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Abstract
Looking back on the nineteenth century and beyond from her vantage point of the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf wrote that 'if we [women] had the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think ... then ... the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down'. 1 This body of which she speaks is the form of our artistic choosing - the body of mind - the only body over which we have shaping control. The choice of form and the consequences of that choosing is the subject of this paper. Emily Dickinson chose the hyphenated hymnal, Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose the verse novel, Pauline Tekahionwake johnson chose the literary ballad but regretted what she perceived as the lost poetic status involved in not choosing lyric.

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Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson: Her Choice of Form

ANNE COLLETT

Looking back on the nineteenth century and beyond from her vantage point of the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf wrote that 'if we [women] had the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think ... then ... the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down'.¹ This body of which she speaks is the form of our artistic choosing – the body of mind – the only body over which we have shaping control. The choice of form and the consequences of that choosing is the subject of this paper. Emily Dickinson chose the hyphenated hymnal, Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose the verse novel, Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson chose the literary ballad but regretted what she perceived as the lost poetic status involved in not choosing lyric.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Emily Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson (born of English mother and Mohawk father) became a cult figure in Canada, known as 'The Mohawk Princess', and briefly touted her exotic image around the salon circuit of London, to die some fifteen years later in virtual obscurity. Her poetic performances were marked by a schizophrenia, one half of her programme dressed in 'traditional' (although markedly sexualized – even vamped) Indian moccasin, bead and feather, and the other half in English evening dress of pale rose or white (a marketable sexuality of a very different and ambiguous nature). Although her poetry addressed the politics of indigenous people's rights to self-representation in its many meanings and forms, it was a poetry whose effective political and poetic possibility was curtailed by her own and her audience's perception of what poetry, more particularly, women's poetry, could and should be, and indeed, by her indeterminate status not only as a woman poet but as a 'halfbreed'. However, although her voice was partially contained by and within nineteenth-century notions of a poet, woman and native, what that voice achieved within its lifetime, its influence upon contemporary North American indigenous writing, changing attitudes to women's poetry, and the degree to which her voice eluded containment should not be underestimated.

In fact, Tekahionwake's chosen dramatic form, the literary ballad, allowed her the malleability to acknowledge and make use of the
continuum of a European tradition whilst giving her the means of imposing the difference and the distinctiveness of an indigenous North American heritage. The literary ballad offered access to a literary canon and a measure of aesthetic/poetic credibility whilst affecting a highly emotive and polemic orality, at its best capable of capturing and swaying audience opinion. It is within her use of the ballad rather than the lyric that she balances on the knife edge of acceptable ‘women’s poetry’, and it is in her treatment and response to this form, and the resultant success or failure of that form that I am particularly interested. It is here, in her literary and dramatic understanding and presentation of the woman in a shadow-land between indigenous and white cultures, colonized and colonizer, that, as George Lyon has proposed, she ‘strains against the semiotic (or indeed, artistic) boundaries of her time’.2

Tekahionwake first came to critical notice when her poems, included in a collection of Songs of the Great Dominion (1889),3 were selected for special attention by the English critic Theodore Watts-Dunton who proclaimed her to be the poet of ‘the Red-Man’s Canada’: ‘a poet so rare – so full of the spirit of the open air’.4 Watts-Dunton’s ecstatic reaction to Tekahionwake’s poetry and her person was to be repeated many times over by academic and plebian audience alike throughout the years of her performing-life; but apart from a brief resurgence of nationalistic fervour in the 1920s when the Canadian content of her poetry was again in demand as the symbol of native/natural heritage, she fell into critical disfavour. By the early 1940s, the influential Canadian critic, A.J.M.Smith, was dismissing the earlier nationalistic acclaim of her poetry, declaring it to be neither Indian nor Canadian, but ‘empty of content as any devotee of pure poetry could wish’.5 Patronised and denigrated as a mere versifier, a music-hall entertainer and a ‘mock Indian’, she disappeared from anthologies, school texts and literary journals. It is possible to surmise that she has perhaps lost value today because she was so much of her time – sentimental, romantic, nationalistic. The poems that Betty Keller6 lists as most popular in her day include poems that are generally dubbed by modern readers as melodramatic, sentimental or even ludicrous; but what these poems have in common gives us an important clue that will go some way towards explaining the polar swing in critical response.

