Impressions Sincerely Given: Publishing Rita Joe's Poetics of Continuity

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Rita Joe's first poem appeared in the May 1971 issue of *The Micmac News*. Titled "Eskasoni — Land of Many Trees," the poem describes, in fifty-one lines of unrhymed free verse, the landscape and people of the Eskasoni First Nation in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. "Here are my impressions I sincerely give," writes Joe, "So there will be an interest in people everywhere / For Indians of Canada and our cultures we hold dear, / Here is freedom, happiness and pride that has a new lease" (lines 27-30).[1] An ode to the natural and cultural resources of the community at Eskasoni, the poem announces the beginning of Joe's career as a poet while gesturing toward the broader "Native Renaissance" in Canada that burgeoned in the 1960s and 1970s (McKenzie 7). The poem also anticipates Joe's lifelong commitment to articulating a positive assertion of Mi'kmaw[2] cultural vitality, reflecting her belief that, "if one wishes to be healed, one must dwell on the positive" (*Song of Rita Joe* 14). Implicit in this first poem is the recognition that positive formulations of Mi'kmaw identity and culture have the power to challenge colonial narratives that not only perpetuate stereotypes but also expunge from the historical record the existence of Mi'kmaw forms of cultural expression, both material and oral. Joe makes this point explicit in the prologue to *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet*: "[Our] history would be different if it had been expressed by us . . . , but the way our views were passed into history and literature by the so-called 'discoverers' has done harm in more ways than can be imagined" (14). Coupled with her call for "more writing from [Mi'kmaw] people" about contemporary Mi'kmaw experience, Joe's comments reveal the twofold purpose of her poetic project: to challenge, revise, and augment colonial histories of Mi'kmaw culture, on the one hand, and to remediate the erasure of Mi'kmaw cultural expression through positive assertions of historical and contemporary Mi'kmaw experience, on the other.

Situating Joe's poetry within the specific contexts of its publication, I examine representative examples to suggest that the publication of

her work by alternative print periodicals and small regional presses was integrally tied to her poetic project of contesting colonial history and fostering a renewal of Mi'kmaw cultural expression. I suggest that a "poetics of continuity" can be traced through Joe's published works, from her earliest poems in *The Micmac News*, through her first published collection, *Poems of Rita Joe* (1978), and up to her second collection, *Song of Eskasoni: More Poems of Rita Joe* (1988). Joe's poetics form a strategy that stresses the continuity between historical and contemporary forms of Mi'kmaw representation and communication, oral and material, over the notions of discontinuity and rupture that so often form the focus of colonial narratives of European-Indigenous contact. Of course, the themes, subjects, and aesthetics of Joe's poetry evolved over the two decades between her first published poems and her second collection. There is a distinct development from a focus on the representational capacity of the land in her periodical publications and *Poems of Rita Joe* to a focus on specific material and oral forms of Indigenous media in *Song of Eskasoni*. However, Joe's commitment to articulating the continuity and dynamism of Mi'kmaw cultural expression — whether impressed on the land, woven baskets, or paper — remains constant throughout her published works.

Particularly germane to a discussion of Joe's writing as a continuation of pre-existing Mi'kmaw material practices is the work of Thomas King and Blanca Schorcht. King's approach, outlined in his important essay "Godzilla vs Post-Colonial," emphasizes Indigenous literary practices as "points on a cultural and literary continuum" and rejects progressivist discourse that sets the written above and in opposition to the oral. Drawing on the work of King, Schorcht argues that contemporary Indigenous literatures should be understood as "literary recreations of familiar Native genres in the context of European colonization, but where the 'pivot' is no longer colonial" (5). Joe's poetry, in both subject and form, reflects this sense of continuity while resisting paradigms that simply oppose the oral to the written (Fuller 162). As Danielle Fuller has argued, "the didactic purpose of Joe's poetry, her desire to produce a 'good image' of Mi'kmaq people and disseminate her message, suggests one way in which print literature can be employed to perpetuate elements of specific oral practices" (160). But for Joe contemporary written forms such as the printed book are not foreign media that simply allow for oral discursive devices to be perpetuated and disseminated; rather, they

are media that should be seen in relation to a range of material forms utilized by Mi'kmaw authors throughout history. This crucial aspect of Joe's poetics has gone unexamined in the extant criticism of her work.

Although a number of scholars have sought to excavate Joe's writing for its sociopolitical import, few have dedicated critical attention to her poetics and the centrality of Mi'kmaw cultural forms in her work. In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), there has been renewed interest in Joe's poetry. The inclusion of four lines from Joe's "I Lost My Talk" in *Canada's Residential Schools: The Legacy*, the appropriation of the poem's title for the third chapter of that document, as well as the activities of the Rita Joe National Song Project have helped to bring Joe's most celebrated poem to the attention of mainstream Canadian audiences. Nevertheless, though the recognition spurred by the TRC has helped to raise the profile of "I Lost My Talk," it has done little, if anything, to foster a critical dialogue attentive to Joe's poetic engagement with material and oral forms of Indigenous media. Moreover, there exists no sustained critical treatment of Joe's poetry.[3] Drawing on the work of Emma Larocque, Fuller attributes this dearth of criticism to the academy's "privileg[ing] of a small group of Native Canadian writers," arguing that "this blinkered and colonizing attitude ignores the complexity of Native experiences and politics, how it elects a few authors as the 'authentic voices' of Canada's First Nations" (158). Taking a regionalist perspective, Herb Wyile similarly contends that the "Folk paradigm" that has come to define popular perceptions of Atlantic Canadian culture, and that is "complicit in the colonial tactic of constructing the land as unoccupied territory," has served to erase Indigenous writers from the literary-historical record of the region (107). Yet it is precisely this misconstruction of the land as "unoccupied," and the accompanying erasure of Mi'kmaw cultural expression, that Joe seeks to redress in her earliest published poems and her first collection.

