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Crèveœur, Chateaubriand, and the Twilight of Native American Civilizations

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Cet article compare la représentation des peuples amérindiens dans l'œuvre de deux auteurs français ayant voyagé en Amérique à la fin du dix-huitième siècle : Saint-John de Crèveœur et Chateaubriand. Ces deux auteurs partagent une même conviction : bientôt, les civilisations amérindiennes seront anéanties. L'article analyse les stratégies adoptées par ces deux auteurs afin de collecter et transmettre à la postérité des fragments appartenant aux cultures amérindiennes. Dans la lignée de *L'Écriture de l'histoire* de Michel de Certeau, il s'interroge également sur le « logocentrisme » dont cette entreprise témoigne et sur les rapports conflictuels entre cultures de l'oralité et cultures de l'écrit.

This article compares the representation of Native American people in the works of two French writers who visited America at the end of the eighteenth century: Saint-John de Crèveœur and Chateaubriand. These two writers share a similar conviction: soon, Native American civilizations will be destroyed. This article studies the strategies adopted by Crèveœur and Chateaubriand in order to collect and pass on to posterity cultural fragments of Native American civilizations. In line with the *The Writing of History* by Michel de Certeau, it questions the "logocentrism" inherent in this undertaking as well as the conflictual relations between oral and written cultures.

Saint-John de Crèveœur (Michel), Chateaubriand (François-René de), Amérindiens, Révolution française, études transatlantiques

XVIII^e siècle, XIX^e siècle

Amérique du Nord

In just a few decades, the end of the eighteenth century saw both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. French contemporaries regularly used the word "naufage" to describe the two revolutions and the brutal collapse of the social construct they called reality¹. Michel Saint-John de Crèveœur (1735-

¹ In *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* (Paris, Prault, 1784, t. 1, p. 312) Crèveœur uses the expression "naufage général" ("global shipwreck") to describe the effects of the War of

1813) had the privilege –and also the misfortune– of witnessing both sides of the Atlantic Revolutions. According to Bernard Chevignard, the American War of Independence was the cradle in which not only a new man, but also a genuine man of letters was born². While Crèvecoeur’s ambiguous attitude during the American Revolution has been the subject of much scrutiny³, there is another historical event he witnessed that attracted less interest among scholars, an event leading to changes as irreversible as the ones that occurred in France at the same period: the twilight of Native American civilizations.

During the twenty-seven years he spent in North America before his first return to France in August 1781, Crèvecoeur lived in the vicinity of Native Americans, and at times among them, both in present-day Canada and the United States. This long-standing relation between the “American farmer” and Amerindians led some to affectionately refer to him as “mon sauvage américain⁴”, including his protector, the French marquise d’Houdetot. But Crèvecoeur also claimed this identification: following the steps of his friend the marquis de Lafayette, who had been adopted by the Oneidas under the name “Kayewla”, Crèvecoeur presents himself on the cover of his *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie et dans l’État de New York* (1801)⁵ as an “adopted member of the Oneida nation⁶”.

One of the main goals of its bizarre textual construction, where a long journey across the United States is told with many gaps due to the fictional and partial destruction of the manuscript during a shipwreck in the Baltic sea, is to make a conscious attempt to perpetuate the memory of a people on the verge of extinction and to provide them, through the power of writing, with a form of symbolic immortality they were not looking for themselves. In the course of this voyage, one of Crèvecoeur’s characters makes a declaration that mirrors the fascination of the author with time: “Everything that survived the destructive power of time and people attracts, attaches for reasons I do not know, the sights of my mind: the more its origin appears to me to be far away and uncertain, the more it seems interesting

Independence on colonial America. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from French texts are mine.

² On this topic, see B. Chevignard : « St. John de Crèvecoeur in the Looking-Glass : *Letters from an American Farmer* and the Making of a Man of Letters », *Early American Literature*, vol. 19, 1984, p. 173-190.

³ On this topic, see by Bernard Chevignard, *Michel Saint-John de Crèvecoeur. Au miroir de la mémoire*, Paris, Éditions Belin, 2004, p. 40-47.

⁴ Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Mémoires sur ses contemporains et la Révolution française*, Paris, Ladvocat, 1830, t. 2, p. 409.

