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After a Decadent Fashion: E. Pauline Johnson and the Staging of Indigeneity

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At the peak of her popularity in the 1890s, the Mohawk and Canadian writer Emily Pauline Johnson (or Tekahionwake) was one of the most recognizable literary figures in North America – a reputation earned largely through dramatic recitals of her poetry and prose rather than on the printed page. The daughter of George Henry Martin Johnson, a hereditary chief of the Mohawks of the Six Nations reserve, and Emily Howells, an Englishwoman and relation of American novelist William Dean Howells, she garnered such public acclaim that in 1895 the critic Hector Charlesworth could proclaim without controversy that '[f]or the past five years, Miss Pauline Johnson has been the most popular figure in Canadian literature'.¹ This popularity had much to do with Johnson's performance of her own Indigeneity. A typical recital would begin with Johnson taking the stage in an elaborate buckskin dress; after the intermission, she would return in a Victorian gown. As a woman of mixed Mohawk and English descent with an overwhelmingly white settler audience, Johnson's access to the literary marketplace was predicated on her ability to navigate a system of stereotypes, myths, and stock images that structured settler conceptions of Indigenous peoples.² Thus, on page and stage alike, she felt compelled to enact an autoexoticizing performance of her own Indigeneity – a performance that was self-consciously stereotypical but that also ironized the audiences who consumed and propagated such stereotypes.³ Critics' efforts to articulate more fully the agential or recuperative dimensions of these complicated acts of autoexoticism have been among the most fruitful strains in recent Johnson scholarship.⁴

What interests me here, though, is the way that settler fantasies of Indigeneity often did double duty at the *fin de siècle* as part of a public discourse of anti-decadence. The full import of Johnson's literary and theatrical performances will remain obscure unless we understand them against the backdrop of her readers' pervasive concern with the threat of cultural decadence and

civilizational decline. I make two central claims in this article that connect Johnson to these discourses, which I trace from her early poem ‘The Re-Interment of Red Jacket’ to her later stage performances of the 1890s and early 1900s. The first is that Johnson’s audiences looked to her work as a tonic for the symptoms of *la maladie fin de siècle*: a gnawing sense of *ennui* at the artificiality of modern life, an anxiety that modern life was becoming ever more alienated from its sources of meaning and vitality, whether in the natural world or the traditions of the past, and a fear of the growing atomization of social life. Settler audiences thus saw Johnson’s work as a way of salving their own decadence.

My second claim is that Johnson herself stood in a starkly different relationship to these discourses, which she participated in through a paradigmatically decadent aesthetic of artifice that allowed her to undermine her audience’s essentializations of cultural and racial otherness. Scholars such as Carole Gerson have argued, albeit in passing, for considering Johnson among the women whom Elaine Showalter has described as ‘daughters of decadence’ on the basis of her allegiances to the New Woman movement and the defiant eroticism of some of her poetry; I argue that her decadence extends further still, to her subversive performance of settler fantasies about Indigeneity.⁵ By catering outwardly to settler stereotypes about Indigenous people, Johnson in fact baits and makes a spectacle of settlers’ desires to find correctives for the alleged decadence of modernity in their own fantasies of alterity. Coded as an anti-decadent by her audiences, Johnson in fact took up a decadent aesthetic posture to undermine the racist assumptions that often subtended judgments about who was – or was not – decadent at the *fin de siècle*.