Although Joe's poetics of continuity would eventually become manifest in her attention to specific oral and material forms, her concern with representations of Mi'kmaw cultural identity begins with her descriptions of Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory and landscape of the Mi'kmaq in eastern North America. It is of no small significance that "Eskasoni — Land of Many Trees" articulates Mi'kmaw cultural tenacity through a description of the land of Eskasoni and, by extension, Mi'kma'ki. The union between land and community is established

by the title of the poem itself, which draws the reader's attention to the meaning of the place name Eskasoni: *Eskasoni* is derived from the Mi'kmaw word *We'kwistoqnik*, literally "where the fir trees are plentiful" ("History of Eskasoni"). The central connection between the cultural matrix of the poem — "entertainment," spirituality, "trade," and "stories" (3, 13, 35) — and the landscape of Eskasoni is reinforced by the refrain that ends each stanza and reiterates the titular translation: ". . . Eskasoni, surrounded by water, / mountains and trees" (7-8). The poem thus becomes an expression of *weji-sqalia'timik*, a Mi'kmaw verb infinitive that "expresses the Mi'kmaw understanding of the origin of its people as rooted in the landscape of Eastern North America" (Sable and Francis 17).

According to anthropologist Trudy Sable and Mi'kmaw linguist Bernie Francis,[4] "*weji-sqalia'timik* is about embodied landscape," "a living landscape filled with networks of reciprocal relationships and moral obligations" (25). This is "a landscape that is still integral to the cultural psyche of the Mi'kmaq today, one that can still be recalled, despite increasing urbanization and institutionalization of the Mi'kmaw population" (25). So it is that in "Eskasoni — Land of Many Trees," "cord hops, beaches, community hall and gym" are juxtaposed with ". . . stories / Of long ago," and both are united by their embeddedness in the land (1, 20-21). Understood as an articulation of continuity, Joe's first poem depicts the changing, "living" landscape of Mi'kma'ki as embodying the organic and evolving character of Mi'kmaw culture. Joe returns to this theme in "Your Buildings" from *Poems of Rita Joe*, in which the destruction of the landscape becomes a metaphor for cultural assimilation. The speaker, addressing a white Anglo-Canadian audience, writes that "Your buildings, tall, alien / Cover the land," and "No breezes blow / Through standing trees; / No scent of pine lightens my burden" (1-2, 6-8). Faced with the pressures of cultural assimilation, urbanization, and industrialization, the Indigenous speaker of the poem is nevertheless hopeful, deriving cultural knowledge from the land itself:

> Relearning our culture is not difficult,
> Because those trails I remember
> And their meaning I understand
>
> While skyscrapers hide the heavens
> They can fall (17-21)

Once again the survival of cultural knowledge is enabled by the embeddedness of Mi'kmaw narratives in the land, which becomes the inscriptive surface on which history is impressed and stories are recorded.

The predominance of *weji-sqalia'timik* in Joe's earliest poems is unmistakable. In poems such as "Whycocomagh," "Indian Summer," and "There Be a Place," Mi'kma'ki forms the conceptual axis around which Joe's poetic reflections rotate. In the disjointed but evocative poem "Indian Summer," "Pines holding warmth protectingly" give way to "tales" told "By our residents of old / That earth and Indian / Unity remain unbroken" (2, 18-20). Similarly, the connection between land and spirituality is expressed by the speaker of "There Be a Place," who attains a moment of transcendence while lying "under the pines eyes staring / Upward to the stars and dark shadows" to where ". . . there be a place / For [her] people to go and rest" (1-2, 6-7). In each poem, the embeddedness of the speaker in the landscape — and significantly, as in "Eskasoni — Land of Many Trees," among fir trees — recalls the significance of place names as signifiers of cultural knowledge. According to Sable and Francis, Mi'kmaw place names tell the story of Mi'kma'ki and work as "mnemonic devices providing a framework by which to remember relevant aspects of cultural knowledge" (51). Thomas Andrews similarly observes of place names in the northern Dene culture that they "provide a 'hook' on which to structure the body of narratives, and in doing so, become an integral part of the narrative itself" (50). "Physical geography," writes Andrews, "is transformed into 'social geography' where culture and landscape are fused into a semiotic whole" (50). This representational function performed by place names informs Joe's early work and becomes the explicit focus of "Aye! No Monuments" in *Poems of Rita Joe*.