⁵ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie et dans l’État de New York*, 3 vols., Paris, Édition Marandan, an IX [1801]. A selective edition of this work was published under the title *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie et dans l’État de New York. Une géographie de l’Amérique du Nord à la fin du XVIIIème siècle*, edited by Françoise Plet, preface by Bernard Chevignard, Saint-Denis, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2002. A selective edition of Crèvecoeur’s travel narrative was translated into English by Percy G. Adams under the title *Crèvecoeur’s Eighteenth-Century Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1961. Whenever possible, I will quote Adams’ translation ; otherwise, I will translate excerpts from the 1801 and 2002 French editions.

⁶ In *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* (ed. 1787 cit., t. 3, p. 189) and *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York* (ed. 1801 cit., t. 1, p. 133) Crèvecoeur describes his adoption by the Oneidas under the name Cahio-Harra or Kayo.

to me⁷.” Opposing this “destructive power” to the feeble forces of writing is Crèvecoeur’s first objective in his 1801 travel narrative.

In many respects, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) followed the footsteps of Crèvecoeur⁸. Like his compatriots, he witnessed the French Revolution, traveled to the United States, and commented on the decline of Native American cultures under the pernicious influence of White settlers⁹. On April 8, 1791, Chateaubriand embarked for America in Saint-Malo with intentions that are still disputed to this day: was he merely trying to escape from a hostile political climate or seriously considering, as he claimed repeatedly, to discover the North-West passage linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via Arctic waterways¹⁰? In any case, his journey was quickly disrupted since, after only five months on American soil¹¹, he learned about the king’s flight to Varennes, and immediately decided to fight against the French republic along with the émigrés. Chateaubriand’s sojourn in America was considerably shorter than Crèvecoeur’s, but he nonetheless gave himself a title his compatriot could have very well disputed: “I am the last observer of the people from the land of Columbus¹².” In both *Travels in America* (1827) and the books VI to VIII of *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb* (1848)¹³, Chateaubriand meditates on the evolution of Native American civilizations at the end of the eighteenth century, and much like Crèvecoeur, considers writing to be the means by which to save the last vestiges of these cultures from oblivion.

This community of interest between the two writers was not a fortuitous event: Chateaubriand was directly influenced by Crèvecoeur since he wrote two articles on his *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*, one of which was later included in *The Genius of Christianity* (1802)¹⁴. We shall see that Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand, despite the similarity of their goals, nonetheless differ in the appreciation of the eventual success of their endeavour. Crèvecoeur has a rather optimistic view on the power of writing and considers the patient collection of historical debris to be a form

⁷ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 203-204.

⁸ Chateaubriand never met Crèvecoeur but he certainly knew his *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* before his American voyage of 1791. Indeed, Chateaubriand declares in *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (ed. Jean-Claude Berchet, Paris, LGF, Le Livre de poche, 1989, t. 1, p. 417) that he read a great deal about North America to prepare his own journey : given the fame of Crèvecoeur’s book, it is unlikely that Chateaubriand left it aside. Moreover, Chateaubriand’s protector, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, corresponded with Crèvecoeur when he became the Consul general in New York, precisely at the time when he was helping Chateaubriand to plan his trip towards the western part of the United States.

⁹ In a famous passage of his memoirs, Chateaubriand describes his brief encounter with an Amerindian woman who is abused by white settlers. See Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, op. cit., t. 1, p. 477-478.

¹⁰ On the topic of Chateaubriand’s goals when he came to America, see by G. D. Painter, *Chateaubriand : a Biography. The Longed-for Tempests (1768-1793)*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1977, p. 135-228.

¹¹ Chateaubriand arrived in Baltimore on July 10, 1791, and left the same year from Philadelphia at the beginning of December.

¹² François-René de Chateaubriand, *Le Voyage en Amérique [1827]*, *Œuvres complètes de Chateaubriand*, edited by Henri Rossi, Paris, Honoré Champion, t. 6-7, 2008, p. 137.

¹³ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, op. cit., t. 1, p. 422-542.

