

Poet-Advocate: Feminist and Aboriginal Dualism in the Poems of E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake

By Laura Sanders

Due to the multiple and often contradictory roles that many women are required to fulfill, the means by which one chooses to navigate them has been a primary concern of the feminist movement. Feminist attention has also focused on the association between feminism, race, and the effects they have upon each other. In a society that relies predominantly on a Eurocentric, Caucasian perspective, many Canadian women of non-Caucasian backgrounds struggle to maintain their cultural identities amidst other demands and responsibilities. Their struggles could help to account for the recent resurgence of critical interest in the early Canadian poet E. Pauline Johnson (1861-1913). An independent woman of mixed Mohawk and European descent, Johnson chose a course of action not often undertaken by women of her era; she became an enormously popular performance poet, touring Canada, Britain, and the United States. Many of her poems discussed the reactions of Aboriginal women to colonial rule, challenging both literary and political conventions of her time. Her great popularity led some critics to deride her, in the decades following her death, as little more than a stereotypical "Indian princess." Yet she long fascinated Canadian audiences, and continues to draw new admirers due to her unique solution to the problems posed by being an Aboriginal woman in Canada during the Victorian era.

Those of Pauline Johnson's poems that addressed Aboriginal and feminist concerns were curiously effective in making members of the dominant Eurocentric culture aware of the havoc their presence was wreaking on Canada's indigenous population. In a time where racial appropriation of Aboriginal identity and culture was considered acceptable, Pauline Johnson was able to frame her own experience so that it was accessible to European paradigms of thought, without pandering to them. Three of her poems "Cry from an Indian Wife-" "Ojistoh-" and "The Cattle Thief-" published in her anthology *Flint and Feather* in 1914, seem to anticipate the concerns of many later literary theorists regarding race and gender by presenting them as inextricably linked.

Although the English language divides gender and racial identity, in everyday experience it is often more difficult to separate the two. For Aboriginal women this held special significance. After the Indian Act of 1876, their racial status was dependent upon patriarchal notions of marriage and patrilineal descent. In her book, *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic*, Roberta Hamilton explains,

This categorization made possible and sustained legislation and social policy based on an original fiction: that women "and only women" were divisible. They could be *either* Indian [*sic*] (by marrying an Indian) or women (by marrying a non-Indian) but not both. Indian women's struggle for reinclusion was a struggle against discrimination that made them unequal to Native men, who did not lose status when they married out,

and to non-Native women, who gained Indian status by marrying an Indian. (100)

Ironically, in a time when many Aboriginal women were struggling with their disenfranchisement, it was this very system that allowed Pauline Johnson to claim a Mohawk identity. Johnson's mother, Emily Howells, was entirely of European descent, and her father, George Henry Martin Johnson, though predominantly Mohawk, had European ancestors as well. (*Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Life and Times of Pauline Johnson*, Strong-Boag, 47) In contrast to the European patriarchy, however, Mohawk society was matrilineal. Thus, European society considered Johnson to be predominantly Mohawk, while Mohawk society would not have counted her among the members of their nation. Johnson was excluded, on some level, from both the cultures from which she came. This was an experience shared by many individuals of mixed race in Canada at the time. Their sense of cultural alienation was often so strong that some established new, independent cultural identities, of which the Métis were an example.

Johnson, however, did not choose such an identity for herself. She possessed a marvellous ability to exist within the realms of both her cultures, and to present a strong female presence in her works. She never allowed her readers or audiences to divorce her gender from her Aboriginal identity. In many ways, she was the *mestiza* of which Gloria Anzaldúa writes, a figure who exists in the midst of multiple cultural identities, on the borderlands:

It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness "a *mestiza* consciousness" and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from a continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (101-102)

Johnson had many ways of negotiating this consciousness. In a time when many female authors (such as the Brontë sisters) were publishing under male pseudonyms, she published under "E. Pauline Johnson," leaving nobody in doubt that she was a woman. Her one pseudonym, Tekahionwake, was always used alongside her European name, and was chosen specifically to reinforce her status as an Aboriginal. She did not attempt to constitute herself as a person of mixed race, or to inscribe a new identity for such a group. Rather, her two parent cultures were always presented alongside each other together, yet distinct. Nowhere was this more apparent than during her recitations, when she performed the first half in Aboriginal dress, and the second in Victorian costume. The title of her first published book, *The White Wampum* (1895), also testifies to this dualism, which resulted in such great popularity that Charles G.D. Roberts, a noted Canadian poet, wrote, "You are the aboriginal voice of Canada by blood as well as by taste and the special trend of your gifts" (qtd. in *Pauline Johnson and Her Friends*, McRaye, 36).

