

This is Not a Biography: Pauline Johnson and the Process of National Identity

Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag. *Paddling Her Own Canoe: the Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson–Tekahionwake*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000. 331 pp.

Anyone familiar with the literary criticism on early twentieth-century Canada knows that the writer and performer Pauline Johnson has long been a source of fascination for students of the period. Because she occupied both Native and White worlds, and because her work contributes something to dialogues on race, women, performance, and imperial identity in the young Canada, she has been the subject of several studies, most of them biographical. As biographies must, these examinations of the poet and performer seek the identity of their subject by attempting to recreate the person. Biographies often serve as bellwethers for the interests of the times when they are written, and the continuing appearance of new ones about Johnson demonstrates that she still provokes many questions for contemporary scholars. Biographies also require their authors to make inferences, sometimes tenuous, about the subject's life on the basis of documentary evidence, sometimes sparse. This practice is especially difficult in the case of someone like Johnson, many of whose private papers were burned by her sister Eliza shortly after her death. In *Paddling Her Own Canoe: the Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson–Tekahionwake*, Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag do not attempt another biography of Johnson but undertake, instead, an analysis of the texts that she wrote in the contexts of her own time. Freeing themselves in this way from the necessity of heavy speculation on a life that is inaccessible to readers, they devote the book to a reconstruction of the milieu in which Johnson lived and to a scrutiny of writings by and about her.

This is an ambitious and exhaustively researched study, both in its quest for new documentary clues to Johnson's situation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada and in its

bibliographical search for Johnson's many uncollected prose publications. Gerson and Strong-Boag believe that a thorough survey of Johnson's writing is necessary in order to understand her place in the history of Canadian ideas. They forego nothing in Johnson's life work, considering everything from her ode to Joseph Brant, which was read at the unveiling of the monument raised to the Native chief in 1886, to her early literary essays, her memoirs of her mother, and the occasional verse that she wrote for different towns on her performance circuit in later years. One of the fruits of their bibliographical research is a detailed chronology of her publications, a chronology that enables them to challenge the pattern of development into which other critics have persistently tried to place the poet-performer. Their inquiry into the expectations of the markets for which Johnson wrote suggests that writers like her addressed, at different times, two very different audiences. On one hand, there were the readers of Johnson's poetry (which was largely unremunerated and found in anthologies and newspapers), and on the other there were the readers of her fiction and memoir-writing (which was paid writing for specific audiences with well-defined expectations). Framed by their research into her historical context and into her publication record, Gerson and Strong-Boag's argument is that Johnson alternated between expressing popular Canadian imperialist sentiments and challenging prevailing preconceptions of Native peoples as vanishing, weak, and invisible.

Like Johnson's biographers, Gerson and Strong-Boag view Johnson as a figure through whom many questions about turn-of-the-century Canadian culture may be asked, and they want to know how her many identities—as a woman, as a person of Mixed-race heritage, as a member of the middle class, and as a performer—made her such an enduring contributor "to the national imaginary" (11). The first chapter extensively reviews the various attitudes toward race at the end of the nineteenth century, dwelling particularly on ideas of racial hybridity in Canada. By examining a variety of texts published in Canada during Johnson's lifetime, including anthropological studies of Native North Americans, newspaper clippings, and correspondence, Gerson and Strong-Boag argue that "in enforced encounters with English language, texts, and laws, Indians increasingly confronted attitudes that designated them and their traditions as subordinate" (27). In this way, they begin to outline the sense of conflict under which they subsequently argue that Johnson lived and worked. Johnson's immediate family (she had a White mother and a Native father) captures the complicated situations of Native and Mixed-race persons who, like Johnson's father, simultaneously held positions of authority on a Native reserve and worked closely with federal imperial authorities. The authors draw attention both to the mixed feelings of

some Reserve members towards this Native elite and to the settler community's equally noncommittal stance towards it, and they suggest that the two groups' always-reluctant acceptance of Native leaders shaped Johnson's early consciousness.

