Lafcadio Hearn as Global Citizen

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When Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) arrived in Japan in 1890, the country was in the midst of a period of globalization not unlike the situation today. As part of the effort to modernize in the face of encroaching Western powers, Meiji-period leaders implemented significant educational reform, including a heavy emphasis on English. When Hearn took up his first teaching post at Matsue Middle School, he joined a growing wave of foreign teachers hired to teach English at schools throughout Japan. Despite minimal knowledge of Japan prior to his arrival, he would become one of the best-known interpreters of Meiji Japan to the Western world. Hearn possessed an unusually broad worldview, derived in part from his status as a perpetual outsider - one not fully identifiable with any one ethnic group or nationality - who had wandered the globe since infancy. He would apply these lifetime experiences to his observations of Japan, to offer interpretations not bound by the conventional norms of the times. This paper examines Hearn's writings on Japan within the context of his life experiences, arguing for an interpretation of Hearn as a precursor to today's notion of the global citizen. After examining the factors which led to his status as perpetual outsider, I consider links between these experiences and his writings on Japan.

Hearn as Perpetual Outsider

In his introduction to his memoirs on his father, Hearn's son, Koizumi Kazuo, recalls a conversation between his parents on the topic of interracial marriage:

> Father, one day, remarked to mother about the bad results from marriage of close relatives. But inter-racial marriage produced bad results too, he thought. He was thinking of writing on the subject to a foreign paper. When he consulted his wife, she replied, 'You are a product of inter-racial marriage - but are you a poor product? He replied, 'At times I think I am a very poor result, almost a waste. This is a result of very distant inter-racial marriage, I think. So, I just thought that I would write about it.' 'But,' mother said, 'you write about such a thing, but you and I are two different races and what about our children? Is it right to acclaim to the world the poor product of such a marriage?' He said to her, 'Do you think so?' and he tore up

his manuscript (Koizumi, p. 13).

As the child of a Greek mother and an Irish father, Hearn was the product of a marriage that did not last long. Born in Greece but taken to Dublin at the age of two, he was placed in the care of an elderly aunt following his mother's return to Greece. When his aunt became unable to support him, he lived briefly with a former maid of his aunt's in London before eventually making his way to Cincinnati, in hopes of being taken in by relatives there. However, his American relatives were unable to offer help, and for the third time before the age of twenty, Hearn found himself abandoned. Slowly, he began to establish a career in journalism, first as a writer of sensationalist stories, but later focusing on themes reflecting an affinity for marginalized peoples like himself – the lower classes of Cincinnati, the Creole culture of New Orleans, and those encountered in his travels through the West Indies.

Hearn married twice, first to an African-American woman in Cincinnati. The marriage eventually resulted in Hearn being fired from his job at a local newspaper because of anti-miscegenation laws of the time. His second marriage, to Japanese national Koizumi Setsu, was another interracial union. While not illegal in Japan, it was condemned by many of the time, including influential British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who encouraged Japan to prohibit marriages between Japanese citizens and foreigners. Comparing the situation to the interbreeding of cows and sheep, Spencer stated that intermarriage would result in an "incalculable mixture of traits, and what may be called a chaotic constitution" (quoted in Hearn, *Japan*, p. 461). Hearn's own attitude toward his background, that he felt he might indeed be "a very poor result, almost a waste," emphasizes the degree to which criticism, even abhorrence to interracial marriage, had pervaded public thought at the time. As a child of an interracial marriage, in the nineteenth century Hearn would be considered neither Greek, nor Irish, nor American, but a perpetual outsider. Perhaps it was only his wife's comments, that writing such an article would be tantamount to denouncing the character of his own children, which forced him to abandon the project. Some have suggested that Hearn finally found a place to call home when he took on Japanese citizenship in 1896. It is likely, however, that this was done primarily if not solely to protect his wife and children legally after his death because laws of the time did not permit a Japanese married to a foreigner to inherit the spouse's property (Hirakawa, p. 35). By adopting into his wife's family through marriage and taking Japanese citizenship, Hearn ensured his family's financial security.

