Home-Work

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Postcolonialism Meets Book History: Pauline Johnson and Imperial London

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Pauline Johnson offers a rich opportunity to engage students with various intersecting features of turn-of-the-century society and culture in the larger British Empire. As a mixed-race woman, she personally embodied the sexual interaction between English conquerors and Aboriginal subjects that has recently received extensive attention from postcolonial critics. As an unmarried woman with a successful career, this implicit New Woman challenged patriarchal values. As a public performer and a published author, she wrote poetry for both the stage and the page. Simultaneously a Canadian nationalist and a staunch imperialist, she demonstrates the pull of the imperial centre even to those who celebrated the independent identity of a former settler colony. This tapestry of complex issues provides the context of Johnson's two major trips to London, in 1894 and 1906, which proved to be significant moments in her career. Moreover, an examination of her reception and publication in London offers an occasion to demonstrate the complementarity of book history and postcolonialism as critical methodologies, and to enrich classroom discussion with hands-on examples of textual representation in periodicals and books.

In a recent speech, historian Jonathan Rose nicely accounted for the current expansion of book history from the realm of bibliographers to the larger fields of literary, historical, and cultural studies, as well as the
attraction of print culture as both a method and subject of pedagogy:

Once upon a time, professors studied literary works. Then, for the past 25 years or so, they studied texts. Now, we should redirect our attention to books. The problem with focusing on texts is that no one can read a text—not until it is incarnated in the material form of a book. It is perfectly legitimate to ask how literature has shaped history and made revolutions, how it has socially constructed race, class, and gender [and so on]. But we cannot begin to answer any of these questions until we know how books (not texts) have been created and reproduced, how books have been disseminated and read, how books have been preserved and destroyed.

Bringing various early editions of books into the classroom raises students' awareness of the role of textual objects in shaping the reception of authors, and makes book history an integral component of their understanding of the relations between print and power, an idea they often first encounter in Benedict Anderson's discussion of the historical significance of print in creating national consciousness, in the second and third chapters of Imagi ned Communities. While not all instructors can show actual copies of rare Canadiana, it is now possible to access electronically the texts that have been digitized at Early Canadiana Online (www.canadiana.org). This collection, available without charge to anyone sitting at a sufficiently powerful terminal, includes one of the major texts under discussion in this essay—Johnson's first book, The White Wampum (1895)—as well as W.D. Lighthall's 1889 anthology, Songs of the Great Dominion. Johnson's second book, Canadian Born, is available on fiche as CIHM no. 73199. Also pertinent for students is the Pauline Johnson Web site at McMaster University, holder of the largest collection of Johnson papers, at www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~pjohnson/home.html. Constructed in 1996, its major weakness is the absence of subsequent publications in its bibliography.

In his contribution to a recent collection of articles entitled Women and British Aestheticism, Edward Marx calls attention to two overlooked women from India who brought a touch of the exotic to late nineteenth-century English literary decadence. Young Sarojini Naidu, who arrived in London in 1895, and Adela Nicolson, who sent her work to London from remote military stations in central India, were welcomed for the oriental flavour of their sensuous, erotic verse. Both made strong impressions on
leading literary figures of the day, including Arthur Symons and Thomas Hardy. However, they were not the first representatives of a remote, alluring region of the Empire to entice imperial London with nuances of cultural alterity. In the spring of 1894, Londoners were treated to the spectacle of a youngish woman from a different corner of the realm who not only wrote intriguing verse, but also recited it on stage, and in costume. She was Emily Pauline Johnson, of mixed Mohawk and English lineage, who sailed from Canada to London in order to enhance her growing reputation as a performer, and to issue her first book of poetry. While the 1895 publication of The White Wampum by John Lane at the Bodley Head situates Johnson in the field of London's aesthetes and decadents, her reputation in Canada long outlasted her profile in Britain.

