time is unquestionable," (548). Jemison and Tanner's narratives primarily explore the cultural conditions within their own tribes, but also include interactions between tribes. These explorations work to illuminate the cultural dilemmas causing the identity crises faced by Jemison and Tanner.

Conflict between tribes and Europeans instigates the circumstances that give rise to the initial capture of Jemison and Tanner. This aspect of their narratives is surprisingly similar, as is their induction into Native society. Jemison was at home with her biological family when six Indians and four Frenchmen plundered goods and took Mary, her mother and six other captive. The journey away from her home was strenuous, and although Jemison eventually comes to

consider her Native captors very civil, she does not gloss over the hardship of her journey to Fort Pitt, "an Indian went behind us with a whip, which he frequently lashed the children…In this manner we travelled till dark without a mouthful of food or a drop of water," (Seaver, 67). In addition, she uses white colloquial expressions within her descriptions, with "My suspicions as to the fate of my parents proved to true; for soon after I left them they were killed and scalped…mangled in the most shocking manner," (Seaver, 70). Even in light of the terrors of her captivity, Jemison includes the Native view, that the Natives "…should not have killed the family if the whites had not perused them," (Seaver, 71). Upon arriving at Fort Pitt, "the Indians combed the hair of…myself, and then pained our faces and hair red, in the finest Indian style," (Seaver, 73), then dispersed the captives to different tribes, Jemison given to a Seneca tribe. The Seneca took her to a small Seneca town called She-nan-jee, "They first undressed me…then washed me clean and dressed me in the new suit they had just brought, in complete Indian style; and then led me home and seated me in the center of their wigwam," (Seaver, 76). After all the Natives of the town came to see her, and "they immediately set up a most dismal howling, crying bitterly…Their tears flowed freely, and they exhibited all the signs of real mourning," (Seaver, 76). At the end of the ceremony, Jemison recounts the leader of the tribe saying,

> "Oh our brother! Alas! He is dead…Oh friends, he is happy, his spirit has seen our distress, and sent us a helper whom with pleasure we greet. Dickewamis has come: then let us receive her with joy! She is handsome and pleasant! Oh! she is our sister, and gladly we welcome her here. In the place of our brother," (Seaver, 77).

Importantly during the ceremony, the Seneca accepted Jemison into their tribe as one of their own, and gave her a new, Native name: Dickewamis. Later, Jemison goes into the specifics of her adoption, "The two squaws had lost a brother in Washington's war…and in consequence

of his death went up to Fort Pitt...in order to receive a prisoner or an enemy scalp," (Seaver, 77). In order to assimilate Jemison into the tribe, her Seneca sisters did not allow her to speak English, and "were diligent in teaching me their language," (Seaver, 79).

Somewhat similarly to Jemison's capture, John Tanner's captivity occurs when he is nine years old and at home with his family. He recalls that he was bored, and went outside to play, having heard of Natives in the area. Tanner was curiously exploring in the woods near his parent's fields when two Natives captured him, "I was seized by both hands, and dragged off betwixt two," (James, 25). The two Indians, Manitoogeezhik and Kishkauko, took him on a difficult several day journey to their town, Saugenong, and an old woman came crying exubertly to them when they arrived. The day after, "…they took me to the place where the old woman's son had been buried…the friends of the family had come provided the presents…my party began to dance," (James, 9,10), and afterward accepted Tanner into Manitoogeezhik's family as a son. Tanner explains that Maintooogeehik had recently lost a child and wanted to adopt a new son in the place of the one she had lost, in a very similar manner as Mary Jemison's Seneca family had accepted her.

In Richard Vanderbeets' article he argues that the central theme in captivity narratives that is omnipresent and what makes them significant as a genre is shared ritualistic features (549). He believes this is true based on the fundamental assumption that certain recorded rituals were generally similar across tribes and served certain functions (550).