¹⁴ On October 8, 1801, Chateaubriand published in the *Mercure de France* a text entitled “Discussion historique sur les ruines trouvées sur les bords de l’Ohio dans l’Amérique septentrionale et dont il est parlé dans le *Voyage en Pennsylvanie* de M. de Crèvecoeur”.

of moral compensation for the destruction of Native American cultures. Chateaubriand, however, has a more tragic perspective on this subject: despite his apparent belief in literature's capacity to provide a form of symbolic immortality to an agonizing culture, he is intimately convinced of its ultimate failure. For Chateaubriand, nothing can defeat the "destructive power of time" which Crèvecoeur hoped to counteract with his *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*.

Looking for a Monument

In *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*, Crèvecoeur keeps an equivocal perspective on the influence of colonization on the tribes of the New World¹⁵. Indeed, Crèvecoeur constantly wavers between empathy and rejection, between a Eurocentric appreciation of Amerindians' so-called inferiority and an implicit identification with their cause and their way of seeing the world. The "surprising contradiction" that Native Americans purportedly embody explains the indecision of Crèvecoeur's viewpoint:

how could we call them barbarians, after having observed the unflinching kindness of their domestic conventions, this peace of mind, this selflessness, this continual tendency to help one another in times of need and distress? [...] But how could we combine the ideas that occur when considering such sweet customs, with the ones that are inspired by their ferocity in times of war and against their prisoners?¹⁶

This unresolved contradiction explains the paradoxical representation of Native Americans in Crèvecoeur's travel narrative: depending on the fictional character who exposes his or her point of view, the discourse will tilt towards empathy or reprobation though, as a whole, the book does not take a definitive stand. One of the most recurring criticisms against Amerindians consists in blaming their obstinate refusal of agriculture and sedentarity: "It is a shame that this nation, one of the largest in the continent, among which you can see so many tall men, whose language is so harmonious and sweet, has always opposed to all the efforts that were done in order to inspire its members with the taste of the sedentary and agricultural life¹⁷!" declares one of the characters about the Shawnees. If Crèvecoeur recognizes that the influence of alcohol has been especially harmful among Native Americans, he also implies that they are ultimately responsible for their own decline: it is by refusing to embrace the European way of life that they are losing, little by little, their land and their power.

Crèvecoeur also criticizes Amerindians' incapacity to anticipate the future. They discount the passage of time and "unable to cultivate lands or to erect enduring monuments, their existence and their time on earth will leave no instructive trace¹⁸". According to him, the desire for symbolic immortality is unknown to Native

¹⁵ This ambivalence is characteristic of ethnography texts, as Gordon M. Sayre points out : "In exploration-ethnography texts, the Noble Savage arises from paradoxical generalizations that describe the Native Americans as selflessly generous and as hard bargaining traders, as chivalric warriors and as back-stabbing cowards, as indulgent parents and as careless infanticides." *Les Sauvages Américains : Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p. 126.

¹⁶ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 40-41.

¹⁷ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 271.

¹⁸ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 191-192. Our translation.

Americans and it is ultimately this lack, much more than their inherently violent way of life, that leads to his moral reprobation. It becomes, then, Crèvecoeur's duty to take care of what the Native Americans do not value as much as Europeans — to create an “enduring monument” that will preserve the memory of their own civilization.

Chateaubriand shares a similar perspective in *Travels in America*. After mentioning the variety of means possessed by “Civilized people” to preserve the memories of their civilizations, he compares them to the “only monument” known to the Amerindians: the tomb. “Take away from the savages the bones of their fathers, and you take away from them their history, their law, and even their gods; in the eyes of posterity you strip these men of the proof of their existence as well as the proof of their nothingness¹⁹.” The conclusion reached by Chateaubriand is especially tragic since bones are a paradoxical monument testifying to past existence of people while saying nothing of who they were. Their blankness is not comparable to the page of the chronicle where a long-gone civilization can be described to future generations but, rather, it is the symbol of the complete erasure of their specific identity. The fragility of this so-called monument is emphasized in the epilogue of *Atala* when the narrator meets wandering Amerindians in search of a new homeland while carrying the bones of Atala and Chactas. Whereas a true monument is a victorious affirmation of man's power over death, the bones only prove the constitutive misery of man's condition and the transitory nature of his existence: “Man, thou art but a fleeting vision, a sorrowful dream²⁰” declares the narrator when he contemplates these mortal remains.