Images and text on McMaster University's Johnson Web site can be used to enhance the story of Johnson's biographical connection with England, which begins with her 1861 birth into a family that identified with international Euro-American culture. Her father, George Henry Martin Johnson, was a mostly Mohawk hereditary chief and professional interpreter whose fascination with Napoleon inspired him to name his youngest child Pauline, after the sister of his hero. Her mother, Emily Susanna Howells, born in Bristol, was a cousin of the eminent American author, William Dean Howells. In the family home of Chiefswood, an elegant Georgian mansion on the Six Nations reserve at Ohsweken, Ontario, that has recently been restored as a national historic site, the four Johnson children were raised on English classic authors along with some Mohawk traditions. Imperial affection always lay close to their hearts: a treasured family memory was the 1869 induction of the young Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, as a "Chief of the Six Nations Indians" (Legends 170). Pauline's grandfather, Chief John Smoke Johnson, presided over the ceremony, whose rituals required the third and favourite son of Queen Victoria to stand on the chief's scarlet blanket "consisting of the identical broadcloth from which the British army tunics [were] made" (Legends 170–72). This blanket later became part of Pauline's costume, gracefully cloaking her shoulder and trailing onto the floor, according to her publicity photographs. (Students in British Columbia's Lower Mainland can see the blanket and her buckskin dress at the Vancouver Museum.) The Duke of Connaught himself was to serve as Governor General of Canada from 1911 to 1916, during which time he visited Johnson, now dying in
Vancouver, where he once again occupied the famous red blanket, this time draped over a hospital chair.

Johnson's literary reception in England predated her crossing of the Atlantic, when the influential English critic, Theodore Watts-Dunton, reviewed W.D. Lighthall's 1889 anthology, *Songs of the Great Dominion*, in *The Athenaeum*, one of Britain's most important cultural periodicals. Johnson contributed just two poems to Lighthall's nationalist project, but Watts-Dunton, reading the biographical notes as well as the verse, picked her out as "the most interesting English poetess now living" because she struck "a new note—the note of the Red Man's Canada" (412). Students looking at Lighthall's volume—in codex or electronic format—can see why Johnson's biography, with its stress on the abilities and loyalties of the Mohawks, captured the attention of a Londoner like Watts-Dunton. In the last years of the nineteenth century, the imperial centre was known for its qualified hospitality to interesting aboriginals and half-castes from its distant margins. Those of elevated status in their homelands were especially appealing. For example, one analogue to Pauline Johnson was Princess Victoria Kaiulani, heir through her mother to the throne of Hawaii, despite having a Scottish father. Educated in England in the early 1890s, she was reputedly a protégé of Queen Victoria.

Various factors seem to underlie Johnson's unusual decision to have her first book published in London. In the 1880s and 1890s, literary publication in Canada was notoriously precarious. Subscription publishing and authors' subsidies were the norm, as the buying public was too thinly distributed and unstable for most publishers to take risks with poetry or fiction. Most threatening to Canadian presses was the burgeoning American publishing industry, whose products inundated Canadian homes, schools, shops, and libraries. Hence the majority of ambitious literary Canadians flocked southward; as Sara Jeannette Duncan shrewdly commented in 1887, "The market for Canadian literary wares of all sorts is self-evidently New York" (518). However, none of the Canadian writers who published in Boston and New York were First Nations, and, as some of the clippings in Johnson's papers attest, Americans sometimes received her ungraciously. For example, in 1897 a journalist for the *Chicago Tribune* opined that "she does pretty much everything that a real Indian would not be expected to do, and leaves undone everything that one would expect from a child of the Iroquois" ("Poetess"). The racism of the day, along with
long-standing imperial connections, were among the factors that led Johnson to John Lane (although precisely who facilitated this connection remains a mystery).

