PAULINE JOHNSON: A RECONSIDERATION

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Without entering the debate on the necessity of the autonomous literary work, one may note that there are authors who make it difficult to separate their writings from their biographies or from the public personae they have created, personae which may often affect their artistic endeavours as much as the endeavours serve to build their images. Pauline Johnson was one such; not only did she mine her own past for content and for image, presenting that image, carefully groomed and trimmed, on the concert stage, but she asserted that her genetic history gave her the privilege of addressing certain subjects. This essay will consider Johnson's verse, a limited amount of her prose, and her published persona (somewhat informed by available biographical material) as pieces of an esthetic whole.

Johnson recounted much of her parents' biographies in the long story, "My Mother," in which apparently only the names of her parents and their immediate families were changed to provide a disguise to readers who would have no access to family details. In this, she relates the patriarchal brutality of her English grandfather, and though she does not speak of her mother's sexual tension, which biographer Betty Keller later uncovered (1981, 13, 20), we can suppose that it could easily result from such a sternly religious childhood. Through a sister who married a missionary, Johnson's mother, Emily Howells, met George Johnson, a competent and prominent Mohawk, who became a renowned chief. They married despite some resistance from both families. His efforts to end the whiskey trade on the reserve were effective enough that he was severely beaten more than once in attempts to stop him. Pauline, a sister, and two brothers were raised in a small mansion, and Pauline seems to have had access to both Mohawk and Anglo-Ontario culture. According to her fellow performer and travelling companion of many years, Walter

McRaye, Johnson early read Tennyson, Byron, Addison, and Shakespeare (26); Keller indicates that she had a rather extensive education for a young woman of her time (1981, 35), though it was likely an education primarily designed to produce an elegant wife. Why she did not marry is not clear, though there is some reason to suppose that the force of her parents' personalities kept her home until it was too late. Too late, that is, when her father died, leaving a mother unable to provide for herself. Johnson began writing verse in her mid-teens, was published in 1884 in a New York magazine entitled *Gems of Poetry*, and discovered near the time of her father's death that she was able to create a successful stage personality, reading her poems and, later, acting in brief skits. She immediately realized that this personality would be enhanced by an "Indian" costume which she made herself.

From 1893 until 1909, Johnson toured Canada, with excursions to Britain and the United States, first with Owen Smiley as manager and then for a longer period with Walter McRaye. Most writers who have written on Johnson since 1960 have preferred to refer to her as a performer, "an extraordinarily successful platform recitalist and comedienne" (Keller 1981, 1), rather than as a poet,[1] or have suggested that her poetry would have been improved had she avoided the stage, a view that Johnson at least acceded to. If one cannot passionately support her integrity as Clara Thomas did that of I.V. Crawford, "She set out to be a *writer*, to support herself and her sister and her mother by *writing*; in that she succeeded. It was not a small success, whatever the quality of her output" (131), one should note with Marcus Van Steen that " . . . in 1894, Pauline had pressing financial obligations towards her mother. It was, in fact, nagging poverty that made her embark on her recital tours that used up her time, and consumed her energies, during the next fifteen years" (24-25). The situations of the two writers were, indeed, similar. Johnson's response was undoubtedly more instrumentally rewarding, though this sort of venue was less immediately available to Crawford, who had no exotic stage angle. "Whatever the quality of the output" is the sort of phrase that has long plagued both writers, though it should be pointed out that Johnson at least managed to develop a voice that continued to move some parts of the public long after she had died and her verse had lost its appeal for academics. Her collected poems, *Flint and Feather*, remains the largest selling Canadian book of poetry (Hilts), one which remains in print in a popular edition, though

Charles Lillard ungraciously (and without offering proof) claims, " . . . the majority of readers (buyers is possibly more accurate) are tourists, grandmothers buying their childhood favorites for their grandchildren, and the curious" (155). Though Crawford has managed to achieve a strong reputation within some reading circles since James Reaney rehabilitated her in 1959, her *Collected Poems* are no longer in print, and her reputation rests upon a rather small proportion of her output. There are stretches of her work that many readers find as tedious as any of Johnson's smaller collection. Both writers undoubtedly suffered from a lack of contact with others who shared their poetic concerns, from the impositions of patriarchal society, from the demands of the popular market, or from their own uneven talents, but both have also perhaps been unjustly neglected.

When Pauline Johnson ceased to perform in 1909, she supported herself with writing, primarily fiction. She was, as Van Steen notes, better able to live by writing at this point than she would have been as a young woman, since her name was widely known and editors would recognize it when copy came over the transom (247). Johnson's mother had died in 1898, and it may be that she now intended to devote herself to writing. She may have been aware that the touring life, whether or not it still held attractions for her, would soon be impossible for her, since she was fatally ill. She died of breast cancer in 1913.

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Although Johnson always spoke of herself as an Indian (Keller 1981, 35), her right to the designation has been questioned. Chalmers claims that, although she was "legally" a Mohawk, "genetically" she was "three-quarters white," since there was white blood on her father's side, as well as on her mother's (25). These distinctions ignore the cultural problematic. What is an Indian? Regardless of its legal significance, the question is nonsensical. The "Indian" is a European invention unifying artificially a large number of groups of human beings who considered themselves autonomous and distinct (Berkhofer 23). Pauline Johnson herself was aware of this, declaring in her remarkable essay, "A Strong Race Opinion on the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction," that " . . . there seems to be an impression amongst authors that such a thing as tribal distinction does not exist amongst the North American aborigines" (Keller

1981, 116). Although she frequently claimed to be an Indian, as an adult she spent very little time among native people, virtually none of it among the Mohawk.

