Fur Traders in Conversation

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Fur Traders in Conversation

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Abstract. Firsthand accounts of fur trade life often express frustration at the lack of conversation in fur trade country. By conversation, partners, clerks, and bourgeois had in mind a particular mode of talk associated with a particular cultural world; they often did not acknowledge the presence of other modes of talk around them. This article pursues the example of Daniel Harmon, a Vermonter who served with the North West Company (NWC) from 1800 to 1819, arguing that attention to Harmon’s expectations about conversation can permit us to use him more effectively as an ethnographic source both for his home cultural formation and for the Native and Canadian cultures within which he worked, lived, and married.

The Factor being informed that the Indians are arrived, sends the trader to introduce the leaders with their lieutenants, who are usually their eldest sons or nearest relations. Chairs are placed for them to sit down on, and pipes, &c. are introduced. During the time the leader is smoking, he says very little, but as soon as this is over, he begins to be more talkative; and fixing his eyes immovably on the ground, he tells the Factors how many canoes he has brought, what Indians he has seen, asks how the Englishmen do, and says he is glad to see them. After this the Governor bids him welcome, tells him he has good goods and plenty, and that he loves the Indians, and will be kind to them. The pipe is by this time removed, and the conversation becomes free. —Edward Umfreville, The Present State of Hudson’s Bay, 1790

Being in a Disconsolate part of the world, where their is Little conversation or Divertisment to be had, I was dubious of that too common Malady the Vapour’s, therefore to prevent such if possible, I have in cold Days and Long winter Nights, amus’d, my self with the following Observations. —James Isham, Observations on Hudson’s Bay, 1743
Edward Umfreville’s account of the distinctions between different modes of talk in the fur trade is only one of many. Traders—at least the successful ones—were well aware of the fine points of Native etiquette; they had to be. In addition to knowledge of places, people, languages, goods, and gifts, a seasoned trader knew when to talk and when to be silent; what to talk about; and who to talk with—sensibilities not unlike those one would have needed in a European court or drawing room, where conversation was also a highly codified art (Cope 1992; Burke 1993). And yet James Isham’s complaint about the lack of conversation in the fur trade country is no less typical of firsthand fur trade accounts. Isham, we can see from his Cree-English vocabularies and dialogues, spoke for many years and on many topics with Cree people, but he writes his Observations because he feels himself to be bereft of conversation and hence in medical as well as moral danger. It may be that Isham, like other fur traders we will meet, did not consider talk around the fort to qualify as conversation, or it may be that, cooped up with illness during a long winter, he simply had little opportunity to speak with anybody. One way or another, Isham’s substitution of writing for missing conversation was a conventional, if awkward, solution for one in his situation—as conventional as his association of conversation with moral uplift.

The idea of conversation as a moral tool is partly an artifact of the term’s etymology: it used to have a much broader meaning than it does in most contexts today. In Latin, conversare means to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, to pass one’s life, to dwell, or to keep company with; likewise in English (Oxford English Dictionary), old meanings of conversation include circle of acquaintance, mode of conduct, and even sexual intercourse, a meaning that was still current in the eighteenth century, as the Robson epigraph rather delightfully demonstrates. Isham had that kind of conversation: he had a Cree wife and a son, to whom he left his estate when he died in 1761. He does not mention his family in the Observations, nor does he use the word conversation in its sexual sense. But he certainly would have understood the term to represent many dimensions of human relationship. So, too, do today’s conversation scholars (see Tedlock and Mannheim 1995; McDermott and Tylbor 1995; Wardhaugh 1985). Let me offer a working definition of my own, inspired by both historical meanings
and contemporary research: conversation is the everyday web of flexible, apparently spontaneous language practice that mediates the larger, explicitly recognized, structural conventions of a society. Every society has it. It is never simply a transfer of information from one party to another; it is, rather, the opposite and necessary complement of ritual. The shapes of governance, family structure, belief, and war, for example, are represented and enacted through ritual, but the texture of each is enacted through conversation. It is at the level of conversation that the finest-grained conflicts in social practice are felt; and it is at this level and by this means that they are either smoothed over or roughed up. Conversation in any culture occupies a fairly narrow band between the obvious and the outrageous, and successful participation in it requires a finely tuned awareness of where those poles lie in any given social setting. A language volley can only become part of a conversation, after all, if another person responds according to the same rules; if not, like a match in which one player is playing tennis and the other lacrosse, it founders instantly.

My definition may pay homage to historical usage in its breadth, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans would have found its egalitarianism altogether appalling. Perhaps because conversation was understood to embrace so much of human life, great energy was devoted in Europe and New England to its regulation and constriction. It was made to be a marker of civilization, increasingly narrowly defined, rather than a marker of humanity. Consider, for example, the language of seduction with which Isaac Watts (1810 [1741]: 200) evokes the potential and the dangers of the practice: conversation, he wrote,

calls out into light what has been lodged in all the recesses and secret chambers of the soul: By occasional hints and incidents it brings old useful notions into remembrance; it unfolds and displays the hidden treasures of knowledge with which reading, observation, and study, had before furnished the mind. By mutual discourse the soul is awakened and allured to bring forth its hoards of knowledge, and it learns how to render them most useful to mankind.

To control this patently erotic process, Watts offers a long list of rules by which one might manage one’s conversation. One must determine, for example, whether one’s companions are “capable of administering to your improvement”; lack of vigilance will lead, he warned, to “the contagion of irreligion and vice” (ibid.: 237). Other writers offered similar advice: “Talking is not always to converse,” admonished Watts’s contemporary William Cowper (1893: ll. 5–8), pursuing the theme that “much depends, as in the tiller’s toil, / On culture, and the sowing of the soil.”
Ideas and metaphors like these were, with varying degrees of fervor and effort, carried north and west into Canada with the fur trade. William Fraser Tolmie, a trader and doctor for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) in the 1830s, carried Cowper and Watts themselves, or rather their books, on his long sea voyage from Scotland to the Columbia District. “Read in the forenoon Watts on the Mind—on Conversation—on fixing the attention & on scholastic disputation—marked several passages which struck me particularly at the time,” he noted one day (Tolmie 1963: 38). On another occasion (ibid.: 51), he applied Watts’s lessons:

Have been conversing with G. [a fellow young doctor] on various subjects; he thinks that Sir Walter Scott’s fame will not long outlive him & that he is not a great genius, & supports his opinion with the force of one who has been accustomed to argue on the subject. I admitted that he is not comparable to Byron & some others of the “illustrious dead” but took up the cudgels in his defense as a Novelist unequalled in any age. . . . G. is very well informed on literary subjects & I hope to be much benefited by his conversation.4

Other less-bookish traders were equipped with similar ways of thinking. Alexander Henry the Elder (1969 [1809]: 148), for example, observed that “my companions in the lodge [at Michilimackinac] were unaccustomed to pass the time in conversation,” and he hastened to explain:

the causes of taciturnity . . . may be easily understood, if we consider how many occasions of speech, which present themselves to us, are utterly unknown to them; the records of history, the pursuits of science, the disquisitions of philosophy, the systems of politics, the business and the amusements of the day, and the transactions of the four corners of the world.

The irony here is that Henry’s writing shows him to have been rather more adept at the tale of hair-raising escape than the philosophical disquisition; he would likely be a little rough for a parlor—and, unlike Tolmie and Isham, he found tobacco to be a better substitute for conversation than writing (ibid.). But Henry could write, and therefore, he could wear the mantle of learning that was commonly associated with that technology.