Nearly all the poems that Johnson brought to London in 1894 had previously appeared in newspapers or magazines, mostly in Canada, with a few in the United States. Her writing career had commenced in earnest after her father’s 1884 death had left his wife and daughters in straitened circumstances. Pauline wrote prose as well as poetry, and became well known for her sketches of recreation activities, especially canoeing, which was her own particular skill. In January 1892 she combined her talents for writing and performance in stage appearances that led to the Magnet Magazine’s later pronouncement that she was “the most unique fixture in the literary world of today.” That autumn, she enhanced the Indian content of her program by creating a costume that was a collage of various aspects of Native culture, inspired by an image of Longfellow’s Minnehaha (according to her sister Evelyn Johnson’s memoir in the Archives of Ontario) rather than a representation of any particular tribe. Johnson’s usual practice of reciting her “Indian” poems in costume for the first half of the evening, and then reappearing in evening dress for the remainder of the program, gave audiences the thrill of a performance of savagery, which was subsequently contained within a model of decorum. Once on-stage appearances became Johnson’s major medium, the dramatic monologue became her most effective genre. (Students can best get a sense of the orality of her verse by reading her monologues out loud.) When she arrived in London with elite letters of introduction, Johnson’s reputation was well established and she was enthusiastically received as both a novel performer and a distinguished foreigner.

In the competitive arena of late nineteenth-century English publishing, John Lane created his niche by bringing out The Yellow Book and the works of the English fin de siècle avant-garde. Johnson fit his list quite nicely: she had penned a number of erotic love poems from a female perspective which qualify her as Canada’s own “daughter of decadence,” in line with Elaine Showalter’s analysis of the New Woman counterparts of Beardsley and Wilde (Strong-Boag and Gerson 144–45). The online version of The White Wampum enables students to see that Lane’s 1895 Catalogue, titled “List of Books in Belles Lettres,” is bound in with Johnson’s text. Here, by virtue of its alphabetical arrangement, Johnson’s
book is listed on the same page as Lane's sexually adventurous Keynote series, "each volume with specially designed title-page by Aubrey Beardsley" (Lane 9).

However, Lane and his designers constructed Johnson quite differently, foregoing the erotic to focus instead on the exotic. In so doing, they took their direction from Johnson's reception in the British press. Articles about her tended to open with sensational statements such as "To think of a red Indian is to shudder" ("Miss E. Pauline Johnson") and "Do not be alarmed, gentle reader" (P.A.H.). These attention-grabbing lines were quickly modified with adjectives like "cultured" and "charming" as their authors expanded upon both words in the term "noble savage." While commending Johnson's poetic gifts, reporters also noted how she had decorated her London studio at 25 Portland Road with "reminders of her Indian home and associations":

On the mantelpiece rested the most hideous of masks, the bearded goggle-eyed mask of the mystical Medicine Man; on a screen were hung wampums which, it may be, have checked many a butchery in the past; while a fringed tunic of buckskin, ermine tails, and bracelets and necklaces of bear claws and panther teeth, all told of one who was proud of her Indian lineage and associations. (P.A.H.)

In Canada, Johnson did not travel with these artifacts. Their display in London was a dramatic ploy that generated substantial interest in her as a person, and in her cause of justice for Canada's First Nations. However, the effects of "playing Indian" (to cite Philip Deloria's title) to receptive English spectators would reach farther than she may have predicted in June of 1894. The arrangement and design of her first book, with its highlighted Native imagery, suggest that this little volume bears significant responsibility for the subsequent construction of the poet by her audiences and indeed inflected Johnson's self-construction as a public figure. When The White Wampum appeared, the distinguished American anthropologist Horatio Hale, himself a good friend of the Johnson family, shrewdly observed that "The first inclination of the reader will be to look in her poems for some distinctive Indian traits, and to be disappointed if these are not strikingly apparent. Her compositions will be judged as those of a 'wild Indian girl,' and not those of a well-bred
and accomplished young Canadian lady with a dash of Indian blood, such as she really is” (Hale 4).

_The White Wampum_ provides a valuable opportunity to demonstrate to students how the selection and arrangement of a volume of poems shapes their reading of the poet. Of the approximately 100 poems that Johnson had written before the end of 1894 and that were therefore available for inclusion in _The White Wampum_, only a dozen directly refer to First Nations topics. Eight of these are among the 36 selected for the book. More importantly, seven “Indian” poems are placed at the beginning of _The White Wampum_, thus casting a Native aura over the subsequent verses. The first poem, “Ojistoh,” had not appeared in print before. While it proclaims female agency in a thrilling performance piece, it can also be read as a heightened account of pre-contact tribal warfare, much like the second poem, “As Red Men Die.”