Johnson's father had eagerly absorbed white culture, to the point of taking Napoleon Bonaparte as his avowed idol. Upon his accession to chiefhood, a role which some Mohawks questioned because he had connections to the white government (serving as a translator), he was happy to dress in ceremonial costume, though this may have reflected a love of finery more than cultural dedication. Nevertheless, he was said to have worked hard for his people and, as we have seen, to have suffered attacks for that work. It is difficult to determine to what degree Pauline Johnson grew up acculturated as a Mohawk. An article she wrote for *Harper's Weekly* in 1894 does not necessarily offer the point of view of an insider. By ignoring her connections to the smaller group, Johnson rendered problematic her right to use the larger term. One suspects that she called herself "Indian" simply because the term "halfbreed" has always been opprobrious and the term "metis" was applied to French speakers, usually of Cree extraction. Pauline Johnson must have lived with considerable anomie, and though her sympathies for both sides of her ancestry may have been strong and her expressive capabilities genuine, the unavoidable tensions between those conflicting ancestries, not to mention the economic pressure upon the poet, are sufficient to account for the degree of semiotic confusion one finds in her work.

That confusion began with her stage presentation, indeed with her costume, a costume that was syncretistic to the point of being fanciful; she apparently designed it herself, with some input from her sister, and it featured an untailored left sleeve of draped rabbit skins, not unlike "primitive" outfits for sale at the Leather Ranch, as well as a neckline one would not expect to see in an anthropological collection. In some photos she wears a cape. It is frequently remembered that she wore a pair of scalps, but these are not discernable in any photographs I have examined. It became her custom to offer half a reading in this costume, returning after the interval in a white evening gown. As we shall see, her message, that white stereotypes about Indians were incorrect and unfair and needed to be recast, was, as Terry Goldie notes "ideologically undeveloped" (62), and we can see both the message and its confusion in this matter of dress. The stage demanded elegance as well as exoticism, and Johnson spoke at least once of her resentment that Indians were not accepted as educated people (Keller 1981, 235), but what would have been dignified wear among the Mohawk would not be recognizable as such in white theatres. Johnson had to work within the long established role of the Indian Princess, whether or not she perceived that it was inadequate.

The Indian Princess or Maiden is the "temptation" of Goldie's *Fear and Temptation*; the model goes back to Pochahontas in Virginia and Malinche in Mexico. Examining treatments by European ethnics of native peoples of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, treatments which he has found unsurprisingly similar, he notes that the semiotics of indigene signification most often carry violent or sexual baggage. "Often both are found in the same work, as in . . . *Wacousta* . . . , in which the warrior constantly attacks but the maiden is an agent to avoid that attack. They are emotional signs, semiotic embodiments of primal responses. Could one create a more appropriate signifier for fear than the treacherous redskin? He incorporates, in generous quantities, the terror of the impassioned, uncontrolled spirit of evil but of unrestrained joy" (15).

Although only a few of Johnson's poems deal with violence,[2] one encounters the claim that these are poems the public has chosen to remember. Margaret Harry complains, " . . . her most popular poems were not those in which she described the actual plight of the Indian in her time, but rather those which appealed to the romantic view of the Indian as a noble savage" (151). Harry's emphasis here is on the "savage" and her example is "Ojistoh," a stirring poem of revenge, honor, and, not incidentally, sexuality, which happens to be the first poem in both *White Wampum*, Johnson's first published book, and in *Flint and Feather*. Readers can be forgiven for remembering such a striking narrative that has been given such a prominent location.

However, no more than a half dozen of Johnson's poems can be said to offer violent portraits of native people, and in none is violence directed to whites. A white reader of "Ojistoh" might imagine the violence of both the treacherous Huron and the avenged, honorable Mohawk woman as potentially directed at him, but if there is an issue here other than the announced topic of the maintenance of honor, it would seem to be the working out of a diverted and uncomfortable sexuality. To adapt one of Johnson's later prose lines, rather than fear the voice of this poem as coming from an Indian, male audiences ought to have attended to it as coming from a woman.

The skein of sexual treachery and subversion here is tightly knit and complex. Ojistoh has been kidnapped because she will not betray her Mohawk husband. Readers with any feminist sensitivities will ask whether or not she has betrayed herself within that very relationship, in which she seems to contribute nothing, since the Mohawk ("whose name breathes bravery and life") is the source of all sustenance, and to display no virtue other than loyalty, sexuality, and marital purity, the last two of which sit together with difficulty. Ojistoh accepts the patriarchal model of femininity, though her misadventure gives her the opportunity to express, brutally, if not with political effectiveness, the rage that her acquiescence to this model has created within her. Ultimately, Ojistoh, having lulled her Huron captor into carelessness with his own stereotype of sexuality, asserts her right to power and equality by murdering him, metaphorically, with his own phallus. The Mohawk himself remains untouched, unimplicated; Johnson cannot attack patriarchy at its source.

> I, bound behind him in the captive's place,
> Scarcely could see the outline of his face.
> I smiled, and laid my cheek against his back:
> "Loose thou my hands," I said. "This pace let slack.
> Forget we now that thou and I are foes.
> I like thee well, and wish to clasp thee close;
> I like the courage of thine eye and brow;
> *I like thee better than my Mohawk now.*"
> He cut the cords; we ceased our maddened haste
> I wound my arms about his tawny waist;
> My hand crept up the buckskin of his belt;
> His knife hilt in my burning palm I felt;
> One hand caressed his cheek, the other drew
> The weapon softly — "I love you, love you,"
> I whispered, "love you as my life."
> And — buried in his back his scalping knife.

