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*The Mohawk Princess Recites and Writes:  
How Pauline Johnson Battled Negative  
Indian Stereotypes through her  
Performances and Prose*

Pauline Johnson was a woman of both Mohawk and British ancestry, which allowed her to occupy a space that would have been inaccessible to her if she had been either fully British or fully Mohawk. While her mixed-heritage family experienced some prejudice, according to Johnson's account in "My Mother", her parents were generally respected. In one example, Johnson shares that her father, George Johnson, gained government admiration and some fame for stopping many of the "whiskey dealers" (Johnson 224) that plagued the community. She describes her family home as "a hospitable country house [where] men and women of culture, of learning, of artistic tastes, of congenial habits" would visit (Johnson 225). In the years after her father's death, she took advantage of her unique position and became a writer and performer. While her performances often required that she succumb to traditional "Indian" stereotypes, Johnson would undermine these stereotypes with her descriptions of Indigenous life in her writing. Despite her primarily western education, Johnson's works of prose constantly compare British ideology with traditions of the Iroquois confederacy. Johnson argues that the Iroquois surpass the British in many ways, particularly when it comes to the Iroquois' inclusion and treatment of women. While some critiques view Johnson's presentation as the "Mohawk Princess" a mere perpetuation of native stereotypes (Lyon), her writing allowed her to "present a strong although ideologically undeveloped support of native people" (Goldie 61-62). In several of her works, Johnson juxtaposes the values and behaviour of the British to those of the Iroquois confederacy; these comparisons challenge the dominant Eurocentric and patriarchal culture and present the Iroquois tradition as a far better alternative.

While reflecting on her parents in “My Mother”, Johnson explains that in their own cultural realms their union cost them both respect and privilege. By marrying a British woman, George Johnson broke the matrilineal family line that would have allowed his heir to succeed his position as chief. Consequently, this role was passed to the children of his aunt (Johnson 191). For Pauline Johnson’s mother, Emily Howells, the union was socially fortuitous, since she recently had lost her sister and primary caregiver. In spite of the support of her deceased sister and brother-in-law, several of Howells’s remaining siblings ostracized her for marrying an “Indian” (Johnson 198). After her marriage, Howells’s citizenship was changed to the reductive Canadian title of “Indian” (Johnson 214). In spite of their difficult introduction to marriage, Johnson describes her parent’s union as nearly perfect, claiming, “these two lived together for upwards of thirty years and never had one single quarrel” (206). While Johnson’s father “eagerly absorbed white culture” (Lyon) and her mother strictly schooled the children in “English middle-class culture and manners” (Gerson and Strong-Boag xv), Johnson and her siblings learned many Mohawk legends and traditions through their grandfather, Chief John “Smoke” Johnson (Keller 5), and were all “reared as Indians in spirit” (Johnson 215).

After the early death of her father Johnson felt compelled to begin a career in writing and performing poetry in order to contribute financially towards the support of her mother and sister. Since her Mohawk lineage was already known, Johnson’s agent, Frank Yeigh (Keller 2), capitalized on her heritage; he marketed her as “the Mohawk Princess” (Keller 20), despite the inaccuracy of the title, and introduced her by her great-grandfather’s name, Tekahionwake (Keller 16). Meanwhile, Johnson created a costume to enhance her performances. Although the costume was a full-length buckskin dress, it was not an accurate representation of what her father’s people wore. Some unique characteristics included a sleeve of rabbit pelt, silver brooches made from hammered coins, ermine tails she received from the Hudson’s Bay Company, and a red woolen cloak made from a ceremonial blanket (Keller 21). She also added gifts to her costume, including a necklace of bear claws

that she received from naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, as well as a scalp given to her by a Blackfoot chief (Gerson and Strong-Boag xvii). Johnson quickly became a popular performer. She would commence her recitation in the buckskin dress and then, for the second half of her show, she would reappear in a stylish evening gown, shocking the crowd with her ability to move between both cultures with such ease. The popularity of the poems she recited, like “The Song My Paddle Sings” (Keller 18), eventually allowed her to publish several books of poetry and develop a career as a writer.

After many years of travel and performance, Johnson finally settled in Vancouver for the latter part of her life. During this time she began regularly contributing prose to *Boy’s World*, *Mother’s Magazine*, and the *Vancouver Province Magazine* (Gerson and Strong-Boag xx). Throughout her prose she juxtaposes Iroquois culture with the allegedly more civilized British ideology of Canada. This is particularly noticeable in her examination of British infrastructure and the resulting role and treatment of women.

In “The Lodge of the Law-Makers” Johnson contrasts the British-Canadian system of government against that of the Iroquois Confederacy, concluding that the Iroquois government works more effectively. She opens her article declaring that “the paleface is a man of many moods; what he approves to-day he will disapprove tomorrow” (215). After self-identifying as one of the “ancient Iroquois race”, Johnson insists that this indecisive behavior is not found in the Iroquois Confederacy: where the “paleface” is “never content to let his mighty men rule for more than four or five years” the Iroquois are “pleased with [their] own Parliament, which has never varied through the generations” (215-216). Ironically, Johnson explains that she wanted to further explore the “wisdom of the white man’s superior civilization” by visiting the “abode of the wise men of this nation” (216). After visiting the House of commons she refers to their style of debate with disgust. While the “white man’s” speech is unpleasant, undiplomatic, disrespectful, and unadorned with symbolism (216), the formation of the Iroquois Confederacy required “the council fires” and “council pipes” to smoke endlessly until “the fifty chiefs in con-

clave all ratified the policy under discussion” (217). Indeed, describing the debate in the Canadian House of Government, Johnson compares the representative’s behaviour to the behaviour of “Hiawatha”<sup>1</sup> and the chiefs who formed the council of the Iroquois Confederacy; Johnson also reminds the reader that her father’s tribe is part of “the oldest constitutional government of America – a free Commonwealth older than any in Europe, save ... England and ... Switzerland” (216).