A Collection of Cultural Samples

Given this upcoming destruction, to which they see no remedy, both Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand conclude that collecting and preserving Amerindian cultural artifacts is an urgent task. “Instead of accelerating the degradation of these debris, we should consider their destruction as a sacrilege and their conservation as a religious act²¹” declares Crèvecoeur, a conviction shared by Chateaubriand who gathered during his 1791 journey “[...] a multitude of details on the manners and customs of the Indians²².” Among these “debris”, the toponyms are the first ones Crèvecoeur wishes to save from oblivion:

It is a precaution I have frequently recommended to the founders of new settlements across the Alleghenys, in Indiana, Washington, in the great Meneamy, in Kentucky, Wabash, Tennessee, etc. This respect for these names should even had been prescribed by law; [...] let's transmit to posterity their original names so we will prevent that the memory of these tribes be forever lost in the depths of time and we will make eternal the only proof of gratefulness that we can give and that we certainly owe to the former masters of this continent, whom we have so frequently seduced and abused²³.

¹⁹ Chateaubriand, *Travels in America*, translated by Richard Switzer, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1969, p. 92.

²⁰ *Atala*, translated by Irving Putter, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1952, p. 82.

²¹ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 118.

²² Chateaubriand, *Travels in America*, op. cit., p. 69.

²³ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 271.

Here, the idea of safeguarding linguistic evidence of the past domination of Native Americans on the lands henceforth occupied by White settlers is firmly linked to the hope of giving them some kind of moral compensation. It can be easily argued, of course, that such a compensation is meager in comparison with the territory that has been monopolized by White settlers, but Crèvecoeur never declares that Amerindians should be satisfied with this somewhat morbid reparation at the symbolical level. On the contrary, the encyclopedic ambition of this long travel narrative, where so much of the apparatus surrounding the text is dedicated to the patient collection of historical and linguistic information regarding Native American cultures, is the expression of a guilt impossible to assuage and which, in the end, constantly rekindles Crèvecoeur's resolution to preserve more cultural samples for future generations. Similarly, Chateaubriand dedicates many chapters of *Travels in America* to the description of Amerindian cultures, from games to funerals, from feasts to languages. Nevertheless, this picture of the New World tribes is a description of what they were during Chateaubriand's 1791 voyage and not, in fact, of what they are when *Travels in America* is published in 1827. These chapters, therefore, paint the posthumous portrait of people who have degenerated from heroic individuals to shadow-like figures.

One of the most interesting examples of this attempt to preserve cultural samples for posterity can be observed in the first volume of the French original edition of *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*. In chapter V, Crèvecoeur reproduces a letter where a European describes the circumstances in which a young Shawnee warrior dictated a text to him²⁴. This document is particularly exceptional, the European insists, not only because it comes from a remote land, but also because poets are the exception among a people of warriors and hunters. Unfortunately, there is something lacking in the very nature of the Algonquian language from which he is about to translate, something that, according to him, does not allow for the expression of abstract ideas:

Despite my best efforts to translate this little piece as literally as possible, I confess that I had to use some words that do not exist in their language, such as, for example, *soul*, which they replace by *life*, *animation*; or *shadow*, by *dark form*; *absence*, by *remoteness*. It is because of their incapacity to conceive of the metaphysical ideas attached to some of our words that they have never been able to understand several truths and historical points of our religion²⁵.

It would be easy to accuse Crèvecoeur of prejudice toward Native Americans given that this declaration of their lack of metaphysical aptitude is just one step away from clear disdain for their intellectual capacities. Racism was indeed customary among some of his French contemporaries, and Volney, for example, declared bluntly that Native Americans were “[...] dirty, alcoholic, lazy, prone to steal, exceedingly proud,” and that “nothing is easier than offending their vanity and in this case they are cruel, bloodthirsty, implacable in their hatred and atrocious in their vengeance²⁶.” Coming from Crèvecoeur, however, these allegations about the inherent limits of the Algonquian language are not the sign of rejection since he

²⁴ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 1801 cit., t. 3, p. 106.

²⁵ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 1801 cit., t. 3, p. 112.

