

# Disclosing an Unknown Source of the Eskimo Entry of Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*

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The Eskimo entry of the Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* [*Encyclopaedia*] conveys a stereotyped, preformed, and caricatured image of the folk, built in with bias, omissions, and generalizations. It emphasizes their bestiality and primitivism, to stick them as the prototype of the savagery, the personification of a degenerated and shy humanity of the borders. The author of the entry, the well-known Chevalier de Jaucourt, widely plagiarizes an undisclosed source, “*Une lettre de Ste Helene, du 30 Octobre 1751*” [An October 30, 1751 letter from *Ste Helene*], a purportedly anonymous text, the author of which is identified here in Mère [Mather] Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène. The Chevalier bafflingly removes all the sentences of the *Lettre* which can turn-out celebratory of the Eskimos' technological skill and their religious sense. These severe cuts show an adverse *apriori* on the veracity of a document written by a woman, and—what is more—a nun.

*Keywords:* Eskimos' image, *Encyclopaedia*, Diderot, Chevalier de Jaucourt, unknown source, Marie-Catherine Homassel-Hecquet, Mather Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène

## Introduction

The present paper retraces, in an ethno-historical perspective, the genesis of the oriented, elliptic, simplistic, and reductive representation of the Eskimos in the Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* [*Encyclopaedia*].

Adopting an inter-disciplinary approach (historical, anthropological, and textual, as well), the paper wonders upon the mechanisms which have governed the construction of the Eskimos' image and deciphers them considering the philosophical challenges and the ideological conditioning of the *Century of Lights*.

The author of the entry, the Chevalier de Jaucourt—an erudite and polyglot scholar who shares a wide contribution to the *Encyclopédie* with the well-known naturalist Buffon—widely plagiarized an undisclosed source, “*Une lettre de Ste Helene, du 30 Octobre 1751*” [An October 30, 1751 letter from *Ste Helene*], a purportedly anonymous text, the author of which is identified here in Mère [Mather] Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène, who sent it to her childhood friend Marie-Catherine Homassel-Hecquet, who later on published excerpts of it in the attachment to her novel.

The Chevalier bafflingly removed all the sentences of the *Lettre* which celebrate the technological skill and the religious sense of the Eskimos. These severe text cuts suggest an adverse *apriori* on the veracity of a document written by a woman, and—what is more—a nun. So doing, de Jaucourt shared the striking judgement

of Voltaire who, in his novel *Candide* (1759), estimated very negatively the French domains in Canada.

### Featuring the Eskimos' Image

According to a hierarchical and Eurocentric vision of mankind—which is unique by nature, but indefinitely diverse in its attributes—shared within the *Encyclopédie* (Diderot & d'Alembert, 1751-1772), the Eskimos embody the archetypal character of the “*Savage*”, such as outlined by the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt in the eponymous entry (Jaucourt, 1765, T.XIV, p. 729).

Under the pen of the Encyclopedists, this sidelines, primitive, and barbarian folk, living in osmosis with a primeval and extreme nature under the civility level and deprived of culture, become the actual paradigm of an irreducible and absolute alterity. Thus, they elude any taxonomic classification (Bogliolo Bruna, 2014, pp. 1-19; Malaurie, 2018, pp. 84-85).

In his entry *Humaine Espèce* [Human species], Diderot, following Buffon, sketches the image of the *Gens du Nord à la “figure bizarre”* [Northern people “with a singular face”].

Nevertheless, the settlement of the Far North border lands does not allow the negation of the monogenism because it participates in the several thousand year old migration of mankind, which is intended moving from the civilization focus (Jerusalem, “*the eye of the universe*”) to the ultimate edges of the *ecumene* (the paramount Septentrion). Thus, the Eskimos, “*a degenerated people*”, join the Adam's family, no matter they reached their distant and inhospitable regions either from Asia or Europe, by land or by sea.

From the center of the civilized and educated world to the faraway regions of the *ecumene* inhabited by Plinian races and exotic people, the discovery travels turn-out a shocking crossing of subsequent rings of alterity.

*Human* gender is not made of “*basically different species*”, so that the differences among the various “*races*”, i.e., the “*varieties of human beings*”, should be imputed to the geo-climatic determinism.

In compliance to the unity of mankind, the difference is not by essence but by hazard. Nevertheless, even if he rejects the biological determinism, Diderot imputes the Eskimos a form of congenital disparity engendered by the accidents of their historical evolution.