Indigeneity and Decadence: The Myth of the ‘Vanishing Indian’

Johnson’s success on the performance circuit depended in no small measure on her audience’s ability to join their fantasies about her Indigeneity to *fin-de-siècle* discourses of anti-decadence. She seemed to promise fleeting access to a pre- or even anti-modern vision of life structured by precisely those features that seemed most on the verge of vanishing in modernity: authenticity, an

immediate or direct relation to nature, and a sense of rooted belonging to past traditions. Of course, there is a deep irony in the fact that this popular appetite for representations of Indigeneity was ultimately sated by illusions of authenticity rather than by representations of the complex lives that Indigenous people like Johnson led. Contemporaries of Johnson often resorted to the language of health and simplicity in their estimations of her qualities. One notable example occurs in Charlesworth's review of her 1895 poem collection *The White Wampum*, where he contends that Johnson's 'Indian ballads are fresh and stimulating to healthy people with dramatic intelligences, and there is a fine Mohawk barbarity about them.'⁶ Gilbert Parker, writing in the introduction to Johnson's 1913 volume *The Moccasin Maker*, likewise emphasizes the alleged simplicity of her work, which he portrays as a natural extension of her Indigeneity: Johnson, 'singing and happy, bright- visioned, high-hearted, and with the Indian's passionate love of nature', brings to Canadian literature 'a breath of the wild' that promises to be a remedy for 'an age grown sordid'.⁷ In short, if modernity appeared to Johnson's fin-de-siècle contemporaries as a decadent state of overrefinement, her Indigeneity could appear, on the contrary, as a counter-ideal of wholesome and harmonious simplicity.

There is also a pronounced tendency among Johnson's reviewers and critics to articulate her Indigeneity as a font of new aesthetic resources that could be incorporated into settler literary traditions. The British critic Theodore Watts-Dunton, a crucial advocate for Johnson's writing in Europe, argues that her work demonstrates that '[i]t is not in the old countries, it is in the new, that the poet can adequately reflect the life of Nature. It is in them alone that he can confront Nature's face as it is, uncoloured by associations of history and tradition.'⁸ By this account, the animating feature of Johnson's work is something like an aesthetic correlate of the doctrine of *terra nullius*;⁹ Watts-Dunton treats her Indigeneity as something both appropriable and practically contentless, being somehow unmediated by 'history and tradition'. What it offers to settler writers is precisely this emptiness, a precedent for beginning anew without the weight (supposedly) of prior literary traditions. Charles Mair takes a different view, though one that is no less

mythologizing. A fellow poet and an ardent Canadian nationalist, Mair argues that Indigenous peoples' 'closeness to nature, their picturesque life in the past, their mythical religion, social system and fateful history' gave rise to the tradition of Canadian literary Romanticism, 'which, as a counterpoise to Realism, our literature needs, and probably never shall outgrow'.¹⁰ Implicit in Mair's judgment is a sense that literary Realism depicts the world as it is, that is to say, in the decadence of its modernity, and that a healthy literature requires a Romantic tendency such as Johnson's to provide access to an alternative sense of the world as it could be. Not only does Johnson depict a healthier, less decayed world, by Mair's account, but Canadian literature itself is healthier for having writers like her as a counterbalance against the claims of realism.¹¹

A complicating factor in these discourses of anti-decadence, especially insofar as they relied on certain presumptions about Indigenous people, or on the reduction of Indigeneity to certain values, is their intersection with various narratives about decadence. The posture of anti-decadence necessarily relies on a story, even if only a suggestive or implicit one, about who has fallen – or is in danger of falling – into decline. These narratives were often contradictory; for instance, the fact that Johnson's audiences saw her as an icon of anti-decadent possibilities for their own consumption did not preclude them from also seeing her as the representative of a people who had already endured their own decadence and who now spoke as a kind of haunting voice from the past. The anti-decadent discourses that emerged around Johnson depended almost invariably on a host of dehumanizing stereotypes and myths, such as the 'Indian princess' and the 'noble savage'. The most crucial of these myths, though, was that of the 'vanishing Indian', which became the prevalent lens through which Canadian and American settlers, to say nothing of Europeans, viewed Indigenous people in the nineteenth century.¹² This myth, enshrined in the settler imagination in literary texts like James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, portrayed Indigenous people as living relics of nations and ways of life that were incompatible with modernity and that now verged on extinction. There is a natural affinity between the myth of the vanishing Indian and the temporalities of decadence. For scholars like Vincent Sherry and Richard Gilman,

the ‘imaginative time zone’ of decadence is that of ‘perennial *afterwardness*’, a sense of living in the arrested aftermath of a fall that somehow keeps falling.¹³ This is precisely the temporality that an Indigenous writer like Johnson necessarily evoked on the stage for her settler audiences: she could not help but be read, however fallaciously, as the ambassador of a nation all but destroyed by the violences of colonialism. Part of the fascination for Johnson’s audiences, then, was this sense of bearing witness to a historical anomaly, to the presence of something otherwise absent.