²⁶ C. F. Volney, *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis d'Amérique*, Paris, Courcier et Dentu, 1803, t. 2, p. 370.

clearly expressed in earlier works his own preference for painting emotions. He expresses pride, indeed, for the title given to him by the English recipient of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, the “farmer of feelings²⁷.” In the French translation of this work, Crèvecoeur also described his own poetics as an effort to share sensitive impressions rather than developing the “metaphysical ideas” with which he seems less familiar: “I have no other method than telling, as I can, the impressions that I receive (since what I may have to tell you will be more a description of my sensation rather than of my reflexions)²⁸.” At a deeper level, there is, consequently, a genuine affinity between Crèvecoeur’s aesthetic preferences and the Amerindian tale transcribed by the character of *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*. In this story told to the European observer, preserving the past and offering, through this very act, a form of moral compensation for former abuse are once again associated. Indeed, this short tale is, at the same time, a sample of Native American eloquence and a direct accusation against Europeans:

Panima sits under the great Nemenshehela, while the moon is beautiful and glittering, and says to her friend Ganondawe. Your doorstep has been removed, the ashes of your hearth dispersed, and your fire extinguished, brave Ganondawe! So you have abandoned your wigwam and the village to go to the country of Oans, where White men have made both shadow and freshness disappear! Why do they ignore how to make their living as we do, by hunting and fishing? Why do they ignore how to sleep on the skin of a bear and to drink the water of the stream²⁹?

According to the European character, the style of expression generally adopted by Native Americans privileges concrete images over abstract expressions and ideas whose referent does not belong to the empirical world. Crèvecoeur imitates this style in the translation of the paragraph quoted above where abstract concepts are translated into concrete images: the violence against Ganondawe is conveyed by three successive references to the disruption of his home, while the settlers’ responsibility in the deforestation of American lands is suggested by a formula expressing sensitive impressions, the disappearance of both “shadows” and “freshness”. The last sentence confirms Crèvecoeur’s ambivalence when it comes to the destiny of Native Americans: while he did not hesitate, earlier in the text, to blame what he calls their “obstinate refusal” of agriculture and the sedentary life that comes with it, here, the blame of their decline and of the dramatic changes that occurred in the North American wilderness is explicitly placed on the White settlers. It is their rejection of nomadism and their incapacity to adapt to a new way of life that is responsible for the animosity between them and Native Americans.

The polyphony of the text makes possible the expression of this nuanced and partially contradictory reflexion on Native Americans. Indeed, many pages of the *Travels in Pennsylvania and New York* are in line with the traditional representation of Noble Savages that one finds in French literature during the Enlightenment, despite what Crèvecoeur had to say about writers perpetuating an idealized

²⁷ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays* [1782], edited and with an introduction by Denis D. Moore, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 17.

²⁸ Crèvecoeur, *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*, ed. 1784 cit., t. 1, p. 2.

²⁹ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 1801 cit., t. 3, p. 118. Emphasis added by the author.

representation of Amerindians. Since Native American tribes are the new victims of the millenary conflict between sedentary and nomadic people, all that remains for Crèvecoeur is the choice to preserve the memory of their culture by posthumously painting them with the goal of commemorating their existence for future generations. If Chateaubriand, in his *Memoirs*, describes his book as an edifice “built with bones and ruins³⁰”, Crèvecoeur’s *Travels* is, similarly, a metaphorical ossuary where cultural remnants of a people about to disappear are translated into written memory. Nevertheless, the trust that Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand have in the medium of this symbolical safeguard greatly differs.

The Death of Languages

According to Crèvecoeur, writing has, indeed the capacity to transmit to posterity the memory of dying civilizations. This trust has not wavered since his first published book: in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the translation of the Bible in Natick is already considered to be the only “monument” that will outlive the tribe itself³¹. On the contrary, Chateaubriand pushes, further than his compatriot did, the tragic awareness of the overwhelming power of time which will destroy everything, including languages: “The Oranoke tribes no longer exist; all that remains of their tongue is a dozen words pronounced at the crown of trees by parrots turned loose, like Agrippina’s thrush cheeping Greek words on the balustrades of Roman palaces. Sooner or later such will be the fate of all our modern dialects, fragments of Greek and Latin³².”