At the time of the myth of Noble Savage, the boreal space is perceived as the kingdom of inversion and anomie relative to the standards and criteria of the Jewish-Christian civilization.

### The Eskimo Entry

Under the pen of the Chevalier de Jaucourt—an erudite and polyglot scholar who shares a wide contribution to the *Encyclopédie* with the well-known naturalist Buffon—the *Eskimaux* [Eskimos] are processed into the “*Sauvages des Sauvages*” [Savages of Savages]. Through this rhetorical figure, the description borrows the register of the exceptional and the emphasis to stigmatize the specificity, “*the singularity*”, of this boreal people, unknown and feared. Within a Euro-centered scale of mankind, the Eskimos alone embody a radical and irreducible anthropic alterity, intrinsically embedded in a primeval and absolute nature. Thus, a projective image emerges which discloses the impeded and preformed view of the Occidental eye.

Instead of adopting the triangulation of data and, as a follower of Francis Bacon, professing the consultation and the crossed comparison of ancient and modern documentary sources on the topic (Bogliolo Bruna, 1996, pp. 19-35; 1997, pp. 161-179; 2002, pp. 79-96; 2008, pp. 27-58.), de Jaucourt—even though he was considered a

scholar and a polygraph of unusual erudition—departs from methodological rigor. He keeps on plagiarizing with thoughtlessness “*Une lettre de Ste Helene, du 30 Octobre 1751*” [An October 30, 1751 letter from *Ste Helene*], a purportedly anonymous text of which we have been able to identify the author, Mère [Mather] Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène.

French born but Canadian by hart, this educated and sharp-minded woman, eventually decided to enter the orders. From the *Nouvelle-France* she sent a letter to her childhood friend Marie-Catherine Homassel-Hecquet, who later on published excerpts of it in the attachment to her novel *Histoire d'une jeune fille sauvage, trouvée dans les bois à l'âge de dix ans* [History of a young savage girl, found in the woods at age of ten], published in Paris in 1755.

Why does the Chevalier withhold the authorship of the *Lettre*, despite adopting it as a main source, and—what’s more—why does he condemn the excerpts which promote the Eskimo culture? Why such an erudite man—who boldly and courageously fights against the fanaticism and the superstition and trusts in the “*Reason*”—elaborates so a stigmatizing image of the Eskimos, appointed the symbol of savagery, an extreme and troublesome anthropic difference? According to Diderot, this difference would be engendered by the geographic and climate determinism.

Why does this holder of an encyclopedic knowledge provide so a messy, floating, and oriented Eskimo’s depiction? That is even more amazing considering the scientific-oriented mind which is the Enlightenment’s mark.

The Eskimo entry in the *Encyclopédie* adopts a quite conventional structure: a description of the *locus geographicus* [the country] and the climate, a short excursus on the phenotypical and cultural features of the “*Savages of the Savages*”, a mention to the Vikings’ discovery, the bartering practice with Europeans, and, as a corollary, some bibliographical references.

Despite a number of books available for consultation addressing the travels to the Far North and the Eskimos (travel stories, dissertations,...), de Jaucourt confines to a pair of bibliographical sources, undoubtedly prime level but ageing: the *Recueil de voyages au Nord* [Collection of North travels] (Amsterdam, Bernard, 1717) as well as the Baron de Lahontan’s *Mémoires de l’Amérique Septentrionale* [Memories of the Northern America] (Lom d’Arce, 2013 [1705]). Moreover, he hardly criticizes and denigrates both of them as pure fiction<sup>1</sup> arguing that: “Neither travelers nor shipowners have ever hazarded entering deeply enough the wide country of Labrador, to be able to relate. Thus, Eskimos are the North American people we have got the lower knowledge upon until now” (Jaucourt, 1755, T.V, p. 953)<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, the Chevalier omits deliberately referring to the travel literature (narrations and essays, current and ancient ones as well) which he knows insofar because he uses them in the writing of other entries of the *Encyclopédie*. That magnifies the paradox.

That is the case for the *Voyage de la baye de Hudson* [Travel to the Hudson Bay] by Henry Ellis,

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<sup>1</sup> The interest of the Enlightenment Scholars for the empirical approach, either experiential or based on the ocular testimony of witnesses, has not to be proven any longer. Besides, de Jaucourt substantiated his borrowings from Voltaire writing the entries “Kamtschatka [Kamchatka]”, “Laponie [Lapland]”, “Ostiaks”, “Samoyèdes [Samoyeds]”, “Tongues”: “*Le lecteur aimera mieux trouver ici les réflexions [de Voltaire] que l’histoire mal digérée de Scheffer*” [The reader will enjoy finding down here the Voltaire’s thinking more than the poorly digested Scheffer’s story] (Jaucourt, 1751/1765, T.IX, pp. 287-288).