This arrangement of Johnson's verse to accentuate her few poems about primal Native conflict is complemented by the material book, whose design can be effectively deconstructed in the classroom. This volume marks her first significant use of the name “Tekahionwake,” the only word to appear on the front cover. Here, a sense of the primitive is visually enhanced by both colour and image: the dark red-brown cloth (the colour of dried blood) is decorated with a black linear design dominated by a tomahawk draped with a wampum belt, and enclosed in a broad border whose oblique geometric lines and angles suggest traditional Iroquois art (see Figure 1). In contrast, the spine shows the title “The White Wampum” stamped in gold, above the name E. Pauline Johnson.

While the exterior of the book thus separates Johnson's two identities, the title page unites them, surrounded with an elegant art nouveau frame illustration, as artificial as Johnson's buckskin costume. Teepees of Plains Indians are improbably pitched in a dense coniferous forest, against a background of lofty western mountains, behind which extend the rays of the setting sun (see Figure 2). Both designed by artist E.H. New, the illustrations on the cover and the title page are complementary, a significant feature of Bodley Head publications. While no details have survived concerning Lane's co-publishing arrangements with Copp Clark in Toronto and the literary house of Lamson, Wolfe in Boston, we can infer that the small crossed tomahawks placed above the names of the three firms on the title page—reiterating the large single tomahawk on the cover—were
FIGURE 1. Cover of *The White Wampum* (1895)
FIGURE 2. Title Page of *The White Wampum* (1895)
chosen as a potent image that promised readers on both sides of the Atlantic the thrill of encountering savagery within the comfort of a familiar aesthetic format. In this sense, the material book reproduces the impact of Johnson's stage appearances, with her disarming costume change from buckskin to evening gown, and loose hair to dressed hair.

This little book, which transformed Pauline Johnson from a woman writer into a First Nations writer, had three significant effects on her subsequent career. The most obvious result was the consistent addition of "Tekahionwake" to her signature, a name that had belonged to her grandfather. All available evidence indicates that she did not possess a Mohawk name (nor, apparently, any Native garments before the creation of her costume). After The White Wampum, Tekahionwake became a common addition to "E. Pauline Johnson," especially in foreign periodicals, and sometimes even a substitute. At home in the Vancouver Province Magazine she was usually Pauline Johnson, with or without the "E." But during her 1906 visit to London, she was further exoticized as "Tekahionwake, the Iroquois Poetess," the signature given to her articles in the London Daily Express.

The second effect of The White Wampum, as Hale had predicted, was that this book initiated a pattern of overdetermination that affected reading of her poetry for more than a century. Although the erotic verse that preceded The White Wampum identifies Johnson as Canada's own "daughter of decadence" and her nature poetry aligns her with the major male Canadian poets of her generation, her identity as Iroquois excluded her from these other categories, and thus from the mainstream of Canadian literary history as it was constructed in the middle of the twentieth century. One way to make this point in the classroom is to show students some of her non-Indian poems without identifying her as the author. Today, Johnson has been restored to the canon of Canada's national authors; in the canon of New Woman writers she is visible in Canada, but not yet known abroad.

The third outcome was the most profound. By constructing Johnson as distinctively Native, The White Wampum enabled her increasing politicization and fostered her image as an advocate of Native rights. This development is signalled by her revision of the ending of "A Cry of an Indian Wife" specifically for this volume. First published in 1885 during the course of the Northwest Rebellion, the poem originally concluded
with lines that accept the outcome of history: "O! heart o'erfraught—O! nation lying low—/ God, and fair Canada have willed it so" (Gerson and Strong-Boag 292). We don't know how Johnson enacted this ending on the stage, but on the page, the word "fair," which carries at least three meanings ("just," "light-skinned," "favourable"), invites an ironic reading that could be missed by the casual reader. For her book, Johnson altered this connotative ending to denote a more political position by inserting three penultimate lines that assert Native rights by reiterating original ownership of the land by "our nation." The last line issues a challenge to "the white man's God" that locates the speaker outside European Christianity. Note the fabulous control of iambic metre and its variations to accentuate key words:

Go forth, nor bend to greed of white man's hands.
By right, by birth we Indians own these lands,
Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low . . .
Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so. (Gerson and Strong-Boag 14-15)

It is always illuminating to show students how a writer revised a text, but because Johnson's life on the road was not conducive to saving papers, there are few similar examples of her process of composition.