Amerindian and European languages alike are destined to become meaningless utterances of words. A reduced lexicon will reach posterity only to be heard by people for whom these forgotten words will be but sounds, signifiers whose link to a signified are forever broken. The unavoidable destruction of languages implies the incapacity of writing to provide a form of posthumous existence to the cultures it is meant to save: a literary monument crumbles and eventually disappears when the language used for its construction ceases to be intelligible. Although the title of Chateaubriand’s book, *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*, implies the possibility for a discourse to survive its enunciator, sooner or later, this discourse will no longer be understood: writers hope to build for eternity when they, in fact, are erecting cathedrals with sand. To men trying to assuage the fear of their own death with writing, along with the anxiety provoked by the disappearance of the things they loved, Chateaubriand answers by pointing towards the wide-open gap of time into which everything disappears forever. Consequently, he does not place his last hope on literature, but rather on Christ. “I have only to sit near my grave; then I shall daringly go down, the crucifix in hand, to eternity” are the last words of his memoirs³³. In the end, a belief in literal immortality (the immortality of the soul) ultimately replaces Chateaubriand’s hope for symbolic immortality through writing. On the contrary, before the *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*, and with a stronger faith in literature’s capacity to produce enduring monuments, *Travels in*

³⁰ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, op. cit., t. 1, p. 429.

³¹ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, op. cit., p. 81.

³² Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, op. cit., t. 1, p. 498.

³³ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, op. cit., t. 4, p. 607-608.

Pennsylvania and New York produces a posthumous representation of Amerindian cultures which is simultaneously the sign of its upcoming destruction and an attempt to collect its debris between the pages of a book. If Chateaubriand is a mourner on a grave, Crèvecoeur is an herbalist of the past.

Western Logocentrism

Nevertheless, despite their sympathy towards Native Americans, despite their efforts to protect linguistic remnants and cultural debris of Amerindian civilizations for future generations, their endeavour, as altruistic as it may appear at first glance, is, at a deeper level, a form of cultural violence and a way to impose European values on the tribes of the New World. First, Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand accept as inevitable the upcoming extinction of Amerindians. Chateaubriand, for example, declares: “The reasons for this depopulation are known: the use of strong liquors, vices, illnesses, and wars, which we have multiplied among the Indians, have precipitated the destruction of these peoples [...]”³⁴. Both Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand are unable to imagine ways for Native Americans to present any lasting resistance to the pernicious influence of White settlers, something that has been said, also, about their most famous successor in the United States: Alexis de Tocqueville³⁵. Confronted with a situation in which they see no hope, they turn toward the art of writing to record and pass on what they have observed among their “savage” hosts. But what Crèvecoeur presents as one of the most successful examples of this endeavour –the translation of the Bible in Natick– also symbolizes the alteration of the culture it claims to defend.

Admittedly, such a translation could potentially work as a Rosetta stone for future generations as a guarantee that the Natick language will be forever understandable and, thus, contradict Chateaubriand’s prediction of the death of languages. Nonetheless, such an achievement also reveals the absorption of Amerindian culture by Europeans since they do not preserve a written version of an oral tale belonging to the Natick culture, but rather a translation in English of what is the foundational text of their own civilization. What Crèvecoeur describes as a form of moral compensation and an altruistic effort to preserve a dying culture in the end only asserts European universalism at the expense of Native American civilizations. Moreover, it prepares the inclusion of the last Amerindian survivors into the Christian community since the translation of sacred texts into native tongues is a prerequisite for conversion.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau reflects on the causes of this “primacy of writing” and on the relations of power between written and oral culture: “To writing, which invades space and capitalizes on time, is opposed speech, which neither travels very far nor preserves much of anything. In its first aspect speech never leaves the place of its production. In other words, *the signifier cannot be detached from the individual or collective body*”³⁶. By separating a statement from

³⁴ Chateaubriand, *Travels in America*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

³⁵ Harvey Mitchell, *America after Tocqueville. Democracy Against Difference*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2002, p. 107.