How was it possible that Johnson could be an icon of decadence and anti-decadence at the same time? Simply put, her audiences viewed her as the remnant of a fallen nation whose simple and natural modes of living, though they could no longer be of any use to themselves, could nevertheless provide revivifying moral lessons for settlers. Johnson’s readers thus imagined her to be the vehicle of an anti-decadence that she could not herself enjoy. This image appears with dogged persistence in early critical estimations of her work. Mair, for instance, in his reflections on Johnson and the Canadian Romantic tradition, makes a point of narrating the fate of Indigenous nations in terms of simultaneous decline and persistence: “They failed, however, for manifest reasons, to maintain their own. They had to yield; but, before quitting the stage, they left behind them an abiding memory, and an undying tradition.”¹⁴ Notably, Mair claims that it is not as peoples but as a tradition, one made meaningful through its subsequent appropriation by settler writers, that these nations endure. They persist neither in nor for themselves but as a resource for settler consumption – a medicine for settler decadence. The rhetoric of inevitable decadence recurs in Ernest Thompson Seton’s estimation of Johnson. Perhaps no one better represents the entanglement of *fin-de-siècle* discourses of anti-decadence and settler mythologies of Indigeneity than Seton, the Canadian-American author who co-founded the Boy Scouts of America. Seton was largely responsible for the Scouts’ spurious Indigenous trappings and explicitly viewed the Scouting movement as a remedy for the evils of Western industrial civilization, which he regarded as a ‘blight’ under which there could be ‘no complete happiness’.¹⁵ He was also an admirer of Johnson and provided the introduction to her 1913 volume *The Shaganappi*, where he invokes both

civilizational decadence and the vanishing Indian myth to suggest that Johnson's work calls on settler audiences to

remember that no people ever ride the wave's crest unceasingly. The time must come for us to go down, and when it comes may we have the strength to meet our fate with such fortitude and silent dignity as did the Red Man his.¹⁶

Johnson thus appears as a moral exemplar who shows North American settlers struggling with their own impending or ongoing decadence how it is done – how to endure this fate with stoic poise and aplomb.

I have so far emphasized the way that Johnson was received by those who read her work or saw her performances; however, I do not ultimately take her to be an uncomplicated representative of these anti-decadent discourses. It is crucial also to account for the ways that she exploited her audience's stereotypes about her to underscore the fictitiousness or artificiality of settler conceptions of Indigeneity. One can think of Johnson's literary-theatrical project as operating under a kind of creative constraint, seeking out what unexpected subversions of the discursive violence of colonialism (including the appropriation of her Indigeneity into anti-decadent discourses) were possible under conditions where Indigenous peoples' real lives were perennially reduced in the minds of settlers to the imaginative role of the fallen predecessor. To perform these subversions, Johnson engaged in a career-long project of self-fashioning that depended on a knowing cultivation of artifice. By the time Johnson embarked on her literary career in the mid 1880s, an aesthetics of artifice had emerged as one of the defining elements of literary decadence, and much of her work, from her early poem 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' to her stage performances, can be understood as an effort to adapt decadent artifice to her own ends.¹⁷