<sup>2</sup> The author made all the translations of Old French quotations into Modern English.

which—very surprisingly—is the main source of his entry “*Fausse Couche*” [Miscarriage] (Jaucourt, 1756, T.VI, pp. 450-453).

Why does such an eclectic and fair scholar, a celebrated disciple of Montesquieu, write so a messy entry scattered with downgrading stereotypes and dotted with blatant ellipses? Could the entry be the work of an unskilled collaborator, scarcely sensitive to the scientific rigor? Why does he obliterate the author of the *Lettre de Sainte Hélène*? Because of a latent misogyny? Why does the Chevalier cleanse the text out of any positive appreciation on the Eskimo’s material culture?

### Between Plagiarism and Censoring

According to a comparative investigation, it is worth claiming that the Chevalier plagiarizes the *Lettre* and, what is more, he impoverishes its content adopting several *ad hoc* cuts to serve an ideological and oriented approach of the geographical and anthropic universe of the North, which apparently does not stimulate his intellectual *curiositas* [curiosity].

The *Lettre de Me Duplessis de Sainte Hélène*<sup>3</sup> possesses for many reasons an undeniable historical, proto-ethnographic, and documentary value at the time.

In the *incipit* [introduction] of the *Lettre*, Mather Marie-Andrée already keeps on stigmatizing the Eskimos, an edge-people, she emphasizes the extreme oddity of whom, charging them with the very unflattering and unpleasant hyperbola “*Les Sauvages des Sauvages*” [“The Savages of the Savages”]. She adopts a similarity/dissimilarity comparison among Eskimos—who are fierce and pristine as the deserts, infertile, and hard country they dwell in—and the other barbarian and exotic “*nations*”, to try explaining their appalling alterity and transforming it into difference.

The Chevalier carefully follows the above mentioned introduction, while operating an inversion of the sentences to enforce a tight correspondence between the extreme climate of the Far North and the feral habits of the Eskimos, whom the Europeans, according to Father Charlevoix, never succeeded to “*domesticate*” because they would be “*resistant by nature*” to the civilization. As the taming is the first step to assimilation, according to the Chevalier, the impossible acculturation of the Eskimos not only reinforces their stigmatization but also portends the expected danger of the extinction of the “*Eskimo race*”, he considers deprived of the learning capacity, which is the main engine of the historical dynamics:

The Eskimos are the Savages of the Savages. Other native peoples have got human manners, even though unusual; but among them all is fierce and almost unbelievable. The most of their nation are settled in the Hudson Bay in the far North; but some of them can be found also in the Labrador, a very cold country, which is located close to the mentioned Bay and borders part of the St. Laurent River. They are anthropophagi; because they eat the human flesh, when they succeed to catch men [...] They are quite small, white skinned and extremely fat. They cherish the seal oil as much as the drunks the wine. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 64)

These “*homines bestiales*” [“feral men”] live in underground holes they come in crawling as savage animals

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<sup>3</sup> The daughter of Georges Regnard Duplessis and Marie Le Roy, Mather Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène (1687-1760) was the last nun born in France to become a member of the Canadian communities under the French rule. On March 12, 1732, she was appointed Mather Superior of the Hôtel-Dieu of Québec. She kept this position until her death, in rotation with a role of assistant. She wrote the *Lettre* under an epistolary form on demand of her childhood friend, Mrs. Marie-Catherine Homassel-Hecquet.

and are fond of seal oil which they greedily gulp. The animal comparisons retrieve the negative image of the Eskimos such as awful and indomitable “*human animals*”. Their food too is seen as a tangible mark of their extreme savagery, even more abhorrent because it is overhauled by the anthropophagy, which both Mather Marie-André Duplessis de Sainte Hélène and, following her, the Chevalier consider their current feeding practice.

Within the dialectic of difference and identification, fascination and repulsion, dietary practices and dwelling are cultural markers of these Northern folks who live close to a neither a sacralized nor a mythical nature. Thus, they contribute to sketch an unrevealed social classification relying upon cultural basis.

