

“The Most Canadian of all Canadian Poets”¹: Pauline Johnson and the Construction of a National Literature

On March 10, 1913, the City of Vancouver publicly observed the funeral of Pauline Johnson with office closures, flags at half-mast, and a funeral cortege. Three days later, the municipal Parks Commission supervised the burial of her ashes in Stanley Park, which required special permission from the admiralty, as the land was officially still a naval reserve. Both events were without precedent, testifying to the amazing popularity of this part-Mohawk woman poet,² an appeal all the more remarkable for its occurrence in a national culture usually characterized as less than encouraging to women, to First Nations Canadians, and to literature.

In 1961, on the centenary of Johnson's birth, the Canadian federal government issued a commemorative stamp, rendering her the first woman (other than the Queen), the first author, and the first Native Canadian to be thus honoured. On this occasion, Vancouver newspapers cited a number of assessments by Canada's literary authorities. In his capacity as both poet and professor, Earle Birney dismissed Johnson as not “at all important in Canadian literature.” R.E. Watters, who had excluded Johnson from the scores of western authors gathered in his 1958 *British Columbia: A Centennial Anthology*, faulted her verse for lacking “philosophical or intellectual content” (as quoted by N. Hamilton). Robertson Davies described her poetry as “elocutionist-fodder” and Johnson herself as “not given to reflection,” thereby justifying the decision of A.J.M. Smith to omit her entirely from his 1960 edition of *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*.³ In a column for *Maclean's Magazine* reprinted in the *Vancouver Sun*, Mordecai

Richler derisively reported on the launch of McClelland & Stewart's reissue of Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver*. The same year, in his *Creative Writing in Canada* (1961), Desmond Pacey scorned her poetry as "meretricious" (68) and disdained from further consideration of a writer whose work he elsewhere described as "cheap, vulgar, and almost incredibly bad."⁴

The decline of Pauline Johnson's reputation, in the decades between 1913 and 1961, provides insight into the way Canada's literary identity and literary history were shaped by a characteristically nationalistic rendition of modernism whose echoes still resonate today. At the popular level, Johnson maintained a presence that kept her books in print and preserved her name in schools and schoolbooks, a chocolate company, and almost in a major Vancouver theatre.⁵ But at the level of elite culture, she experienced a dramatic downward trajectory. David Perkins claims that "[t]he possible plots of narrative literary history can be reduced to three: rise, decline, and rise and decline" (39). After discussing the context of Johnson's decline, this essay posits a fourth pattern that has become increasingly familiar in women's literary history—decline and rise—by proposing the recuperation of Pauline Johnson in light of current critical interests in race, gender, and Native Rights.

Twentieth-century literary canons, as we know from the analysis of critics like Leslie Fiedler, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and John Guillory, have for the most part been constructed by, or on behalf of, institutionalized education, especially at the post-secondary level. The canon of Canadian literature—as transmitted in colleges and universities—was confirmed from the 1950s through the early 1970s by several major projects whose goal was to legitimize Canadian Literature as a distinct scholarly field. Most influential in this process were Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952; rev. 1961), the establishment of McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library series (initiated in 1959), the multi-authored *Literary History of Canada* (1964; rev. 1976, 1990), Dudek and Gnarowski's *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (1970), and the final edition of Klinck and Watters' *Canadian Anthology* (1974). The overtly nationalist agenda of these various undertakings—to determine the uniquely Canadian features of Canadian writing—was underpinned by the academic high modernism in which their editors and authors (almost exclusively male)⁶ had been trained. Scorning romanticism and sentimentality, they valorized detachment, alienated individualism, elitism and formalism over emotion, domesticity, community,

and popularity, a binarism that implicitly and explicitly barred most of Canada's women writers from serious academic consideration. The literary history that these projects constructed was based not on what the majority of Canadians had in the past written and read, but on the elitist vision that prevailed among Canadian scholars and critics. Applying these principles to the 1920s, for example, Northrop Frye's vision of "the indifference of nature to human values" as "the central Canadian tragic theme" ("Preface" 171) esteemed A.J.M. Smith's poem "The Lonely Land" and Frederick Philip Grove's naturalistic prairie fiction over the much more popular—and therefore arguably more representative—fiction and poetry of L.M. Montgomery, Marshall Saunders, Nellie McClung, and Marjorie Pickthall. While male popular authors such as Robert Service and Ralph Connor received recognition in anthologies and reprint series as regional writers, their female counterparts were usually dismissed. Indeed, the endurance of Frank Scott's 1927 poem, "The Canadian Authors Meet," which mocks the female members of the Canadian Authors' Association, demonstrates the extent to which "poet" and "woman" were treated as incompatible concepts.

