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Interpretresses: Native American Women Translators in Colonial America

Underlying all the disputes and treaties between native Americans and Europeans was the need for an understanding of what the groups were saying to each other. Translation was the common denominator throughout the numerous interactions between native tribes in America and colonists coming over from Europe. In colonial America, translators were crucial to establishing relationships between native Americans and the Europeans that came to North America to create colonies. These interpreters operated in the in-between of two different cultures and they needed to be knowledgeable enough about both of them to correctly convey meaning to either side. It was also a space that many women occupied. Who were these women? How did they come to be translators and why were they chosen? The answer is different and varied for every native American tribe and every native American person. This paper will look at three different women from three different tribes to analyze the differences and similarities between native American translators and the significance of them. The women looked at in this paper are Thanadelthur, a translator for the Hudson River Company, Mary Musgrove from the Creek nation, and Madame Montour, a Métis woman from Canada. In this paper, I argue that the women who worked as translators were able to harness a unique power and authority within both their cultures despite the limitations their gender placed on them. This power was finite and entirely dependent on how the women were viewed within their respective tribes. The role of interpreter also required a certain amount of privileges, namely education and familial connection.

Jobs as interpreters were not wholly or even mostly a woman's vocation. It was predominantly a job for native Americans who had a better understanding on native languages, although there are a few instances of colonists becoming translators, such as Thomas Mayhew Jr. and John Eliot.¹ Native languages were often considered too complex and difficult to learn by Europeans, so it was easier to teach native Americans the colonist's native language or employ a translator. Interpreters, if they performed well, were highly respected in both colonist and native communities. As both groups were often wary of being tricked by confusing land or trade agreements, a competent interpreter who did not take sides was sought after greatly. More than that, an interpreter could act as a diplomat between the two communities. Interpreters themselves often lived in the middle ground of two cultures.² They knew enough about both or many communities that, if they were willing, they could help them understand one another and reach a common ground. Likewise, they could also be partisan in their interpretations and use their knowledge of language and culture to further the wishes of whomever they worked for. In this way, interpreters could exert more power than other native Americans on land agreements and other political measures. The job provided a reasonable amount of safety as well. Those who hired interpreters ensured their protection on expeditions as they were not easily replaced.

Interpretation as a career was also not the end goal for some native Americans. Many moved on to become influencers in their community or within the colonist's community as informants, diplomats, and political leaders. As such, if a native American woman translated for the British, French, or Spanish colonies, she had more power than average within those colonies. Translation work provided a way for women to enter into spaces where they normally would not

¹ Kawashima, Yasuhide, "Forest Diplomats: The Role of Interpreters in Indian-White Relations on the Early American Frontier," *American Indian Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1989): 3.

² For more information on the middle ground, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

be allowed. Some came to know multiple languages through interracial marriage or through time spent in captivity in various tribes. There was no one way to enter into this profession. The women examined in this paper provide an overview into the various ways in which women obtained their jobs and how they used the power that came with it.

In 1715 James Knight, director of the Hudson Bay Company at the time, enlisted the help of a Chipewyan woman who recently escaped slavery to help him and his company with translation during land negotiations with neighboring tribes. The woman's name was recorded as Thanadelthur. She escaped alongside another woman from the Cree tribe where she was held captive after being traded in warfare. The culture surrounding slavery in between native Americans was more varied and complex than the better understood and studied American chattel slavery.³ Slaves often lived within the family and became respected members of the community. The close interactions Thanadelthur had with her captors allowed her to learn the language and cultural knowledge she used in the coming years as an interpreter. She was discovered by members of the Hudson Bay Company during her escape and taken to York Factory, Manitoba in November of 1714. No exact details of Thanadelthur's escape were ever recorded, and she left no written texts in her own words. The York Factory journals and the oral tradition of the Chipewyan people provide the only evidence of her existence or accomplishments. She was written about many times in journals from the Hudson Bay Company, specifically by James Knight with whom she worked with extensively on expeditions to obtain land agreements with different tribes. Knight mainly used the York Factory journals to record the daily activities and the minutes of meetings of the Hudson Bay Company. It is through these

³ For more on native American slavery see Brett Rushforth, "'A Little Flesh We Offer You': The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2003).

journal entries that Thanadelthur's influence on the Hudson Company and the way in which her presence within the company is seen.