The mood of treachery here is as personal as it is systematic. Johnson's description of Ojistoh's caresses is given so lovingly that it is as difficult not to assume an erotic agenda on her part as it is not to find Ojistoh's duplicity disturbing. We will see that love is predominantly an unhappy experience in Johnson's poetry. "Ojistoh" is the most extreme expression of an intense passion that cannot be forgotten, cannot be tamed, and cannot be trusted.

Although Johnson names Huron and Mohawk as the tribes involved in "Ojistoh," she acknowledged elsewhere that the event actually occurred on the plains, and the wild ride of the antagonists does seem unlikely in an Ontario forest. Only rarely does Johnson produce characters or actions that are culturally representative of any tribe. One possible exception is "How Red Men Die," the second poem in *White Wampum* and *Flint and Feather*, one which undoubtedly confirmed many readers' suppositions about the bloodthirstiness of native people. This poem also deals with the established rivalry of Huron and Iroquois, which had such an effect upon the history of European colonization. In this case, a brave Mohawk has been captured and is made to walk on a bed of fire until he expires. Of course, he performs this last act of his life with great courage and nobility. The Iroquoian peoples of the eastern forests did historically torture captured enemies, but this practice cannot be compared to any within our ken, such as a Central American death squad practicing interrogation techniques on a beggar, in which experience the victim earns nothing by behaving "well" and may not even have that option, since the object of the practice is to learn to erase it. Captured Iroquoians could expect to be abused to death; they could also expect a large group of onlookers to honor their bravery if it were displayed. The concept is probably culture bound, and it might not be possible to translate it into iambic pentameter: "The eagle plume that crests his haughty head / Will *never* droop until his heart be dead." Where our generation laughs, earlier audiences shivered in horror, and likely Johnson's scalps and war whoops encouraged them to do so. But perhaps she realized that this was not what she was after, either, for only these two early poems have such extremes of violence.

Where violence occurs in her work, Johnson often attempts to demonstrate that whites need not fear Indians, that it was all a mistake. This is quite literally the case for "Wolverine," the narrator of which claims, "Them old Indyans [sic] ain't so bad, not if you treat 'em square." At least they were not so bad in the old days, though " . . . the Indyans now ain't like they used to be . . . ." The narrator's life is saved by an Indian named Wolverine, who is shot by a group of whites as he is attempting to return to them goods which have fallen off their carts. They think he is attacking them.

"The Cattle Thief" is more direct, acerbic, and successful.[4] In this poem, a group of whites ("English") track down and shoot a Cree cattle thief. They are planning the mutilation of his body, when his widow appears and reproaches them with an unhumorous variant of the traditional complaint that when the white man came, he had the Bible and the Indians had the land, and by the mid-Nineteenth Century, the Indian had the Bible and the white man had the land. Her cry, "When *you* pay for the land you live in, *we'll* pay for the meat we eat," is both passionate and appropriate, although the number of Indian cattle thieves was never large and only sometimes politically coordinated. It must have been all too easy in turn-of-the-century Canada for audience members to take the poem quite literally and slough responsibility for the native people's situation, since very few if any of them had ever shot, much less mutilated, rustlers, native or otherwise.

Perhaps one reason "The Cattle Thief" remains a moving poem is that it is cast in ballad meter, iambic tetrameter/trimeter; though the lines are stretched out to incorporate all seven beats in one line, turning the line break into a caesura, the pulse is more germane to the content. Early writers, particularly English critic Theodore Watts-Dunton, occasionally spoke of echoes of the native voice in Johnson's work (xi), but they were never able to be specific; it is unlikely that they knew anything at all of the conventions of native people. There may be none at work in Johnson's verse. However, by her time, the techniques and commonplaces of Anglo-Canadian folk verse, as well as the early output of Tin Pan Alley and other popular music venues, would have been common in areas where natives lived, and native people would more often have heard the four/three beats of ballad meter than the iambic pentameter of academic verse.

Johnson returned to iambic pentameter for "A Cry From An Indian Wife," which, despite her rhymed couplets, seems to have been meant for public reading as a sort of indigenous Shakespearean monologue, complete with hesitations and shifts of argument. Johnson's here offers a character who can "see both sides" of the conflict, as a rhetorical inducement to her listeners to consider matters from the native perspective. The soliloquy is presented as Middleton's troops are marching west to crush the Riel Rebellion of 1884, though the Metis themselves are not mentioned in the poem. The wife first counsels her husband to join the fight against the troops from Ontario. She relents, imagining that " . . . their new rule and council is well meant. / They but forget we Indians owned the land . . . ." Then she realizes that the whites would have no sympathy for her or her husband, so she tells him to go, until she thinks that all of those soldiers are also husbands and sons, and she would not have him cause wives and mothers to grieve. . . . She eventually sends him off to war. As with "The Cattle Thief," her situation is far enough in the past and specialized enough to be irrelevant, and her narrator's vacillations might have struck her original audiences as human, warm, and reasonable, but both her lack of singlemindedness and her historicity may have allowed them to see her predicament as sufficiently distant to require tears, but not involvement.