In my view, the single most powerful contribution to the erasure of early women poets from Canada's literary history was Malcolm Ross's anthology, *Poets of the Confederation*. Published in the New Canadian Library in 1960, this book not only reduced the complex field of early Canadian lyric poetry to four of Johnson's male peers, but also formalized the subsequently solid quartet of Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman and D.C. Scott as "The Confederation Poets."⁷ All, like Johnson, were born between 1860 and 1862 and achieved recognition in the 1880s and 1890s. Roberts always viewed Johnson as an equal: in 1895, he described her as "one of the acknowledged leaders of our Canadian group," and in 1933, he retrospectively identified the "men & women of the 1860 group (1860-61 & 62)" as "Carman, Lampman, D.C. Scott, F.G. Scott, W.W. Campbell, Gilbert Parker, Pauline Johnson,—also Helena Coleman & Albert E. Smythe."⁸ The authors of the spate of serious studies of Canadian literature published during the 1920s situated Johnson likewise: according to W.A. Deacon, she was "in skill, sentiment and outlook, one of the powerful 'Group,'" and wrote "with a mastery equal at times to the best of them, and seldom much below it" (164-66). Professors Logan and French judged her to be "[i]n some respects . . . the most original and engaging singer in the company of the Canadian lyrists who were born in 1860, 1861, and 1862" (195). Lorne Pierce

described her as “one of the most gifted singers of Canada” (79), and O.J. Stevenson found her “in one sense, the most Canadian of all Canadian poets” (148).⁹

For the next generation of cultural taste-makers, the reception of Pauline Johnson was inflected by representations of the Indian in popular culture. The rise of modernism in Canada coincided with the increasing commercialization of the image of the Indian princess, visually documented in the recent exhibit, “Indian Princesses and Cowboys,” which has appeared in Montreal and Vancouver. According to one of the curators, Gail Guthrie Valaskasis,

From about 1915 through the 1940’s, the dominant representation of the Indian Princess was the “red tunic lady,” a maiden draped in a red tunic, wearing the requisite headband and feather, and posed with mountains, waterfalls and moonlit lakes. These romanticized princesses which adorned calendars, advertisements, paintings and postcards—with names like Winona, Minnehaha, Iona and even Hiawatha—worked in consort with their male counterpart, the Indian warrior, to establish the historicized Indian as “one of the icons of consumer society” [Francis 175]. Calendar princesses, gazing wistfully or longingly, appeared in a remarkable range of poses and settings. There are paddling princesses and fishing maidens, sewing princesses and maidens of the feathers or the flowers; but most common are maidens . . . merely posed as imaginary Indians amid pristine, romanticized scenery. (27, 31)

Although Johnson was described as “poetess” far more often than “princess” while she was alive, the term “poetess” disappears after her death, with “princess” becoming the primary signifier. The seriousness of the first full-length study of Johnson and her works, published by Mrs. W. Garland Foster in 1931,¹⁰ is belied by its title, *The Mohawk Princess*, which not only describes Johnson’s heritage incorrectly, but also plays directly into the prevailing stereotype. Earle Birney’s dismissal of Johnson cited earlier in this essay includes the comment, “I don’t read her.” This statement raises the question of whether Johnson’s work was actually read by any of her 1961 detractors, given that by this time her image was so tainted by the category of Indian princess that no self-respecting mid-century man of letters would likely take her seriously. If we regard the metonymy literally, we can see that Earle Birney had indeed read “her”—as person—and that having read Pauline Johnson’s identity as the commodified Indian princess of popular culture, he rejected the notion that her poetry could deserve his attention. Birney’s statement replicates R.E. Watters’ decision to omit Johnson, as author, from his British Columbia *Centennial Anthology*, and to represent her instead with a 1952 *Maclean’s* article about her, titled “The Passionate Princess.”