In her autobiography, *Song of Rita Joe*, Joe reflects on her poetry of the 1970s: "[M]y words were frustrated, angry, crying, hoping for communication. I wrote about what I had experienced and what I now saw my children experience — the feeling of being immersed in an alien nation and culture" (109). This sense of being doubly marginalized — of being *déraciné* in her native land and powerless to communicate that experience — pervades her first collection, *Poems of Rita Joe*, even as the poems themselves provide a powerful medium for the communication of her lived experiences. "Aye! No Monuments" is her response to this double marginalization. Conceding the absence of Mi'kmaw com-

municative forms — a concession that she would emphatically retract in her subsequent collections — Joe reasserts the power of the land and Mi'kmaw place names to embody narrative, to bear witness to, and ultimately to prevail over cultural loss and assimilation:

> Aye! No monuments,
> No literature,
> No scrolls or canvas-drawn pictures
> Relate the wonders of our yesterday.
> How frustrated the searchings
> of the educators.
> Let them find
> Land names,
> Titles of seas,
> Rivers;
> Wipe them not from memory.
> These are our monuments. (1-12)

The poem is important both for its articulation of the relationship among narrative, culture, and land and for its attention to the supposed absence of Mi'kmaw material and literary culture. Addressing "scholars" who search in vain for material records of Mi'kmaw history, Joe proclaims both the continuing sovereignty of Mi'kma'ki and the semiotic power of place names: "Scholars, you will find our art / In names and scenery, / Betrothed to the Indian / since time began" (18-21). "Aye! No Monuments" thus represents the culmination of Joe's *weji-sqalia'timik* poetry while anticipating her preoccupation with oral, material, and literary culture in her second collection, *Song of Eskasoni*. Here Joe's increasing attention to specific iterations of Mi'kmaw material culture is brought to the fore.

In her brief but incisive article "The Gentle War," Joe formulates her literary undertaking as a "gentle war" that involves recreating Mi'kmaw history while "arguing against non-literal attestations by non-Indians about the aboriginal lack of arts and word[s] not left behind" (28). *Song of Eskasoni*, writes Joe, focuses on that "literal part of Native expression left behind in stone-writings and other forms" (28). Her poem "Project Pisuaqn," from the second collection, contemplates one such form, *pisuaqn* or "Indian dress," in order to arrive at an expansive vision of cultural expression. Referring to "The women there" who "Create on cloth / The design of the Micmac," the poem begins with unnamed people in

an unspecified place, establishing its setting broadly as Mi'kma'ki without demarcating a circumscribed space for the expressive act. From the second stanza on, the poem documents the material process of rendering lived experience sharable and discussable by sewing the "geometrics of life" into cloth designs:

> They sew with care
> With gentle hands,
> The geometrics of life
> The aborigine saw around him.
>
> These are the curtains of tomorrow
> Documents of peace
> Between you and I.
>
> Let us admire them
> They hang in the museum of man.
> A part of life to bring forward
> The record of the past. (5-15)

Like many of Joe's later poems, "Project Pisuaqn" derives its undulating rhythm principally from the variation of syllable count, as the pace of the poem quickens and slows with the length of the line. Unlike Joe's later poems, however, "Project Pisuaqn" relies not on parallelism and repetition for its narrative progression but on a movement from the collective creative act to the materiality of the resulting artifact. The poem thus offers a formal and thematical transition, bridging *Song of Eskasoni* and her previous collection.

The product of the women's labour, the *pisuaqn* defies any sense of a fixed temporal frame, obtaining significance in the past, present, and future. The dresses are at once a "record of the past," a "part of life to bring forward," and "the curtains of tomorrow." Spatial fixity is also undermined by the capacity of the dresses to communicate lived experiences to numberless witnesses across vast distances. Given symbolic form, the "geometrics of life" are made meaningful for both the speaker and the reader of the poem in the tenth and eleventh lines — becoming "Documents of peace / between you and I" — before being brought in the thirteenth line to a wider audience, to "hang in the museum of man." In the final stanza, the symbolic consequence of the *pisuaqn* is enlarged: the "geometrics of life" come to represent the creative process

itself, cultural "virility," and the connection among land, identity, and self-determination:

> The symbols tell of virility
> On the pisuaqn
> Tracing status across the land.
> Now it is there for you to see
> That I was the master of my own dream. (16-20)

The poem is ostensibly dispassionate, chronicling the creation of the dresses, their representational significance, and the diffusion of their symbolic content. However, the final two lines of the poem serve as a volta, giving the poem a retrospective-prospective structure while dispelling the detached tone of the preceding stanzas. As if in response to the lack of arts identified in "Aye! No Monuments," Joe posits the existence of Mi'kmaw media by challenging Western notions about the illegitimacy of non-literate, non-alphabetic forms of communication. If, as Andrews suggests, place names transform "physical geography" into "social geography," so does Mi'kmaw material culture, here in the form of beaded dresses, provide a material form for the transmission of narrative and cultural knowledge — "The geometrics of life."

Although many of Joe's most frequently anthologized poems from *Song of Eskasoni* lament the loss of Mi'kmaw language and culture, just as many, such as "Project Pisuaqn," show Joe's determination to assert, retrieve, and renew Mi'kmaw cultural traditions. Furthermore, the collection demonstrates her direct engagement with questions about the conceptual and material dimensions of Mi'kmaw literature and art. Indeed, Joe suggests that contemporary Indigenous literature is not a product of colonial print culture but a continuation and renewal of pre-existing forms of Indigenous media, from traditional songs and dance to wampum and the Mi'kmaw hieroglyphic writing system. Poems such as "Basketmaker," "Soapstone Carvings," and "Graphics of Life" describe a specific medium — woven baskets, soapstone carvings, and Mi'kmaw pictographs — in order to cultivate a robust cultural paradigm grounded in the continuity of Mi'kmaw cultural expression. This is a continuum that extends from place names, impressions on the land, to hieroglyphs, impressions on birchbark, to Joe's own poetry, impressions on paper. Perhaps nowhere is this continuity more effectively expressed than in "Stone Writings":

In cave of stone the figures lay
a symbolic gesture.
From eons of migrant sketchings
relating tales of journey and stay.
Proofreaders of yesterday's mirror

The characters are like trees
spirits that tell of life.
Eyewitnesses to bygone milestones
tomorrow's gift to children
an impressive understanding of ongoing relations

How true you ask the wind!
How true you shout to the world.
Bend your ear to aura
The mind will see the true mark
left forever by rooted cry.