Pauline Johnson's assessment of Indian/white relations may have been politically incoherent, but it did not lack instinct. Her perception that religion was a major concern both for her people and their oppressors was accurate (and, given her family history, one she was in a good position to make), but she applied this useful insight unevenly. Her father, a zealous Christianity among his many acculturations, at least once interrupted a Mohawk ceremony, destroying paraphernalia and stealing the head of an idol, which remained a family heirloom throughout Johnson's life (Keller 1981, 11). Whatever her religious beliefs may have been, it is as difficult to discount her charges against Christianity as a repressive force as it is to ignore the five poems on Christian themes in *Flint and Feather*. As Elizabeth Loosely would have it, "In her prose, she wavers between an almost violent antipathy towards the Christian faith, but without any seemingly deep commitment to it" (87). Commitment can only be measured subjectively, but if this verse from "Brier: Good Friday" does not bespeak a serious involvement with Christianity, then the charade calls into question any statement the author might make:

> Because, dear Christ, your tender, wounded arm
> 	Bends back the brier that edges life's long way
> That no hurt comes to heart, to soul no harm,
> 	I do not feel the thorns so much to-day.

Johnson synthesizes her attraction to and repulsion from Christianity in the short story, "Her Majesty's Guest." In this story, narrated by a white man who runs rum onto the Mohawk reserve, a scoundrel whom Johnson cannot resist turning into a sort of gentleman in his own right, the young adult son of the reserve missionary appears to have developed at college a taste for alcohol as well as some serious gambling debts. Believing that the Mounties are on to him, the narrator offers the youth a substantial sum to assist him in diverting them. The youth's involvement in the plot is a front, an opportunity for him to get at and destroy the whiskey, and indeed his whole degeneration has been a masquerade, since he was suspicious of the narrator from the beginning. The plot of the story allows Johnson to have her anti-clerical cake and eat it, too, for although Christianity is true to its ethics at the end, she is able to get in some good whacks at it, including some hackle-raising moments when it seems that the college boy is truly going to murder a young Mohawk woman who has discovered his connection to the bootleggers, a possibility that horrifies the law-breaking narrator. In later days, the melodrama became laughable and politically incorrect, to put it mildly, but it may well represent a sincere wish on the author's part that the two sides of her ancestry, especially the Christianity which has clearly failed to live up to its finest promise, would redeem themselves. This story is one of the first in the literary history of North America to bring native people into real time, to consider their current situation, though with the exception of the Indian girl, the main characters are all white. Perhaps because the seamier side of contemporary native life was too unpleasant for Johnson to face up close, having been raised sheltered from it. All the more reason, perhaps, to credit her for raising it at all.

Christianity does not fare so well in all of her stories. In "The Derelict," her solution to a difficult ethical dilemma turns away from established religion. The scion of a prominent British family, a missionary in Canada, falls in love with a half blood woman and wishes to marry her, but finds the decision a difficult one, since she is accused of theft, and to marry a thief would dishonor his Church. He determines to marry her, dishonor or no, but must attend to a dying Indian before he can speak to her or announce the marriage. This Indian confesses, clearing Lydia's reputation, and the protagonist asks her to be his wife. She is " . . . great enough not to remind him that he had not asked . . . until her name proved blameless, and he was great enough not to make excuse of the resolve he had set out upon just when August Beaver came to turn the current of his life." His happiness is shattered when his Bishop explains to him the seriousness of his offense against the dead man, broadcasting the proof of Lydia's innocence. He leaves the interview convinced of his worthlessness, but Lydia clings to him, and the two marry. The final sentence is its own paragraph, "But, of course, the Bishop took away his gown."

Johnson certainly stands with the organic needs of the lovers, rather than with the institutional needs of the Church, but she nevertheless reveals the necessity of the Church's rules, having the Bishop declare, "Who could trust again such a man as you have proved to be. . . ?" The Church of redemption ironically has no ability to redeem the individual or trust that he can change. Having no other political response before her, Johnson takes refuge in the nuclear family, which is a revolutionary act of sorts, countering bourgeois institution against medieval institution, though that she saw no third option suggests that she was as alienated from her tribal ancestry as from the social theories of her day. The ambivalence of her final sentence, while it rejects the Church's inflexibility, does not deny the legitimacy of the Bishop's concerns.

"The Derelict" focuses upon the male protagonist. "As It Was in the Beginning" is told by an Indian woman and is perhaps Johnson's most bitter condemnation of Christianity. The protagonist, having grown up in a Protestant boarding school, falls in love with the nephew of the Blackcoat, Father Paul, who is called "St. Paul," for his kindliness. Father Paul's nephew, with whom Esther has been raised, reciprocates her love, and the two expect to marry, though they have not declared so, even to each other. Esther overhears Father Paul counsel the nephew away from the match, because "My whole heart is with the Indian people, my son; . . . *but it is a different thing to marry with one of them.*" Esther fulfills the hypocrite's prophecy ("You can't trust her.") by murdering the young man in his sleep. At last she escapes to her tepee and the wilds. Perhaps Johnson saw Esther's final comments as defiant:

> They account for it by the fact that I am a Redskin.
> They seem to have forgotten I am a woman.

As appealing as this insolence may be, without a political foundation, the rhetoric only confirms the weakness of both positions.

Pauline Johnson herself must have suffered the contradictions manifest in her art and presentation. To the extent that she identified herself as an Indian, her several poems expressing the Vanishing Red Man theme ("A Cry From An Indian Wife," "The Happy Hunting Grounds," and "Silhouette") may have had a special poignancy for her, since she had no children herself and so embodied in her own life this theme. Any commentary upon her romantic affairs (or lack of them) is rather speculative,[5] but one may suppose that as a young woman she had been aloof from the Mohawks and then discovered herself to be both too Indian and too much the actress (she was, after all, in three marginalized groups) to wed easily or well in the white world. The glamor that she experienced on the stage likely would have intensified the unhappiness of her situation, and her middle-aged portraits with her chin stuck in the air in a posture that attempts to appear proud, even defiant, but in reality was struck to hide a doubling chin, are difficult to look at now, once the ruse has been noted (Keller 1981, 229). The economic and social status of a woman alone must have borne heavily upon Johnson. She was over thirty when she began touring, and regardless of how much pleasure she took, or did not take, in it, before long she would have had no choice but to keep at it. Unflattering photos could damage her ego and more; audiences paid, after all, to see the Indian Princess, not the Squaw.