During the 1930s, Johnson's admirers continued to praise her work in the pages of *The Canadian Bookman*,¹¹ the journal of the Canadian Authors' Association. However, in the more august *Canadian Forum* John Ayre assessed the subject of "the Pauline Johnson legend" as merely "a very genteel lady in a bustle who has nice thoughts about Nature and the proper sentiments toward love and yearning, motherhood, and the manly virtues," and "is no more Indian than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow."¹² The first extensive modernist treatment of Johnson, this article demonstrates that her devaluation was largely due to three features that make her especially interesting today: she was female, she claimed a First Nations identity, and she was amazingly popular. Attention to Canadian modernism's treatment of women, natives, and popularity assists our understanding of several important features of Canadian cultural history.

Gabrielle Griffin's comment that "woman constitutes high modernism's other" (9) is well illustrated in Canada. While many feminist and post-colonial critics have been deconstructing the history of American and British modernism in order to recuperate eclipsed female modernists as well as earlier women writers, in Canada so effectively has modernism "suppressed its origins" (Levenson xi) that far more Canadian scholars focus on modernism's relation to the postmodern than to the pre-modern.¹³ Canadian modernism's insistence on its own immaculate conception at McGill University in Montreal in the late 1920s led its proponents to pillory its female companions and precursors as "virgins of sixty who still write of passion" (to return to Scott's "Canadian Authors Meet"). The project of re-inscribing women writers into Canadian literary history challenges the self-fashioning of Canadian modernists: for example, could Irving Layton, the most outspoken iconoclast of the next generation of Canadian poets, have posed so vehemently as the inventor of eroticism in Canadian poetry if Pauline Johnson's "The Idlers" were better known?

Two landmark publications suffice to illustrate how, to cite Griffin again, "Boys will see boys, especially if they look like themselves" (2). The first is the 1936 anthology *New Provinces*, retrospectively canonized as a foundational monument in Canadian literary modernism.¹⁴ This assemblage of six male poets of the inter-war generation omitted Dorothy Livesay, the major Canadian woman poet of this period. Forty years later, Livesay attributed her exclusion to her political radicalism,¹⁵ yet two of the included male

poets, A.M. Klein and F.R. Scott, were also outspoken left-wingers (albeit not as far to the left as Livesay). The second book is Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski's *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, a 1970 collection of 55 articles, manifestoes, letters, and the like, of which only two were written by women (P.K. Page and Joan Finnigan). The missing female presence includes Louise Morey Bowman, Florence Randal Livesay, Floris Clarke McLaren, Dorothy Livesay, Anne Wilkinson, Constance Lindsay Skinner, and Elizabeth Smart.

In addition to misogyny, intellectual colonialism shaped the stream of academic modernism that became dominant in Canada. The well-known dispute over the preface to *New Provinces* evinces disagreement among its contributors concerning the extent to which the “new poetry” should be politically engaged; despite the rejection of his initial preface, the vision that triumphed was that of A.J.M. Smith. Smith's elevation of intellectually difficult “cosmopolitan” poetry over “provincial” romantic verse prevailed in his very influential anthology, *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, whose three editions (1943, 1948, 1957) established the canon of early and mid-century Canadian poetry that still obtains today¹⁶ and underscores the master narrative of Canadian modernism subsequently constructed by Dudek and Gnarowski. This narrative can now be seen to have incorporated those who apparently challenged it, as in the intellectual Marxism of John Sutherland's call for a national proletarian literature, and the egotism of Irving Layton's misogynist attacks on gentility (Prefaces). Sutherland's manifesto on behalf of poetry that is “the embodiment of the common man, completing in poetic terms what the average Canadian thinks and feels,” clings to a limited conception of the literary and a rather idealized notion of the interest of common men (and women) in “poetry on a high creative level” (60).