The central argument of Chapter Two, "I am a woman': Finding Her Way as a New Woman"—that Johnson tried to reconcile "the insights of Natives and New Women in a critique of the dominant race and gender politics of her day" (69)—leads the authors again to examine the conflicting racial identities that influenced Johnson's work. Defined as the New Woman usually was by middle-class White women, Johnson's occasional identification of herself with the figure sets some of her writing within "a middle-class Victorian sisterhood of tale-telling travellers" (80), a sisterhood to which her own middle-class (and White) identity allowed her to belong. The market for Johnson's outdoorsy canoeing articles was strengthened by the popularity of this robust, independent model of femininity and by the popularity of "exercise as a source for physical and moral redemption" (80). Not a suffragist herself, her own position on the feminist movement that helped to generate the New Woman was characterized by her apparent idea that the sexes occupied "complementary" roles (94) and by a liberal toryism that she shared with her family, not to mention many other Canadians. Gerson and Strong-Boag acknowledge, too, that Johnson conveniently suited many White Canadians' view of "the noble Indian as a figment of the national past" (67). Her Native identity, and the sporadic political commentary in which she eloquently pointed out the flaws in the logic that relegated Native peoples to a place in the past, were heavily mediated by an environment full of White admirers and readers (67). Although she was constructed by others in ways that silenced her most outspoken social commentary, however, she never entirely abandoned the effort to make it.

Gerson and Strong-Boag's argument frequently moves from large to ever-smaller spheres, scrutinizing by turns Canada, Ontario, the town of Brantford, the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, the Johnson family, and finally Pauline Johnson herself, drawing inferences from the narrowing contextual circles that they describe:

Like her sister and brothers, Pauline Johnson was the product of a country, Canada, which was, for the most part, committed to a politics of racism; of a nation, the Six Nations, which desperately sought accommodation for its own traditions; and of a family which was hard put to maintain itself within a Mixed-race elite. A literary-minded youngest child, Johnson had to make sense of a complicated

heritage, full of contradictions and ambiguities. Chiefswood's bicultural experiment forcefully shaped her imagination and her understanding of both the British Empire and Canada itself. (57)

The final three chapters are devoted to drawing out these ambiguities and contradictions in Johnson's art. Chapter Three, "Unique Figure on the Borderland': Literature, Performance, and Reception," exchanges the historically-oriented work of the first two chapters for a discussion of Johnson as a literary figure and as a performance artist. As a performer, Gerson and Strong-Boag argue, Johnson negotiated between elite and popular culture, establishing a performance space for herself that was unique for a Native performer of the day. Easily defined neither as an elocutionist nor as an actress, her performances stood apart from those of "Show Indians" such as those in Buffalo Bill's tour, as well as from those of White stage performers.

For several reasons, among them the scarcity of records left of the audiences' response to Johnson, Gerson and Strong-Boag do not confine themselves to contemporary reactions to her performances but focus on the history of her reception (as a writer and as a performance figure) over the past century. In some ways, this section is the most interpretively active part of the book, for in it the authors attempt to distinguish Johnson's role as a performer from her identity as a writer, a distinction that allows them to consider how the first identity may have (re)constructed the second. Unlike the Johnson biographers who assume the authenticity of her famous costume (presumably because it, and all aspects of Johnson's career, reflects on the life),¹ they treat it as another text created by a person whose outfit is interesting not because it is "authentic" but because it signals her recognition that, pressed by the need to distinguish herself in a competitive field, she could construct an identity that would permit her economic survival.