Johnson was hardly the only writer on the Canadian scene who looked to decadence; in fact, the movement was more readily associated in the public mind with figures like Bliss Carman and Charles G. D. Roberts, who came to be canonized alongside Duncan Campbell Scott and Archibald Lampman as Canada's 'Confederation Poets'. Carman and Roberts immersed themselves deeply in the writing of the decadents and Symbolists; both were especially drawn to

the ornate poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne and the esotericism of Maurice Maeterlinck.¹⁸ Carman, who moved from Canada to the United States, had helped to edit *The Chap-Book*, one of the most significant of the American ‘little magazines’ of the fin de siècle, which placed French writers like Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé alongside English-language contributors, including Carman himself, Roberts, Henry James, and Max Beerbohm.¹⁹ With the publication of his 1895 volume *Behind the Arras*, Carman became closely linked in the public imagination with decadence and Symbolism, though by this point he had privately begun to repudiate both tendencies.²⁰ Johnson was of the same generation as both figures and deeply admired Roberts, whom she took as a literary mentor and who championed her work in the 1890s.²¹ We must understand Johnson, in other words, as emerging against the backdrop of a wider decadent tendency in Canadian letters; at the same time, she stands out within that tendency as an exceptional figure whose experiences as a Mohawk artist compelled to navigate the fantasies and misconceptions of a settler audience granted her a heightened sensitivity to the sly power of decadence as a means of both catering to and criticizing her audience’s prejudices.

When Johnson toured Great Britain in 1894, it was an opportunity not just to expose her work to a wider audience but to make connections with a network of decadent luminaries and sympathizers that extended beyond those she knew in Canada. She was introduced to a coterie of writers associated with *The Yellow Book*, including Wilde, who was then at the pinnacle of his fame, and William Watson.²² While in London, she approached John Lane at the Bodley Head, the publishing house responsible for *The Yellow Book*, as a prospective publisher for what would appear in the next year as the poetry collection *The White Wampum*; one of the manuscript’s editorial reviewers was yet another *Yellow Book* alumnus, the poet Richard Le Gallienne.²³ Lane was also known as a publisher of ‘New Woman’ texts, which likely appealed to Johnson, who viewed herself as a fellow traveller of the New Woman movement.²⁴ On a later London trip, she met Watts-Dunton in person for the first time and through him met Swinburne and declared him a profound influence on her own development as a poet; though they did not know each other long, Johnson

and Swinburne left powerful impressions on each other.²⁵ Ironically, Charlesworth had in 1895 praised Johnson's poetry for imparting 'a quality of absolute naivete in dealing with natural things' that contrasts sharply with 'those gyrating rocket flights of passion of which Swinburne has the key', even while he conceded to finding in her work the occasional 'record of a mood that seems at first blush fin-de-siècle'.²⁶ But if the literary affinities between Johnson and Swinburne, or indeed Johnson and the decadent milieu broadly writ, were not obviously stylistic or even thematic, what were they? Above all else, they owed to a common investment in the possibilities of artifice. What this commitment looked like for Swinburne, as Jerome McGann has argued, was a conception of life as coextensive with poetry, that is, as being thoroughly mediated and shaped by language in an ongoing process of unfolding in which 'enlightenment and understanding [...] turn upon themselves, being part of an emergent poetic process'.²⁷ What it looked like for Johnson, on the other hand, was a literary world in which all possible meanings were processed, as soon as they were expressed, through a matrix of settler notions, preconceptions, and myths. This was a world, in short, that Johnson, as a Mohawk woman writing and performing for settler audiences, could not inhabit on her own terms but only, in a sense, between them, in ambiguous middle grounds. To that end, her poetry and performances do not strive to invent new terms but to take hold of existing ones and bend them to new meanings. For Johnson, artifice is a way of inventing the means of living under fundamentally hostile discursive conditions.