Another concept inflecting the modernist assessment of cultural value was a conflicted attitude towards material success. Canada's most influential modernist poets and critics upheld the ideology that “resisted the commodity-text” (Li 38) and “held art and money to be antithetical” (Wexler xii), an attitude reinforced by Northrop Frye's discomfort with popular writing, evident throughout his Canadian criticism.¹⁷ During and before the modernist era, popularity—and occasionally even commercial success—were offences frequently committed by women writers, such as Pauline Johnson, Nellie McClung, L.M. Montgomery, Mazo de la Roche, and Edna Jaques.¹⁸

To the mind of the academic modernist, poetry presented in costumed performances aimed at audiences of the semi-washed could not possibly inhabit the same realm as poetry published in small university-based magazines. Poems written for oral performance, which would have been dignified with the term “dramatic monologue” if authored by a Robert Browning, earned denigration as “elocutionist-fodder” (to return to Robertson Davies’s phrase) when penned by a Pauline Johnson. Today it is amusing to read the page allotted to Johnson in the *Literary History of Canada*, where the inability of modernist criticism to account for Johnson’s enduring appeal leads Roy Daniells into uncharacteristically tentative phrasing and puzzlement.

Further complicating the picture was Canada’s marginality in the larger spectrum of modernist culture. In a recent article on A.J.M. Smith, Sandra Djwa captures a major problem with a simple question: “could one be modern *and* Canadian?” (“Who” 206). Balancing the aim of Canadian modernists to ally themselves with the mainstream of British and American modernism was the desire to assert a sense of national distinction. This feat was accomplished by invoking geography to construct the trope of the empty land, usually humanized as the “lonely” land (Djwa “A New Soil”). Northrop Frye further mythologized this image into the hostile land, an inflection created by “an introverted boy who grew up in the relatively harsh climate of New Brunswick, and who in his early student days in Toronto lacked the money to buy warm clothes” (A.C. Hamilton 9). Now almost a cliché to most Canadians familiar with the painting of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, this view required the erasure of the First Nations to whom the land was neither empty nor lonely, a feat that Scott Watson argues was underpinned by a development agenda, and that Graham Carr suggests may have been assisted by the American-oriented continentalism of the major Canadian modernists.¹⁹ Whereas pioneer writing attempted to bring order to the wilderness by containing its representation within European conventions, modernist primitivism aimed to decivilize the land by depicting its elemental qualities. To be questioned is the extent to which the notion of Nature as challenging and even hostile is both masculine and urban, in that it elevates the lone male seer/adventurer—the hinterland *flâneur*—in his canoe with his pen or paintbrush, as master of the wilderness.²⁰ As soon as women glide into view, this picture is

disturbed: visually by Emily Carr, whose paintings of Coastal British Columbia are infused with images from First Nations cultures, and in poetry by Pauline Johnson, whose expertise as a solo canoeist was well publicized in her verse and her New Woman recreational journalism of the early 1890s.

Most remarkable about Indigenous Canadians in modernist art and writing is their virtual absence. Looking specifically at poetry, we can see that their sparse appearances fall into several categories. The dominant image is the Indian as museum piece, a remnant of the past. This depiction enters Canadian modernism with the transitional figure of Duncan Campbell Scott. As Deputy Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs, Scott collected West Coast Native art while supervising the repression of the potlatch, and administered the government policy of assimilation while naturalizing the disappearance of Native Canadians in elegaic poetry. Published regularly throughout his career, from the 1890s to the 1930s, were poems focussing on Indian women whose intermingling with white men poetically enacts the absorption and miscegenation desired by government policy.²¹ From Scott, it is not far to E.J. Pratt's epic *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940), much admired throughout Frye's Canadian criticism for the way Pratt's "Indians who martyred Brébeuf" represent "the capacity in man that enables him to be deliberately cruel" (*Conclusion* 845-46).

Rarer are poems that acknowledge the Indian in the poet's own present time. The alienness of Douglas LePan's "lust-red manitou" teetering at the conclusion of his well-known 1948 poem, "A Country Without a Mythology," was preceded by a more obscure articulation in Frank Prewett's "The Red Man" (1924). This poem describes the relation between Native and Euro-Canadian as utter incomprehension and unknowability, concluding: "His ways are strange, his skin is red / Our ways and skins our own" (5).²² A.M. Klein's "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga" (1948) may be the only occasion when leftwing modernism's call for social justice was extended in poetry to Native Canadians.

