Bears, Culture-Crossing, and the Leatherstocking Tales

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When dealing with the work of authors such as Cooper who celebrate and complicate the significance of the natural world, scholars tend to overlook the animals that help populate these texts. While a handful of critics such as Scott Michaelsen and Christina Starobin have conducted studies devoted specifically to understanding the ways animals figure into Cooper's work, critical anthropocentricism remains the norm. This trend probably stems in part from the larger social tendency to prioritize human concerns, to spend our time and energy devoted to the study of what most overtly concerns ourselves. Nevertheless, analyzing the specific components that make up Cooper's concept of nature allows us to see the animals of his fiction as figures that can tell us much about his vision of the relationship between humans and nature and even between different cultural groups.

One animal that figures significantly into Cooper's environmental and social imagination is the bear. Wayne Franklin suggests that the bear serves as Natty's "totem" animal (247), and examples from *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* certainly support that claim. Other characters are also associated with bears in the pages of the Leatherstocking Tales, and these animals often mark those characters' transition between one culture and another. From Hawk-eye donning the bear suit of a Huron "conjurer" to rescue Alice and Uncas in *The Last of the Mohicans*, to Hetty Hutter's uncanny relationship with a family of real bears that escort her to an enemy camp in *The Deerslayer*, bears and bear-related imagery repeatedly emerge at significant moments of culture crossing. In discussing the importance of beavers in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Scott Michaelsen comments on the cultural and racial importance of Cooper's animals. Michaelsen writes, "though Magua argues that a sharp line divides the black animals from red and white, the novel shows that no such sharp line exists. Natty can become a bear and Chingachgook can be a beaver" (14). Such instances of figurative shape shifting denote Cooper's merging of nature and racial identity, a concept that resides at the core of the Leatherstocking Tales. Exploring Cooper's portrayal of bears in his work allows for a better view of how he analyzes the complexities of cultural and racial identification in America.

Perhaps the first step to understanding the importance of bears to Cooper is to explore their importance to the American Indians found in his books. Bear imagery and characters form an important element of Iroquois belief systems and oral traditions. In describing the standard narrative
of many Iroquois oral traditions, Anthony Wonderley writes, "the classic Iroquois plot demands a hero chased by a supernatural being—most frequently a monster bear...the hero employs such tricks of deception as shape changing...to elude pursuit" (143). In fact shape-shifting and bear imagery also coincide in Iroquois belief systems that attribute magical powers to twigs taken from the red willow. Wonderley writes, "In Iroquois folklore a wand of this material enlarges or shrinks a dog, then transforms the canine into a monster bear to do your bidding" (147). This shape-shifting quality to the Iroquois bear denotes the variable nature of these animals.

As Wonderley indicates, the bear of Iroquois oral tradition is an amorphous figure. Depending upon the story, the bear is a trickster, a monster, or a wise and even beneficent figure. For example, in Jesse Cornplanter's version of the Iroquois oral tradition called "The Bears that Adopted a Boy," the character of the mother bear who adopts a human child tells the boy: "we can see far more than you people; in fact, we can see into the minds of all hunters as they approach us. We, the bears, are most closely related to your people. Our habits are almost the same as your people" (174). Clearly, Iroquois bear tales present a figure that is intelligent, powerful, wise, and closely associated with humanity. The sum of these traits then creates a figure adept at crossing between the borders of species and culture. Iroquois bears speak in human language and at times even adopt human children and teach them sacred songs and their methods of reading hunters' minds. All of this makes the bears of Cooper's fiction powerful cross-cultural figures, a characteristic he might have derived from reading Heckewelder's early accounts of American Indian culture (255-256), or from the tales of frontier life he heard during his youth at Lake Otsego.