More than a suggestion of her feelings about her state is revealed in *Flint and Feather*. Against only three lyrics that simply express love or delight in love, ten speak of unrequited, lost, or at least clearly past tense love. This count includes only lyric poems, so the Indian narratives, which more often speak of barriers to mating (if not to intercourse) must be counted above this. We have already seen the ferociously destructive expression of "Ojistoh," in which touching lies as much as words or the gaze. Violence, love, and Indians are again brought together in a later poem, "The Archers," in which an Indian manhunter is compared or contrasted (the effect is as uncertain as the intent!) to Cupid blindly shooting for "mischief." In another, "Your Mirror Frame," she accepts symbolically a position in a harem, her photo among the many that line the lover's mirror, although she derives from the relationship neither personal intercourse nor the economic benefits of marriage, nor even the social potential of a genuine harem, since she expresses competition, not community, with the other women in question: "I think I have the best of them." Love seems not to have been a happy experience for Pauline Johnson.

Ellen Moers has suggested that, rather than the lily ponds of Isabella Valancy Crawford or the jungle flowers of Georgia O'Keefe, women's perception of their own sexual topography is best expressed by the " . . . hilly, high-lying, and hard . . . female landscapes of literature . . ." (257). She does not deny the sexual attraction of low, wet lands, although she claims that they do not correlate with women's happiest sexual experiences: "The gardens in [Willa] Cather's work—the lush marsh at Sweet Water, in *A Lost Lady*; or the garden under the mulberry tree in *O Pioneers!*—are scenes of passion and cruel violence; they are very different from Cather's landscapes of female ecstasy out on the open prairie or the mesa" (263).

Johnson does not exclusively site unhappy love in the wet lowlands, but since that is the predominant sense of love in Johnson's work, Moer's suggestion seems applicable. A reader is struck by how many of Johnson's poems, particularly the love poems, employ rivers, ponds, lakes, and even the sea. The canoe is often the site of her lovemaking, or of the memory of it, and when Dorothy Farmiloe thought to aggrandize Crawford at Johnson's expense, claiming that in the latter's verse, a paddle is just a paddle, she had not noticed the (presumably masculine) voice of "Re-Voyage":

> Have you no longing to re-live the dreaming,
> Adrift in my canoe?
> To watch my paddle blade all wet and gleaming
> Cleaving the waters through?
> To lie wind-blown and wave-crested, until
> Your restless pulse grows still?
>
> . . . .
>
> Ah me! my paddle failed me in the steering
> Across love's shoreless seas;
> All reckless, I had ne'er a thought of fearing
> Such dreary days as these . . . .

"In the Shadows," the poem which first caught Watts-Dunton's eye and began Johnson's British reputation, describes such a lush lowland as Moers speaks of:

> On the water's idle pillow
> Sleeps the overhanging willow,
> Green and cool;
> Where the rushes lift their burnished
> Oval heads from out the tarnished
> Emerald pool.

As so often, it seems, Johnson is alone in her canoe, amid the fecundity:

And the perfume of some burning
Far-off brushwood, ever turning
        To exhale
All its smoky fragrance dying,
In the arms of evening lying,
        Where I sail.

Even the happiest and perhaps sexiest of her love poems, "The Idlers," in which consummation is undeniable,

But once the silence breaks,
But once your ardour wakes
To words that humanize this lotus-land;
So perfect and complete
Those burning words and sweet,
So perfect is the first kiss your lips lay on my hand.

ends with a vague dread and unnamed loss:

The paddles lie disused
The fitful breeze abused,
Has dropped to slumber, with no after-blow;
And hearts will pay the cost,
For you and I have lost
More than the homeward blowing wind that died an hour ago.

In her poems, Pauline Johnson rarely deals with Moers' uplands, and when she does, as in "The Cattle Country," she seems not to have much to say about the land itself. She uses here shorter lines than usual—trochaic tetrameter/trimeter, with a single, stressed, syllable foot at the end of each trimeter line — that seem to zip by as though she is in a hurry to get out of the poem.

There is a rather spectacular example of this topography, however. In "At Crow's Nest Pass," she notes with a glee that befits her scalp-wearing, war cry-howling stage incarnation, " . . . the mountains rend / Themselves apart . . . . " For at least these three verses, she seems to have found a home and a role that is more than the merely poignant self-effacement she wrote in "Shadow-River: Muskoka":

Mine is the undertone;
The beauty, strength, and power of the land
Will never stir or bend at my command. . . .

Nor does she in "At Crow's Nest Pass" accept the assignment of her other work, which I will suggest is to help tame the land for recreational use; for once, she is part of the land, seeing from the mountain's perspective:

> The nesting eagle, discreet,
> Wings up the gorge's lone retreat
> And makes some barren crag her friend
> At Crow's Nest Pass.

But most often the poet remains at sea level, in the wetlands. If she does not admit to have known herself any of the brutality of the Indian poems, still there is a constant note, at least, of a quiet, cruel loneliness, as in the short and poignant "Goodbye":

> Sounds of the seas grow fainter,
> Sounds of the sands have sped;
> The sweep of the gales,
> The far white sails,
> Are silent, spent and dead.
>
> Sands of the days of summer
> Murmur and die away,
> And distance hides
> The long, low tides,
> As night shuts out the day.