One of the ironies of Johnson studies that Gerson and Strong-Boag illuminate is that in spite of the relative lack of records of the response to her performances across the country, the idea of Johnson as a performer has often determined the idea of Johnson as a writer. The two advance a new theory of Johnson's representation as an artist: from 1892, the year that marked her debut as a stage performer (and the first time that she publicly presented herself as partly Native), Johnson's identity as it emerged in reviews and other representations of her was progressively Nativized. Although the proportion of poems on Native subjects to those on more common Canadian poetic themes such as the landscape remained about the same in all her published collections of poetry, Canadians came increasingly to associate her

with a Native identity. Johnson's dismissal at the hands of those usual suspects, the High Modernist critics in Canada, owes something to her popularity as a performer. While I would grant more truth than the authors do to Roy Daniells' suggestion that Pauline Johnson is "a symbol which satisfies a felt need" (425-6 qtd. in Gerson and Strong-Boag 127), it is true that Modernist critics generally could not fathom what that need is. Their tendency to fall back on the idea that a primitive Romanticism lurks among Canadians who enjoy the work of early twentieth-century writers like Johnson has ignored approaches to her that would take her performances and her popular fiction more seriously.

In Chapter Four, Gerson and Strong-Boag propose that the textual record of Johnson's publications and performances suggests that her career "fell into three fairly distinct phases" (136): poetry writing, a stage career and prose writing, and finally commodity writing for specific markets (136-37). Reading Johnson's work in terms of the markets that she found for it, they object to the high-low cultural distinctions within which Johnson's writing is considered to worsen as she aged, and particularly to the assumption "that Johnson sacrificed her literary career when she turned to the stage to make a living" (136). In Chapter Five, they argue that Johnson attempted, with some success, "to knit a new nationalist narrative" in "non-fiction, short stories, and poems" that presented Native traditions as indispensable to a "common [Canadian] future" (186). At the same time, they suggest that this narrative is compromised by her use of romance, a genre that usually mythologized Native peoples as part of the North American past (187). Her attempt is also rendered ambiguous by her acceptance of the "racial thinking" that accompanied typical Anglo-Canadian views of the nation, a nation whose government de-legitimized Native efforts to gain a full political voice in the country's affairs by diminishing or ignoring Native history. In accord with Anglo-Canadian nationalism, she never associated Asian and African-Canadians' claims to equal rights with those of Natives (184).

In these last two chapters Strong-Boag and Gerson offer readings of some of Johnson's literary output; indeed, the fourth chapter focuses primarily on the authors' interpretation of Johnson's fiction, poetry, and memoirs. Despite their wish to refrain from guesswork about the life of the writer, they do conjecture about that part of Johnson's life that tempts all of Johnson's biographers—her romantic past. Her love poems, they believe, "comprise her first original contribution to Canadian writing" (140), and they suggest that several of these poems trace her romantic experience from her early twenties to her middle age. Johnson did have at least two romantic relationships over these years—one with Charles Drayton, which ended in a broken engagement,

and the other, as Betty Keller's research suggests, with her manager Charles Wuerz. Strong-Boag and Gerson add two hypothetical lovers to this short list, one who "may have left her in 1887 or early 1888" (141) and another who courted her during the summer of 1890 (142). Passionate poems such as "The Firs," "Fasting," "Ungessed," and "Through Time and Bitter Distance" suggest two romantic arcs that unfolded in Johnson's own life.

While the authors warn in advance that their interpretation of these poems is "highly speculative" (141), the trouble with biographical approaches to Johnson's writing, even the ones that come with caveats, is that they can facilitate the reading that the interpreter most desires. By echoing Frye's declaration in "The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism" that "when we have no real knowledge of a poet's life at all, it is better to leave it alone than to invent a biography out of fancied allusions in the poetry" (270), I do not mean to suggest that the critics should not engage in any speculation whatsoever, or that they ought to focus on the "poems themselves." Where documentary clues to the writer's life exist, it is pointless to deny that they may enrich later readers' understanding of the literary text. I mean that Gerson and Strong-Boag's own research into the "contexts outside literature" leads logically away from the speculative biographical reading that they present. Their work really encourages an interpretation founded on the contexts in which they have placed Johnson the writer. Is it possible to give the poems the kind of literary reading that would be supplemented by the contexts with which the authors have framed Johnson's writing, but that would take the poems, not Johnson's life, as the key point of reference? The ample historical discussion in the earlier sections of the book solicits a detailed consideration of her writing, and a more detailed one than they sometimes give it. The suggestion that Johnson's feminization of the land in "The Indian Corn Planter" represents "First Nations and feminist values" (152), for example, is exciting but unconvincing without a more extended discussion of how the poem in its particulars relates to these values as they existed at the time. The impressive analysis of textual records and of Canadian attitudes in previous chapters is not always joined to a detailed scrutiny of the writing.²