Despite this, it is questionable as to whether or not Johnson could succeed in her attempts to embody this *mestiza* consciousness. The most obvious objection is, of course, to her regional bias - it is difficult to accept that a Mohawk writer from Ontario could speak for each of the Six Nations spread across Canada. A still greater concern, however, is that Johnson was in large part a product of European discourse, which cast patriarchal values and traditions upon Aboriginal cultures that may not have been compatible with it. Therefore, any Aboriginal narrative that she attempted to convey would inevitably be affected by these characteristics. As Paula Gunn Allen argues:

Those who translate or "render" narratives make certain crucial changes, many unconscious. The cultural bias of the translator inevitably shapes his or her perception of the material being translated, often in ways that he or she is unaware of. Culture is fundamentally a shaper of perceptions, after all, and perception is shaped by culture in many subtle ways. In short, it's hard to see the forest if you're a tree. To a great extent, changes in materials translated from a tribal to a western language are a result of the vast difference in languages; certain ideas and concepts that are implicit in the structure of an Indian language are not possible in English. Language embodies the unspoken assumptions and orientations of the culture it belongs to. ("Kochinnenako in Academe," 2111)

Johnson, however, was not using European discourse to translate Aboriginal myths into English so much as she was describing the ways in which Aboriginal culture was being altered by the European presence in Canada. The confrontations between the two cultures were resulting in new discourses: stories that arose from Aboriginals using the narrative tools of a colonial presence, such as rhyming couplets and linear emplotment. Because of her own unique position between these two groups, Johnson was ideally suited to formalize these narratives.

The very structure of "A Cry from an Indian Wife" demonstrates how Aboriginal modes of thought were being forced to adapt to European demands. Its rhyming couplets are characteristic of much British poetry, and its lyric form would eventually become a benchmark of Canadian poetic style. As a dramatic monologue, it places the narrator's thoughts into a linear narrative progression, so Johnson's use of these forms to describe the thoughts of the Aboriginal speaker testifies to this encroachment of the European culture upon her own.

In "A Cry from an Indian Wife," European obsessions with conflict and war subsume traditions of Aboriginal culture, forcing them to bend to foreign paradigms. The poem begins by drawing attention to the activities of daily life which must now be disregarded in the wake of greater concerns:

Here is your knife! I thought 'twas sheathed for
aye.
No roaming bison calls for it today;
No hide of prairie cattle will it maim;

The plains are bare, it seeks a nobler game:
'Twill drink the life-blood of a soldier-host. (5-10)

The knife of the speaker's husband will no longer be used for traditional Aboriginal hunting; it must now operate as a weapon of war, functioning in a foreign, European context.

The narrator also speaks of notions of ownership, another particularly European concept, stating:

They but forgot we Indians owned the land
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand
Upon a soil that centuries ago
Was our sole kingdom and our right alone. (22-25)

"Ownership," in the European sense of the term, did not exist for the Aboriginal tribes before the arrival of the colonizers. Following this event, however, the Six Nations were forced not only to consider this concept, but also to *enact* it. The encroachment upon their homes required that they perceive themselves as *owners* of the land to *defend* the land, possessing it in the same European fashion against which they were rebelling: "By right, by birth we Indians own these lands" (61)

By engaging in this defense, the Aboriginal warriors were then made players in a European style of war, bending once again to the imposing culture. The lines, "Then go and strike for liberty and life,/ And bring back honour to your Indian wife" (30-31) are reminiscent of the ideologies concerning battle and honour found in *Beowulf*, which is a foundational element of European discourse: "Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,/ honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen/ eagerly served him" (*Beowulf*, 64-66). The Anglo-Saxon ideologies that Johnson's character mentions, however, may not have even existed in her original Native language.