Indigeneity on the Page: 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket'

Although the obvious place to locate this subversive play of artifice is in Johnson's performing career of the 1890s and early 1900s, it would be a mistake to assume that her cultivation of artifice only began on the stage. It appears already in an early lyric that Johnson wrote commemorating the reburial of the Seneca chief Sagoyewatha (or Red Jacket) in the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York, an event that Johnson attended. A gifted orator, Red Jacket became famous for his impassioned defense of Seneca religious practices in a speech before the New England

missionary Jacob Cram.²⁸ The reburial exemplified a growing public fascination in fin-de-siècle North America with Indigenous cultures and histories, albeit one with a broadly assimilationist thrust that tended to incorporate them imaginatively into the national histories of the settler colonial states. Thus, the Buffalo Historical Society's reburial of Red Jacket, which it undertook with the blessing of some of his descendants, in a certain sense recontextualizes him as an American rather than a Seneca or Haudenosaunee figure.²⁹ This gesture was deeply freighted with presumptions about the respective historical destiny of settler and Indigenous societies, and presented absorption into American history as an appropriate fate for a people otherwise imagined to be on the verge of disappearance.

Johnson's poem 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' appeared in the *Transactions of the Buffalo Historic Society* alongside a poem of Walt Whitman's, 'Red Jacket (From Aloft)', and is noteworthy as her 'first identifiably Indian poem'.³⁰ A deceptively simple elegy, 'The Re-Interment' is a complex rendition of settler myths of the vanishing Indian that ultimately upends them by revealing its speaker to be a living Indigenous subject who does not merely look back upon the past but also insists upon their own persistence into the future. The poem connects the season of the re-interment, which took place in autumn, with the allegedly declining historical fortunes of Indigenous peoples across the continent. At the same time, it partially ironizes this context of decline and this season of death by imaginatively resurrecting Red Jacket's memory – though the poem in the end must consign his memory to a new death. Overseeing the action of the poem is the abstract personification of 'Indian Summer', which Johnson treats simultaneously as a kind of chthonic *genius loci* of North American nature and an abstract guardian spirit of Indigenous peoples. As the poem opens, Indian Summer sleeps,

Trusting a foreign and a paler race
To give her gifted son an honoured place
Where Death his vigil keeps.³¹

Johnson plays directly into settler stereotypes by portraying Indigenous people as uncomplicatedly coextensive with the natural world, and while 'Indian Summer' lies dormant in its deathlike sleep, it expresses a reassuring confidence in the honour and good will of the settlers.

As Johnson's poem proceeds, her speaker lauds the qualities for which Red Jacket is best remembered: his eloquence (he 'stirred the hearts' of the settlers whose 'heirs' now bury him), his oratory ('factious schemes succumbed whene'er he spoke | To bid his people rise'), his capacity for improving those around him (he 'blessed the little good and passed the wrong | Embodied in the weak'), and his enormous intellect.³² These are, notably, the qualities that one might associate with a skilled diplomat: what Johnson memorializes is Red Jacket's ability to mediate disputes and prevent conflict. This choice is especially notable given that Red Jacket was well known to the American public for siding with the United States in the War of 1812 – a significant reason why the Buffalo Historical Society might have seen him as a compelling figure to memorialize. Johnson downplays any settler association of Red Jacket with war or battle, writing that 'The keenest flint or stone | That barbed the warrior's arrow in its flight' could not compare to what 'he attained alone' by deliberation and contemplation.³³ She invokes Red Jacket as a statesman rather than a warrior, a role arguably more difficult to assimilate smoothly into a settler history, since he appears in 'The Re-Interment' as the autonomous representative of a sovereign people rather than a mere participant in the events of American history.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in the context of decadence, though, comes just before the volta, when the speaker begins to consider the significance of the re-interment for relations between settlers and Indigenous people. The speaker muses that

The world has often seen
A master mind pulse with the waning day
That sends his waning nation to decay
Where none can intervene.³⁴