He lives, the man in folded arms.
He lives in the sketches of wonder
In red ochre, the sacred colour
of the original faces of stone.

Written in the relatively terse lines characteristic of Joe's late poetry, the poem uses parataxis and parallelism to break down the reader's sense of a fixed temporal frame. The successive associations are given without the expected number of participles, adverbs, and conjunctions. The effect is a poem that eludes linear chronology. The petroglyphs, etched in stone, represent "eons of migrant sketchings," encompassing a vast and variegated history of "journey and stay," while Joe's juxtaposition of past, future, and present proclaims their continuing relevance: "Eyewitnesses to bygone milestones / tomorrow's gift to children / an impressive understanding of ongoing relations" (8-10). In the poem adjacent to "Stone Writings," titled "Micmac Hieroglyphics," Joe uses intertextuality to assert a similar sense of continuity between contemporary Indigenous writing and historical material forms. Translating quotations from Franciscan missionary Chrétien Le Clerq's descriptions of Mi'kmaw hieroglyphs and wampum, Joe declares that these are "The written word of the Indian / That the world chooses to deny" (35).

Both "Stone Writings" and "Micmac Hieroglyphs" anticipate Joe's introduction to *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*, in which Joe makes her con-

cern with continuity more explicit: "In the Mi'kmaq world of pre-European times our stories were told in petroglyphs, hieroglyphs, or other character artwork where we showed what was going on in our lives. Now that we know many different forms of writing, there is no stopping our written material" ("Introduction" 5). For Joe, then, continuity can be seen not only in the incorporation of oral discursive devices into written forms but also in the strategic use of the written word to call attention to its analogues in Mi'kmaw material culture: petroglyphs, hieroglyphs, and wampum. At the same time, her comments gesture toward the proliferation of Indigenous literature in Canada, made possible in Atlantic Canada by alternative periodical publications and small regional presses. As a territory located on Canada's geopolitical periphery — a territory lacking key points of access to large presses, arts capital, and cultural media — Atlantic Canada has been disproportionately served by alternative media such as small magazines and regional presses. Moving from a close reading of Joe's poems to a broader focus on the context in which those poems were published reveals crucial intersections between her poetics and the social and material conditions of their production. The publication of Joe's work reflects the significant role played by alternative media in the region: less restricted by commercial considerations, saleability, and marketability, alternative print periodicals and small presses were uniquely positioned to publish and disseminate Joe's poetics of continuity, beginning with her first published works in the small but influential *Micmac News*.

Joe's early work with *The Micmac News* and, in particular, her monthly column "Here and There in Eskasoni" demonstrate both her willingness to critique the Canadian government for injustices committed against Canada's Indigenous peoples and the paper's willingness to publish those critiques. Nowhere is this polemical drive clearer than in her column in the issue of 24 September 1976, in which Joe indicts the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for using eighty-five percent of its $400 million budget for departmental expenses, leaving only fifteen percent for the Indigenous communities that the budget was supposed to have supported. "[The] taxpayers," wrote Joe, "are paying a well paved way for the livelihood of the Department itself and not for the services and programs [on] the reserve." In the department's response to Joe's comments, a copy of which was sent directly to Joe, W.E. Brooks wrote that "It should be stated again that

it is a policy of the department to encourage the Indian people to take on more and more responsibility for the management of their own affairs" (2). Claiming progress toward that goal, Brooks pointed toward the department's Indian and Eskimo Recruitment and Development Program, "designed to give special encouragement to Indian people . . . to enter Public Service" (2). Joe chose not to respond to the letter in the subsequent issue of *The Micmac News*. Two years later, however, the first poem of *Poems of Rita Joe* offered a powerful rebuttal: "I am the Indian," wrote Joe, "And the burden / Lies yet with me" (1). Of course, the poem is not a direct response to the letter from Brooks, nor is it simply a tongue-in-cheek condemnation of the government's failure to fulfill its obligations to Canada's Indigenous peoples — though the poem does speak to that failure. Rather, it also contains a genuine call to action: for Joe, only through positive and autonomous expressions of Mi'kmaw culture could Mi'kmaw artists and writers combat the destructiveness of Canada's colonial legacy, the detrimental effects of cultural assimilation, and the violence of Canada's residential schools. Non-commercial, independent, and guided by the politically activist editorial program of Roy Gould, *The Micmac News* provided a crucial forum for such expressions.

The letter from Brooks in response to Joe's column in the September 1974 issue of *The Micmac News* is also indicative of the paper's considerable influence. Founded and edited by Joe's cousin Roy Gould in 1965 and later published by the Union of Nova Scotia Indians and the Native Communications Society of Nova Scotia until 1991, *The Micmac News* was an important example of Mi'kmaw print culture ("Micmac News"). Beginning as a small mimeographed publication, by 1970 the paper had adopted the economical format of Berliner daily newspapers, and a typical issue ran to twenty pages. The paper was published monthly and covered historical and contemporary issues and events, including Indigenous rights cases, social and labour history, material and oral culture, and celebrations of Mi'kmaw culture. Although literature made up a relatively small portion of the paper's content, prayers, songs, and poems were featured in each issue, with Joe contributing poetry to nearly every issue from 1972 to 1977. No record of the paper's distribution or circulation exists, so it is difficult to determine the number of readers. Nevertheless, the number and range of the paper's contributors, as well as the lively and extensive "Letters to the Editor" section, suggest

that the paper was read widely in Indigenous communities throughout Atlantic Canada.