Like those of Iroquois oral tradition, Cooper's bears, through their anthropomorphic characteristics, take on the role of quasi-human figures that often mark, and even serve as guides for, the transition between animal and human realms. One such instance occurs in The Deerslayer when Hetty Hutter travels from the relative safety of her family's home to enter the Huron camp in the forest. Cooper quickly points out that Hetty's insanity keeps her safe from violence at the hands of the enemy Hurons, and she also appears to be immune to harm from bears. Through Hetty, Cooper equates American Indians with bears, but more resides within this positioning of animal and human figures. In leaving the security of her family in hopes of finding the enemy camp, Hetty leaves the safety of her own cultural context for another. The forest represents a transition zone between these two worlds, and it is significant that Hetty finds bears within this wilderness between human communities. At this point Cooper creates one of the most intriguing scenes of any of his novels when he writes that after falling asleep in the woods, Hetty awakens to find herself beside what he describes as "a cub of the common American brown bear balancing itself on its hinder legs" (172). This image of a brown bear cub standing upright like a human begins Cooper's uncanny bear mediated scene, a scene he overtly comments upon by stating that "it would exceed all the means of human knowledge to pretend to analyze the influences that govern the acts of the lower animals. On this occasion, the dam, though proverbially fierce when its young is thought to be in danger, manifested no intention to attack the girl. It quitted the honey and advanced to a place within twenty feet of her, where it raised itself on its hinder legs and balanced its body in a sort of angry, growling discontent" (173). Again a bear positions itself upright on its hind legs reinvoking the human quality of these creatures that the Iroquois oral traditions assert are "more closely related to" humans than any other animals (Cornplanter 174).

One critic suggests that the scene involving Hetty and the bears is a "charming vignette" meant to demonstrate that "God... watches over the mentally impaired" (Starobin 143-146). However, when read in tandem with oral traditions such as "The Bears that Adopted a Boy," this encounter appears less rooted in Euro-American religion and more like a thoughtfully placed invocation of Iroquois beliefs. The bears become guardians of and guides for Hetty. It is perhaps not coincidental that American Indians often fill this same role in Cooper's work. Hetty's bears are ambiguous entities that
hold the potential for violence while also possessing great knowledge of the wilderness. Cooper’s parallel between American Indians and bears is not surprising because he often associates his American Indians with the characteristics of animals; they are even named after animals. Cooper writes, "To [Hetty's] surprise, though not to her alarm, the family of bears arose and followed her steps, keeping a short distance behind her, apparently watching every movement, as if they had a near interest in all she did" (173). The bears, with their pseudo-human form and actions, represent the type of sentient creature needed to help a character, in this case Hetty, move into the hostile Huron camp.

Hetty's relationship with the bears comes into even clearer focus when, in a gesture that again seems to echo the Iroquois tale of "The Bears that Adopted a Boy," the mother bear appears to treat Hetty as one of her cubs—or at least as another bear: "Hetty knew...she was getting near to the encampment, and had she not, the bears would have given her warning of the vicinity of human beings" (174). Evident in this passage is Cooper's construction of the bear as a guide and interpreter. The narrator's indication that the bears would have warned Hetty of the hostile camp demonstrates not only the complicated function of the bears, but also their role as figures that exist outside of human communities yet possess knowledge of those communities.

Cooper never explicitly states the method by which the bears communicate with Hetty, but he describes the interaction this way: "snuffing the air, the dam refused to follow any further" (174). It is not clear whether the mother bear communicates the presence of the Huron camp simply by the act of smelling the air. In their initial meeting, the bears-in standing on their hind legs—seem to pantomime the human stance. A bear standing upright is also the classic pose of bear hostility, and it seems that Hetty and the bears share a form of physical communication that relies upon her lack of fear. In fact, after reaching the Huron camp, Hetty overtly tries to communicate with the bears when she beckons them with what Cooper describes as, "childish signs and even by direct appeals made in her own sweet voice" (174). As this passage demonstrates, Hetty does not fear the bears and even wants them to continue on with her into the camp. However, in this case the bears' role of escort ends where human habitation begins.

In others books by Cooper bears do not stop at the border of the camp, and they even manage to mirror the shape-shifting quality of some bears found in Iroquois oral tradition. For example, The Last of the Mohicans contains one of the most significant bear encounters of the Leatherstocking Tales, an encounter that goes beyond simply the physical movement across space seen in Hetty's bear escort. As in The Deerslayer, The Last of the Mohicans illustrates how Cooper employs bears—both real and otherwise—as facilitators for a character's movement from one culture to another. However, the unique bear found in The Last of the Mohicans also allows the character in question to operate (at least temporarily) within a foreign community without permanently altering his own cultural identity. Near the end of the novel, Heyward finds himself face to face with a most intimidating bear that Cooper describes as a "shaggy monster" possessing "a voice half human and half sepulchral" (253-254). Soon enough, the animal turns out to be Hawk-eye in a bear suit, a comical scene of interspecies cross-dressing. This passage also represents a complex situation in which Hawk-eye steals and then dons a Huron conjurer's bear suit in order to occupy a hazy middle ground that actually belongs to none of the dominant human groups of the novel. Heyward, Gamut, and Uncas all mistake Hawk-eye for an actual bear, and in each case the bear is—in part because of the lack of fear it inspires in the Hurons—viewed as an enemy. Heyward's knowledge that the bear "was often domesticated among the Indians" (252) further associates the potentially hostile creature with the enemy Hurons. In each case by taking the guise of the bear Hawk-eye becomes both an animal and an enemy to his friends.