On rare occasions, fur trade writers acknowledge that this mantle could be worn by nonwhites and even women; race and gender as qualifying categories for conversation could sometimes be trumped by education. In 1800, Daniel Harmon (1957 [1820]: 40) “was agreeably surprised to find that Mr. Sutherland’s Woman a native of this Country [today’s Saskatchewan] could speak the English Language tolerably well and I understand
can both read and write it also. She likewise speaks the Cree & Sauteux tongues, and with her had a long conversation, who appears to be a sensible Woman but her Husband is a great Drunkard and when in his cups a perfect mad-man.”

We see here that not even all literate white men qualified as conversationalists, and thus we come to another criterion of the form. Harmon’s North West Company (NWC) mentor Archibald Norman McLeod (1933: 138) had reported in his Fort Alexandria diary a couple of weeks previously that the same “Mr John Sutherland (alias Sugar Royall) [an HBC man] came here to pay me a visit accompanied by two of his men, &. I made him very drunk, of all the stupid Puppies I ever set eyes on he is the most nonsensical &. dull.” The next day, McLeod (ibid.) fumed, “Mr Sugar Royall did not think proper to leave me &. I was tormented with his Super Stupid conversation all day.” The NWC man Charles Mackenzie’s (Masson 1890, 1:336) report of his visit with Captains Lewis and Clark in 1804 displays a similar frustration: “Captain Lewis could not make himself agreeable [sic] to us. He could speak fluently and learnedly on all subjects, but his inveterate disposition against the British stained, at least in our eyes, all his eloquence. Captain Clarke was equally well informed, but his conversation was always pleasant, for he seemed to dislike giving offence unnecessarily.” Perhaps Captain Lewis had not read Watts’s (1810 [1741]: 236) eighteenth rule: “Do not bring a warm party-spirit into a free conversation, which is designed for mutual improvement in the search of truth.” It is important to note that conversation, as celebrated in this period, was not dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense (see Tedlock and Mannheim 1995): it did not represent or stage difference. Rather, one recognized conversation, as opposed to other kinds of talk, precisely by the familiarity of the virtuous ideas and sentiments exchanged. A successful conversation mirrored back to one and reinforced the best parts of one’s own nature and culture; it was various but not estranging.

Daniel Harmon’s journal embodies these ideas more insistently than almost any other fur trade writing; it also demonstrates vividly and awkwardly a shift away from them. In turning now to an examination of Harmon’s journal as a kind of case study, I have three purposes. First—and this I have already begun—I want to understand what the claim about absence of conversation means when it appears in fur trade writing. What did fur trade managers and partners miss when they missed conversation? Central here is the question of the relation between literacy, as these men understood and practiced it, and speech. What functions did a written complaint about local speech practices serve? Second, I seek to determine the ways in which traders’ understanding of conversation changed as they
spent time and developed relationships in the fur trade country. This of course differed in every case, depending on disposition and circumstance; but perhaps because Harmon traversed a wider arc of cultural adjustment than some other fur trade writers, his journal makes visible a process of conversational transition others shared some part of but left unwritten. And third, I explore various strategies for amplifying the talk that often went on just out of earshot of trader writers or at least out of earshot of their readers: that is, the conversation of Canadian, Native, and Métis people. I do think there is ethnographic information to be found in even the most ethnocentric of fur trade writings. But I want to be clear: my goal is not to “cancel out” the cultural biases of the sources but to dwell on them—to make bourgeois and clerks and partners, not only their laborers, families, and suppliers, objects of ethnohistorical inquiry. I think this makes for both more interesting and more accurate history, and it is appropriate for a study of conversation, an interactive, multidirectional phenomenon.

Admittedly, this is also an approach permitted by the existing documents. Literacy was the core criterion for distinction within the fur trade hierarchy. If a young man could write, it was assumed (often wrongly, of course) that he would have no difficulty with all the other tasks of the trade; he could be engaged as a clerk and hope to be promoted. If he could not write, he was by definition a laborer. This is why we find no documents from laborers, hunters, and middlemen. While the literate/illiterate distinction was in many regards practical—writing was necessary for record keeping and communication about the trade—it was also ideological, since, as we have seen, the senior members of the trade associated writing with other cultural traits and values, and it is the ideological dimension that I will investigate here.

Like others in the management of the fur trade, Harmon was appointed to a clerk’s position as a young man on the basis of little more than his literacy and willingness. An innkeeper’s son from Bennington and Vergennes, Vermont, he grew up in an area a Bostonian would have considered remote, but he certainly considered himself a New Englander through and through as he set out on his grand adventure at the age of twenty-two. “I yesterday,” Harmon (1957 [1820]: 11) begins his diary on 29 April 1800 at Lachine Rapids, “in company with several other Clerks left Montreal for this place, and am thus far on my way to the Indian Countries, there to remain at least Seven Years.” “Yesterday,” “for this place”: Harmon shows in this formal declaration an impulse to plant himself firmly in time and space, just at the moment of departure from the markers of place and time that he knows. The diary is a genre often associated with such efforts: in its repetitive entries it marks time as a constant through cultural and physi-
cal dislocations and implies a coherence of subjectivity in the person who keeps it. The act of keeping a personal diary (as opposed to a post journal or account book, the most common fur trade genres) also indicates an affective orientation toward a literate culture, whether the imagined reader be the author or other intimates. Indeed, in 1816, upon hearing that two of his brothers were deathly ill, Harmon (ibid.: 185) copied out his journal and sent it thousands of miles home, “in order that they (in case I never have the inexpressible pleasure and gratification of seeing them myself) may know . . . how their long absent Relative has been employed both as to Body & Mind while in this Savage Country.” It seems that the copy or word of it circulated in Vermont; in any case, when Harmon returned home on furlough in 1819, he delivered his journal or a copy of it to Daniel Haskel, a minister in Burlington, who furnished “a suitable English dress” for publication (ibid.: 3). It was published in 1820 as *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*. No other writing by Harmon survives—we have no explicit statement, for example, about why Harmon published his journal or whether he contemplated publishing it at the time of writing.

While one might reasonably suspect Reverend Haskel to be responsible for the muted tone of propriety that characterizes this journal, W. Kaye Lamb’s edition allows us to compare the 1820 *Journal* with the extant manuscript and see that Haskel made fewer changes to the manuscript than his introduction (and Lamb’s introduction) suggests. Haskel may have exaggerated his intervention, and thus Harmon’s distance from polite society, as a salesman’s guarantee of the authenticity of the narrative—the rougher the author, the better the yarn—and an invitation to readers to imagine how wild and woolly the journal must have been in its original version. By claiming that he added “English dress,” Haskel even implied that the original was not written in English at all. But along with the assertion that the author never intended to publish and the editor never intended to edit, the claim/apology for revision was a standard feature of introductions to travel narratives, which were generally expected, interestingly and impossibly, to be both immediate and mediated. Polite readers sought both the titillation of the exotic and some degree of gloss and polish, and editors usually promised both without troubling themselves over the contradiction—a contradiction similar to that Harmon would have had to face and finesse in conversation with his friends and neighbors when he returned to Vermont after twenty years away. That is to say, people would have eagerly sought him out for his stories of wild animals and wild Indians but would have also anxiously sought evidence in his manner that Harmon himself had remained “one of them.”