Encounters with Language

Despite his dubious social status and struggles as a child, Hearn established himself as a successful journalist and linguist early in his career. During his time in New Orleans, he became known for his English translations of French literature, and also wrote a number of articles on the translation process. Notwithstanding his clear interest in foreign languages and the study of language itself, Hearn never mastered Japanese beyond an elementary level, despite living in the country for fourteen years. In a letter to his friend Basil Hall Chamberlain written shortly after arriving in Japan, Hearn expressed his eagerness to learn the language. However, he became discouraged within a few months, possibly because oral methods of direct translation which he had successfully used to learn French and French Creole did not work for a language such as Japanese, with fundamentally different sentence structure (Kanazawa, 2011). Later Hearn wrote, "Experience in the acquisition of European languages can help you to learn Japanese about as much as it could help you to acquire the language spoken by the inhabitants of Mars" (*Glimpses*, p. 12). Hearn and his Japanese wife Setsu eventually developed what Kanazawa describes as a pidgin form of Japanese, including simplified forms of Japanese used by Setsu and elements of languages that Hearn knew. They referred to their communication as "Hearn-san kotoba," or "Hearn's language." The term pidgin typically refers to a simplified linguistic system used for limited communication, but using this invented language, Setsu was able to convey to Hearn the folktales of her childhood, which he would transcribe into English, and publish in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904), one of his best-known works.

The fact that Hearn found it easier to invent a language sophisticated enough to understand his wife's complex stories of old Japan rather than learning Japanese is evidence of the gap he felt between the disparate languages of Japan and the West, a topic which frequently appears in his writings. In his early observations on his first experiences teaching English in Matsue, he records the following:

> And what is the waste entailed upon the Japanese schoolboy's system by study? It is certainly greater than that which the system of the European or American student must suffer at the same period of life. Seven years of study are required to give the Japanese youth merely the necessary knowledge of his own triple system of ideographs - or, in less accurate but plainer speech, the enormous alphabet of his native literature…Besides these Oriental studies, his course includes foreign history, geography, arithmetic, astronomy, physics, geometry,

> natural history, agriculture, chemistry, drawing, and mathematics. Worst of all, he must learn English, - a language of which the difficulty to the Japanese cannot be even faintly imagined by anyone unfamiliar with the construction of the native tongue, - a language so different from his own that the very simplest Japanese phase cannot be intelligibly rendered into English by a literal translation of the words or even the form of the thought (*Glimpses*, pp. 375-6).

Hearn laments the heavy burden on Japanese students, who must study many more years than their Western counterparts simply to acquire basic literacy skills in Japanese. The additional burden of studying English as a foreign language in Japan is further complicated by that fact that literal translation, which Hearn appears to have employed when learning Western languages, is difficult to transfer to Japanese-English studies because of the vastly different word order. Interestingly, Hearn's son Kazuo reported that his father often used literal translation when teaching him English (Kanazawa, pp. 20-21). This method seems to have been possible in Kazuo's case because he was familiar with the structure of "Hearn-san kotoba."

In addition to the difficulty of mastering the mechanics of a language so different from Western languages, Hearn also notes the issue of differing socio-cultural backgrounds in language learning. Reflecting on his experiences in Matsue, he observes that the content of his students' essays, which strikes him at first as novel and imaginative, is actually amazingly similar from one paper to the next. He attributes this to the shared cultural background of the students, noting that "his [the Japanese child's] imagination was made for him long centuries ago - partly in China, partly in his native land…Every boy has thus learned that the vision of Fuji against the blue resembles a white half-opened fan…Every boy knows that cherry-trees in full blossom look as if the most delicate of flushed summer clouds were caught in their branches" (*Glimpses*, p. 379). Applying this principle to foreign language learning, Hearn reflects on the difficulty of mastering a foreign language without sufficient knowledge of cultural context. He states:

> Even one of Shakespeare's plays must remain incomprehensible to a person knowing nothing either of Christian beliefs or of the beliefs which preceded them…The language of even the unlettered is full of religious meaning: the proverbs and household phrases of the poor, the songs of the street, the speech of the workshop…Nobody knows this better than a man who has passed many years in trying to teach English in Japan, to pupils whose faith is utterly unlike our own, and

> whose ethics have been shaped by a totally different social experience" (*Japan*, pp. 5-6).