Modernism was most comfortable with Indians when they were cast as primitives and studied by anthropologists, whose salvaging of "original" native culture furnished materials to corroborate the modernist effort to discover new, more authentic modes of expression.²³ The connection between Imagism and the recording of Native American songs at the beginning of this century has been noted by several critics.²⁴ Indian poetry became especially visible in 1917 in a special issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), followed the next year

by *The Path on the Rainbow*, the first anthology of North American aboriginal verse. Consisting largely of translations by anthropologists, this book also included poems by several interpreters of Indian culture. Pauline Johnson, the only Native literary author, was admitted on the insistence of the publisher, despite the view of the editor that her poems “show how far the Indian poet strays from her own primitive tribal songs, when attempting the White Man’s mode” (Cronyn 162-63, qtd. in Castro 31-32). She was singled out in reviews and in subsequent criticism as “ironically, the most traditionally Western and the least Indian in both content and form,” an attitude still dominant in 1983, when an American critic studying primitivism in modern American poetry faulted Johnson’s work as “excessively romantic,” and having “little to do with actual Native American modes of life and expression” (Castro 31). Canadian critics who sought to valorize Johnson’s Indianness by placing her within the primitivist paradigm did so by reifying her self-dramatization. One person who knew her personally remarked that “She was in one way quite patrician in mind and spirit,” and therefore “not quite as primitive as she pretended” (Stringer). Others, nonetheless, preferred to accept her performance as—to cite the title of Henry James’ allegorical story about authenticity and representation—“The Real Thing,” and praised her embodiment of “the valkyrie-like wild passion of the traditional Red Indian” (Forster 234).

While 1961, the year of the Pauline Johnson centennial,²⁵ was not a high point in the general Canadian assessment of Native culture, Hartmut Lutz points out that the 1960s were to prove a foundational decade for the upsurge of Native writing that is underway today (“Canadian Native Literature”). Yet despite the groundwork laid by Betty Keller’s 1981 biography (*Pauline: A Biography of Pauline Johnson*), Johnson has been less prominent in this movement than one might expect. One reason may be that scholarly attention to Natives in Canadian literature began with critical analysis of representations of Indians in writing by white authors, hence the greater attention paid to Duncan Campbell Scott than to Johnson in 1980s studies by Leslie Monkman and Terry Goldie. In a 1985 article, Margaret Harry calls attention to the lack of critical interest in Johnson relative to that given to Isabella Valancy Crawford, a point restated five years later by George W. Lyon, whose thoughtful 1990 reconsideration constitutes the only sustained scholarly attention Pauline Johnson has received in Canada since Norman Shrive’s 1962 attempt to reconcile her romanticism with his

modernism.²⁶ The cluster of studies and anthologies of Canadian First Nations literature which appeared in the early 1990s allow Johnson a few pages apiece, to the extent that Margaret Atwood claimed in 1990 that “she is undergoing reclamation today” (“A Double-Bladed Knife”). Yet Johnson receives more deliberate reclamation in Atwood’s rather idiosyncratic 1991 Clarendon lectures on the North in Canadian literature than in the books specifically dedicated to Native writing, including the special issue of *Canadian Literature* in which Atwood’s comment appeared.²⁷ Perhaps most telling is the fact that Joan Crate’s fine volume, *Pale as Real Ladies: Poems for Pauline Johnson* (1989, 1991), remains virtually unknown, to the undeserved disesteem of both Johnson and Crate—who has also authored an excellent novel, *Breathing Water* (1989), which has similarly been overlooked. Moreover, all of Johnson’s titles have now been allowed to slide out of print, with the exception of *Legends of Vancouver*, which has appeared in a fresh 1997 illustrated edition aimed at Vancouver’s residents and visitors.

Several First Nations women authors, especially those in or from geographical regions associated with Johnson, write with an historical awareness of her achievements: in an interview, Lee Maracle commended Johnson’s handling of Joe Capilano’s voice in *Legends of Vancouver* (Lutz *Contemporary Challenges* 171), and Beth Brant, in a more extensive discussion, declares “It is . . . time to recognize Johnson for the revolutionary she was,” whose bequest is to have “walked the writing path clearing the brush for us to follow” (6-8). The focus on current writers shared by the contributors to Jeannette Armstrong’s *Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (1993) precludes attention to Johnson other than a few passing references. Non-native Canadian scholars, their perspective still shadowed by the modernist shaping of literary value and Canadian literary history, now work on current First Nations writers without much effort to recuperate their historical antecedents. However, the same cannot be said of our neighbours to the south, whose dragnet quest for Native American literary history has appropriated Pauline Johnson into the American canon.²⁸ Needless to say, their understanding of Johnson’s antipathy towards the United States, patriotism towards Canada and loyalty to the British Empire is rather limited.