The description is intertwined and, at the same time, discloses the first-level paradigm of interpretation: The phenotypical markers transform either into values (they bring together the Other and the Self, i.e., the white man) or into counter-values (when they point-out a difference which is always perceived as a source of inferiority).

However, quite surprisingly, no mention is made of their nomadism, which—according to the Jewish-Christian tradition—would have categorized them not only as barbarians wandering-away as wild-beasts, but also as “*Dionysian possessed men*” and satanic furies. That is even more surprising whether considering the large number of travel stories which compared and sometimes even identified the Eskimos with the Scythians and the Tartars.

Despite the squabble opposing the supporters of monogenism to the supporters of polygenism, de Jaucourt does not even wonder upon the debate on the controversial origin (European, Asian, or Native?) of the Eskimo people, which impelled the scholars during the XVII and XVIII centuries.

The narration which essentializes the difference, and mainly the mobilization of the “*extraordinary*” and of the “*incredible*” commits to serve a rhetoric of the alterity perceived in terms of strangeness vs. the current Euro-Christian standards.

Midway between fanaticism and reality, the image of the “*Savages of the Savages*” fluctuates, progresses, and complexifies: Nevertheless, according to the Nun, the wild Eskimos, who catch the foreigners to devour them, possess a religious feeling. As *homines religiosi* [religious men], they worship the fire: “Despite their very chilly climate, they seldom ignite fire; we believe they worship this element” (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 65).

So doing, Mather Marie-Andrée joins Father Jean François Lafitau, who authored *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (1724)<sup>4</sup> [Customs of the American savages compared to those of pristine time], giving birth to the comparative studies on religions.

As a follower of the monogenism, the Jesuit Father trusts in the universality of the religious feeling: The man is the same everywhere and all the men descend from Adam. He acknowledges the Eskimos’ affiliation to the Adam’s family because, like the Elders, they worship the fire (*ikuma*, the flame). This theological argument will be adopted later on in the struggle against the atheism and the polygenism (Lafitau, 1983 [1724], p. 54).

The description of the Eskimos, which fluctuates between proto-ethnographic data and simple-minded fancy, goes on pointing-out their biological features and their cultural way of life, which are classified under the marker of the inversion and the disorder considering the Euro-Christian scale of reference.

In close agreement to the travelers and the missionaries, from Martin Frobisher to Louis Jolliet, from Father

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<sup>4</sup> Father Lafitau makes a parallel between “*the habits of American Natives*” and those of great peoples of Antiquity, extending the comparison to the intellectual level. The cultural differences express any people’s phases of evolution, only.

Charlevoix to Bacqueville de la Potherie (Bogliolo Bruna, 1999, pp. 81-110), the religious Sister points-out the *industria ingeniumque* [the ability and the skill] of this poor, deprived and indigent folk, but extremely imaginative in the construction of the kayak, a marine marvel, of the “*snow huts*” (the igloos) as well as the manufacture of their outfits:

They are very skilled and able to engineer the tools they need. They work with iron and tan the skins. They make rafts with water-proof leather and cover accurately them leaving a hole in the middle, such as a bag, in which a sole man can slip fastening the belt of the bag around his waist. He catches a two blades rowing, [...]. With such a boat they brave the heaviest seas and face the biggest fishes. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, pp. 65-67)

Sometimes, in the winter, they build ice huts on the iced sea of bays, where the depth of water behind is more than a hundred feet. They sleep inside without warming, nevertheless they dress a double layer seal skin dress. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 65)

The Nun considers the Northern Savage the prototype of the *Homo Faber* [industrious man], “*skillful*” and ingenious, an excellent craftsman who, according to Raudot, learned to forge iron through a contact imitation, “*far better than our most skillful smiths*” (Raudot, 1904, p. 54). At the opposite, de Jaucourt obliterates this crucial information, the laudatory nature of which could have countered and infringed his absolute conviction of the impossible perfectibility of this “*degenerated race*”.

In her narration, Mather Marie-Andrée crosses the experiential knowledge from her own *Experientia* with the bookish one, the truthfulness of which is sometimes subject to doubt. Among the key-bibliographical works she considers, we mention the books of missionaries and travelers, such as the Jesuit Father Lafitau, the Father Charlevoix, and the Baron de Lahontan, of whom she resumes *ad litteram* the sentence on the Viking origin of the first discoverers of the Labrador, as well as the information on the cartography of the trade places: “The Danish are the first discoverers [of the Land of Labrador]. It has numerous harbors, ports and bays where during the summertime the ships from Quebec are accustomed to come and trade sea-wolf [seal] skins with the Savages” (Lom d’Arce, 2013 [1705], p. 40).