One focus of print culture is to investigate how the design of a book can be regarded as a form of instruction to its readers; in Megan Benton's concise formulation, "We cannot read a text without also, simultaneously and inevitably, reading its form" (5). Because Johnson subscribed to an English clipping service, her papers contain ample evidence of the extent to which British reviewers perceived her poetry as the work of an exotic "red Indian from Canada" ("Poet") whose verse was the swan song of an "ancient dying race" (unidentified clipping, 5 July 1895). Taking their cue from the book's illustrations and arrangement, reviewers who read Johnson's words through their visual presentation stated that "the subjects are mostly Indian" (Review, The Sketch). Unlike Canadian reviewers, who were already quite familiar with Johnson and her work, British reviewers strove to situate her within their previous literary acquaintance with Native North America by invoking such American writers as James Fenimore Cooper, Longfellow, and Whittier.
While all of Johnson's British reviews comment on her distinctive identity, many also contain a curious thread of resistance. Evincing discomfort with the “dash” and “melodrama and fustian” of Johnson’s Native poems, they prefer her lyrics that “sing of those themes common to the world at large” (Star). In the words of one commentator, “When she is restful she charms” (unidentified clipping, 27 July 1895). The opinion that “her talent is better suited to reflective poetry” (Review, The Academy) or to “Nature poetry” (Review, The Sketch) seems to derive from a definition of poetry that excludes polemics. The review in Black and White best elucidated the situation. On the one hand, this journal found Johnson intriguing for voicing “the wrongs of the Indian” and giving “expression to the mind and the moods of a strange, interesting race, of which we have heard nothing hitherto save what was reported by observers from the outside.” On the other hand, it describes her dramatic monologues like “The Cattle Thief” as “hardly poetry at all” (“Poet”). Although British reporters were interested in quoting at length her analysis of injustice to the Iroquois (“Fate of the Red Man”), British reviewers of her book were generally alienated by the published texts of the poems that excited her stage audiences. Within the current Canadian classroom, Johnson offers an opportunity for students to investigate definitions of poetry, as well as to consider the role of reviews in constructing a writer’s immediate reception and long-term reputation.

The complex state of affairs surrounding the British publication and reception of Johnson’s first book may help to explain her subsequent disconnection from London. After she returned to Canada, where her book was universally acclaimed, she placed a few poems and articles in London periodicals such as Black and White and the Ludgate Magazine, but her primary foreign market was to be American magazines. Yet her ideological allegiance to the Empire remained unshaken. In an era when Canadian authors like Charles G.D. Roberts found themselves “bidden to Manhattan Island” because “Your poet’s eyes must recognize / The side on which your bread is buttered” (196–97), Johnson repudiated American values. Her title poem, “Canadian Born,” written in 1897, not only celebrates the superiority of those “born in Canada beneath the British flag,” but also proclaims “The Yankee to the south of us must south of us remain” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 125–26). A decade later, her acrostic
“Canada” celebrates the ship of state flying “her Empire’s pennant” while avoiding the southern “rival’s stealth” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 154).