A turn-of-the-century woman who both upheld and transgressed cultural codes and structures of a society in transition, Johnson is always highly mediated: by the reportage of those who wrote

about her, by her own various self-representations on stage and in her writing, and now by feminism and post-colonialism. In line with current interests in addressing and redressing historical power imbalances, I would like to conclude by discussing several poems that show that Pauline Johnson was not only “given to reflection” (in retort to Robertson Davies), but is especially relevant today, as we work to unravel constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, empire, value, and national literary history.

“A Cry From an Indian Wife” appeared in *The Week* 18 June 1885, during the Northwest Rebellion, between the surrender of Poundmaker (May 26) and the surrender of Big Bear (July 2). This poem marks Johnson’s first public self-positioning as native/woman/other, and is one of her few overt textual engagements with her own hybridity, albeit in this case the hybrid is the nation, rather than a person. This dramatic monologue’s self-interrogating and self-interrupting voice, as the speaker alternates between advocating the cause of the dispossessed Natives and expressing sympathy with the Euro-Canadian perspective, rendered it one of her most successful performance pieces. There is no acknowledgement of the Métis as a major element in the Northwest Rebellion; rather, the poem’s dramatic conflict oscillates across an unresolvable either/or, white/native binary, its tension underscored by an additional opposition of male and female that constructs woman as powerless to intervene in masculine warfare. In giving voice to the unnamed “Indian Wife,” Johnson demands recognition for the silenced figures of colonial history, a position reinforced by her revision of the ending for publication in *The White Wampum* (1895). The original 1885 version simply yields to divine and national destiny, concluding, “God, and fair Canada have willed it so.” However, the later version inserts three penultimate lines asserting Native rights, followed by a challenge to “the white man’s God” that locates the speaker outside European Christianity. In addition to the questions posed within this poem by its speaker and externally by its composition history, there is also a question of the larger social role assumed by the poet in that her description of a plains warrior as a “Forest Brave,” armed with knife and tomahawk, suggests the assumption of a pan-Indian identity. In other words, while writing as woman seems to have been a clearly defined position for Johnson in 1885, writing as Native appears to have been complicated by a need to speak for all Natives.

“The Song My Paddle Sings” (1892), along with Johnson’s other poems and prose about canoeing, awaits feminist rereading. Probably her best-known

poem, like much of Johnson's verse it is articulated in a first-person voice that accentuates the oral and performative presence of the speaker. As an expression of female agency, it celebrates the physical prowess of a solo woman canoeist fearlessly making her way through a sensual, wild landscape that hums with its own vitality, but whose challenges invite collaboration—the paddler and her canoe become “we”—rather than confrontation. The title metaphor of “song” suggests a harmonious relationship between paddler and river: the rapids that “seethe, and boil, and bound, and splash” are overcome by being “raced” rather than conquered, with the paddler then continuing in the river’s “silent bed” where the only sounds are the “tinkling tune” of bubbles and the “lullaby” of the wind in a fir tree on the hill. Here the canoe supplies a Canadian iconographic counterpart to the New Woman’s bicycle as a very physical symbol of freedom of movement. Moreover, the canoe, unlike the bicycle, can provide a site of sexual liberation,²⁹ as in “The Idlers” (1890) and a cluster of similar poems of such erotic power that one critic gendered the paddler of one poem, “Re-Voyage,” as “presumably masculine” (Lyon 148). The fact that there is surprisingly little contemporary and subsequent response to this aspect of Johnson’s work gives rise to a number of questions: was Johnson, as Native, permitted greater leeway in openly expressing sexuality during the decadent 1890s? Is the subsequent exclusion of these poems from the Canadian canon attributable to our legendary cultural puritanism, or to the race and gender of their author? Had they been written by Lampman (whose canoeing poems are scarcely erotic) or Roberts (known to have penned a naughty verse or two), would they now be taught and studied? And finally, why have critics so eagerly sought expressions of female sexuality in Isabella Valancy Crawford’s poetry while ignoring Johnson’s more explicitly erotic verse?