Johnson’s description of Iroquois policies in “The Lodge of the Law-makers” also includes a topic that appears often in her works of prose: the role of the “chief matron” (217). According to Johnson, after the death of a chief, the role of chief matron “bestow[s] the title upon one of his kinsmen” (217). She is quick to point out, however, that this does not mean the role automatically falls to the elder son; often the chief matron will pass by the “inadequate eldest son” to nominate a younger “more capable” candidate (218). She goes on to explain that the choice of the chief matron is final.

The old and powerful chiefs-in-law never attempt to question her decision; her appointment is final, and [...] when he is installed...the chief matron may, if she desires, enter the council-house and publicly make an address to the chief, braves, and warriors assembled, and she is listened to not only with attention, but with respect. (218)

Johnson concludes her text by comparing the rights of white women with the rights of Iroquois women. She insists that there are not “fifty white women even among those of noble birth” who could speak and be heard respectfully in the lodge of the [Canadian] law-makers” (218).

The theme of the “chief matron” appears again in many of Johnson’s other prose texts. In “Mothers of a Great Red Race” she reiterates the role of the chief matron in the Iroquois “parliament” and insists that “there is not a feminine influence known to civilization that means to this nation what the title, “chief matron”, means

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<sup>1</sup> According to Micah L. Issitt, Hiawatha is the “[legendary] Iroquois leader who helped craft a peace treaty among Native North American peoples during the sixteenth century”, but that “most modern historians believe that Hiawatha is an amalgamation of several Iroquois leaders involved in the foundation of the Iroquois Confederacy between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries” (1).

to the Iroquois” (225). To demonstrate the chief matron’s influence, Johnson describes her grandmother’s experience in the role. Johnson’s grandmother had appointed Johnson’s father as chief, even though he was the second-born son. When George Johnson began to work as the official tribal translator his two roles were considered a conflict of interest by many of the other chiefs. When it was suggested that he withdraw from his role as chief, his mother, the chief matron, refused to appoint a new leader as alternative chief and thus threatened to “annul the title forever... weakening by one the Mohawk position in the [Iroquois Confederacy] council” (225). Again, in “The Iroquois Women of Canada” Johnson describes the role of chief matron, insisting that not even the “civilized races honour their women as highly as do the stern old chiefs, warriors and braves of the Six Nations’ Indians”<sup>2</sup> (205). In each of these stories, Johnson argues that the Iroquois have a more successful government system because of the respect they have for women.

According to Gerson and Strong-Boag, in “Paddling her Own Canoe” Johnson is often associated with the “Canadian New Women” of the 1880s to 1920s (59). These women were “often identified with feminism although [were] not always suffragist[s]” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 59). Many had, for the first time, set about to “earn their own living” while still maintaining “respectability” and “some independence from their families” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 60). The “New Woman” espoused many causes, all promoting gender equality, including “better education, paid work, egalitarian marriage, and health and dress reform” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 59). Many of these causes are reflected in Johnson’s prose about Iroquois women and her glorification of the role of chief matron. Johnson’s positive representation of powerful women in the Iroquois Confederacy encourages readers to reconsider the role of women in the Canadian political infrastructure. While Johnson compares these two systems carefully, she tends to only focus on the aspects of Mohawk culture that she considers ideal. This has led some critics

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<sup>2</sup> The Iroquois Confederacy was “initially comprised of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk nations”. In the mid-eighteenth century “the Tuscaroras were admitted as a sixth constituent nation” (Snow).

to accuse her of perpetuating the “noble savage” stereotype (Lyon).

While Pauline Johnson could be accused of encouraging “fantasies about primitivism” in her depiction of the Iroquois people, her position as a child of both cultures allowed her to challenge the more prominent view of the “imperial project” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 20). The prominent Indigenous stereotypes of Johnson’s era “pictured Indian societies as the inverse of middle-class Victorian propriety, censuring them for debauchery, sloth and violence” (Gerson and Strong-Boag 20). In reaction to this dominant view, there was an alternative view “adopted by a few Euro-Canadian observers” that looked to Indigenous culture in search of a “golden age” before industrialization (Gerson and Strong-Boag 21). Much of Johnson’s work contributes to this second perception of Indigenous culture. In her examination of “Literature in English by Native Canadians” Margaret Harry explains that much of Johnson’s work “appealed to the romantic view of the Indian as a noble savage” but admits that it also expresses “resentment against imposed stereotypes and the suffering resulting from a disrupted way of life” (Harry). Angry over the misrepresentation of the First Nations community, Johnson employed this idealized image of indigenous life to combat the much more negative view of First Nations peoples that dominated Canadian society.

Johnson’s representation of Iroquois life and their treatment of women may create an overly idealistic pre-colonial Eden and reinforce stereotypes of the noble savage; at the same time, her access to the white community allowed her to challenge the prevailing negative stereotypes of the “North American Indian” that excused the violence of imperialism and patriarchy. Her representation of the Iroquois Confederation, like her recollection of her family history, expresses a profound optimism that Euro-Canadians might learn to respect the traditions of her father’s people. Johnson’s depiction of Iroquois traditions in her prose challenges the limitations of European patriarchy. As a middle-class woman of both Mohawk and British heritage, Johnson was granted a unique opportunity: she was granted access to the white Canadian community, where she then shared the Mo-

hawk stories she had collected. That is to say, through her writing and performances, Pauline Johnson confronted the prevailing Eurocentrism that excused the violence of imperialism in Canada.

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