Firstly they are poems that demand performance – they are written for recitation. As such, they fall outside the restrictive nature of much literary criticism that no longer has access to that performance for which the poet was so famous: value judgements applied to the printed word are often inappropriate, but we have no method or precedent to judge otherwise. Secondly, they are the Indian poems of her collection. When The White Wampum,7 her first volume of poetry, was published in 1895, it contained not only the ballads of Indian legend and recitation pieces on the contemporary and historical plight of the Indian, but personal lyrics
of love, death, Christian faith and doubt, and the nature of art. True worth has in fact never been accorded her because she has always been appreciated within the boundaries of the exotic: Canadian Indian and female entertainer. To understand the force behind the critical rise and fall of Tekahionwake’s literary credibility, we must return to Theodore Watts-Dunton’s catalytic reaction to her person and her work in which he remarks particularly upon the significance of her ‘famous Indian family—the Mohawks of Brantford! that splendid race to whose unswerving loyalty during two centuries not only Canada, but the entire British Empire owes a debt that can never be repaid’. This admiration for the perceived nobility of the Mohawk is echoed by Charles Mair whose memorial tribute in 1913 defined Tekahionwake as ‘a girl whose blood and sympathies were largely drawn from the greatest tribe of the most advanced nation of Indians on the continent’. A similar response to the romance and exoticism of ‘the wild’ comes from Gilbert Parker, who writes in memorium:

she brought a breath of the wild; not because she dressed in Indian costume, but because its atmosphere was round her. The feeling of the wild looked out of her eyes, stirred in her gesture, moved in her footstep. I am glad to have known this rare creature who had the courage to be glad of her origin, without defiance, but with an unchanging, if unspoken insistence.

In a sense, the canonization of indigeneity, as represented by the colonizer’s legitimisation of Tekahionwake’s poetry by critical acclaim, is an act of appropriation that authenticates settler status by association, and which then allows the origin of indigeneity to be discarded, as indeed, Tekahionwake has been discarded and dismissed as a Canadian curio of value only to the nostalgic and the ingenuous—memory seekers, defined by Charles Lillard as either grandmothers or tourists. The Tekahionwake-Johnson ballads, lyrics and legends were used by the literary critic and politician to create and define the idiosyncratic nature of the Canadian nation, and to lend the aura of indigeneity to the settler, thereby validating settler rights in the conquered land: Tekahionwake’s mixed race, and indeed, the legendary fealty of the Mohawk tribe to the British, was very useful. Despite the many poetic and polemic attempts to awaken the conscience and consciousness of her audience to the untenable position of the indigene, and more poignantly, the halfcast, under the regime of Canadian colonization, Tekahionwake was, and is still, viewed as through a blurred glass. As Betty Keller has observed, ‘for all her idealization and defence of the red man, she did not change the average white man’s attitude’, and neither did she change the critics’. Bernard McEnvoy’s image of her work as ‘a gracious mantle of romance’ is an invidious and disturbing one, consistent with the critical acclaim of other contemporaries. Of one of her recitals in the 1890s the Toronto Globe writes:
Miss E. Pauline Johnson's may be said to have been the pleasantest contribution of the evening ... It was like the voice of the nations that once possessed this country, who have wasted away before our civilization, speaking through this cultured, gifted, soft-voiced descendant.

Costume, performance, person and poetry are veiled in a soft light. It is as though poet and audience are ennobled in her 'brave expose'. It is astonishing that Gilbert Parker could perceive a life-time's crusade declaiming the plight, the poverty, the beauty and the strengths of the Indian peoples, over fifteen years, across thousands of miles, as 'unspoken insistence', 'without defiance'. How could the intent and impact of poems that so obviously cry out with insistence and defiance against the historic and prevailing image of the Indian, be so misconstrued and somehow diluted? It would seem that the language and structures of an English literary tradition have brought her 'on side', in the wake of her loyal forefathers: any political edge to her poetry is dulled and glazed over with a romantic shimmer.

Despite her many poems, articles and letters that refute the prevailing semiotic of the soft and rather silly Indian maiden, there is an extent to which Tekahionwake was trapped within that semiology, if she was to be heard at all. Tekahionwake romanticised her political stand, claiming herself to be 'the saga singer of her people, the bard of the noblest heroic race'. The language of her self-image is rhetorical rather than polemic, normative rather than radical. The song her paddle sings is 'soft'. It is this soft-sell, this image of the genteel Indian poetess, that modern critics find superficial and dishonest.