Throughout the journal entries written by James Knight, he routinely referred to Thanadelthur as "Slave Woman" or "Slave Woman Joan". Most of the entries that pertain to Thanadelthur detailed the work she completed for Knight. This largely consisted of interpreting land agreements between the French and various native American tribes. Her greatest accomplishment was in helping to forge a peace agreement between the Chipewyan people and the Cree people. As she had spent time with both tribes, she was able to bring her knowledge of both the language and culture of each to facilitate discussions between the two as well as with James Knight and the Hudson Bay Company. Thanadelthur's importance within the Hudson Bay Company makes itself known through Knight's personal requests that she be taken care of during expeditions when he was not around. While writing to William Stuart who led a peace mission alongside Thanadelthur, Knight stated "I order you to take care that none of the Indians Abuse or Misuse the Slave Woman that goes with you or to take what she has from her that is to be given amongst her Country People"⁴ Knight cared either for Thanadelthur herself or her translating talents enough to ensure that she was taken care of in his absence.

With the minimal written source material about Thanadelthur, her presence makes itself known in the York Factory journals. The fact alone that she stood out enough to make it in journals from James Knight shows that her job as a translator was crucial to the function of the Hudson Bay Company. Thanadelthur worked for the Hudson Bay company up until her death in 1717 due to a fever. James Knight expressed remorse for her passing and gave her a ceremonial burial. He had trouble finding a replacement for her and lamented the loss of "above 60 skins

⁴ James Knight, *York Factory Post Journal 1714-1715*, December 4, 1714, York Factory Post Journals (1M154), B.239/a/1, Archives of Manitoba, Manitoba, Canada.

value in goods”⁵ to hire a new translator. Thanadelthur used the knowledge she gained in her childhood and in her time as a slave to help the Hudson Bay Company achieve peace agreements with neighboring tribes. Her work made an impact in James Knight’s life and in the success of the Hudson Bay Company. Although none of her own writing was ever recorded, the journals of James Knight show that her work was crucial to him. His references to her as “Slave Woman” show the typical lack of respect for native women at the time. However, the ceremonial burial and his writing about her at the time of her death show a respect for her talents and the work she aided him in completing. This insight into how colonists in French Canada treated and felt about women interpreters offers a glimpse into the culture surrounding native American women who worked in the in-between as translators and mediators.

Thanadelthur gained her knowledge of language and culture through her time spent as a captive, but this was not the only way native women learned the skills needed for interpretation. Mary Musgrove, born in 1700, was of both Creek and English descent. She married Captain John Musgrove Sr., a South Carolinian man who worked as a trader and had close ties to the Creek tribe. John Musgrove also worked as a translator for officials like James Oglethorpe, who founded the colony of Georgia, and needed assistance in fostering land cession discussions with the native tribes in the surrounding area.⁶ At the time John Musgrove worked for Oglethorpe, Mary Musgrove and Oglethorpe seemed to have a close relationship and the Georgia founder trusted her knowledge on native American relations. Unlike Thanadelthur, there are a few letters and documents written by Musgrove throughout her life. A letter written by Musgrove to Oglethorpe when him and her husband were in England described the current relationship

⁵ James Knight, *York Factory Post Journal 1716-1717*, February 5, 1717, York Factory Post Journals (1M154), B.239/a/3, Archives of Manitoba, Manitoba, Canada.

⁶ Steven C. Hahn, *The Life and Times of Mary Musgrove* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

between the Choctaws and the Creek as well as stating “I hope Your Honour and all your family is in good health and my husband is the same. And I beg Your Honour will take great care of him, he being in a strange place and not able to take care of himself and to send him home as soon as possible.”⁷ This friendly relationship paved the way for her to replace her husband as an interpreter in the coming years. When John Musgrove died from a fever in 1735, Mary Musgrove married Jacob Matthews, one of her previous indentured servants, and took on some diplomatic duties for Oglethorpe that included establishing trading posts to keep tabs on the Creek and the Spanish. As Musgrove could speak Muskogee, she also became crucial in land agreements between the founders of Georgia and the native Americans already living on the land. Like Thanadelthur and James Knight, Musgrove helped Oglethorpe by working within her tribe to facilitate treaties and land cessions from the Creek tribe. Oglethorpe biographer Harriet Cooper wrote about Musgrove “This woman proved very useful on account of her influence with the Indians, and Oglethorpe afterward gave her a \$100 yearly for her services.”⁸

Musgrove’s power was enough that she gained the right to own land and fight for herself in court when those rights came into dispute. This power was not given to many white women at the time, let alone native American women. Although, the British government did not do this out of respect for Musgrove. They knew she occupied a space where she had considerable influence over both the native Americans in the area and the colonists. If she wanted to, she could have the Creeks turn against the colonists at any time. The government knew they had to keep her on their side, so they allowed her to travel to London in 1755 to claim land in Georgia in her name as well as back payment for the services she provided to James Oglethorpe. She won the case,

⁷ Mary Musgrove, *General Oglethorpe’s Georgia: Colonial Letters, 1733-1743*, ed. Mills Lane (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1990), 44-45.