However, for the Hurons, from whom Hawk-eye steals the suit by attacking their conjurer, the white man becomes an additional entity. By donning the conjurer's bear suit, Hawk-eye becomes—to the members of the Huron tribe who recognize the ceremonial function of the suit—a member of the Huron tribe. Thus, by wearing the ceremonial suit Hawk-eye actually takes on the guise of an Huron
conjuror, a tribal figure who represents the spiritual power of the bear. This means that the interpretation of Hawk-eye in a bear suit shifts considerably depending upon the cultural background of the viewer. Magua betrays his disdain at the ceremonial practices of the Hurons by telling the bear suited conjurer, who is actually Hawk-eye, to "go play with the children and the squaws; leave men to their wisdom" (262). Despite such sentiments, Magua's own view of bears also pertains to questions of race, an opinion evident when he explains his ideas about racial equality: "the Spirit that made men, coloured them differently...some are blacker than the sluggish bear. These he said should be slaves, and he ordered them to work for ever, like the beaver" (300). While Cooper's Euro-Americans portray American Indians as animals, Magua passes on the sentiment by describing those of African descent in much the same way. However, the cultural elasticity that Hawk-eye gains by wearing the bear suit disproves Magua's ideas about the inflexibility of racial categories.

As Scott Michaelsen points out, American Indians and animals are often confused with each other in The Last of the Mohicans. For example, Heyward mistakes a group of beavers for Hurons, (222) Magua speaks to a large beaver that turns out to be Chingachgook (285), and both Hawk-eye and Uncas dress up in the bear suit to free themselves and others from the hostile camp. These instances of mistaken identity also recall Iroquois oral tradition that harks back to a time when the animals and humans shared a close relationship. For example, in Cornplanter's version of "The Bears that Adopted a Boy," he states that "it is said that in those days the Indians were living so close to nature that it was common to see animals in the form of human-being [sic]" (172). At issue in both these oral traditions and in Cooper is the association of the American Indians with the animals that they form a close relationship with in the wilderness. Cooper's association of American Indians and animals plays directly into the novel's overarching concerns of race and cultural origins. Through his bear charade Hawk-eye becomes both a bear and a human depending upon the cultural background of those he encounters.

Yet Hawk-eye's ability to mimic a bear and thus cross a hostile cultural boundary unscathed requires Cooper to eventually not only re-humanize Hawk-eye but also to remind readers of his hero's Euro-American heritage. In other words, Cooper must have Hawk-eye travel back across the cultural divide without any permanent change to his character. He in part accomplishes this return through Hawk-eye's practical jokes while in disguise. Additionally, Cooper has Hawk-eye take a moment to explain his ability to mimic a bear when he says to Heyward, "I should be but a poor scholar, for one who has studied so long in the wilderness, did I not know how to set forth the movements and nature of such a beast!" (257). This boastful statement is pure Hawk-eye and also in its subtle contempt for nature invokes a stereotype brand of Euro-American superiority over the land.

In short, Cooper presents Hawk-eye's ability to become a bear as the product of his unique inventiveness rather than the innate animalism of an American Indian. A few pages later, Hawk-eye reminds his readers, through his bear-suited encounter with Gamut, that he is, "a man like yourself; and one whose blood is as little tainted by the cross of a bear, or an Indian, as your own...you may see a skin, which, if it be not as white as one of the gentle ones, has no tinge of red to it" (269). With this characteristic statement of racial purity, Hawk-eye equates bears with American Indians and proves that his mimicking of the bear in no way altered—or relied upon an alteration of—his cultural identity. For Cooper, the bear suit coupled with Hawk-eye's status as a "scholar" of the wilderness allows him to cross from one human community into a Huron camp without compromising his own cultural identity.

Cooper uses bears as symbols of and facilitators for movement across blurry cultural and racial lines. He takes advantage of the complex symbolic and natural implications of bears—even at times drawing upon American Indian belief systems—to mediate the transition of characters from one culture to another. Examining how Cooper's bears take on a powerful cross-cultural significance leads
to a better understanding of how he viewed the complexities of what were often hostile cultural borders.

**Works Cited**