That Johnson should have identified herself with nature is no surprise. Sherry Ortner has called our attention to a widespread tendency to view culture as the masculine domain and achievement and nature, that environment which must be tamed by culture, as feminine. Pauline Johnson was twice attached to nature: as a woman and as a native. Goldie's comments on the indigene and nature echo comparisons by Ortner, Sydie, and others on woman and nature:

> It would be possible to divide much of the semiosis of our society, if not all, between the semiotic fields of nature and art. That part of our environment which is not shaped by man and that which is . . . . The indigene is often used to present the possibility of nature in a human form. In the same way, the indigene's closeness to nature is used to justify an emphasis on the indigene as land. (19)

Remembering that Goldie identifies the Indian woman figure as Temptress,[6] we should add to this Sydie's comment, "It is not simply that nature, 'like' women, is to be subject to mastery but also that nature, again like women, is understood as a mysterious, unpredictable and, therefore, dangerous Other" (205). If that "dangerous Other" reminds us of Northrup Frye's "alien continent" by which one is "silently swallowed" (336), Goldie finds that the Princess/Temptress offers more than a carnival for the European libido,

> She represents the attractions of the land but in a form which seems to request domination, unlike her violent male counterpart who resists it. The image of the female as the receiver of the male power provides an explicit opportunity for the white patriarchy to enter the land. If . . . the sexual relationship is repressed or even denied she becomes still more explicitly object, as the domination is not through sexual 'interaction' but through the spectator-owner. And at all times she represents a passionate heterosexuality with the limited perversion of miscegenation—with all the tensions that, as Foucault shows, are productive of discourse. (65-66)

Goldie implicates Pauline Johnson at every turn. Not only could a sexual relationship with her result in miscegenation, she herself was the product of miscegenation. The allure of that "limited perversion," from the half-castes of the Raj to the quadroons of New Orleans, has been the subject of many discourses, from Noel Coward to Tennessee Williams.[7] The dominant gaze of the spectator-owner was as much a part of her costumed readings as of a stripshow. The stage produces and thrives upon repressed, or at least postponed, sexuality. And repressed or thwarted sexuality, we have already seen, formed a great deal of her content. In the case of "Ojistoh," particularly, revenge involved sexual arousal, quite possibly arousal of repressed disloyalty to patriarchy, if the narrator's admiration for the Huron is not entirely feigned. One wonders whether or not Johnson in her single-driver canoes did not project the sort of vulnerability that made Marilyn Monroe seem as accessible as she was attractive. Such would have constituted a clear invitation to enter, inhabit, nourish (as Foucault speaks of the nourishing state), and dominate the land. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Van Steen writes of Johnson visiting " . . . remote communities [which were, after all, at the leading edge of the domination] like a vigorous and refreshing wind from civilization, bringing not only entertainment but a vision of Canada stretching from sea to sea" (26). Roy Daniells finds in Johnson's Indian poems the intimacy between Indian life and western landscape" and in Johnson herself "a symbol which satisfies a felt need . . . to realize topography in terms of life . . . the fundamental fact of Canadian experience" (442). Two years after Johnson's death, J.D. Robins wrote of "the weird and fascinating legends of the soil . . . whose spirit breathes so strongly and beautifully through the work of Pauline Johnson. Of these we are the sole heirs . . . " (141). If Johnson's assignment was to tame nature and to pass it on to a white patriarchy, she seems to have succeeded.

Goldie sees the canoe (surely the most frequently recurring object in Johnson's verse) as a signifier of the native's connection to nature. "Even the most obvious aspects of the indigene's artifice are transformed into emanations of the natural . . . . Often the canoe is made to seem a simplistic evocation of nature in opposition to white technology . . . "(21). There is an element of this in the canoe's role in Johnson's poetry, but we should remember, first, that the canoe was still in her day a more useful means of transportation in many parts of Canada than it has been for many years. Nor had it yet been supplanted by the automobile as an erotic vehicle and portable bedroom. The erotic value of the canoe remained high, of course, throughout the Twenties, and there were likely many more people than Johnson and Crawford who saw paddles as suggestive instruments. Furthermore, we ought to consider our more recent understanding of the canoe, as a signifier of prowess, of success in urban life (which enables one to buy expensive Grummans and Kevlars), and of escape from our (apparently) successful urban lives—of recreation in nature, a concept that was new in Johnson's day, unknown to the generation before.

Throughout *Flint and Feather*, Johnson's share in the taming of the wilderness reveals itself as the development of this hobbyist enthusiasm. This is the venue of "The Song My Paddle Sings," her best known work but possibly the least interesting of her canoe poems.[8] In poem after poem, even in those warm valleys where she was less happy than she might have been elsewhere, Johnson offers us vignettes of a gentle nature which we pretend we do not wish to exploit so much as to visit, to "recharge our batteries," in a phrase commonly heard on the way to the woods: "Low Tide At St. Andrews" ("wrapped in all her summer harmonies"), "Lady Icicle" ("her pillow all aglow"), "Marshlands" ("Late cranes with heavy wing, and lazy flight, / Sail up the silence with the nearing night"), "Rainfall" ("the land, crisp whiteness of the nearing rain"), "The Birds' Lullaby" ("we drowse to your happy laughter"). Only in one poem, "The Wolf," does Johnson offer a nature red in fang and paw.

> His savage eyeballs lurid with a flare
> Seen but in unfed beasts which leave their lair
> To wrangle with their fellows for a meal
> Of bones ill-covered.