⁸ Harriet Cornelia Cooper, *James Oglethorpe: The Founder of Georgia* (New York: Appleton, 1904), 25.

mostly because the British felt they could not afford to lose her support, and she was granted the land rights to St. Catherine's island in Georgia in 1760.⁹

In this way, Musgrove occupied a space not given to many women at the time. She gained considerable authority within the government of the Georgia colony, enough to own land and have a voice in her own land disputes. However, it is important to acknowledge that Musgrove herself was only one-half Creek and she also made a name for herself within the colonies only after she married a white planter.¹⁰ Musgrove was a talented interpreter and diplomat; however, she was only allowed to sit in that position because of her husband who in some ways gave her the level of status she achieved. Another way this manifested in Musgrove's life was the loss of power she faced after James Oglethorpe left the colonies. Much like Thanadelthur, who relied on James Knight, Musgrove needed the support of Oglethorpe to continue her job as interpreter. With no white man left to deem her acceptable to the general population, she lost some of her authority and sway in Georgia. She was less trusted, but able to hold some authority because they did not want to lose the support from the native Americans that she brought with her. Musgrove's history differs somewhat from the typical background of native American women translators; however, it finds commonality in that she had more power than most native women in the colonies and occupied the in-between space often required of interpreters.

Born around 30 years earlier and far north of Georgia in French Canada, Mary Musgrove and Madame Montour never knew of each other, but their stories bear a striking resemblance to

⁹ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," in *Sifters: Native American's Lives*, ed. Theda Purdue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁰ For more on interracial relationships between native women and colonists see Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 187-201.

one another. Madame Montour's early life, and even most of her adult life, is one filled with confusion and misinformation. Her last name alone garnered much rumor and discussion at the time she was alive, and Madame Montour "reinvented" herself at least once in her lifetime. Most major writing about her contradicts itself, as did those who talked about Madame Montour while she was alive, so finding a cohesive and comprehensive biography that cuts through rumor, myth, and postulation is difficult. Montour spoke many languages but was not able to write so there are no sources written by herself to use. Many historians attempted to write Madame Montour's history; this paper draws on Alison Duncan Hirsch's research¹¹ as a focal point.

Madame Montour was born in 1667 and given the name Isabelle or Elisabeth by her Christian Algonquin mother and French father. Her family lived in a popular town in New France surrounded by many different tribes and given Montour's mother's Algonquin heritage, they often interacted with the natives in Canada. Her father worked as an interpreter himself for some time. Isabelle married in 1684 to Joachim Germano with whom she had one child. Around 10 years later, Joachim disappeared from recorded history and Isabelle went to live with two of her other sisters and their husbands in Machilimakinac. Her brother's-in-law each worked as interpreters in the surrounding area, with one of them described as "an official interpreter of the Ottawa language"¹² Details during this period of Madame Montour's life are blurred by multiple people likely exaggerating certain aspects of her life while others refused to acknowledge having anything to do with her. She may have worked as a translator for a man named Antoine Laumet dit de Lamonthe Cadillac in secret business meetings with a Huron chief; Cadillac vehemently denied these rumors.

¹¹ Alison Duncan Hirsch, "'The Celebrated Madame Montour': 'Interpretress' Across Early American Frontiers," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4, (2000).

¹² Hirsch, 89.

Montour supposedly left Machilimakinac with her brother Louis Couc Montour in 1708. He worked as a guide for Great Lakes Indians who were traveling to Albany which is eventually where Madame Montour ended up living and working for a time. Upon arrival in Albany, Louis Montour was hired by the New York government to serve as a guide for more native Americans on their way to the colony, however he was murdered in 1709. Louis Montour was well-respected by many of the native Americans he was associated with and evidently so was Isabelle Montour because she was allowed to take his place as guide and interpreter for Albany. The officials in Albany were less optimistic about her trustworthiness but intended to keep her on as a guide. No one else knew both Ojibway – the language spoken around Ontario by native tribes at the time – and English.

Eventually, the leaders in Albany came to recognize Montour's abilities not only in interpretation but in negotiation. Most of the native Americans and colonists Montour interacted with knew her last name, and consequently her brother, so she was easily trusted. Hirsch wrote "The name "Montour" no longer represented a single individual but rather the embodiment of a type of person, an interpreter or go-between".¹³ Montour helped the New York colony prepare for a war in which they planned to seize France. This plan never came to fruition, but Montour used her knowledge of Canada to help officials plan their attacks. Montour remained an interpreter for New York. She worked personally for the governor of New York, served as his private interpreter, and accompanied him to conferences where she verified the accuracy of the translations provided by other interpreters.