³⁶ Michel de Certeau, “Ethno-Graphy : Speech, or the Space of the Other : Jean de Léry,” *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 216. Emphasis by the author.

the social act of enunciation and the original community to which it is addressed, writing, functioning as a form of archive, produces history and preserves everything in an intact state, whereas orally transmitted fables tend, eventually, to lose track of their own origin. But writing is also the exportation of a content that does not necessarily come back to its source of production. The European archivist is similar to these archeologists of the beginning of the XXth century who, under the pretence of preserving cultural artefacts for all eternity, ended up taking them to museums in their own countries where they would no longer be seen by the descendants of the people that had produced them. Bringing to the land of the colonizer what belonged to the colonized in order to protect it for his own sake often turns out to be an act of dispossession. Similarly, the culture of the colonized, translated into a new language, will no longer be accessible to him: William M. Clements notes that “[...] it has been customary for texts of Native American verbal expression to be published in professional journals or museum series that are largely unavailable in the communities where the expressions originally occurred³⁷.”

It is true that Crèvecoeur also recommends the protection, in their original form, of Native American toponyms and gives the example of translating an oral tale into French while trying to conserve some of the most specific aspects of the Algonquian language, in particular its use of physical images to express abstract ideas. If translating is always betraying, as the old saying goes, strategies can nevertheless be implemented by translators to limitate as much as possible alterations made during translation, and, in doing so, represent the original context as much as possible. But Crèvecoeur does not ask the question of the cultural and social impact of this transition from orality to writing, since he is convinced of the ultimate superiority of the latter. It is the conviction that “overcoming the power of time” is a moral duty which leads him to argue for the superiority of books over orality. Nevertheless, he neglects the fact that oral cultures are also preoccupied with the transmission of tales, legends, and ritual songs for posterity. And, most of all, he ignores that these cultural expressions have a special relationship with secrecy.

Since Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand, many oral history projects in print and on the Internet have been implemented to carry the stories and teaching of Native Americans to wider audiences. But as de Certeau noticed, writing and recording detaches the enunciation from its social context of production and, in this case, removes the elders’ knowledge from the “relational context of a student-teacher relation so important, as we have seen, to traditional Anishinaabe eldership³⁸.” Thus, while trying to preserve Native American cultures, Europeans like Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand tend to undermine the tradition of Amerindians by making available outside of their community that which used to be the exclusive knowledge of the elders. The following reflexions by Michael D. McNally concern the Anishinaabe tradition, to which the tale of the “Shawnee warrior” we read earlier belonged:

the primary orality of the Anishinaabe tradition has secured a certain prestige for the religious and cultural authority of elders who can choose, or not, to relate their knowledge depending on the circumstance and intentions of the student. And that

³⁷ William M. Clements, *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1996, p. 8.

³⁸ Michael D. McNally, *Honoring Elders : Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion*, New York, Columbia UP, 2009, p. 271.

prestige, though local, can still be maintained precisely by not participating in such projects that commit knowledge to posterity through technologies of print, recording, publishing, and the Internet³⁹.

Preserving, in the name of Amerindians, samples of their cultures through writing and modern technologies may have a transformative effect on their community since it risks to disentangle the link between orality and the sacred. It shows that the attempt to preserve languages, practices, and traditions ends up altering what it tries to maintain unchanged: the very effort to record cultural artefacts for posterity modifies their meaning and, indirectly, the communities that gave birth to them.

In the end, Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand do not use the arguments generally employed by their contemporaries to assert the superiority of European culture over Native American civilizations, such as the refinement of Europeans customs compared to the brutality of Amerindians. During the French Revolution, both Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand observed the “savagery” of their own compatriots and would have agreed with their predecessor in the New World, Jean de Léry, when he declared that eating one’s enemy is less barbaric than torturing a member of the same community⁴⁰. Following the footsteps of Lahontan, who used the example of Native Americans to criticize European customs⁴¹, Chateaubriand compares the education of French and Amerindian children to the advantage of the latter: Amerindian children are raised in their full independence whereas authority and punishment are used to correct European children of the vices they take by imitating the adults around them⁴². Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand also abstain from adopting the theory promoted by Buffon and De Pauw⁴³ regarding the physical and intellectual degenerescence of Native Americans under the influence of an hostile climate: both were, on the contrary, impressed with the strength of Indian warriors and quoted the famous speech made by Logan in front of Lord Dunmore as the proof of the eloquence they could display⁴⁴.