With or without editorial changes, Harmon is not one of the more
colorful fur trade writers. Although in his early years in the Northwest he
does make note of Cree dances, Scottish festivals, Canadian marriage cus-
toms, and Assiniboine hospitality, Harmon does not sustain the curiosity of
a David Thompson, the sweetness of a Ferdinand Wentzel, the near-death
true adventure of a Simon Fraser, or the vitriol of a James McKenzie. His
turn of phrase is highly conventional. For example, recurring phrases, such
as “the face of the country” and “delightful objects . . . constantly pre-
senting themselves to our view” (ibid.: 68, 78) show that Harmon viewed
land as landscape, consistently and unselfconsciously participating in the
discourse of the picturesque (see Stacey 1988; MacLaren 1987). But the
banality of Harmon’s journal makes it interesting in its own way. Some
fur trade writings (Samuel Hearne’s, for example, and that of Alexander
Henry the Elder) read rather like after-dinner speeches, complete with sci-
etic information and titillating tidbits. But presenting itself as a journal
of personal matters lovingly prepared for family viewing, Harmon’s writ-
ing offers short comments on recent or unfolding events and human rela-
tionships at regular intervals. It is more like half of a conversation. This
characterization appears especially apt when we note that Harmon gener-
ally avoids discussion of his work, unlike McLeod (1933), his NWC mentor,
whose journal written at Fort Alexandria in 1800–1 details hunting, trading,
and labor arrangements, not the materials of Harmon’s journal or of
parlor conversation.

Ronald Wardhaugh (1985: 47), in discussing the social dynamics of
conversation, observes that

many interchanges serve little function other than what has been called
the “phatic” one, the indication of social solidarity. They function
much like mutual grooming behaviour in the animal world, showing
only that the various parties acknowledge that they have a social bond
which they have agreed to maintain. Hence, what is most likely to
impress you if you read transcripts of recorded conversations drawn
from everyday life is that not much of importance ever gets said.
Indeed, most conversations are so banal that they must have some
other function than communication.

Wardhaugh has too narrow an idea of communication; he seems to think
of it as transmission of information, when, in fact, establishment of social
relation is surely a major part of communication. But to point this out actu-
ally reinforces Wardhaugh’s point. For Harmon, daily writing served to
prove and create a dogged stability of purpose and culture. Putting pen to
paper according to the same diurnal rhythm that structured the lives of
family at home was as important as the content of the writing. And later,
as the journal circulated in manuscript or print, the diurnal rhythm of the
text in itself would have implied the question “what were you doing that
day?” and thus structure the potentially estranging text as part of domestic
conversation.10

The idea that the diurnal rhythm represents an attempt to overcome
distance becomes more striking when we consider the annual rhythms that
governed Harmon’s actual exchanges with family. When Harmon (1957
[1820]: 168, see also 167, 176) was posted at Stuart Lake, west of the
Rockies (see Figure 1), April was the month of greatest homesickness,
because companions often left and because only then was heading east
a real possibility. Every spring, Harmon dispatched letters home and to
“Gentlemen in this Country” with the returns for the past winter. Almost
every fall, Harmon received letters from home with the shipment of sup-
plies and trade goods. In other words, the letters usually crossed en route.
Sometimes it was worse. In September 1806, Harmon learned that his
father had died in June 1805 (ibid.: 101). In the fall of 1815, the brigade was
late and stayed the winter at Fort Chipewyan; only in February 1816 did
Harmon learn that two of his brothers in Vermont were dying of tuberculo-
sis—he promptly dispatched a copy of his journal, but by the time it arrived
(if not by the time he got the letter from home), they had almost certainly
died, as he learned in November. Letters home arrived and departed only
according to the demands of trade and staffing. This logistical fact turned
spatial dislocation into temporal dislocation. Thus, while Harmon and his
family wrote each other at the same time of year (the spring) and gener-
ally read each other’s letters at the same time of year (the fall), the grief
at bad news must have been exacerbated by the sense that at the time the
death, say, was happening, one was carrying on business as usual.11 The
mechanics of letter carrying in this context go some way toward explaining
why Harmon became more and more devout as the years passed. One never
knew when one should be thanking God for his mercies, so it was safest
to do it constantly. The constraints of annual seasonal and trade rhythms
made diurnal rhythms more important.

If Harmon’s correspondence with his family in Vermont was struc-
turally almost the opposite of conversation—in the sense that appropriate
response to another person was impossible—his interactions with those in
closer proximity generally also failed his requirements for the practice. In
March 1802, Harmon (ibid.: 55) reported in his journal on the pleasures of
one of his frequent trips from Bird Mountain to Alexandria, a fort on the
Assiniboine about fifty miles away:

I am just returned from paying my friends who are at Alexandria a visit
& where I passed four Days pleasantly in conversing in my Mother
Figure 1. Map of Daniel Harmon's travels. By Paul Schauerte.
Tongue—which is a satisfaction as no one knows except those who are situated much like myself—that is alone as it were the greater part of my time, or at least with people with whom I cannot speak fluently—and if I could, what conversation would an illiterate ignorant Canadian be able to keep up. All of their chat is about Horses, Dogs, Canoes and Women, and strong Men who can fight a good battle.

Note that Harmon attributes the lack of conversation at Bird Mountain to social rather than linguistic differences. After two years of living with them, Harmon is still incapable of talking with the Canadians, but he forecloses this anxiety by claiming that he would not want to talk about the same things anyway. That is, he transfers the qualities of his own crude, gestural, asyntactic learner’s French onto fluent French speakers. Harmon may justly strike us as closed-minded or mistaken. But he is also right within the terms of reference I have delineated above. Harmon sees conversation as the meeting of two like minds, each well versed in middle-class Protestant pieties and proprieties. Those who have not read the “right” books are incapable of it.

“Chat,” the social talk of a hunting people, Harmon considered animalistic—like those who indulge in it and their subject matter. He may have understood “chat” to be the savage counterpart of the kind of talk Sarah Fielding (1744): 315), in a novel he read on his first trip up to the fur trade country in 1800, condemned as damaging parlor frivolity: “to those,” she declared, “who mistake bon-mots, insulting Raillery, malicious Ridicule, and murderous Slander for the Attic Salt of Society, I write not.” To the middle-class agrarian sensibility, those too far divorced from tilling the soil, be they overly refined “society” ladies or voyageurs, could not speak or act virtuously: remember what Cowper said about “Culture, and the sowing of the soil.” It may be surprising that Harmon, the son of an innkeeper and not a farmer, would see a necessary connection between cultivation in its two senses, but his years at fur trade posts made him a gardener and thus actually brought his life into line with this prevalent model of virtue. Consider Harmon’s domestic vision of Fort Alexandria in April 1804:

We are preparing a piece of ground for a Garden & where I hope to pass many an agreeable hour in the company of my two companions. As Mr. Goedike plays the Violin well, he now and then will give us an air to enliven our spirits, and thus make the minutes pass away more pleasantly than they otherwise could. However the most of our leisure moments (and which is nearly nine tenths of our time) will be spent in reading, conversing on what we have read & meditation.
Here gardening, reading, conversing, and friendship are all linked. Harmon was very upset when separated from Goedike in July 1805. “He it is true had romantic Ideas,” he ponders in his diary, “but I believe him to have a generous humane heart—and susceptible of the strictest ties of friendship. He has good natural parts, and has had a tolerable education, which he strives to improve by reading. . . . He has an even temper and is fond of his Mother” (ibid.: 92–93). It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that for Harmon, at least at this point in his life, a man simply could not love his mother without reading the right books, nor could he be a true friend without constantly making efforts to improve his education in matters moral and intellectual. And “what is there in this changeable World,” Harmon (ibid.: 120) asks, than “to be preferred [sic] to a real Friend?” As he noted (ibid.: 55) bitterly in 1802, “Friendship [between Native and white people] seldom goes farther than their fondness for our property and our eagerness to obtain their furs—which is I am persuaded (with a few exceptions only) all the friendship that exists between the Traders and Savages of this Country.”