After publishing "Eskasoni — Land of Many Trees" in *The Micmac News* in 1971, Joe became a regular contributor of both poetry and editorials. In 1973, she began writing her column "Here and There in Eskasoni," which dealt with a wide range of topics, from local Eskasoni news to Mi'kmaw medicinal, spiritual, and literary practices. By publishing her work in *The Micmac News*, Joe was able to access a considerable readership both within Indigenous communities and beyond, as the letter from Brooks suggests. A small publication at the margins of mainstream Canadian culture, the paper did not reach a mainstream reading public. However, its geopolitical marginality meant that it was unconstrained by the commercial pressures faced by larger, established periodicals. The paper was thus able to foster emerging Mi'kmaw writers such as Joe, Noel Knockwood, and Isabelle Knockwood, who might otherwise have gone unpublished. Writing in the June 1965 issue, Gould stressed the critical role of the paper in cultivating Mi'kmaw self-expression: "The MIC MAC NEWS, for some of you, may be just reading matter but for the greater number of us it is a major breakthrough for self-expression and shows the great possibilities for communication and a closer bond between Indians" (1). Underpinned by the same principles of sociality and community that informed Joe's poetic explorations of Mi'kmaw material culture, the paper fostered an environment that encouraged collaboration. Publication was thus seen as a cooperative social process, and production of the paper, undertaken by a dedicated team of volunteer editors, regular contributors, and responsive readers, put the cooperative editorial principles of the paper into practice.

Joe's experience with *The Micmac News* is a testament to the paper's role as a vehicle for emerging writers and would eventually lead to the publication of her first collection, *Poems of Rita Joe*. It was the publishing opportunity provided by *The Micmac News* and the positive responses that her work garnered that encouraged Joe to write more: "I got such feedback — I got letters and fan mail and people wrote to the newspaper and commented on my writing. So I wrote more stories and poems and articles" (*Song of Rita Joe* 98). In 1974, Joe compiled a manuscript, "The Valiant Race," composed of published and unpublished works that she had written for submission to *The Micmac News*. She submitted the manuscript to a literary contest hosted by the Halifax

arm of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia (WFNS), won first prize, and the following year joined the WFNS with the intention of establishing connections with other writers in Nova Scotia (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe* 112). Writing to Joe in October 1975, Geraldine Gaskin, executive director of the WFNS, asked Joe which press would be publishing the award-winning manuscript (1). When Gaskin discovered that Joe had not yet considered publishing the collection, the WFNS offered to locate a publisher, identified potential sources of funding, and provided Joe with editorial advice (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe* 112). That year Abanaki Press accepted her manuscript for publication.

A small press based in Halifax, Abanaki Press in 1978 was under the direction of Scott Thompson and Susan Renouf. However, with no archival repository and no historical record of the activities of the press beyond the 1940s, the circumstances of its operations in the 1970s remain unclear. What is clear is that the press was originally founded by Andrew Merkel in 1928. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Merkel and a group of poets based in Halifax and known as the Song Fishermen — a group that included Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Robert Norwood, and Charles Bruce — "produced illustrated broadsheets, kept in touch with writers living outside the region . . . , published a memorial to Bliss Carman upon his death, and between 1928 and 1930 channelled their energies into the creation of a poetry publication entitled *The Song Fishermen's Song Sheets*" (Davies 163). One of the few "independent literary publishing houses" established in Canada in the decades preceding the Second World War, the first incarnation of Merkel's Abanaki Press was ephemeral, publishing only a series of broadsheets and a limited number of chapbooks (McKnight 311).[5] According to Sandrine Férre-Rode, however, Merkel revived the Abanaki Press imprint in the 1940s. "The resurrected Abanaki, an imprint that built on folk themes," writes Férre-Rode, "lasted from the late 1940s until the mid-1950s, and represented the return of an antimodernist trend within the provincial cultural establishment" (179). Merkel died in 1954, however, and there is no record of how Thompson and Renouf came to assume control of the press in subsequent years.

Whether or not Abanaki Press published any other works in the years preceding and following *Poems of Rita Joe* is difficult to determine. The last title produced before Joe's collection appears to have been Agnes MacDonald's 1951 poetry collection *Once and Again*, published

nearly three decades before Joe first contacted the publisher and three years before Merkel's death (Tratt). By all indications, the reincarnated Abanaki Press of the 1970s was the effort of Thompson and Renouf, dedicated to producing a small number of high-quality publications. The financial assets and national stature of the press appear to have been minimal, and the publishers themselves undertook to format, market, and distribute their publications.[6] Yet precisely those conditions, intimate and participatory, provided Joe with an ideal working relationship for the publication of her first collection. In an interview with Hartman Lutz in 1991, Joe described her first experience with the publishing process as integral to her development as a writer: "*Poems of Rita Joe*, I feel I was born there! I don't know how to explain it, but it feels I was born as a writer there" (247). In nearly every respect, the preparation and publication of the collection were collaborative. Thompson and Renouf worked closely with Joe, recruiting author Chipman Hall to help her edit and revise the manuscript and enlisting Mi'kmaw linguist Bernie Francis to help her with the translations of her work (Joe, "Monuments"). The resulting collection was a slim but expensively produced hardcover volume of twenty-six poems printed in dark green on the right-hand pages with the left-hand pages left blank. Where Joe thought it necessary, brief contextualizing introductions were included before the poems. A glossary of Mi'kmaw words with translations was included at the end of the collection, and five of the poems appeared in both Mi'kmaw and English.