Johnson’s second book, *Canadian Born*, published in Toronto in 1903, seems to have gone unnoticed in the British press, perhaps because of its title. It is interesting to speculate whether its design was intended to reclaim her for Canada. In contrast to the dramatic artwork of *The White Wampum*, the visual appearance of *Canadian Born* seems decidedly demure. Issued by Morang without international co-publishers, *Canadian Born* was available in two different covers—pale blue or white—the latter probably higher priced. The front cover bears the title and the author’s full name—E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)—stamped in graceful gold letters, discretely enhanced with one small maple leaf. Unlike the dark colours and strong images of *The White Wampum*, the delicate colours and lettering of *Canadian Born* convey restraint, and perhaps femininity. Inside, the undecorated title page in itself contains no overt instructions to the reader. However, it is accompanied by a frontispiece photograph of the author dramatically posed in her Native costume, the first of many such photos to grace subsequent editions of her work (see Figure 3). Like E.H. New’s design of *The White Wampum*, these photographs shaped the reception of Johnson’s poetry and prose by establishing the lens of race and gender through which all her work would be read. *The White Wampum* and *Canadian Born* were never reprinted after these original editions because their contents were later incorporated into *Flint and Feather* (1912).

It may have been a desire to pursue British publication that inspired Johnson to return to London for an extended visit in 1906. In typical fashion, she received newspaper publicity titled “From Wigwam to Concert Platform. Red Indian Chief’s Daughter to Appear in London. Gruesome Ornaments.” Her recital in Steinway Hall was attended by Lord Strathcona, the Canadian High Commissioner, as well as the knighthed Canadian author Sir Gilbert Parker, and her old admirer, Theodore Watts-Dunton. The most important literary outcome of this visit was her publication of four articles in the London *Daily Express*, under the byline of “Tehahionwake, The Iroquois Poetess.” The first in this series, “A Pagan in St. Paul’s Cathedral,” which she later described as her favourite piece of writing, became one of her best-known prose works. In this bravura performance she assumes the persona of an innocent moccasin-shod native
CANADIAN BORN

by

E. PAULINE JOHNSON
(TEKANHOWAKE)

TORONTO
GEORGE N. MORANG & CO., LIMITED
1903

FIGURE 3. Title Page of Canadian Born (1903)
of “far Saskatchewan” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 213), and concludes by equating Native spirituality with the practices of the Church of England. A subsequent visit to London in 1907 yielded no known publications.

During Johnson’s last years, before her death from cancer in Vancouver in 1913, imperial values continued to sustain her. Although her connections with the capital of the Empire had been sporadic, her visits had occasioned the publication of her first book, and of some of her prose sketches. After her death, an unsigned obituary in the Times Literary Supplement opined that “her poems are but faint adumbrations of her dark and exotic grandeur” and were overrated by Watts-Dunton: “Certainly she never attained that technical mastery which characterizes the best work of Sarojini Naidu and . . . others who have come from afar” (“A Mohawk Poetess”). While this author believed that it was the “reinforcement of her stately presence” that created interest in her writings, Canadian opinion differed. Despite her exclusion from the canon of elite authors, Pauline Johnson’s popularity with common readers endured, as evidenced in the many editions and re-editions of her work. Looking at these volumes through perspectives from book history and postcolonialism enables us to see how she was constructed by her appearances in print, and how, in turn, print constructed her.

NOTES

1. Antoinette Burton and Judith Walkowitz have documented how London welcomed natives of the Indian Subcontinent who presented polished displays of the exotic insider.

2. This detail does not appear in Kristin Zambucka's Princess Kaiulani of Hawaii, but was reported by a tour guide at Huilhe’e Palace in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, in October 2000.

3. In “Pauline Johnson: Tekahionwake,” Bertha Jean Thompson cites at length an account of the intervention of Clement Scott and “Professor Clark, of Trinity University.” However, according to Hector Charlesworth’s Candid Chronicles, the introduction was made by John Davidson, while Walter McRae, in Pauline Johnson and Her Friends, cites Richard LeGallienne. An 1897 interview in the Chicago Tribune (“Poetess”) claims that Andrew Lang and Sir Frederick Leighton were Johnson’s advisors.
In 1895, Hector Charlesworth described the book as "an austere looking little tome, with its plum-colored cover and its bold device of tomahawk and wampum" (478), but all the volumes I have seen have the same dark red-brown cover.

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*Star* 11 July 1895. Johnson fonds, McMaster.


Unidentified clipping. 5 July 1895. Johnson fonds, McMaster.