Montour remarried and found work in Philadelphia translating for its governor. Her husband, Carondawana, worked as the Iroquois spokesperson for the Shawnee tribe and the two

¹³ Hirsch, 92

often attended conferences and meetings together. Madame Montour officially began translating for the government there in 1727 and continued to do so until around 1734. As she became trusted in the Philadelphia community, she also provided advice and insight to different officials and private traders due to the knowledge she had of Iroquois and Algonquin language and culture. Additionally, she worked as an informant for leaders in Philadelphia. Carondawana was killed in 1729 while fighting in an attack with the Iroquois on the Catawba. After the death of her husband, Madame Montour lost much of the status and respect she gained in the time she spent working in Philadelphia. Hirsch cites her age as well as political infighting with another tribe, the Oneida, as explanation for why she no longer interpreted or advised in an official capacity.¹⁴ Montour still remained part of the community in Philadelphia, where she privately advised traders and other leaders, but she rarely attended conferences and her opinion no longer garnered the respect that it used to. She retired to a small village in Pennsylvania near Williamsport where she taught her son Andrew Montour to be an interpreter.

Madame Montour's often confusing and fabled background made it all the more possible for her to enter into the field of interpreting. She traveled extensively and picked up knowledge of different cultures wherever she went. Montour had the privilege of traveling as a free woman, but women who traveled in captivity like Thanadelthur also benefited from the knowledge they picked up while moving from group to group. The lack of details about her early life also worked in her favor, as no one was sure exactly who Madame Montour was or where she came from. Some believed she was Algonquin and had spent time in captivity where she learned different languages. Others believed she was a French woman who lived among native Americans for so long that she became one. Madame Montour may have recognized this fluidity as a benefit to

¹⁴ Hirsch, 101.

her, as she was not quick to dispel rumors and often spread them herself. Whatever the true story of who Madame Montour was, like Thanadelthur and Musgrove, she certainly showed a vast knowledge of native American culture and language that helped whoever she worked for. Still, the way in which she rose to that position must be acknowledged. Her first official job in translation was given to her only after the death of her brother, a respected interpreter in the community. Particularly when she lived in Canada, Madame Montour became popular and respected by last name alone. Additionally, after the death of her husband Carondawana, Madame Montour lost her job and much of the respect she gained in Pennsylvania. These facts do not negate Montour's considerable intelligence and knowledge about the inner workings of native American politics, but it does provide an explanation for how she rose to power and ultimately fell from it. Montour's connections with the men in her life routinely shaped how the community around her perceived her, a theme present in all three of these women's lives.

Interpreting was not a profession easily entered into independently by any native woman. There were certain privileges a woman needed to have to become a translator-- education and connections. As seen from the examples discussed here, the women needed someone who could vouch for and prove their skill. Examples like Mary Musgrove and Madame Montour show that some credibility had to be established by a man, usually a family member that passed down the role of translator to a wife, daughter, or sister. James Knight trusted Thanadelthur, so she became respected and trusted as a translator. Mary Musgrove took her husband's place after he died and retained credibility by remaining close to James Oglethorpe. Locals in Canada knew Louis Montour as a trusted interpreter, so they allowed Madame Montour to take over his job. Whenever these men died or left, it became difficult for them to find work or be respected in the way they had before. This highlights a limitation to the way in which a woman could become a

translator. Like most jobs for women at the time, they made little headway without the approval of men. While the role of an interpreter allowed the women some amount of power and authority, the amount of power the women obtained was contingent upon how women were viewed within their tribe and within the colonies.

The job of a translator was about more than just translating the language. It required conveying meaning and tone, as well as differences in cultures that at the time often opposed each other and approached interactions with caution. Translation involved a significant amount of trust in the interpreter to understand both sides and be honest. Each of the women in this paper have little in the way of written source material.¹⁵ They showed up in the short references in letters and offhand comments in journals. It is hard to tell how many of these women existed, who completed this crucial work yet faded into white noise amidst louder voices. The women examined here weren't exactly the voice of their people, but the vessel through it which was heard. They existed as an undercurrent throughout numerous documents from colonists, setting the tone for discussion between their tribes and colonists during a time when tensions were high, and everything was at stake. Those able to make it into historical records provide a glimpse into an often fractured life-- one that existed in between colonist and native, and everything that came along with being a woman in both. This left a varied and diverse population of native women who used their knowledge of different cultures and languages to further themselves and their tribe.

¹⁵ For more on the lack of source material on native American women see Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

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