In the year following the publication of *Poems of Rita Joe*, Thompson continued to provide Joe with advice, helping her to navigate the book market and sending her the royalties from sales of the collection. By 1980, however, correspondence between Joe and Thompson appears to have ceased, and Abanaki Press produced no further titles. Joe continued to compose verse, but even before the release of her first collection she had an idea for a new project. In 1978, Joe sent a letter to Tom Hill, then director of cultural affairs for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Her hope was to enlist his help in obtaining a grant that could fund a collection of stories and photographs detailing life on Eskasoni. "I'm not worried about the story-telling," wrote Joe, "that part is easy. There is so much to be told about Eskasoni Reserve and about the native people, the list is endless of the things that I want to do" (1). Responses to *Poems of Rita Joe* had been generally positive, and Joe was

hoping to write another book in the same vein, focusing on positive aspects of Mi'kmaw culture. Her letter suggests, however, that some readers were dissatisfied with her reluctance to disclose her experience at the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, which she attended beginning at age twelve from 1944 to 1948: "I received a letter from a lady from Halifax yesterday asking if I was going to write a book about the injustices done to the native children at the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie and I'm holding her off right now because some of those nuns are still living. I was at that school from 1944 to 1948 and saw a lot of unpleasant things. I don't like to talk about them too much" (1). Joe's reticence had been palpable in *Poems of Rita Joe*, and it would be another decade before Joe chose to write about her residential school experiences in *Song of Eskasoni*. The resulting collection, however, was not a sustained and uncompromising disclosure of abuse and trauma, cultural and linguistic loss, but an often subtle balance between loss and recovery, destruction and reconstruction. At its core were poems such as "Project Pisuaqn" and "Stone Writings" — explorations of Mi'kmaw cultural forms underpinned by the same poetics of continuity that Joe had cultivated in her first collection. As in *Poems of Rita Joe*, the focus of *Song of Eskasoni* was closely on celebrations of creativity; expressions of trauma formed a considerably smaller portion of the text.

As Sam McKegney observes — and as the letter to Hill indicates — a determination to focus on the positive aspects of her personal experience left Joe vulnerable to charges of apology and appeasement. Like *Poems of Rita Joe*, *Song of Eskasoni* fails to conform to "the notion that survivor testimony must attend to trauma and mistreatment" (McKegney 34). Yet her refusal to accept colonial stereotypes of Mi'kmaw culture, and her desire to contest the dominant literary history of Canada, situated her work outside the Canadian literary establishment. As a result, Joe's poetry occupied, and continues to occupy, a precarious position within the context of Indigenous writing in Canada. It is fitting, then, that the publisher of Joe's second collection should be Libby Oughton's Ragweed Press. Dedicated "to publishing writing by women whose works exploit acts of resistance, both personal and political, sensual and cerebral," Ragweed's commitment to publishing avant-garde and activist writing by women aligned with Joe's "greatest wish" — "that there be more writing done by minorities" ("The Honour" 269). At the same time, the press struck a balance between localism and cosmopol-

itanism, supporting regional authors while also encouraging submissions from national and international writers and catering to local audiences while also securing shelf space for its publications in feminist bookstores across Canada. Ragweed was thus well positioned to produce and market Joe's collection without sacrificing editorial and authorial autonomy to the dictates of the marketplace.

Based in Charlottetown, Ragweed for more than three decades was the sole publisher in Canada's smallest province. The origins of Ragweed can be traced back to 1973, when Harry Baglole founded a small press "as a reaction to Central Canadian presses' evident lack of interest in 'regional' or 'local' stories" (Ledwell). Throughout the 1970s, Baglole's Ragweed produced several books of local history, literature, and art, "titles that would reflect the provinces and Atlantic Canada's life and culture" (Nowlan). In 1980, Baglole teamed up with Oughton, a recent émigré from Toronto, and the two incorporated the company, making it official and expanding it to fill the niche left by the recent demise of Reshard Goul's Square Deal Publications (Johnson 96). Baglole soon moved on to other projects, and Oughton became the sole owner and publisher of Ragweed.

Under her direction, the press saw unprecedented success for an island publisher. Oughton soon established gynergy, an imprint of Ragweed devoted exclusively to the publication of feminist and lesbian fiction (MacSkimming 264). Her commitment to giving women writers a voice within the male-dominated Canadian publishing industry allowed the press to avoid what Férre-Rode identifies as the "inescapable" "dilemma of regional publishing": "Entrenched very early in a strong regionalist mandate that was the basis of its legitimacy and originality, and concerned from the outset, out of both desire and necessity, with preserving its regional distinctness, publishing in Atlantic Canada set its own limits on expansion" (181). Welcoming submissions from across Canada and beyond, Oughton established connections with bookstores in Canada's urban centres, breaking down the barriers that so often forced regional writers out of the country's peripheries and into central Canada in search of greater remuneration and larger audiences. As Carole Gerson observes, "the dual imprint of Ragweed/gynergy . . . illustrates both the multiple focal points of feminist publishing and the ingenuity required to keep such a press alive" (321). Oughton was successful not because she rejected the localism that had characterized

Baglole's operation of the press but because she fused that localism with her devotion to publishing literature by minority and women writers from within and outside the region, publishing everything from children's books and local histories to radical tracts and avant-garde fiction.