The canon has allowed the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott to represent Native concerns in early Canadian literature, while ignoring Johnson’s earlier advocacy in “The Corn Husker,” first published in 1896. This poem counterposes Scott’s well-known 1898 pair of sonnets, “The Onandaga Madonna” and “Watkewenies,” which likewise focus on a single woman as the embodiment of a people thought to be in decline. Like Scott, Johnson presents Indians as a people of the past—the woman is thinking only of “the days gone by”—but she also calls attention to the present—her people “to-day unheeded lie.” Unheeded, one might add, by the likes of Scott himself, as senior administrator in the Department of Indian Affairs. And whereas

Scott's poems place responsibility for the decline of indigenous culture on its own perceived weaknesses (promiscuity in "The Onandaga Madonna" and violence in "Watkewenies"), Johnson cites the cause as "might's injustice": a carefully crafted phrase which allows her to use the powerful word "injustice" while attributing its origins only to the abstract noun "might."

The Corn Husker

Hard by the Indian lodges, where the bush
Breaks in a clearing, through ill-fashioned fields,
She comes to labour, when the first still hush
Of autumn follows large and recent yields.

Age in her fingers, hunger in her face,
Her shoulders stooped with weight of work and years,
But rich in tawny colouring of her race,
She comes afield to strip the purple ears.

And all her thoughts are with the days gone by,
Ere might's injustice banished from their lands
Her people, that today unheeded lie,
Like the dead husks that rustle through her hands.

"Might's injustice": an appropriate phrase with which to close this essay. Rather than finish with a conclusion whose tidiness might belie the complexity of the issues that constellate around Pauline Johnson, I would simply like to end by leaving these words on the page, to demonstrate Johnson's relevance to current concerns with power, literary value, race, and gender, and to illustrate her challenge to the historical construction of Canadian literature.

NOTES

- 1 Stevenson 148. Research for this project was assisted by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 Most readers of *Canadian Literature* should be familiar with the basic details of Johnson's biography. She was born in 1861 on the Six Nations reserve, just outside Brantford, Ontario to an English mother and a mostly Mohawk father. Her first poetry and prose began to appear in periodicals in the mid-1880s; after a dramatic Toronto debut as a recitalist in January 1892, she embarked on a strenuous 17-year international career as a performer of her own work. Her first book of poetry, *The White Wampum*, was published in 1895 in London by the Bodley Head, followed by *Canadian Born* (1903), and *Flint & Feather*, misleadingly subtitled "The Complete Poems of Pauline Johnson," in 1912. Three volumes of her selected magazine and newspaper stories were published as *Legends of Vancouver* (1911), *The Moccasin Maker* (1913), and *The Shagganappi* (1913). She retired to Vancouver in 1909 where she succumbed to breast cancer in 1913.