Vanderbeets' article focuses on two well-recorded rituals: cannibalism and scalping. Tribes' views of cannibalism varied greatly, with most accepting it only within ritual (551), as was true of the views expressed by Tanner's narrative. Scalping, a practice remarked upon in

both narratives, is commented upon by Vanderbeets, with, "The taking of scalps, a practice popularly thought to have originated with the American Indian, was in part a manifestation of far older -beliefs ascribing magical powers to the hair. Anthropology attests the widespread primitive belief in the hair as the seat of the soul, and the hair is also a principal feature of the primitive and pagan conception of the external or separable soul…American Indians, like many other primitive peoples, attributed special powers to the hair and believed the scalp to be somehow connected with a person's fate. Consequently, the scalp often symbolized life itself," (552). Tanner mentions scalping multiple times in his narrative, with "They brought home the scalp of the man they had killed," (13), and later in his discussion of war between tribes.

Many aspects of individual Native cultures are also evident within Jemison and Tanner's narratives. Jemison's description of marriage within the Seneca tribe is also of interest as a cultural construct. By her adopted sisters, Jemison was told to marry a Delaware Indian man named Sheninjee, who she describes most favorably as,

> "a noble man; large in stature; elegant in his appearance; generous in his conduct; courageous in war; a friend to peace…Yet, Sheninjee was an Indian. The idea of spending my days with him, at first seemed perfectly irreconcilable to my feelings: but his good nature…soon gained my affection…I loved him!" (Seaver, 82).

Here Jemison discusses her initial reluctance but eventual acceptance and admiration for her Native husband, views James Axtell's text *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohisotry of Colonial North America*, analyzes. He believes that sexuality between Natives and whites was one-sided, and that, "the Indians never cared to like with white people," (Axtell, 152). Both Jemison and Tanner's narratives portray Natives wishing to have sexual relations or

marry adopted whites. Hilary Wyss makes an important point in her article "Captivity and Conversion" about Jemison's narrative, since, "Jemison does not write her own tale, Seaver adapts it to fit his expectations and the expectations of his readers," (13). It is therefore important to be careful as a reader about the extent to which Jemison's views are factual and representative, although it seems, as Wyss suggests, that, "..the details of Jemison's experience elude clear narrative boundaries,".

John Tanner also explores aspects of his tribe's society, primarily in his relation to his role as a hunter, suicide, marriage and religion. Initially, Tanner works with the women in collecting and preparing food, before he graduates to hunting. Being a hunter and trapper is one of the most central aspects of his narrative, and his first hunting experience is given great significance, with "Since I have been a man…but my anxiety for success was never greater than in this, my first essay as a hunter," (James, 17). He is initiated into hunting with his adopted father's giving to him a pistol, and saying, "It is time for our son to begin to earn to e a hunter…Go, my son, and if you kill anything with this, you shall immediately have a gun, and learn to hunt," (James, 17). After killing pigions with the gun, Tanner turned his mind of trapping martins, as the other hunters in his tribe did. He describes his lack of success until his father helps him make traps, and his growth into manhood within the tribe, "I became more and more expert and successful in hunting and tripping, I was no longer required to do the work of the women about the lodge," (James, 19). It is also of interest that Tanner describes that, through interactions with another tribe at Netnokwa, his family caught measles (James, 18), and he later describes various illnesses affecting his tribe as they come into contact with other tribes and Europeans. He also discusses normative Indian behavior in relation to suicide, with, "Suicide is

not very unfrequent among the Indians," (James, 97), after trying to kill himself during a very painful illness.

Jemison includes brief descriptions of interaction between various Native tribes, and between Native tribes and Europeans. Primarily, Jemison briefly describes the alliance interaction between the Shawnee Indians and the French, "The party that took us consisted of six Indians and four Frenchmen," (Seaver, 67), and later, "Fort Pitt…was then occupied by the French and Indians, and was called Fort Du Quesue," (Seaver, 72). During her stay at Fort Pitt, she describes being given to the Seneca by the Shawnee, "two pleasant looking squaws of the Seneca tribe…returned with my former masters, who gave me to them to dispose of as they pleased," (Seaver, 75). She gives no indication of the relationship between the two tribes, or any monetary/good transfer for her acquisition.