Oughton's wide-ranging list moved beyond a strictly regional focus. Oughton was well aware of Canada's politics of the centre and the disadvantages that came with publishing from Canada's geopolitical margins. Nevertheless, she was also aware of the advantages of being a regional small press without a strictly regional focus. As Harold Adams Innis observes in *Changing Concepts of Time*, "the conservative power of monopolies of knowledge compels the development of technological revolutions in the media of communication in the marginal areas" (78). Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest and, arguably, most marginal province, provided a sociocultural climate conducive to the development of unconventional publishing ventures such as Ragweed. Oughton thus resisted the "trend towards centralization" that, according to Innis, accompanies "the development of . . . new medi[a] of communication" ("Plea" 48). Writing to Toronto's *Fuse* magazine in 1985, Oughton affirmed her allegiance to regional small press publishing in a letter tellingly titled "Central Errors":

> Many thanks for the fine review of Penny Kemp's book, *Binding Twine*. . . . I would appreciate, however, that in your listings at the top of the review . . . you would correct the reference to Ragweed Press (Toronto). We publish all of our books out of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, a place not particularly well-known in Toronto for its politically committed publishing on women and other subjects. Actually, I begin to realize that it is often the regions, and the smaller publishers who *do* take on unusual or difficult books, rather than the large publishers of Toronto.

For Oughton, then, the peripheral location of the press was not unfavourable but advantageous. Unencumbered by a desire to achieve broad national sales and free of the pressure to conform to literary trends, Ragweed encouraged experimental and politically activist writers as well as those underrepresented in the white, predominantly male world of Canadian literature.

Given Oughton's politically committed publishing policy and her willingness to take on "difficult" books, it is perhaps unsurprising that, when Joe submitted her manuscript to Ragweed in 1987, Oughton was

immediately interested. She accepted the manuscript for publication and outlined in a letter the rigorous editorial process that the press would undertake in cooperation with Joe:

> We feel that the rest of the manuscript will require considerable editorial work, whereby we would make suggestions to you about improving the poems and these are suggestions you are free to use or reject. This is a long process that often takes a year or so, and requires much hard work by both Ragweed and yourself. . . . If you felt that you could do the work or would like to try it then I would send you 3-4 poems with editorial suggestions for you to see whether you liked doing the revisions, whether it was a good and creative process for you. (1)

Evident here is Oughton's dedication to working closely with Joe to improve the manuscript for publication while allowing her the final decisions on changes and revisions. This balance between authorial autonomy and editorial guidance proved to be highly favourable for both Joe and Ragweed, and the letter marked the beginning of a professional relationship that would last for more than a decade. Of course, Joe was willing to do the work, and the result was her most striking and fully formed collection, *Song of Eskasoni*.

After providing Joe with minor suggestions on how to improve the manuscript, Oughton gave a copy to Coast Salish poet and author Lee Maracle, who agreed to edit the collection (Joe, "Rita Joe" 251). Maracle was impressed by Joe's verse and thought that no further editing was necessary, writing in the editor's note to the collection that "to discard a turn of phrase or re-write a verse of poetry not penned by the self can be hazardous. The inner spirit of the poet is violated somewhat by the carving of the editor's pen" (10). If Joe had been born as a writer with *Poems of Rita Joe*, she reached maturity as a writer with *Song of Eskasoni*. Comprising sixty-one poems of varying lengths, the collection was divided into six sections, roughly corresponding to the subjects of the poems: (1) "To Be Poor This Was No Crime," (2) "Talking," (3) "I Lost My Talk," (4) "The Motherland," (5) "The Empty Page," and (6) "Inside My Soul."

In every section, but particularly in sections 2, 3, and 5 — "Soapstone Carvings," "Stone Writings," and "Micmac Hieroglyphs" all appear in section 3 — Joe navigated the landscape, literal and figurative, of Mi'kmaw cultural forms. The collection thus exhibits a movement

from the representative capacities of Mi'kma'ki to the varied communicative forms — beaded *pisuaqn*, hieroglyphs, wampum, pictographs, soapstone carvings, woven baskets, and more — that colonial histories had either deemed illegitimate or disregarded altogether. To those forms, Joe added her own voice, her own impressions on the page. "Rita Joe's poems," wrote Maracle in her note, "pen for the reader that most important love of all — love of people in their quest for a just society" (10).

Despite Oughton's sale of the press to Louise Fleming in 1989, Joe would go on to publish two more books with Ragweed Press, a collection of poetry, *Lnu and Indians We're Called* (1991), and her autobiography, *Song of Rita Joe* (1996). Apart from her work with Ragweed, Joe also published a collection, *We Are the Dreamers*, with Breton Books in 1999 and co-edited *The Mi'kmaq Anthology* with Lesley Choyce and his small press, Pottersfield Press. Joe's final two collections are not my focus here, but it is worth noting that in these later collections Joe remains committed to articulating her poetics of continuity while also engaging new forms and subjects. *Lnu and Indians We're Called* invokes the same connections among land, stories, and communal identity that Joe communicates in her first collection. This continuity of focus is reinforced through the reiteration and expansion of her 1978 poem "I Am the Indian" as "Analysis of My Poem: 1" and "Analysis of My Poem: 2." Meanwhile, Mi'kma'ki and *weji-sqalia'timik* are central to the poems "The Hidden Fence," "On Being Original," and "Chapel Island Today." Joe's exploration of specific material forms, and her self-conscious meditations on the act of writing, are exhibited in poems such as "The Art of Making Quillboxes," "Indian Sketch," "Minuitaqn," "Sarah Denny," and "Keskmsi'." Yet the collection also demonstrates the growth of Joe's poetics through the inclusion of both highly confessional and highly politicized poems, tackling contemporary racism and prejudice through direct references to personal experiences and specific, ongoing Indigenous issues. "Kluskap O'kom" protests the development of an industrial mining quarry at Kellys Mountain, Nova Scotia, that threatens to destroy Mi'kmaw petroglyphs. Both "Migration Indian" and "Free Trade" explore the impingement of neoliberal economic initiatives on the lives of individuals through the experiences of Mi'kmaw migrant labourers. Finally, "Oka" and "Oka Song" directly confront the Oka Crisis of 1990.