Not unlike notions of globalization today, Hearn's observations highlight the need for both linguistic and cultural competency in order for meaningful communication to take place.

Encounters with culture

Hearn's limitations with the Japanese language did not prevent him from studying about the country, and his love of Japan and its culture is well known. From his first day in the country, he delighted at the mystery and strangeness he saw around him. Although he was eventually forced to leave Matsue because he could not tolerate the cold climate, it always remained his favorite place in Japan because it was least affected by the Westernization taking place throughout most of the country. Hearn was particularly opposed to the spread of Christianity in Japan at the expense of Buddhism. In his preface to *Glimpses of An Unfamiliar Japan*, he stated, "my own conviction, and that of many impartial and more experienced observers of Japanese life, is that Japan has nothing whatever to gain by conversion to Christianity, either morally or otherwise, but very much to lose" (pp. xix-xx). His attitude stood in stark contrast to the pervasive attitude toward Westernization in nineteenth-century Japan: that all aspects of Western culture from economic and educational policies, to food and fashion, were more progressive and modern than indigenous traditions.

Uemura (1993) suggests that Hearn's positive depictions of Japanese Buddhism were primarily a reaction against Christianity, attributed to his strict religious upbringing (p. 388). Hearn's writings on religion and Japan are complex, and a full analysis is beyond the scope of this short paper. However, irrespective of the reason for his opposition to Christianity in Japan, this attitude may have also predisposed Hearn to evaluate indigenous aspects of Japanese culture in more positive terms than other Western critics. It is worth noting that, by rejecting Christianity and promoting Buddhism in Japan, Hearn also rejected the general notion of the primacy of Western values. In this way, he elevated not only Japanese religious traditions, but opened the door for the elevation of other aspects of culture as well. This challenged conventional thought of the time which presumed that a technologically advanced civilization must necessarily be considered advanced in all other aspects including religion, literature, and arts. To support this claim, Hearn often used a comparative analysis with ancient Greek culture:

> The reader scarcely needs to be reminded that a civilization less evolved than our own, and intellectually remote from us, is not on that account to be regarded as necessarily inferior in all respects. Hellenic civilization at its best represented an early stage of sociological evolution; yet the arts which it developed still furnish our supreme and unapproachable ideals of beauty (*Japan*, p. 18).

There can be no doubt that Hearn's strong affinity for Japan sometimes led him to idealized depictions. At the same time, his insistence on recognizing the sophistication of Japanese arts, at a time when the majority of outsiders accepted the notion of all non-Western civilizations as fundamentally inferior, marks him as unique.

Conclusion

This short paper has argued for an interpretation of Hearn as a precursor to today's notion of the global citizen. Although Hearn suffered early in life because his mixed-race background made him a perpetual outsider, he later drew on these experiences to examine marginalized populations, new environments, and new circumstances from a different perspective than the average Westerner. He most enthusiastically embraced his final destination of Japan, a country for which his fascination never waned. He never mastered the language of his adopted country, a key feature often associated with the global citizen today. Nevertheless, he produced thoughtful, insightful interpretations for his Western readers, in large part because of his ability to draw upon his diverse experience and challenge the conventional Eurocentric views of the time. For these reasons, Hearn remains a writer who continues to inspire readers today to embrace their differences, challenge their own cultural norms, and interpret the world from the perspective of global citizens.

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