Harmon’s sacralization of true friendship is highly reminiscent of Sarah Fielding’s The Adventures of David Simple, Containing an Account of His Travels through the Cities of London and Westminster in the Search of a Real Friend (1969 [1744]), which he read in 1800. The hero of that novel “spent whole Days . . . wishing he could meet with a human Creature capable of Friendship; by which Word he meant so perfect a Union of Minds, that each should consider himself but as a Part of one entire Being; a little Community, as it were of two, to the Happiness of which all the Actions of both should tend with an absolute disregard of any selfish or separate Interest” (Fielding 1969 [1744]: 26). The fur trade posts at Alexandria and Stuart Lake, represented by Harmon as utopias of a distinctly homosocial cast, are also reminiscent of a colorful piece of fiction Harmon read on the outbound trip from Montreal: Simon Tyssot de Patot’s The Travels and Adventures of James Massey (1733 [1710]). The sensational and cerebral plot of this shipwreck adventure novel resists summary, but one message that pervades Massey’s many escapades is that even a dungeon can be pleasant if you have read the right books and have the right man to talk with. Harmon (1957 [1820]: 12) trained himself in such survival techniques when stalled by headwinds on the Ottawa River: “I have passed the Day in reading the Travels of James Massey, and in angling with Mr. John Clarke, another fellow Clerk.” Fishing, characterized here as “angling,” evokes a world of genteel male social intercourse by the burbling streams of Europe or New England (and literary discourse about angling, such as Isaac Walton’s Compleat Angler) that may almost make us forget Harmon’s physical location.
A few days after finishing with James Massey’s adventures, Harmon was immersed in a novel by Fanny Burney: “Fine weather,” he (ibid.: 27) wrote in his diary. “Part of the Day I have passed in reading Camelia or the Picture of Youth, and the remainder in shooting Pigeons and gathering Berries. This is the first Day I ever past (since my infancy) without eating either Bread or Biscuit, but as a substitute for them we now have what the Natives call Pimican, which is a compound of lean Meat dried and pounded fine & then mixed with melted Fat.” Harmon counterbalances his shift in diet (of whose symbolism he is highly aware) by continuing to inhabit, in his imagination, a cozy parsonage in the English countryside. *Camilla* (1796), all five volumes and two-thousand-odd pages of it, is a peculiar novel to be reading on the way to the fur trade country, in that it is entirely concerned with how to get its virtuous but ludicrously naïve English heroine, a country parson’s daughter, married to the right man. Camilla stumbles through an evil world trying only to find a “real friend” and create or sustain virtuous family relations. Harmon offers no comment on any of the novels he read, and he does not record reading any after the first few months of his fur trade life (he frequently mentions reading, but after *Camilla*, he only specifically names the Bible and religious books (ibid.: 47, 175). We do know, however, that Harmon found himself much more isolated from familiar influences than either Camilla or David Simple and that he was very conscious of his own precarious purchase on the way of rectitude as he moved further and further away from the influences of family and home.16

However indicative these novels may be of Harmon’s attitudes toward conversation and human relations, I do not want to give the impression that Harmon was deaf to the world around him. In fact, at the time he was reading the novels, he was also surrounded by, and quite intrigued by, fur trade lore. At Roche Capitaine on the Ottawa River, he saw fourteen crosses, which, he was told, marked deaths in the rapids, and at the next rapid he hears a similar story (ibid.: 15). The canoes pass a cave, “of which the Natives know many remarkable tales to relate,” and camp at a place called “the lost child” after a Native story about a child “taken away by the Devil, or bad Spirit as they call him” (ibid.: 16). On another island, “it is said the Natives killed a Snake that measured thirty six feet, the length and size of which they engraved on a large smooth Rock, which we saw as we passed bye” (ibid.: 17). Another night they camped “nigh a large Rock, on which the Natives as they pass this way throw an Arrow or some other article of little value which they say they do to appease & prevent the Devil or Muchimerutou as they call him from doing them harm” (ibid.: 19). And so on. One thing seems clear from these examples: the voyageurs talked about the places they found themselves in and the relation of their comrades or other people to those places. They read the landscape as they labored
past it. Harmon was in these terms illiterate, and thus he had nothing to contribute to that conversation. Furthermore, he was no hunter or paddler; as a “gentleman” he likely seemed as unmanly to his men as they seemed animalistic to him.\footnote{17}

In any case, the hierarchies of the fur trade were such that Harmon had little requirement to socialize with voyageurs. In April 1801, a year into his fur trade employment, Harmon (ibid.: 146) wrote, “As I have not often been in the Mens company I cannot as yet speak much of their Language”: he must, it appears, have heard the stories of snakes and lost children second- and thirdhand through clerks and bourgeois. The explanation for the snake petroglyph, it might be noted—that it is a memento of a huge snake killed by some Native people—is almost certainly wrong: such petroglyphs usually represented personal visions of manitous or spirits (Rajnovich 1994: esp. 107–10). So Harmon is hearing speculation, possibly already handed down so many times as to become its own kind of myth. Like most fur trade writers, Harmon tends to collapse the voyageurs with the Native people, the Native voyageurs with the Canadian voyageurs, and even sometimes the local Native people with those from afar, under the managerial rubric “my men” or “my hunters.” (He also, of course, erases the women and children in this phrase.) The unlikely story about the snake painting reminds us that there were several different, if intersecting, conversations circulating in any given place in fur trade country.

Harmon (1957 [1820]: 81–83, 160–1, 143–6) did accumulate stories about “Horses, Dogs, Canoes and Women, and strong Men who can fight a good battle” over the years, but he often recounts them in his diary with a heavy dose of Christian moralizing, and it is doubtful that he shared them with the engagés. Probably his communications with “his men” were more like those described by Alexander Henry the Younger (1988, 1:162) in 1804:

It is a very disagreeable task for the Master to undergo when he joins his own Brigade in a difficult and tedious part of the route. Little or nothing is said in the course of the day. They appear to have a certain shame or bashfullness in complaining publickly but no sooner is your tent put up in the evening then you are attacked by every one in his turn. Some complain of having a bad Canoe, others a heavy one, his assistent cannot carry her, others they have a sick man or a lame one in the Canoe, and still must keep up to the Brigade. Some want Bark, others Gum, others Wattap, others Grease & c, unforeseen accidents having deprived them of those very essential items. Having listened to all their numerous complaints, and redressed them as far as lays in your power, you must attend to the sick and lame and administer accordingly.
The interaction between master and men was usually more instrumental than convivial, although both masters and men certainly provided conversational material for each other.\textsuperscript{18}