Despite the exceptional interest, empathy and compassion they express towards Native Americans, their conclusion regarding the superiority of European civilization is the same as most of their contemporaries while using a neglected criterion of cultural superiority: the mastery of posterity. In their eyes, a civilization is superior to another because it has produced means allowing its members to preserve for all eternity the memory of their individual existence as well as the memory of the world to which they belonged. It is true that Crèvecoeur mentions some of the buildings erected centuries ago by Native Americans and which

³⁹ Michael D. McNally, *Honoring Elders : Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁴⁰ See Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* [1580], translation and introduction by Janet Whatley, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 122-133.

⁴¹ Lahontan, *Nouveau Voyages de Mr. Le Baron de Lahontan, dans l’Amérique Septentrionale* [1703], edited by Réal Ouellet and Alain Beaulieu, Montréal, Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1990.

⁴² Chateaubriand, *Travels in America*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁴³ On Buffon and de Pauw, see by Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy : The History of French Anti-Americanism*, translated by Sharon Bowman, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 1-29.

⁴⁴ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 530. In *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie* (ed. 1801 cit., t. 3, p. 113), Crèvecoeur also mentions Logan’s lament.

survived until his time. But this spectacle only suggests “doubts and conjectures⁴⁵” since the name, the origin, the degree of development and the reason of the disappearance of the group that built these monuments is unknown: they are not the living proof of the grandeur of a civilization whose memory is perpetuated, only the mysterious and meaningless indication that someone, at one time, existed to build them. Chateaubriand also describes Native American ruins he observed in an island lost somewhere in the American wilderness:

What people had inhabited this island? Their name, race, the time of their existence – all of it is unknown; they lived perhaps when the world which hid them in its breast was still unknown to the three other parts of the earth. The silencing of this people is perhaps contemporary with the clamor made by the great European nations that fell in turn into silence and left [of themselves] only debris⁴⁶.

What Chateaubriand discovers is not a monument efficiently preserving for all eternity the memory of a civilization –since the very name of the people who raised it sunk into oblivion– but only a question mark, proving once again that men’s memory was victim to time’s terrifying power. If Amerindians are deemed inferior to Europeans by the two writers, it is because they see them as unable to conquer time and even disinterested in producing anything that will outlive them. Such a judgement, of course, is biased since the quest for symbolic immortality is shared by all human beings. But among Amerindians, it takes a form that the two European travelers consider to be inefficient and already vain. For Native Americans, posterity means the transmission of skills and cultural expressions such as myths, traditions, and songs in a collective setting since, contrary to the written world of Europeans where an individual can acquaint himself with his own culture in the solitude of a library, the conveyance of history in nonliterare societies is necessarily a “[...] community experience in which the story teller created mental pictures or ‘images’ of the past, intelligible to all, and passed them on to members of the tribe during ceremonial rituals⁴⁷.”

Nevertheless, Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand fail to see this alternative meaning of posterity, as well as to consider the efficiency of non-written forms of cultural preservation. Among Native Americans “generation after generation, the same ‘pictures’ were handed down with remarkable consistency to young people, each time explaining the origins and history of the tribe⁴⁸”. Similarly, they fail to mention the many semiotic possibilities explored by Amerindians, such as tattoos and hieroglyphics, whose consideration would have reduced the gap they saw between their respective cultures. Their idea of posterity also presupposes a conception of identity that is foreign to Native Americans who adopt an alternative definition of the self by taking a variety of shifting names throughout their lives: preserving one’s name for posterity cannot have the same meaning when an individual has not bound himself to a single, unchanging identity⁴⁹. Literate cultures deem writing to be the best auxiliary for symbolic immortality: by perpetuating this central tenet of Western

⁴⁵ Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie*, ed. 2002 cit., p. 55.

⁴⁶ Chateaubriand, *Travels in America*, op. cit., p. 62.

⁴⁷ James S. Olson and Raymond Wilson, *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 19.

⁴⁸ James S. Olson and Raymond Wilson, *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 19.

logocentrism, Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand show that such veneration for the written word may lead to overlooking alternative strategies for overcoming the fear of death and giving meaning to human life.

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⁴⁹ On the question of shifting names and amerindian conceptions of identity, see *Les Sauvages Américains*, op. cit., p. 213-216.

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