Even if they are roaming as evil furies, the Northern Savages are accustomed to barter with craftiness and, what is more impressive, in a selective way. At the dawn of liberalism, the trade is unanimously acknowledged as a feature of civility that gets them closer to the civilization. To ease the trade, the *Savages of Savages* invented an encoded and performing gestural language that shows their pragmatic and quick-witted intelligence:

Since the Basques, the Saint Malo sailors and the French Traders from the country have established some trade posts in the Labrador to fish the Sea wolf; the Eskimos come close to them and sometimes go on trading with them. Nobody is able to understand their language, but they are very skillful to make themselves understood with signs. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, pp. 66-67)

Mather Marie-Andrée shortens and summarizes here above the very interesting, detailed, instructive, and a little bit colorful description of the trade approach by the Baron de Lahontan:

[...] these Devils approach on their small sea wolf skin made boats and come on board [to barter]—he writes. Once they are close to the ship enough, they show all their furs on the top of their rowing, and, in the meantime, they ask for the knives, the powder and the bullets they need, the guns, the axes, the cauldrons, and eventually everybody shows what he possesses and what he wants getting in exchange; once the deal concluded, they receive and give all customs at the top of a rowing. (Lom d’Arce, 2013 [1705], pp. 40-41)

During the second half of the XVI century, retaliations and raids of extreme violence replaced over time the peaceful trade relationships among the Labrador Inuit and the European cod-fishermen. According to the available and reliable ancient sources (Biard, Champlain, Charlevoix, le Clerc, Lescarbot, and Le Tac, among others), a very sordid event would have originated this climate of conflict and defiance (Bogliolo Bruna, 211, p. 180). In the memories and accounts of the Whites, the irreversible degradation of the inter-ethnic relationships is converted into the caricatural demonization of the Eskimos to the stereotype of robbers. Profiting from their weapon superiority, they shoot these poor Savages who run away such as birds fearing fire:

During the night, when they come too close to their dwellings, the Frenchmen fire to them two or three stone shots and they fly away such as birds, because they are afraid of the fire and of all other men; thus they never make fire because they worry the lit and the smoke make them discovered. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 61)

The Chevalier bafflingly removes the here-above very enlightening sentence on the dynamics of the inter-ethnic relationships, at the time based on reciprocal distrust, and the defense strategies adopted by the Eskimos. The severe text cuts suggest on one hand a deep ignorance of the contemporary documentary sources on the Nouvelle France, and on the other hand an adverse *apriori* on the veracity of a document written by a woman, and—what is more—a nun.

In the *Lettre*, the women's world captures the attention of Mather Marie-Andrée. She depicts the Eskimo women as good housewives, very skillful in sewing, hard-working, pretty, modest, and kind. No mention is made of either the practice of the “*exchange of women*” or the tattoo. This last omission is undoubtedly intentional and meaningful because—the tattoo being considered by the Jewish-Christian tradition as a transgression of the biblical ban (Leviticus, chap. 19, verse 28)<sup>5</sup>—it participates in the “*de-demonization*” of the Savage woman. The Nun emphasizes—providing details of undoubtful ethnographic interest—the clothing and the skin-breeches fabrication techniques, considered a sign of modesty and civilization:

The women, who sew very ably, fashion some small bird-skin shirts, with the feathers inside, which warm them up, and other tunics in white bear guts, which they open as blood sausages after scraping them accurately. [...] They put their babies on their back between the skin and the tunic, so that they pull these poor innocents under their arm or above the shoulder to let them suck. They dress them with a kind of diapers, which they remove when they are dirty. [...] Their pants are open; so that when they sit down on the ground—which is their regular sit—for modesty sake, they pull the quite long tail of their parka between their legs. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, pp. 65-66)

Reassuring metaphor of a pagan America ready to embrace the Revelation, the converted Eskimo woman becomes, under the pen of Mather Marie-Andrée, the paradigmatic example of a perfect and successful assimilation. Inherent to any project for colonization, the evangelization of the Eskimos ought to transform “*this desert [into] haven*”.