Was Harmon a more successful conversationalist with Native or Métis women? Conversation as a speech genre in the Anglo-American middle classes was closely associated with women—conversation with virtuous women being considered to have even greater refining effects than conversation with virtuous men. And yet the earlier sexual meaning of the term still hovered, increasing men and women’s anxiety about an apparently innocent and desultory activity.\textsuperscript{19} The “wrong” kind of conversation with the “wrong” kind of woman was considered highly dangerous. Accordingly, many fur trade managers approached Native women with some caution. Harmon (1957 [1820]: 104–5) expected the worst “in such a Savage Country where there is little to be learnt that we could wish to know,” even if early on he had the pleasure of attending a Grand Portage ball and meeting “a number of this Countries Ladies, whom I was surprised to find could behave themselves so well, and who danced not amiss” (ibid.: 22). When he was first offered the chance to wed à la façon du pays, he turned the offer down (ibid.: 62). Only in October 1805 (perhaps not coincidentally, a few months after his separation from his beloved Goedike), did Harmon (ibid.: 98) take a wife, the fourteen-year-old daughter of a voyageur and a Native woman, noting, “The Girl is said to be of a mild disposition & even tempered, which are qualities very necessary to make an agreeable Woman and an affectionate Partner.” Harmon never records his wife’s name, even though by the time he turned the journal over to Haskel she had been by his side for eleven years and thousands of miles, the birth of five children and the deaths of three of these. We know her only from other sources as Lizette Duval.

Perhaps Harmon was unable to find a word for a nonliterate woman in a genre, the diary, that explicitly enacts the link between moral behavior and writing. Even as he establishes a household with Lizette, it is clear that Harmon expects “effection” out of this relationship but not the kind of meeting of true minds he experienced with a certain class of white men. Thus even as late as 1814, the most blissful passage in Harmon’s journal comes in the entry for 29 August: “The most of our time while my friend [James McDougall] was here was passed in reading to each other or in agreeable conversation while walking by ourselves along the Beach, when now and then we would stop to eat a few Berries which are plentiful along the water side” (ibid.: 169).\textsuperscript{20} However, unlike some fur trader writers who acknowledge no relationships with women at all, Harmon (ibid.: 98) does formally announce his liaison with Lizette and his plans,
when he retires, to leave her behind “in the hands of some good honest Man,” and just as formally he (ibid.: 194) announces, fourteen years later, his change of heart: “if she shall be satisfied to remain in that part of the world, I design to make her regularly my wife by a formal marriage.”

It seems that, by 1819, Harmon was able to acknowledge that Lizette was capable of sentimental response, a crucial qualification for a real friend. In his deep despair over the death of his beloved three-year-old son (preceded by the deaths of twins at birth), Harmon (ibid.: 166) had shared with his “departed Son’s Mother the loss of our Darling Child.” He also seems to have disarticulated the qualities of literacy and family love, so clearly linked in his meditation on Goedike and his mother, as he announces that he will take Lizette and his children east with him when his postings end. “How could I spend my days in the civilized world,” he asks, “and leave my beloved children in the wilderness? The thought has in it the bitterness of death” (ibid.: 195).

Despite his continuing elevation of conversation with like-minded men, it is clear that, after eleven years of marriage, Harmon’s ideas about literacy, relationships, and talk have shifted:

I now pass a short time every day, very pleasantly, in teaching my little daughter Polly to read and spell words in the English language, in which she makes good progress, though she knows not the meaning of one of them. In conversing with my children, I use entirely the Cree, Indian language; with their mother I more frequently employ the French. Her native tongue, however, is more familiar to her, which is the reason why our children have been taught to speak that, in preference to the French language. (Ibid.: 186)

Although he can play at teaching Polly sounds and spellings in English, Harmon can only converse with her in Cree. The very idea of conversation in Cree would have been inconceivable to him in his early years in the Northwest. But Harmon acknowledges that speaking a “mother tongue” is more important to a child than learning English. (Harmon learned this lesson the hard way: his first child, George, died in Vermont, where Harmon had sent him for schooling.) Thus the status of Cree has been elevated, whereas English in Polly’s world is only a kind of pretty gibberish, meaningful as a token of another world but without semantic sense. Harmon himself continues to keep his English-language journal, but the entries become much more sporadic: this entry is dated three months after the previous entry and two months before the next, which notes only that “salmon begin to come up this river” (ibid.). Time is increasingly marked, for Harmon, not by the march of the calendar, but by salmon migration,
planting and harvest, ice breakup, birth and death, and the arrival and departure of visitors and news.\textsuperscript{22}

With the one exception for little Polly, Harmon’s diary does not report the contents or nature of his domestic conversation. It is likely, however, that Lizette was Harmon’s primary Cree teacher and, after Goedike, his primary French teacher as well. As Harmon accommodated her linguistic preferences, he almost certainly accommodated, at least to some extent, her conversational practices as well—a language learned by immersion comes complete with these. And he may, at times, have lived with one or more of her family members. So, having sketched out the dimensions of Harmon’s “writeable” conversational needs and the ways he sought to satisfy them, we can now turn to other trader-writers familiar with Cree people, to a small piece of information about his wife, and to some twentieth-century anthropologists for some clues about the general tone and practices of conversation that circulated around Harmon as he wrote—or didn’t write—in his diary.

Among Harmon’s contemporaries, David Thompson is the richest single source. Thompson is unusual in his routine application of the term conversation to interactions around him; for example, he (Thompson 1962 [1845]: 74) notes that “the natives . . . treat each other with kindness and respect, and very rarely interrupt each other in conversation,” and he vividly recalls an occasion on which “after a weary day’s march we sat by a log fire, the bright Moon, with thousands of sparkling stars passing before us, we could not help enquiring who lived in those bright mansions; for I frequently conversed with them [his men] as one of themselves” (ibid.: 75). Thompson (ibid.: 90) also recognizes the land literacy of his Native guides and companions: “I had always admired the tact of the Indian in being able to guide himself through the darkest pine forests to exactly the place he intended to go, his keen, constant attention on every thing; the removal of the smallest stone, the bent or broken twig; a slight mark on the ground, all spoke plain language to him. I was anxious to acquire this knowledge.” Thompson made a habit of seeking out old men for their stories of travel, war, creation, and the lessons of growing up, which he often records in direct discourse (ibid.: 49, 79, 134–5, 240–51); he also listened to stories of Wasegechak, the trickster, “which the women relate to amuse away the evenings” (ibid.: 78).

One of the stories Thompson presents in his Narrative is especially suggestive as a complement to Harmon’s taciturnity; it is exactly the kind of canoe story Harmon dismissed, and Thompson’s telling allows us to imagine two different slants the story might have been given, depending on the teller and the audience:
Two years before an homeguard Indian . . . with Magnus Twatt were proceeding on their voyage with four pieces of goods in their small canoe. They came to this Cross Lake and nearly got half way over it when a small gale of north wind came on which made awkward waves in the current of the River where they were, the Indian saw the danger, and as the waves permitted threw off his belt and his loose coat and got ready to swim calling to Magnes Twatt “Strip strip man not be long in canoe now man or you will be drowned, drowned man.” Magnus was fast buttoned up in a tight jacket and had on trowsers and could neither strip nor swim; as the Indian every moment expected the waves would upset the canoe, he was continually urging his canoe mate to strip, or be drowned; at length they gained a large patch of tall rushes where they found shelter until the wind moderated.

One can imagine the hilarity with which this story of Magnus Twatt the buffoon would have been related and received by Native and Canadian voyageurs—even if it doesn’t end, as one might expect, with Twatt getting a ducking and even if the name “Magnus Twatt” might not have the same instantly humorous effect in Cree or French as it does in English. On the other hand, the story, as told by Twatt or another partner or clerk, would have turned the joke the other way: it might have been an example of the genre of tales about ridiculously fearful Indians who prayed to far too many gods for far too little protection. Like Harmon’s account of the snake petroglyph, this story is evidence of people consolidating systems of social solidarity and division by telling (sometimes the same) stories about each other.