The female narrator of the poem is grappling with her newly disenfranchised role as an Aboriginal woman, neither racially nor sexually privileged: "Your wife? Ah, what of that, who cares for me?/ Who pities my poor love and agony?" ("A Cry from an Indian Wife," 31-33). As she is no longer a central figure in her culture, she is unable to prevent this battle from occurring. She can only lament the loss she will inevitably face.

Yet this fundamental disjunction between her own culture and the imposing colonial presence is demonstrated most clearly when the narrator speaks about God. It was the aim of many European settlers to convert Aboriginals to Christianity. "The white man's burden," that is, what they perceived as their moral responsibility to civilize indigenous groups, was a further imposition of Western discourse. Yet the narrator, from her perspective, does not consider them "Western" at all: "Curse to the fate that brought them from the East/ To be our chiefs" (18-19). As well, the European settlers posited the Christian God as a universal force, transcending all human difference. The narrator, however,

clearly feels no personal connection to him, describing him always as belonging to the colonizers: "One pleads her God to guard some sweet-faced child" (47-48). Not only that, she does not feel that God has any particular concern for her or her people, instead favouring the Europeans: "Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low . . . / Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so" (62-64).

For this reason, it is not surprising that the most striking aspect of the poem is the narrator's awareness of the fundamental imbalance between the Aboriginal and Anglo-European cultures. Newly dominated by this foreign presence, the narrator has been forced to live, to some extent, within the culture of her oppressors, and thus has some knowledge of them:

Yet stay, my heart is not the only one
That grieves the loss of husband and of son;
Think of the mothers o'er the inland seas;
Think of the pale-faced maiden on her knees. (42-46)

She clearly feels, however, that these women do not share a similar knowledge of *her* culture. Alongside her imaginings of the white soldiers, their wives, and their mothers, is the very real sense that they are not thinking in such terms about her or her husband:

Ah, how her white face quivers thus to think,
Your tomahawk his life's best blood will drink.
She never thinks of my wild aching breast
Nor prays for your dark face and eagle crest
Endangered by a thousand rifle balls,
My heart the target if my warrior falls. (52-57)

Clearly, then, the Aboriginal culture has not affected the European culture to the same extent that it has *been* affected by it. The narrator has a solid knowledge of her oppressors, while they have only the myths of the stereotypical warrior brave. They have no knowledge of her whatsoever. As an Aboriginal woman, she is invisible, negated from both her race and her gender, lamenting the loss of her traditional way of life. Her culture has been overwritten.

As her husband uses his tomahawk for battle rather than for hunting, she uses her traditional storytelling skills to produce, as Paula Gunn Allen suggests, a Western style narrative:

A feminist approach to the study and teaching of American Indian life and thought is essential because the area has been dominated by paternalistic, male-dominant modes of consciousness since the first writings about American Indians in the fifteenth century. This male bias has seriously skewed our understanding of tribal life and philosophy, distorting it in ways that are sometimes obviously but are most often invisible. (2109)

Although Paula Gunn Allen is speaking of the Laguna tribe of New Mexico, her writings are also applicable to "A Cry from an Indian Wife." Johnson was able to demonstrate skillfully how Aboriginal culture had to alter in the wake of European

colonization. Her female narrators may have used narrative tools that were not originally their own, but they were remarkably successful in making Canadian, British, and American audiences empathize with colonized Aboriginal experience. As Strong-Boag and Gerson state:

After she turned to the stage, her Nativeness acquired stronger and stronger political and cultural dimensions, as her persona enhanced the intensity and frequency of her advocacy of Native issues. By 1896 the Native aspect of her work assumed sufficient priority to produce the term "poet-advocate." In print, the effect of a poem such as "A Cry from an Indian Wife" was confined to those who read it in the newspapers [. . .]. By in performance, this confrontational dramatic monologue, highlighted in reviews as the climax of the evening, was repeated hundreds of times to thousands of Canadians and others who may have had limited access to Johnson's writings. (Strong-Boag, 114)

Yet the limited success of her poems lay also with her focus on the Aboriginal woman's role in negotiating the turbulence between the two cultures. While the narrator of "A Cry from an Indian Wife" was in a position of passivity, the narrator of "Ojistoh" portrays a more active Aboriginal woman who succeeds against her kidnapper by using his own weapon.