The poem at this point seems to affirm the myth of the vanishing Indian, and thus a narrative of Indigenous decadence, by portraying the decline of the Seneca as a historical inevitability that no

one can change. Red Jacket, the ‘master mind’, emerges as a kind of twilight figure, a historical personage uniquely suited to thriving as the curtain closes on his people’s history. Johnson ascribes no cause to the decline of the Seneca but presents them as a ‘waning nation’, not one made to wane by specific historical agents or forces. The decline of the Seneca appears, like the passage from ‘Indian Summer’ into autumn that opens the poem, as if it were a natural process built into the world. As the re-interment concludes and the poem ends, Johnson suggests that Indigenous decline will be made good by creating the conditions for the emergence of a powerful and vigorous settler society: the spirit of ‘Indian Summer’ appears to the speaker in a vision and calls for the ‘rising nation of the West, | That occupies my land’, to ‘Forgive the wrongs my children did to you | And we, the red skins, will forgive you too.’³⁵ The violence of colonialism thus appears as if it were a symmetrical phenomenon whose responsibility must be borne equally by settlers and Indigenous peoples.

By a certain reading, these lines go further than a mere endorsement of the myth of the vanishing Indian by perversely casting its fulfilment in the reburial of Red Jacket as a means of settler-Indigenous reconciliation – a gesture made all the more questionable by the fact that it presumes the historical death of one of its parties. But this illusion falls apart when, just prior to the vision of ‘Indian Summer’, Johnson’s speaker lapses, for the first and only time, into first-person reflection:

And few [Indigenous nations] to-day remain;
But copper-tinted face and smoldering fire
Of wilder life, were left me by my sire
To be my proudest claim.³⁶

Like Johnson herself, the speaker has an Indigenous father, and though the lines’ markers of Indigeneity still largely conform to settler stereotypes, the Indigeneity they demarcate is the speaker’s most meaningful inheritance – the aspect of their past that most vitalizes them in the present. The poem suddenly and fundamentally pierces the myth of the vanishing Indian with this proclamation of Indigenous survival and persistence, which also radically restructures the meaning

of the poem's seasonal imagery. The reburial takes place in autumn, during which 'Indian Summer' has fallen into a deathlike sleep that suggests the fallenness of the Seneca. The situation initially seems static and irreversible, but by the time the speaker discloses their own Indigeneity, Johnson restores to the seasons their cyclical meaning: Red Jacket may be dead, but the speaker lives; it may be the autumn of nations, but after winter and spring will come anew the spirit of 'Indian Summer', which is not truly dead but merely sleeping. This revelation transforms 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' into a markedly more complicated gesture than the one that it appears to be making. To read the poem while foregrounding the speaker's revelation is also to see that it treats the myth of the vanishing Indian as an artifice, a mere story. If the myth is performed into being in the first place by settler discourses about Indigenous people, it can just as easily be performed by the Indigenous people it mythologizes in a way that insists upon its blatant fictitiousness. Yet, at the same time, the poem offers us no sense of a way beyond this play and counter-play of artifice – behind one mask there is another. Indeed, it is in this sense that, as Lauren Grewe has argued, 'Johnson's performance [in "The Re-Interment"] of the metrically-savvy Englishwoman who reveals her Indian heritage [...] thus prefigures her more famous stage performances.'³⁷

Indigeneity on the Stage: Johnson's Recitals

It is now necessary to turn to these performances and consider their resonances with the decadent aesthetics of artifice.³⁸ From her entry onto the performance circuit in 1892 until her retirement from the stage in 1909, Johnson toured at sometimes feverish pace across Canada and the United States, and made three notable transatlantic visits to the United Kingdom (in 1894, 1906, and 1907), stirring up enormous public interest.³⁹ But what about these performances was so striking? Firstly, they heavily emphasized Johnson's explicitly Indigenous material, playing directly to the prevailing tastes of a literary marketplace eager for romanticized depictions of Indigenous life, fuelled in no small part, as I have argued, by discourses of anti-decadence. There were strong incentives to play to the fantasies of an audience that was hungry for vicarious experiences of Indigeneity, no matter

how fantastic. Gerson observes, tellingly, that while broadly ‘Indigenous’ content makes up only about ten percent of Johnson’s poetry, such pieces made up fully half of the material for her performances.⁴⁰ The second factor in the success of Johnson’s performances was their structure. She regularly took the stage wearing a distinctive buckskin dress, with her hair unpinned and free flowing; after the intermission, she would return to the stage wearing an elaborate Victorian gown, with her hair neatly pinned up.⁴¹ In these costume changes, Johnson capitalized on her white-passing status to subvert her audience’s expectations of what an Indigenous woman looked like and to produce a kind of culture shock in her audience.