Is Johnson of such enduring interest to Canadians because of the texts that she produced as a writer and performer, or is she important because of the time and place in which she worked as a part-Native artist? She is both, which is why an interdisciplinary study jointly undertaken by a historian and a literary critic is well-positioned to pose the question. At its most creative, interdisciplinarity leads to the rethinking of disciplinary boundaries, as David Hollinger explains in

"The Disciplines and the Identity Debates" (350). English studies, a discipline that has always pursued the question of identity, has benefited richly from "the textualization of the world" that happened with the rise of interdisciplinary studies (346). The "specialists in discourse," English scholars possess skills that can be applied to the analysis of "'all cultural phenomena'" (346). But while English is the point of origin for many of the critical skills that interdisciplinary approaches find necessary, its discrete identity as a discipline is sometimes invisible even in the discussion of literary texts, as the bulk of the analysis is directed toward a discussion of cultural context. The discussion in *Paddling Her Own Canoe* can turn, rather surprisingly, from context back to biography as a source of literary meaning, instead of from context to the literary text. If English seems to be everywhere, it can also be nowhere; the critical skills applicable to all fields of study can easily be dissociated from the more particular skills applied to literary writing. The use of these techniques in literary work reminds readers that such texts are the source of special forms of meaning. While the critical revision of disciplinary boundaries appears to be one of the tasks that this study successfully sets itself, the literary analysis in this book is often brief, limited to a paragraph for a story or a poem. Sometimes it relies heavily on readers' familiarity with the details of the work in question. Because the study frequently examines works by Johnson that are not in wide circulation through existing anthologies or collections, it would be helpful to have extended quotations from the texts under discussion. Without them, it is difficult to appreciate the argument fully. (Gerson and Strong-Boag mention that they expect to see collection of these writings published by the University of Toronto Press.) Ultimately, the two ideas of Johnson, as a writer and as a part-Native and part-White woman situated at a pivotal moment in Canadian history, are inseparable.

Gerson and Strong-Boag conclude that Johnson "became expert in invoking the unsettling potential of simultaneity.... Like the nation she attempted to call into being, she is complex and contradictory, participating in an identity that is always a process of discussion rather than a stable definition" (180). With a postcolonial identity that seems to fit so well with many Canadians' multicultural ideal of their country, what Johnson continues to be to this, as to other, generations of her Anglo-Canadian critics is a metaphor for the nation itself. Multiple, multi-(or at least bi-) cultural, complex, and always "in process," she is fascinating for the same reasons that the mosaic is fascinating, and she easily satisfies a "felt need" among critics for a complicated figure through whom to think of Canadian collective identity. By generally concentrating on contexts and texts, the authors convincingly, if not completely, distinguish her from the person that

Notes

1. See Sheila M.F. Johnston, *Buckskin and Broadcloth: A Celebration of E. Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake, 1861-1913* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/ Natural History, 1997) 100; Marcus Van Steen, *Pauline Johnson: Her Life and Work* (Toronto: Musson, 1965) 23; and Mrs. W. Garland Foster, *The Mohawk Princess: Being Some Account of the Life of Tekahion-wake (E. Pauline Johnson)* (Vancouver: Lion's Gate Publishing Company, 1931) 42. [\[back\]](#)
2. It is also impossible to ignore some of the editing errors in these chapters— for example, the misplaced apostrophe in F.G. Scott's "Wahonomin: The Indians' Jubilee Hymn to the Queen," the attribution of the painting entitled "The Sower" to Millais rather than to Millet, and the consistent misspelling of the titles of two poems by Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Onondaga Madonna" and "Watkwenies." [\[back\]](#)

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