Although there are no characters of European descent in "Ojistoh," the poem nonetheless makes use of classic Western narrative traditions. The Mohawk woman Ojistoh serves as a unit of exchange between her husband the Mohawk chief, and a Huron man, who are at war. This has obvious parallels in the story of Helen of Troy, who in some versions was kidnapped by Menelaus; the myth also includes a strong motif of the need for vengeance. However, Johnson's Mohawk heroine actively struggles against being used as a means of revenge for the Huron man: "Wah! how we struggled! But their arms were strong, / They flung me on their pony's back, with thong/ Round ankle, wrist, and shoulder" ("Ojistoh," 30-33).

Just as Johnson used Anglo-European narrative tools to make audience aware of Native issues, Ojistoh uses the knife of her kidnapper to kill him, ensuring her own freedom. Unlike Helen of Troy, she has no need of her husband's armies to retrieve her: "Ha! how I rode, rode as a sea wind-chased,/ Mad with sudden freedom, mad with haste,/ Back to my Mohawk and my home" (61-63). She is able to exact vengeance on her own, and deliver herself out of her situation.

Yet of the strong female presences in each of the three poems, it is the Cree woman in "The Cattle Thief" who most actively protests the wrongs done to her people, emphasizing the importance of the Aboriginal woman's role.

At the beginning of the poem, the Eagle Chief, whom the white riders are so determinedly hunting, exists in their minds as a figure of nearly mythic proportions, an invincible Indian savage:

That terror to all the settlers, that desperate Cattle

Thief-

That monstrous, fearless Indian, who lorded it over
the plain,

Who thieved and raised, and scouted, and rode like a hurricane! ("The Cattle Thief," Johnson, 9-16)

However, when he finally presents himself to them, they are startled to discover that he is not quite the mythic figure they had envisioned: "Was that the game they have coveted? Scarce fifty years had rolled/ Over that fleshless, hungry frame, starved to the/ bone and old" (37-40). The culture they have forced upon him has driven him to become a cattle thief, a form of criminal deviance that must be punished according to the laws of their judicial discourse. They shoot him dead immediately, afterwards justifying it to themselves: "Let the wolves eat the cursed Indian, he'd have/ treated us the same" (63-64). With this justification, they fail to acknowledge the influence their own culture has had on his behaviour.

It is the Cree woman, his daughter, who communicates the anger of the Eagle Chief to the settlers. Here Johnson presents a woman who refuses to submit, but continues to perform in her traditional cultural capacity even though European settlers like her father's pursuers are tearing that culture apart. While they did not hesitate to fire at him, they do not even try to intimidate *her* into silence: "For they knew that an Indian woman roused, was/ a woman to let alone" (79-80). She succeeds where her father did not; however condescendingly the settlers might consider her, they do listen. Where he flatly threatened to kill them, she explains, in detail, how the impositions of the settlers' culture drove him to commit criminal acts: "You have cursed, and called him Cattle thief, though you robbed him first of bread" (91-92).

The fact that the woman speaks to the settlers in Cree, however, prevents effective transmission of her message. Indeed, the reactions of the settlers following her words are not given. Although they clearly recognize her anger and are subdued by it, they "scarcely understood" her (81-82). While the woman's speech was in Cree, it was written and performed by Johnson in English, thus enabling her to transmit it to her largely European audience in a way her character could not.

This is where Johnson's roles of poet and performer become crucial. Through her art, she responded to the pressures placed on those of her race and gender with great critical and popular success. Because of her knowledge of both cultures, coupled with a hybridized *mestiza* consciousness, she chose to present Aboriginal concerns in a form that could be understood by European settlers. While it may be impossible to translate between them with absolutely accuracy, Johnson's readers and audiences were able to gain a degree of understanding they wouldn't otherwise have had. Pauline Johnson could not, of course, restore Aboriginal cultures to their original forms. But by using European narrative tools, by existing simultaneously between European and Aboriginal societies, she was a highly successful advocate for Native issues. Johnson's poetry continues to

offer an alternative to the heavily patriarchal, stereotypical portrayals of Aboriginal culture that were status quo in the popular culture of her time.

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