Beyond Thompson’s interest in the stories that constituted the content of much fireside talk, he also makes observations about the manner of such talk. For example, he suggests the liveliness of ordinary Native conversation in his claim that while “the Indian is said to be a creature of apathy, when he appears to be so, he is in an assumed character to conceal what is passing in his mind” (ibid.: 92). Peter Grant (Masson 1890, 2:327, 328), a colleague of Harmon’s in the NWC, provides further elaborations of Cree etiquette: he wrote of the Saulteaux in 1804 that “such is their notions of politeness that they seldom give a square refusal to any favor that is required from them”; that “to call one of them directly by his name is considered very impertinent, except among intimates and relations”; and that “when strangers or long absent friends meet, they remain like statues for a considerable time, with their faces hid or inclined to one side and without exchanging one word. After a long pause, they smile or grin at each other, this is understood to be the prelude to asking news, and the conversation becomes general after they have smoked a pipe.” Such observations begin
to evoke an elaborate system of polite discourse, of which Harmon would have had to learn at least the basics. And once he had done that, he and his family moved to New Caledonia, where they spent six years among the Carrier people, who not only spoke an unrelated language but appear to have practiced quite a different conversation. The Carriers, Harmon (1957 [1820]: 245) wrote, “are unusually talkative... men, women and children, keep their tongues constantly in motion; and in controversy, he who has the strongest and clearest voice, is of course heard the most easily, and, consequently, succeeds best in his argument.”

Anthropologists Regna Darnell (1984) and Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981) offer descriptions of conversational practices in Cree and Athabaskan communities that may, complementing the observations of Harmon and his contemporaries, help to evoke the speech dynamics of Harmon’s household. Just as Harmon’s conversational expectations are not identical to those of a traveling Vermont middle manager today, neither would the expectations of Lizette Duval and her family be identical to those offered by the Scollons and Darnell. But as Harmon’s are, in some regards, continuous with today’s educated middle-class expectations, so we may assume some degree of continuity within Cree conventions as well.24 Darnell and the Scollons both enumerate the deficiencies that have normally characterized Native speech practices for white observers: long silences, lack of direct questioning, lack of accommodation to newcomers, lack of eye contact, and lack of formal closure, for example (Scollon and Scollon 1981: 36; Darnell 1984: 43–44). However, they go on to show, these qualities can be understood in a more positive way: the silences, for example, are to Native people an indication that the autonomy of all participants, and particularly the elders, is being respected; they may also be partly an effect of the presence of an outsider. An Athabaskan person, the Scollons (1981: 15) explain, would consider it foolish to talk openly to a stranger, whereas a white person would use talk to establish a relationship with a stranger. Add to this the technical fact that Athabaskans habitually pause slightly longer between sentences than do white people, and the end result is conversation dominated by white people, who, by their conventions, are “politely” filling silence (ibid.: 25). Athabaskans, alas, see this talkativeness of white people as not only foolish but arrogant, because only elders in their society have the right to dominate the floor in such a way. Darnell (1984: 44) describes almost identical phenomena among Cree people and also explores the fact that avoiding the eyes of another person is a sign of respect among the Cree, not a sign of evasion as it would be among white people (ibid.: 46).25 It is not grammar, Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981: 12) point out, so much as “the way ideas are put together into an argument, the way some ideas are selected for special emphasis, or the way emotional information about the
ideas is presented that causes miscommunication. . . . The greatest cause of interethnic problems lies in the area of understanding not what someone says but why he is saying it.”

If the traces of new conversation within Harmon’s writing are elliptical, its existence is dramatically marked by the end of his writing altogether. Thus for Harmon, too, silence may prove to be articulate if we read it attentively. Harmon’s journal ends in 1819 upon his arrival at Fort William (now Thunder Bay) on his way east. “As I have already described the country between this, and Montreal,” he writes, “I shall here conclude my Journal” (Harmon 1957 [1820]: 196). A strange explanation, considering that describing the country has rarely been the primary focus of Harmon’s entries. Indeed, the journal is over because Harmon’s life in the East is less likely to be of interest to friends, family, and a greater public. But the journal is also over because Harmon is no longer in the kind of moral danger of inappropriate conversation that required the journal writing in the first place. Ironically, the Canadian and Native cultures and places and people Harmon resisted, belittled, or ignored in his journal turn out to have been its enabling foundation. So a travel account ends upon the return home, and a young man’s story ends in marriage, just as in the books Harmon read as a young man. But like so many travelers, Harmon did not quite go home. He stayed in Burlington, Vermont, for a few months and then returned to Rainy River for a season before joining his brothers in northern Vermont, where he and Lizette had several more children and apparently ran a store and a farm. In 1843, the family moved to Montreal, where Harmon died shortly after, leaving an estate “more burdensome than profitable” (ibid.: xvii).26

Many questions resonate here about the family’s life and conversation in the East and particularly about Lizette Duval’s experience. There are no answers available from direct evidence. But perhaps we can elicit one line of thought from Harmon’s diary. Harmon (ibid.: 98) does tell us his wife’s parentage: she was, he tells us, a “Canadians Daughter,” and her mother was a “Snare” Indian woman, “whose Country lies about the Rocky Mountain.” Lizette’s mother was, in modern parlance, a Secwepemc, or Shuswap.27 But Harmon (ibid.: 186) also notes that his wife’s native tongue was Cree. How did Harmon’s Secwepemc mother-in-law get to Saskatchewan? Perhaps she was taken by more westerly Crees during a raid, such as those of 1810 described by Alexander Henry the Younger. Perhaps Lizette’s father met her in Secwepemc country, and she accompanied him further east, following his work. In any case, the evidence of the mobility, whether forced or chosen, of Lizette’s mother might suggest that Harmon’s wife was not as fazed by cultural, geographic, or linguistic change as he was. North-
ern Vermont was perhaps no more different from a Saskatchewan fur trade post than the Saskatchewan fur trade post was from a Secwepemc village west of the Rockies. Lizette did not share a Native tongue with her mother, but she did share one with her children. We have no particular evidence to sentimentalize or exaggerate her “culture shock” in the East.

Conversations are among the most ephemeral of historical phenomena. They take place in the dark, on the road, at the table; in indifference or in confidence; every day in tedium or once in passing. An overall tone, a striking fact, or a turn of phrase may be remembered, but the full mechanics of a conversation are most often forgotten or hardly registered in memory at all. A participant in a conversation who does recount it to a third party is unlikely to capture it alive; like dreams, conversations subjected to the discipline of sequence and cause are transformed and flattened. Observers may fare no better. As many journalists, anthropologists, and oral historians have had occasion to observe, the presence of an outsider, a pad and pencil, or a tape recorder changes the nature and manner of speech; this is even more the case with conversation than it is with the narratives these investigators usually solicit. Thus, even had early participants in the fur trade made more efforts at documentation, no archive could fully reveal an oral counterpart, in whatever language, to the written documents of the fur trade in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canada.