- 3 In 1982 Margaret Atwood readmitted her, to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, with “Marshlands” and “Ojistoh.”
- 4 Pacey to Mrs. Olive Dickason, 6 March 1961, Desmond Pacey papers, MG 30 D339, vol. 2, NAC. See also Rashley, which barely acknowledges Johnson because she doesn’t suit his organizational scheme, and Bissell, which omits Johnson from his selection of seventy-five men and only nine women.
- 5 Other suggestions included Princess Margaret and Princess Anne; in a moment of civic inspiration it was eventually christened the Vancouver Playhouse.
- 6 A few women contributed minor chapters to the *Literary History of Canada*: Edith Fowke on folklore, Elizabeth Waterston on travel writing.
- 7 Janet Friskney, who is currently engaged in dissertation research (History, Carleton) on the New Canadian Library, has generously forwarded references to Malcolm Ross’s correspondence which indicate that the term “Confederation Poets” was his own coinage, beginning in 1954 when the volume was first contemplated, and confirmed in response to an enquiry in 1982. See S. J. Totten to Malcolm Ross; Ross to William Toye.
- 8 Roberts to Richard Watson Gilder, 12 October 1895; Roberts to Howard Angus Kennedy, 27 May 1933. Both are quoted in Boone 210, 449.
- 9 Her omission from Archibald MacMechan’s *Headwaters of Canadian Literature* (1924) may be attributable to MacMechan’s strongly Atlantic perspective.
- 10 The University of New Brunswick accepted the book in lieu of a thesis, and granted Annie Ross Foster (later Hanley) an MA in 1932.
- 11 See Walker, Foster, “The Lyric Beauty of Pauline Johnson’s Poetry,” and Foster, “Pauline Johnson’s Gift to Vancouver.”
- 12 The reference to Longfellow relates Johnson to the image of the commodified Indian princess, in that he was the source of most of the poetry on the postcards in the “Indian Princesses and Cowgirls” exhibit.
- 13 For example: Slemon, Hunter, and Neuman. Canada has yet to produce studies like the work of Bonnie Kime Scott, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Ann Ardis’s *New Women New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990); Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (1991); Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano, eds., *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers* (1996); and Gabrielle Griffin, ed., *Difference in View: Women and Modernism* (1994).
- 14 F.R. Scott recounted that “New Provinces sold only 82 copies in the first eleven months and 15 the following year. Of these I bought 10! Two years later I bought the remainders back for 0.18 cents apiece. The last of these I sold for \$25.00” (82).
- 15 See Wayne and Mackinnon (esp. 35-37, 16-18), who state that in the Dirty Thirties Livesay joined the Young Communist League, and Arnason.
- 16 See Gerson, “Anthologies.” Also note Desmond Pacey’s comment that “Smith . . . with E.K. Brown as his principal lieutenant, became the representative critic of the forties and fifties” (“Course” 21). According to F.R. Scott, “Northrop Frye has said [Smith] brought Canadian poetry into focus with his *Book of Canadian Poetry*, now in its third edition. This is no mean achievement for a man who, when I first met him, spoke disparagingly of all Canadian poetry then existing, with the possible exception of Bliss Carman” (81).
- 17 Despite his rejection of evaluative criticism in his international writing, evaluation was a consistent thread in Frye’s Canadian criticism, from his annual reviews of “Letters in Canada” in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in the 1950s, to his two influential conclusions to the *Literary History of Canada*, to his last speech before his death. See Hutcheon 110-12.

- 18 Charles Lillard's review of the 1987 reprint of *The Moccasin Maker* reproduces this attitude in his description of Johnson's readers as "tourists, grandmothers buying their childhood favourites for their grandchildren, and the curious." See also Gerson, "Sarah Binks."
- 19 See Watson and Carr. On political aspects of the emptying of the land, see Owram e.g. 131-33.
- 20 On the flâneur as the figure of the European urban male modernist, see Li. On the artificiality of the Group of Seven's representation of the wilderness, see Underhill and Tippett 84.
- 21 "The Onondaga Madonna," "At Gull Lake: August 1810," "The Halfbreed Girl." See also Salem-Wiseman.
- 22 Ironically, Prewett gained an entrée into elite English Georgian cultural circles by occasionally representing himself as Indian: see Meyer.
- 23 "Modernists, in America as elsewhere, drew on 'primitive' art as a critique of bourgeois philistine modernity. Native Americans were now seen not as an 'immature race' but as inheritors of ancient wisdom. Primitivism was reborn" (Carr 200).
- 24 See Colombo 103-04, and Carr 222-29. Sandra Djwa, in "A New Soil," links the beginnings of imagism to the Northern landscape, but without any reference to aboriginal culture (7).
- 25 The July 1961 issue of *The Native Voice* was designated a special Pauline Johnson Centenary Edition.
- 26 See Harry, Lyon, and Shrive. The shrewd observations of Collet's recent paper are unfortunately undermined by a number of historical errors.
- 27 Atwood's lectures were published as *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. See also Petrone, Grant, Moses and Goldie. Francis keeps Johnson more consistently in sight—due, perhaps, to his Vancouver perspective.
- 28 Erika Aigner-Varoz (University of New Mexico) is writing a dissertation on Johnson and Christine Marshall (Northern Arizona University) has just completed another. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, at the University of Illinois (Chicago) has been the most dedicated Johnson scholar. Entries on Johnson or selections from her work appear in the following recent American publications: *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (1995); *Dictionary of Literary Biography* no. 175, *Native American Writers of the United States* (1997); Bernd C. Peyer, ed., *The Singing Spirit: Early Short Stories by North American Indians* (1989), Paula Gunn Allen, *Voice of the Turtle: American Indian Literature 1900-70* (1994).
- 29 Anderson notes that "romance on the river" was a common motif in Victorian popular culture (although not as common as courting at the piano). While Benedickson questions the pragmatic side of the canoe as a trysting-place, one of my students has testified that anything is possible in a canoe.

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