This focal shift to more contemporary issues also marks *We Are the Dreamers*, which offers fifty-two new poems. Many of the poems continue to treat Mi'kmaw cultural production but with a more distinct focus on language, linguistic colonization, and translation. "Ankita'si (I Think)" is exemplary of this new focus. Moreover, *We Are the Dreamers* is significant for its structural evocation of Joe's poetics of continuity: the collection is prefaced by the first poem from *Poems of Rita Joe* ("I Am the Indian"), accompanied by a note that orients the text toward the future, "the endless trail into another century" (1). The collection reprints *Poems of Rita Joe* in its entirety but places it after the fifty-two previously unpublished poems. The effect is a revitalization of Joe's earliest collection; it appears to be textually unchanged but is necessarily regenerated and refashioned through its juxtaposition with the new poems that precede it. *We Are the Dreamers* thus brings Joe's oeuvre full circle, placing all of her collections into a dialogic relationship in which older poems are given new salience through their invocation in subsequent collections.

In every instance, the publication of Joe's poetry resulted from a close collaboration between Joe and the editors of periodicals and small regional presses. What her work with *The Micmac News*, Abanaki Press, and Ragweed Press reveals is the close correspondence between her poetic project — her desire to contest and augment colonial histories without focusing on the negative — and the cooperative principles that guided small press publishing in the region. Working with small regional presses afforded degrees of collaboration and autonomy that Joe would not have found as an emerging writer working with a larger commercial press. Furthermore, it was not only their willingness to publish but also their dedication to encouraging and cultivating her poetics of continuity that helped Joe to develop the aesthetic, affective, and political dimensions of her work.

From her earliest publications in *The Micmac News*, through her brief but formative experience with Abanaki Press, to her long-standing relationship with Oughton and Ragweed Press, Joe was able to develop and rely on a close network of writers, publishers, and readers committed to fostering emerging talent and providing outlets for authors whose work often challenged conventional, mainstream wisdom and practice. Her oeuvre itself thus becomes the most potent testament to the continuity that Joe ascribes to Mi'kmaw cultural expression. Her work does

not supplant those earlier Indigenous forms but enters into a dialogic relationship with them, acknowledging their organic dynamism and affirming their continuing relevance to authors today. Of course, publishing with alternative periodicals and regional presses has its disadvantages as well: currently, none of Joe's poetry collections remains in print. Nevertheless, the impact of her work has not diminished. Joe's poetry continues to be anthologized widely in collections such as *Native Poetry in Canada* and, more recently, *The Mi'kmaq Anthology Volume 2* (2012). Finally, the recent Rita Joe National Song Project, which premiered in January 2016, has given new life to her poems, with the expressed intention of meeting the challenge that Joe posed to Indigenous youth in her 1996 autobiography "to find their voices, share their stories, and celebrate their talents" (National Arts Centre).

Notes

[1] Line numbers are used where relevant for quotations from Joe's poems.

[2] Following the Smith-Francis orthography, the word "Mi'kmaq" functions only as a plural noun, while the declined form "Mi'kmaw" functions as both a singular noun and as an adjective. However, titles and quotations that use "Mi'kmaq" or "Micmac" as an adjective have been left unchanged.

[3] Danielle Fuller's *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada* (2004), Sam McKegney's *Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School* (2007), Emma Larocque's *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse 1850-1990* (2010), and Herb Wyile's *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Atlantic Canadian Literature* (2011) provide the most in-depth critical treatments of Joe's poetry to date, while McKegney's article "'I Was at War — but It Was a Gentle War': The Power of the Positive in Rita Joe's Autobiography" offers an examination of her autobiography, *Song of Rita Joe*. Each author has made an invaluable contribution to the study of Joe's work, but little attention is paid to her conceptions of Indigenous media and their intersection with the publication of her work.

[4] Incidentally, Francis, a linguist from Membertou First Nation in Cape Breton, was recruited by Abanaki Press in 1977 to work with Joe on *Poems of Rita Joe*. Francis assisted with the translation of Joe's poems from Mi'kmaq to English and from English to Mi'kmaq (Joe, "Monuments" 277).

[5] According to Gwendolyn Davies, Abanaki Press was "given [its] name by Bliss Carman who saw in the ancient tribe of the Abenaki the same affinity for 'water and wind and weeds and the human heart' epitomized by the Song Fisherman's poetry" (166). It is thus somewhat ironic that the reincarnation of the press should go on to publish Joe's first collection, which, though not entirely free of romanticization, directly challenges Romantic assumptions about the static, unsophisticated, and primitive character of Canada's Indigenous peoples.

[6] See, for example, Thompson's letters to Joe dated 26 June 1978 and 25 July 1978, in which Thompson outlines the conditions of Joe's contract, describes the promotional

material and posters that he "sent across Canada," refers to the press's arrangements with bookstores throughout the province, and even mentions an autograph session that he scheduled for 5 August 1978 at A Pair of Trindles, an independent bookstore in Halifax.

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