Nonetheless, we need to make space—a great deal of space—in our historical imaginations for such talk. I am suggesting, paradoxically, that paying more attention to the written nature of the documents of the fur trade might help. People write for other people. Depending on whom we imagine as our reader, there are many things we do not write. These unwritten things are often the most important aspects of our lives: love, grief, and sex, for example, are often eclipsed even from ostensibly private diaries. So, just as we are highly aware of the power of the unsaid in spoken conversation, we can attune ourselves to written silences. Think of the Ottawa family who adopted Alexander Henry the Elder at Michilimackinac. Henry says they didn’t talk very much, and he says this is because they had nothing to talk about. It is, of course, more likely that their taciturnity stemmed from cultural conventions like those identified by the Scollons or Darnell. Or perhaps they were merely quiet—out of respect, reserve, or boredom—in Henry’s presence. (Given Henry’s disposition, we might almost wonder if his companions could get a word in edgewise.) Similarly, Harmon’s silences in and after his journal exist in relation to a particular expected audience. Harmon may tell us less about daily fur trade life than some other sources, but his silences are so strained that they reflect back upon him and echo with the conversations he did not record.
Notes

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1 Other instances of traders’ sensitivity to local etiquette can be found, for example, in Hendry 1968: 337–8; Isham 1949: 84–87; Masson 1890, 1: 376–82. My focus here is on private or casual conversation rather than trade or diplomatic rhetoric (this is the same distinction Cadwallader Colden [1747: 19] credited to the Iroquois: “Every sudden Repartee, in a publick Treaty, leaves with them an Impression of a light inconsiderate Mind; but, in private Conversation, they use, and are delighted with brisk witty Answers, as we can be. By this they shew the great Difference they place between the Conversations of Man and Man, and of Nation and Nation.”) For fine work in “Nation to Nation” discourse, see White 1987 and Merritt 1998. This essay has been inspired also by White 1982 and Black-Rogers 1986.

2 The sexual meaning survives in the phrase “criminal conversation,” but otherwise the word today has no sexual connotation, unlike *intercourse*, the connotations of which have become strongly sexual.

3 Jane Kamensky’s (1997: 5) claim that “in seventeenth-century parlance, the word ‘conversation’ referred both to verbal exchange in particular and to human conduct in general” is borne out by, for example, Experience Mayhew’s (1727: 7) praise for a man “in his Conversation without Spot and blameless, being even wholly free from any Imputation of immoderate Drinking.” The broad sense of the word is implicitly in play as late as 1848, when David Thompson (1862 [1845]: 45) recalled the degraded state of his superior at Cumberland House in the 1780s: “He had... lost all his education except reading and writing and the little of this, for the accounts of the trade appeared labor to him: he appeared in a state of apathy smoking tobacco mixed with weed, had no conversation with any person; the little business he had was done with few words and took no exercise.” While the term *conversation* here may or may not refer specifically to talk, it is tightly tied in with other areas of conduct.

4 Tolmie (1963: 297) later complained of being “deprived of society even of equals not to speak of the benefits arising from intercourse with one’s superiors in knowledge & wisdom—the ideas are seldom raised to objects of a lofty nature but tend to assimilate themselves with those of the persons most frequently met with, viz—the wretched aborigines. The pleasures of polished female society we are obliged to forego & all this for filthy lucre’s sake.” One may wonder why Tolmie simply didn’t go home if he felt this way, but the passage certainly demonstrates his firm association of wisdom with book learning and also provides an example of the association of conversation, virtue, and women that we will see later.

5 Samuel Hearne had similar praise for the Chipewyan Mattonabbee in 1772. “In conversation,” Hearne (1911 [1795]: 330–1) recalled,

he was easy, lively, and agreeable, but exceedingly modest; and at table, the nobleness and elegance of his manners might have been admired by the
first personages in the world; for to the vivacity of a Frenchman, and the
sincerity of an Englishman, he added the gravity and nobleness of a Turk;
all so happily blended, as to render his company and conversation univer-
sally pleasing to those who understood either the Northern or Southern
Indian languages, the only languages in which he could converse.

Hearne waives literacy as a requirement for conversational propriety, but note
that he does require similarity to European deportment.

6 Even in the NWC, known to be less records-obsessed than the HBC, no goods
moved without writing. In 1800, for example, Harmon (1957 [1820]: 36) went
to collect some trade goods at Swan River Fort, explaining that "as there is no
one there who can read & write I went to give out such articles as are wanted
here." See also Thompson’s remarks in note 3 above. It could be argued that dis-
tinctions of status were based on ethnicity rather than literacy, but there were
of course some French Canadian partners, all literate (see Masson 1890, 1:227–
63 and 1:299–313), and traders sometimes educated their “half-breed” sons to
become traders (for example, see the Dictionary of Canadian Biography
entry for Charles Isham, James Isham’s son).

7 Spargo (1950: 38) points out that Bennington and Vergennes lay on the stage
route from Montreal to New York, and thus, in a sense, they were a part of the
fur trade routes; Harmon probably met partners in the trade at his parents’ inn.
More importantly, these towns are closer to Montreal than they are to any of
New England’s centers; from a New England perspective, Harmon began his
life in the hinterlands and just kept moving farther away. This may partly, if
apparently paradoxically, account for the intensity of his devotion to metropoli-
tan values.

8 All citations in this essay are to the Lamb edition (Harmon 1957). Lamb pro-
vides a transcription of the surviving manuscript of Harmon’s diary (probably
the copy Harmon sent to his brothers because it ends with the entry of 15 April
1816), together with entries to 18 August 1819, included in the 1820 published
edition (Harmon 1820). Haskel, Lamb supposes, was working from Harmon’s
original (Harmon 1957: xxiii).

9 See Sherman 1996: 183 and chapter 5. As a minister, Haskel also probably chose
to distance himself from an author who showed no interest in converting the
heathen.

10 See Sherman’s (1996) historico-literary study of the structure of time in diaries;
Nussbaum 1988; and on diurnal structure in Harmon and Henry the Elder, Gil-
trow 1981. Harmon was unusually self-aware about his substitution of written
for spoken conversation, and the form of his writing reinforces this connec-
tion. But other fur trade writing can also be seen as conversation of one kind or
another; Alexander Henry the Elder, for example, who dedicated his book to
Sir Joseph Banks, used writing and publication to join a scholarly conversation;
Thompson, alone and unappreciated in his retirement, wrote his Narrative to
recall past camaraderie of the fur trade and to bring his name to the lips of his
contemporaries; and alliterate fur traders wrote scores of letters to each other,
thereby creating a buzz of written conversation among the posts.

11 In the Athabasca region, there were expresses at other times of year (Harmon
1957 [1820]: 42); this does not seem to have been the case through the Rockies.

12 Alexander Henry the Younger (1988, 1:147) made the Native hunter/decadent
aristocrat connection explicit when he blamed what he called the “unbounded
extravagance of our meadow gentry, both men [Canadians] and Natives” on their attachment to horses—as if they were inappropriately aping the manners of their social betters in Europe. Harmon (1957 [1820]: 84) describes a euphoric interlude in 1804, during which he and his colleagues “would mount our Horses to take a ride out into the Plain, and frequently try the speed of our Beasts”; it was acceptable for “management” to enjoy horses.

13 Henry the Younger (1988, 1:158) also differentiates himself as a gardener from those around him. The conflation of cultivation in its two senses is everywhere in discussions of conversation. For example, Watts (1810 [1741]: 185) advocates his readers converse with their betters lest their understanding become “a barren desert, or a forest overgrown with weeds and brambles. Universal ignorance of infinite errors will overspread the mind, which is utterly neglected and lies without any cultivation.”