But her intent is not to support Darwinism. She neither admires nor accepts the wolf, "A worthless prairie vagabond." His killing and devouring of a settler's heifer (which may be astray but is *owned*) is performed "with savage greed and haste." This portrait justifies the European domination of nature in no uncertain terms.

Pauline Johnson must have been one of the earliest poets to write about camping. As do the assorted nature poems already cited, "Under Canvas: In Muskoka" portrays a non-Darwinian nature, a comfortable and lovely place to be. "The Camper" offers a new application of the Romantic intercourse with nature, a notion still common among outdoor enthusiasts: "And blinking overhead the white stars keep / Watch o'er his hemlock bed—his sinless sleep." It is nothing new to suppose that there is a redemptive power in nature, but prior to the industrial domination of nature, this usually involved some sort of trial, whether it be the Plains Indian vision quest or Jesus's days in the desert. Now, it seems, one need no longer wrestle a grizzly bear as Tay John did to find power; one can, again, dominate with a Benthamite gaze and thereby absorb the mana of the wilderness.[9]

The power of the gaze comes from the position at the center of the Panopticon, from the trigger, not merely the telescopic sight of a rifle, from the pocket change to buy a ticket to the peepshow. Who possesses only the gaze does not possess much. "Shadow River: Muskoka" presents an almost Prufrockian retreat from power ("I only claim / The shadows and the dreaming"). In "The Flight of Crows," she seems explicitly to find in her recreational view of nature the most powerless and irresponsible understanding of democracy: "Could I but live just here in Freedom's arms, / A kingly life without a sovereign's care!" In "Penseroso" she claims to find that "Soulless is all humanity to me," whereas "God's grey earth has no cheap counterfeit," and so she cries,

> Let me but feel athwart my cheek the lash
> Of whipping winds, but hear the torrent dash
> Adown the mountain steep, 'twere more my choice
> Than touch of human hand, than human voice.

Is it unjust to consider this a dereliction, a cheap response to the difficulties and complications of human society? Nature could only become this safe when it has been crippled by technology.

***

That Pauline Johnson's reputation has been subject to extremes of regard is well known. One may infer from Lillard's nastiness that the pleasure she long gave lay readers was, if anything, a reason for academics eventually to scorn her. They did not always, though. In 1933, Robert Ayre complained that Johnson had "quite disarmed criticism" and accused her academic fans of the previous era of "mauve patches as bad as her own" (17). As the public begins to forget Johnson, her work begins to received more critical appreciation than it has had for some time, though at a more modest scale. Margaret Atwood continues the tradition of countering Johnson's poetry to her performances, finding that her poetry evinces "considerably more sophistication" than "The Song My Paddle Sings" or her stage personality (xxxiv), but I would suggest that her stage show cannot be so easily separated from her poetic output and since we cannot see her performances, we perhaps ought not to dismiss them. Some highly respected popular singers perform in extremely stylized fashions (sometimes dressed as Indians!), and some sophisticated audiences consider their verbal art admirably complemented thereby.

Ethel Wilson, almost of Johnson's generation (when she was ten years old, she attended a Johnson reading), claimed that Johnson " . . . pursued a path of her own making, and did this with integrity until the last day of [her] life . . . " (60). In 1894, during the early period of her touring career, Johnson wrote to Mr. Harry O'Brien, who, she perceived, felt that she was debasing her poetic motive for the sake of commercial appeal. She confessed to him that this was so, that she was involved in "literary pot boiling," even "brain debasement," which she "hated" and "despised." She explained to him that she did what she hated because " . . . the public will not listen to lyrics, will not appreciate poetry, will in fact not have me as an entertainer if I give them nothing but rhythm, cadence, beauty, thought" (Beker 127). In more circumspect language, she hinted that poverty was the cause of her commercialization. She speaks of hating the laughter of her audiences, so presumably she is referring to the comic routines she engaged in with Smiley and McRaye, which have not survived, except perhaps as parts of the humorous description of a tour she and Smiley published, characterizing themselves as Miss Poetry and Mister Prose, in *The Globe* in 1894. None of her poems form this period are comic. Ironically, there is a recorded instance of her humor not being approved of by her audience. Two poems form the *Globe* item offended some poetry lovers. "His Majesty the West Wind," a response to her own, beloved, "The Song My Paddle Sings," was written after she had experienced a prairie wind in Manitoba (she had not been west when she wrote the earlier poem):

> . . . knowledge I was missing
> To write of something I had never known,
> That I had never experienced the driving
> Of western winds across a prairie blown.

Esthetes of 1895 did not care to see poets make fun of themselves. Furthermore, both this poem and "Little Vancouver" made use of slang, and poetry did not contain slang during that era. "For weeks, the pages of the literary journal *This Week* carried letters from readers debating her value as a poet" (Keller 1986-87, 20).

Arthur Stringer, in the condescendingly titled "Wild Poets I Have Known," wrote of watching and meeting Pauline Johnson. He considered her Indian stage costume an irrelevant accessory necessary to get public attention, but he was embarrassed by it. "The redeeming factor, in the case of Pauline Johnson, was that her verse was good verse. . . . But poetry is not a profitable vocation. The girl [Johnson began her career when she was thirty-one, remember] from the Brant Reserve had a living to make." Elizabeth Loosely, nearly twenty years later, tried to be gallant, writing of an "indomitable woman with her back to an economic wall. . . . . Let him who can barn-storm a continent, writing prose as well as poetry (with no help from the Canada Council) cast the first stone!" But she, too, is ultimately condescending to Pauline Johnson, and to her era as well: "There are indications that her talent was greater than contemporary modes of expression or the state of Canadian literature could convey" (89).