Mather Marie-Andrée dwells on the conversion of the young Eskimo women, captured and “*tamed*”, i.e., freed from the Satan's hard sway and reduced to a form of unacknowledged slavery. The young Natives, “*pretty, white and clean girls*”, eventually “*civilized*” and perhaps Christianized are to become servants at the colons' service. Unfortunately, she comments, with a disgusting cynicism, the death rate of the captive Natives is so high that the investment does not turn out profitable: This so coveted goods are very “*expensive*” and what is more

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 14.1.

“*frail*”.

The religious proselytism turns out a powerful tool serving an assimilating and unequalitarian colonial policy. No pity for these unfortunate creatures objectified, enslaved, and condemned to a foretold death:

We captured some young Eskimo girls and we tamed them. I unfortunately saw several of them die in our Hospital. Pretty, white captured girls. They were very nice, white, clean and perfectly Christianized girls, who retained nothing of savage. They spoke quite good French. Nevertheless, despite they were quite happy in the houses they lived, they did not subsist longtime, as all the other Savages who live with the Frenchmen. We are accustomed to purchase these quite expensive slaves, due to the scarcity of servants, but we do not take big advantage from them because they die quite quickly. (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 68)

In this world of inversion, the anatomic features (absence of pubic pilosity, nipples “*the tip of which is as black as coal*” (Diderot, 1765, “*Humaine Espèce*” (Human species), T.VIII, pp. 344-345)) and the physiological ones (“*they do not undergo periodic evacuation*”<sup>6</sup> (*ibidem*)) identify an alterity which the analogic language turns into difference and tries to classify through a comparative mode.

Why does the Chevalier show no interest for the Eskimo women? Why does he not mention the assimilation policy adopted by the French in the Nouvelle France, the reduction of the Natives to captivity, their forced conversion, even if he elsewhere systematically plagiarizes his main source? What is even more surprising considering his position on slavery; the Eskimo entry being published in 1755, the same year he asks for the abolition of the slave trade.

Geographic and anthropic universe of limits, located at the fuzzy frontier between the known and the unknown, the *Terrae incognitae* [Unknown lands] of the Northern America, inhabited by the “*Savages of the Savages*”, visibly do not stimulate the intellectual curiosity of the Chevalier, because they have got neither economical nor cultural interest for him. That shows a stereotyped and stigmatizing judgment.

De Jaucourt shares the striking opinion of Voltaire who, in his novel *Candide* (1759), evaluated very negatively the French domains in Canada, quoting them as “*some acres of snow*” (Voltaire, 1759, ch. 23, pp. 209-210), to underline their almost negligible economic value. That shows, among others, the pervasiveness of the physiocratic theory at the Age of Enlightenment.

Mather Marie-Andrée writes in the *Lettre* that the corpses of the killed Eskimos “*float [on the rivers] such as cork*”. This strange phenomenon would originate from the Eskimos’ food, which is by far “*too rich in fat and fish oil*” (Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, 1751, p. 68). In the name of reason and considering his scientific approach, de Jaucourt, a physician, removes the whole fancy sentence because he is committed to ban any slip towards the strange and the sensational. Nevertheless, the principle of inversion contributes to the fabric of a depreciative and stereotyped image of this “*barbarian and fierce humanity*”, whose habits are strange and stranger to the rules and the values of the Jewish—Christian West.

## Conclusion

As an archetype of a very fierce nascent humanity, the Eskimos are singular folk who escape all reductionist taxonomy. Through a descriptive strategy relying upon the epistemological process of the analogy by either conversion or inversion, their indescribable alterity can convert into measurable and notable difference according

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<sup>6</sup> Diderot mentions the well-known winter amenorrhea which affects the Eskimo women in Greenland.

to predetermined cultural schemes. Are they a corrupted species or a perfectible humanity? The incarnation of an extreme savagery or the indicator of a “decay of the species, [which are] aimed at disappearing to birth under other forms again”? (Duchet, 1995 [1971], p. 424)

In *Le Rêve* [The dream], Diderot lets d’Alembert say:

Who can know whether this bipedal being, who is only four feet tall and, in the vicinity of the Pole, is still called a man, and would not last losing his name when deforming a little bit more, is at the image of passing-by species or not? Who can know whether it were the same for all other animals? (Diderot, 1769, p. 15)

*Panta rei...* Nature is an endless flux.

The Chévalier—following Diderot in a cosmo-centered vision—wonders whether the Eskimos, little men kneaded of animality, would be a perishable particle in the perpetual flow of the matter...

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