14 Compare Richard Brown’s (1989: 119) remarks on lawyers’ conversations in late eighteenth-century New England: “to be lacking in the conversation derived from books was much like being a Tidewater gentleman ignorant of horses or fox hunting. It was not that they were central to every conversation, but assumptions and references drawn from them might come up at any time. To express ignorance of the world of genteel learning was to place oneself outside the circle of conversation and so to be excluded from much of the information that passed informally among lawyers and other college-educated men.” The HBC provided libraries for its employees, reinforcing the same connection between literacy and social distinction (see Payne 1989: 73–78). NWC partners depended on more informal book exchange and collection—so, for example, the correspondence between Alexander and Roderick Mackenzie in the 1780s is much concerned with shipments of books (Masson 1890: 20–28, 51).

15 Unlike Silas Felton, Harmon’s contemporary and David Jaffee’s (1990) embodiment of attitudes of the “Village Enlightenment” in New England, Harmon does not report reading any nonfiction works (for example, Benjamin Franklin’s Memoirs, or Jedidiah Morse’s Geography, both widely popular). Among other trader-writers, fiction is very thinly represented: Tolmie read primarily nonfiction; Hearne read (famously) Voltaire but also exploration writing by Arthur Dobbs and Antoine Le Page du Pratz, various natural histories, and poetry by Edward Young and Edmund Waller (Thompson 1962 [1845]: 8; Hearne 1911 [1795]: 94, 160, 240); Isham (1949: 65, 93) read the Baron de Lahontan and Louis Hennepin; Peter Pond read Jonathan Carver (McLeod 1933: 145). Most trader-writers read each other, Carver and Alexander Mackenzie getting frequent mention. For reading habits of fur traders in the mid–to late nineteenth century, see Payne and Thomas 1983.

16 Betty Schellenberg’s (1996: 2) study is interesting with regard to Harmon’s choice of reading: David Simple is one of her prime examples of “mid-eIGHTEENTH-CENTURY fictions that experiment self-consciously with conversational structures as a means of embodying a socially conservative—in other words, an anti-individualistic, anti-conflictual—ideology,” as opposed to more canonical novels that “portray the desirous individual in sustained tension with his or her social environment.” Camilla, Schellenberg argues, values such a community-based identity but suggests that it cannot be achieved. Harmon clearly values stable community over individual questing, but he, too, has difficulty achieving it.
17 Consider Peter Grant’s (Masson 1890, 2:325) 1804 comment about the Saulteaux: “No people assume more merit or consequence from the virtues or war-like exploits of their ancestors... They pity our want of skill in hunting and our incapacity of travelling through their immense forests without guides or food.”

18 Carolyn Podruchny shows how the conviviality of the Beaver Club in Montreal depended on the denigration and romanticization of voyageurs, who were, of course, excluded from its circle. There partners ate “Chevreuil des Guides,” sang voyageur songs, and played a rowdy game in which they pretended to shoot rapids (Podruchny 1998b: 36–37, 43).

19 In his 1867 novel, Miss Ravenel’s Conversion, William De Forest (1955 [1867]: 45) identifies the sexual dimension of conversation directly: “This conversation, the reader perceives, is not monumentally grand or important. Next in flatness to the ordinary talk of two lovers comes, I think, the ordinary talk of two young persons of the opposite sexes. In the first place they are young, and therefore have few great ideas to interchange and but limited ranges of experience to compare; in the second place they are hampered and embarrassed by the mute but potent consciousness of sex and the alarming possibility of marriage. I am inclined to give much credit to the saying that only married people and vicious people are agreeably fluent in an assembly of both sexes. When therefore I report the conversation of these two uncorrupted young persons as being of a moderately dull quality, I flatter myself that I am publishing the very truth of nature.”

20 Berry picking, like angling, is an activity commonly pursued by Native people and particularly Native women but connected in Harmon’s writing with white homosocial pastoral fancy. See also Harmon 1957 [1820]: 180. On homosociality and the fur trade, see Podruchny 1998b.

21 Van Kirk 1980 and Brown 1980 are the classic works on gender relations in the fur trade; Podruchny 1998a and White 1999 provide more recent treatments of the subject.

22 Janet Giltrow (1981: 37) suggests the diary is more diffuse after 1816 because “the burden of expression had been removed once Harmon could know his document rested at home.” This may be a factor, even if my emphasis here is on his shifting conversational circle.

23 Dismissals of the superstitions of Native people include Henry 1869 [1809]: 146, 159; Mackenzie 1970: 370, 397; Thompson 1962 [1845]: 23, 119–20, 314, 321—note that Thompson (1962 [1845]: 43–44) didn’t have his own superstitions, and in fact, he came to give some credence to some Native beliefs (ibid.: 87–88).

24 See White 1999: 116–7 for remarks on the danger of not casting back from later sources. Conversational styles certainly continue to differ between mainstream society and Native communities, as many will attest; for particularly acute literary renderings of the difference in action, see King 1993, short stories set in Cree and Blackfoot country.

25 Interestingly, for all the differences between the conventions described here and those familiar in Harmon’s culture, there are some ways in which standard Euro-American advice about conversation might seem congenial to a Cree or Athabascan person. The first rule for conversation noted by George Washington (1888: 1) was that “Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.” Watts (1810 [1741]: 230) begins his
Laura J. Murray

conversational rules with “If we would improve our minds by conversation, it is a great happiness to be acquainted with persons wiser than ourselves.” A person such as Harmon, attuned to conversation as an enactment of respect and transmitter of knowledge in one context, may well have taken relatively easily to similar values in another context.

On Harmon’s biography, see Lamb’s introduction to Harmon 1957; Spargo 1950; and O’Meara 1950. I have also consulted the diaries of Elijah Cleveland, who lived in Coventry, Vermont, during the years Harmon did (Mona Rouncevelle of Coventry was kind enough to let me read these). Unfortunately, they give little sense of the kind of life the Harmon family might have been living and mention him infrequently. They do suggest, however, that there were some French-speaking laborers in the town, which might or might not have been pleasant for Lizette, depending on whether she sought to assimilate into the growing town’s anglophone bourgeoisie or not.

I owe this identification to David Smythe, to whom many thanks are due. Alexander Henry the Younger (1992, 2:441, 522–3) mentions Cree attacks on the “Snare” Indians in 1810 and 1811; Edward Curtis (1970 [1928]: 174–5) identifies Henry’s Snare Indians as the Shuswap; the Shuswap now use the name Secwepemc (see Ignace 1998).

Recent creative work recovering the experience of women in the fur trade has emphasized their vulnerability to the violence, mobility, or fickleness of their husbands (see Welsh 1991; Halfe 1998); an alternate approach is to imagine them as matter-of-fact participants in a world of unsurprising change (see White 1999). Of course women in the fur trade had many different experiences; some were better able than others to control the terms of their lives. We cannot know where to place Lizette Duval, but the evidence about her mother suggests at least that we not think of the fur trade as a sudden and violent imposition on a previously fixed culture. The information about Lizette’s mother may also make us rethink the stability of Harmon’s own cultural formation. His father came from Connecticut and moved to Bennington; the family then moved north to Vergennes; and Harmon’s surviving children dispersed to Brooklyn, Indiana, and Ottawa (Harmon 1957 [1820]: ix–x, xvii–xviii). Perhaps, in the context of his time and family, Harmon’s own mobility was not very remarkable at all.

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