The less of Johnson's work one reads,and the less time one spends trying to comprehend the persona she created or the context in which she worked, the easier it is to sneer at her. Rewriting Lillard, one imagines that Johnson's detractors are not readers, but public school graduates with bitter memories of language arts classes.[10] Pauline Johnson did not avoid the cheapest stereotypes of the Indian; as Goldie points out, this is not possible: " . . . each text shapes the signifier according to its individual values and needs, but the commodities of the semiosis remain the same" (192). Johnson could not create new figures for the semiosis, new images of her people, the Mohawk, in part possibly because she did not know them as well as might be wished, possibly because she was not truly part of the nation at all, but ultimately because the figures are already inscribed. The suggestion will undoubtedly recur that Johnson simply lacked the talent needed to see beyond the inscriptions of her time, an accomplishment considered within the grasp of the first rate writer; we can comfortably allow Johnson a second level position without debating the assumptions of this suggestion and without denying the worth of what remains of Johnson's art. Pauline Johnson created poems and stories that strain against the semiotic boundaries imposed by the world she knew, as "Ojistoh" in the guise of adventure and cheap arousal raises serious questions about sexual regard and interaction, and "Her Majesty's Guest" in the act of accepting Christianity at its word fairly indicts it for not living up to that promise. And she was also capable of writing lines that ought to be allowed to resonate even in postmodern ears.

> Upwinds your pathway through the yellow plumes
> Of goldenrod, profuse in August blooms
>
> And o'er its tossing sprays you toss a kiss;
> A moment more, and I see only this—
>
> The idle paddle you so lately held,
> The empty bow your pliant wrist propelled,
>
> Some thistles purpling into violet,
> Their blossoms with a thousand thorns afret,
>
> And like a cobweb, shadowy and grey,
> Far floats their down—far drifts my dream away.
>
> "Thistle-Down"

NOTES

Special thanks are due to Helen Buss, the University of Calgary, for her insights and encouragement.

[1] Joan Crate begins her affectionate and affecting poetic tribute to Johnson, *Pale As Real Ladies*, with an unfortunate declaration to make to a poet: "It is not your words I want . . . . "

[2] In fact, only sixteen of her poems deal with undeniably native themes; twenty-nine have European-Canadian (or simply European) themes; twenty-seven are concerned with nature; thirteen with love.

[3] Johnson again accedes to the European refusal to allow native people into history. "In spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of North American lives, whites picture the 'real' Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of that contact" (Berkhofer 148). "The reified indigene is seen to put us into contact with pure prehistoricity. At the same time . . . the indigene is ahistorical because the field is usually removed from historical necessity" (Goldie 148). The Indian who cannot put us into contact with that prehistorical fount of worth is degenerate. The formula obviously accepts the lack of such "natural" virtue among whites as "progress."

[4] In recent years, Pauline Dempsey, a Blackfoot, has drawn tears from Alberta audiences with her recitations of this poem.

[5] Which has not prevented speculation. See Gerson 17-18, Keller (1981) 158-61, 171, 256, 268.

[6] He finds that the indigenous woman in fact contains both (and only) Squaw (Fear) and Princess (Temptation), though both manifestations are not always present. Squaw appears only rarely in Johnson's work, for example in the "The Cattle Thief" and "Cry From An Indian Wife." It was a figure Johnson was trying very hard to marginalize out of her own biography.

[7] An interesting point to consider is that the circumstances of Johnson's miscegenation constitute a worst case scenario among racists: the nonwhite male breeding with the white female. The consequences of this for Johnson's mother must have been considerable. Was Johnson's reception affected by this fact? Did it, for instance, increase the intrigue with which she was observed by women? To what degree did Johnson represent forbidden excitement to her audiences?

[8] Unless one chooses to attempt an extravagant reading of it, considering her unshipping of the mast to be a rejection of phallocentric sexuality and the canoe as emblematic of Luce Irigaray's "two lips" of the vagina. Remembering Irigaray's suggestion that " . . . woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's," we can perhaps read the poem as a masturbatory fantasy, looking for an orgasmic plateau rather than a climax. If we take seriously Johnson's later humorous identification of the "West Wind" as a prairie wind, we can visualize her trip occurring in a geography not dissimilar to Moers' uplands. In fact, a marginal note pencilled into the University of Calgary library copy of *Literary Women*, next to the author's description of "certain lands [that] have been good to women," suggests, "Alberta foothills, for instance." Difficult though it may be to justify, this interpretation makes a splendid little read, in which even the intrusive tick-tock short lines at the

core of each verse fulfill a sense function and seem less arbitrary.

A sympathetic reader would like to imagine that Johnson, for whom intersexual love apparently offered no more than transitory pleasure, was able to enjoy such flights of solitude.

[9] "We cannot tell about the hikes without mentioning the endless, superb views of the Rockies. Anywhere you hiked, any direction you looked they were just so varied, so spectacular and so spirit-nurturing. Arriving at the very top of Pipestone Ridge I could only echo, as possibly so many others have before, 'How Great Thou Art/.'' —Jean Burgess, "Hike #3" (Goldstrom 137). Edna Jaques, looking down upon Shadow Lake in 1935, wrote, "The cup of morning filled with wine, a sort of Holy Grail, / And us . . . Crusaders of the dawn . . . along the Sky-Line Trail" (Goldstrom 50).

[10] "Various forms of what might be termed 'parlour poetry' have used indigene images, usually fairy-like figures. . . . They might be described as 'Indigene as silly wood-nymphs.' Even Pauline Johnson . . . is now best known for just such lyrics" (Goldie 61-62). If Johnson is so remembered, it is only among people who have not read her work or who have forgotten what they read.

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