Jemison also includes Native-white interactions, primarily with her assertion that Fort Pitt had been taken from the French by the English, and then describes going up to "make peace with the British" (Seaver, 80). While there, the British take an interest in her, and sympathize with her. Jemison's adopted sister became alarmed and rushed her back to the tribe, although "the white people came over tot take me back; but after considerable inquiry, and having made diligent search to find where I was hid, they returned," (Seaver, 80). Although at this point in the narrative Jemison is homesick, "the sight of white people who could speak English inspired me with an unspeakable anxiety to go home," (Seaver, 80), she would later become very fond of her Native community, "Time, the destroyer of every affection, wore away my unpleasant feelings, and I became as content as before," (Seaver, 81).

Tanner relays multiple interactions between various Native tribes in his narrative, and interactions between Europeans and Native tribes, although he puts more emphasis on Native-Native interaction. While traveling, Tanner's tribe encounted various other Native tribes, including the Ojibbewas and Ottawwas (James, 30), and later a band of Cress (49), both of whom were welcoming to Tanner's family and allowed them to stay among them for a period of months. Later in his narrative he depicts his wish to join a group of Assinneboins, Cress and Ojibbeways in fighting a group of Agutchoninnewug, but is rejected (70). His tribe's major war interaction is with the Sioux. He talks of the Sioux with a tone of caution, and mentions the conflict between the Sioux and his tribe throughout the text. He describes a conflict between a group of Sioux and Ojibbeway, where the Ojibbeway women had been captives of the Sioux an one Sioux man had married an already married Ojibbeway woman. The conflict was resolved with the Ojibbeway woman being separated from her Sioux husband and returned to her tribe at the end of the conflict (James, 218, 219). Such variety in inter-Tribal interaction evidences the different of relationship that Natives tribes had with one another at the time.

In addition, Tanner explores multiple aspects of interactions and conflict between his native tribe and white settlers. As explained by Edwin James in the preface, Tanner believed that much of the political and social interaction, from the European side, was not transparent in nature. It is in explanation that James writes,

> "The vain mockery of treaties, in which it is understood, that the negotiation, and the reciprocity, and the benefits, are all on one side; the feeble and misdirected efforts we make for their civilization and instruction, should not, and do not, deceive us into the belief that we have either a regard for their rights, where they happen to come in

competition with our interests, or a sincere desire to promote the cause of moral instruction among them," (Tanner, 14).

Tanner seems to view white settlers with extreme caution, only trusting them when they have proven trustworthy. Tanner has much interaction with traders, and describes the goods he had received at one point as, "…a small keg containing sixteen quarts of strong rum," (James, 152), which caused much discord among the other Indians with him at the time.

It is also of interest that Jemison and Tanner both chose to remain or rejoin Natives. In James Axtell's *The European and the Indian,* he claims that Europeans would choose to remain with Native captors for three reasons: because they found Indian life morally superior, because of the nature of the adoptive process by which captives are fully ingrained into Native society, or because they enjoyed, "the most perfect freedom, the ease of living, the absence of those cares and corroding solicitudes which so often prevail with us," (165-66). Aspects of his argument seem very much in line with the views expressed by both Jemison and Tanner. Although it is believed that Tanner rejoined Native society towards the end of his life, he ends his narrative with the choice to remain within white society, and expresses the wish to "bring away" two of his daughters who are currently living with the Natives (280).

In conclusion, although Jemison and Tanner's narratives were separated by region, time and point-of-view by gender, as Richard Vanderbeets argues in "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual," aspects of Native culture were present in both, and issues of personal identity became obvious through the analysis intra- and inter-Tribal and Tribal-European relations. Both narratives mention Native religion and customs, in addition to nuanced views of society within

Native tribes, and the interaction between Native tribes with one another and with Europeans as well as customs including marriage and scalping.

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