Yet, early angry resentment against a culture that condoned and in fact demanded an image of the indigenous woman as ridiculously infantile, indeed, 'silly', was expressed by Tekahionwake in an article, published in 1892, entitled, 'A Strong Opinion on the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction'. She writes:

Yes, there is only one of her and her name is 'Winona'. Once or twice she has borne another appellation, but it always has a 'Winona' sound about it ... She is never dignified by being permitted to own a surname ... In addition to this most glaring error this surnameless creation is possessed with a suicidal mania.

After an extensive discussion of the absurdities and the indignities of 'Winona' in Canadian fiction, Tekahionwake asks 'is the Indian introduced into literature but to lend a dash of vivid colouring to an otherwise tame and sombre picture of colonial life' and makes a plea to 'let the Indian girl in fiction develop from the "dog-like", "fawn-like", "deer-footed", "fire-eyed", "crouching", "submissive" book heroine'.

Pauline Johnson, or Tekahionwake, as she wished to be remembered, was not the 'pure white star' imaged in the ballad 'Ojistoh' – the brave Mohawk princess, but shadow of that image. As Norman Shrive (perhaps sardonically) suggests to 'those interested in symbolic acts and gestures',
her change of image for the second half of her performance, from Indian costume to English evening dress, is 'significant'. Being white and Mohawk, her self, and the poetic image of that self, are the expression an artistic attempt to bring together or hold apart in a single form (of person or poetry) the two divergent cultures. Despite a rhetoric that advertised herself in the acceptable visual and verbal semiotic of her time, Tekahionwake’s chosen poetic form allowed her to transgress boundaries, and contest that semiosis, albeit softly.

Her first published collection *The White Wampum* is emblematic of this desire to bring the two factions of racial, cultural and literary allegiance together into a resilient hybrid whole. The ‘white wampum’ is the wampum of peace, and significantly ‘white’ and ‘wampum’ are brought together in an attempt to combine and perhaps placate the warring worlds of white and Indian (settler and indigene). The poetry of this volume, as Margaret Harry has observed, ‘combine Indian traditions and feelings with the conventions of English verse’. This transgression of boundary is in fact the distinguishing characteristic of literary ballad, the form in which I would suggest she most successfully conveys the problematic of her split identity. The twilight world of Tekahionwake’s poetry (that A.J.M. Smith condemns), is not romantic ambience or sentimental escapism but image of her twilight existence – not dark and not light, not white and not Indian. She was not just ‘Tekahionwake’, but ‘Emily Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson’, and the literary ballad can be seen as the expression of that multiple identity, that shifting status.

In fact, the transitional nature of Adam Lindsay Gordon’s Australian balladry that results in the contestation and the transgression of boundary between worlds and between cultures, is a feature of Tekahionwake’s poetic response to her hybrid Canadian identity, expressed in her art as the trope of twilight. This trope is inclusive of images of half-light – dusk and moon-shadow, mist, smoke, snow blizzard, the image of distance as a horizon that is never attained, and the illusory river-shadow of a reflected, refracted reality. Tekahionwake’s ‘river shadows of dreaming’ are tropologically analogous to Gordon’s ‘smoke wreathed dreaming’: both shadow and smoke provide a measure of protection for the dreamer – edges are blurred, boundaries are ill-defined. They also act as a medium of artistic and spiritual transportation through time and space, and as a metaphor of self-definition and its negative corollary, lack of definition and a confusion of identity and indeed, reality.

From our end of the century, the twilight of trope and form, of poetics and politics, can be seen to be not an insipid, amorphous and ineffective light, but an energized zone of confusion, loss and anger – a choice of light that best reveals the complex anomaly of that legendary exotic ‘halfcast’ – the white indigene and the woman poet. From the mythic and historic material available to her, Tekahionwake selected what was of
importance to her and reset character and story within a poetic landscape and a poetic form representative of her own hybridity. Intent upon the middle ground, foreground and distance are blurred. Her poetry focuses upon the indeterminate ground of border territory, a no-wo/man’s land. Most of Tekahionwake’s balladised Indian legends are the legends that image the difficulties of forced choice. The protagonists are caught ‘between’; and very often it is the woman whose forced choice relegates her to a twilight world. 24

Midway ‘twixt earth and heaven,
A bubble in the pearly air, I seem
To float upon the sapphire floor, a dream
Of clouds of snow,
Above, below,
Drift with my drifting, dim and slow,
As twilight drifts to even. 25

Both as a woman poet and as a ‘halfcast’ Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson is caught between worlds, forever in twilight, dimly perceived – her outline blurred, but this world of shades also allows her the power of creative expression:

Mine is the undertone;
The beauty, strength, and power of the land
Will never stir or bend at my command;
But all the shade
Is marred or made,
If I but dip my paddle blade;
And it is mine alone,

O! pathless world of seeming! 26

This shadow river is a ‘pathless world’ where definition is not only momentary but malleable, easily disrupted by a ripple of wind on water or deliberately changed with the stroke of paddle blade. Her attitude toward the shadow world is ambivalent: ‘I only claim the/The shadows and the dreaming’. Yet her personal hybridity and the hybridity of her poetics is energizing. An indefinite personal and artistic status allows her to disrupt the images of the real world, to shift or transgress the boundaries, in a way that would be impossible if she were clearly defined as Mohawk or white: ‘Mine’, she declares, ‘is the undertone’. The word ‘undertone’ would seem to imply not only the shadow world of reflected life – a twilight world, but also the invisible power of undertow – the powerful force that runs beneath the river’s surface. (The assonance of the two words is too close to be coincidental). The canoe is vessel of her art, moving her through doubt, confusion and turbulence of this shadow world with an apparent power of its own, a momentum in fact derived from the river’s undertone/undertow.

The undertone/tow of Tekahionwake’s choice of poetic/ performance
form, and indeed the undertone/tow of contemporary and current critical discourse on that choice is a fascinating current to explore. The questioning of Tekahionwake’s literary status is multi-faceted: it asks us to rethink our attitudes to, and assessment of, a performance based ‘literature’ and to attempt to understand the difficulties of effectively communicating the experience of the female indigene to an audience blinkered by the semiotics of colonization and indeed of a gendered poetics. Using the language of the conqueror constrains the reaction, response and retaliation of the vanquished; but this does not imply that Tekahionwake’s work stands in need of an apology or an excuse. If Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson’s sole support was gleaned from what price she could command for performance, this does not make her a whore but a professional: she was poet and artist not ‘poetess’ and ‘artiste’. Her Mohawk heritage gave her an exotic aura, but the ‘costume’ of her poetry should not relegate her to the back-stage of faded literary starlet or the museum of primitive curiosity. Her mode of dress and indeed her mode of poetry need not be viewed as a dishonesty but a valid attempt to bridge the gap between English and native American cultures, (between settler and indigene, colonized and colonizer) and between literary and performing arts. The literary ballad was an apt vehicle for this agenda. When Betty Keller and Ethel Wilson\(^2\) claim her to be a valiant woman and a superlative performer, but then disclaim her artistic status with the appellation of ‘poetess’, this is not acceptable, and is typical of a biographical, apologetic approach not only to a performance based literature and its creators/performers, but also too often to women poets.

Like her Canadian poetic foremother, Isabella Valancy Crawford,\(^2\) Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson was a single woman, whose livelihood was dependent upon sales and performance of her literary output. It was an unfortunate, but not altogether unhappy situation, that she clarified, regretted and apologized for in reply to the disappointed expectations and criticism of her recital programme by a friend. In a letter to Harry O’Brien she accedes to a labelling of her ballad art as ‘brain debasement’, ‘literary pot-boiling’ and ‘dramatic padding’, excusing herself with the observation that the public would not listen to lyrics, could not appreciate ‘real poetry’, and declared her dream of “educating” the vulgar taste to Poetry, not action’ \textit{if she were allowed}.\(^2\) Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson underrates herself and her art, not only falling victim to a literary view of a popular performance art, but perhaps also recognizing the restrictions, the consequences and the politics of a choice of form.

NOTES
4. His review appeared in *Athenaeum*, 3231 (Sept 28, 1889) and was recalled in his memorial tribute in *Flint and Feather: The Complete Poems of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912).
16. This is a reference to a line from Tekahionwake’s most famous poem, ‘The Song My Paddle Sings’: ‘For soft is the song my paddle sings.’ *The White Wampum* (1895), *Flint & Feather*, p. 31.
23. English-born Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-70). Volumes of poetry include *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1867) and *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (Melbourne: Clarson, Massina, 1870).
24. These ballads include ‘A Cry From an Indian Wife’, ‘Ojistoh’, ‘The Pilot of the Plains’ and ‘Dawendine’, *Flint & Feather*.
26. Ibid.
27. See Ethel Wilson, ‘The Princess’, review article in *Canadian Literature*, 9 (Summer 1961).
29. Tekahionwake’s reply to Harry O’Brien’s criticism is quoted by Keller in *Pauline*, p. 72.