To grasp the full significance of this performance and the artifice that it entails, one must know something of Johnson’s upbringing. She identified as Mohawk from childhood but also grew up living much as any relatively well-to-do Victorian *bourgeoise* might and did not view this upbringing as being in tension with her Indigeneity. Until her father died in 1884, she lived comfortably at the family estate of Chiefswood, the impressive Italianate home that he built in the 1850s, where she had access to a piano, a wide range of books, and household servants.⁴² Johnson belonged to what scholars have sometimes described as a Christian, predominantly Mohawk elite among the Haudenosaunee of Six Nations – an elite characterized, in the late 1800s, by its material prosperity, English education, acceptance of Anglicanism, and high rate of intermarriage with settler families.⁴³ Though the most memorable aspect of her performances was her buckskin dress, which her audiences read as an icon of authentic Indigeneity, and thus a symbol too of the anti-decadent qualities habitually conflated with it in the *fin de siècle*, Johnson did not grow up wearing traditional Mohawk dress.⁴⁴ Though she was defiantly Mohawk, her upbringing had more in common with her audiences’ than many realized.

Another crucial detail about Johnson’s performances, and one that reveals them most dramatically as exercises in self-fashioning, is that the buckskin costume her audiences viewed as an embodiment of authenticity was anything but – it was, rather, a carefully crafted piece of artifice that Gerson has described as a ‘collage of various artefacts that represented Aboriginality, based

on an illustration of Minnehaha, the fictional heroine of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular narrative poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*.⁴⁵



Fig. 1: E. Pauline Johnson in her performing costume. Her attire was inspired by illustrations of Minnehaha from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1855 epic *The Song of Hiawatha*.



Fig. 2: E. Pauline Johnson in everyday attire.

The costume thus signifies a vague, indefinite Indigeneity – not a manifestation of a specific Indigenous culture but a kind of pan-Indigenous lure for the settler imagination. Johnson’s stage work literalized as much as possible the fact that the Indigeneity her audiences desired was little more than a figment of their own imaginations, which she presented back to them in dramatic form. Though sharply distinct in content, Johnson’s wry performances of settler stereotypes resemble the strategy Wilde adopts in his decadent comedies of manners. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde mocks the high-toned moralism of his audience while inviting them to laugh at the mockery; Johnson similarly gives her audiences the vision of Indigeneity that they want to see, while progressively complicating it and drawing attention to its fictitiousness.

The pan-Indigenous nature of Johnson’s buckskin costume is striking when considered alongside the views about literary representation of Indigenous people that she expresses in the essay ‘A Strong Race Opinion’, which appeared in the same year that her stage career began, in 1892. Settler writers, she suggests, inflict a kind of discursive violence upon Indigenous people in their stereotyped depictions of Indigenous women. One of the hallmarks of this failure of settler imagination is a tendency to reduce Indigenous characters to symbols of Indigeneity writ large. ‘The Indian girl we meet in cold type’, Johnson argues, ‘is rarely distressed by having to belong to any tribe, or to reflect any tribal characteristics’.⁴⁶ She is never allowed to be a determinate or specific person, either in the sense of having her own individual agency or, just as importantly, in the sense of belonging to any identifiable nation. This generalizing approach to Indigenous women characters flattens an immense range of important distinctions, reducing people with their own specific cultural forms, political organizations, traditions, ceremonies, and histories to an indistinct mass. Johnson concludes her critique with a piercing question: ‘do authors who write Indian romances love the nation they endeavour successfully or unsuccessfully to describe [...] or is the Indian introduced into literature but to lend a dash of vivid colouring to an otherwise tame and

sombre picture of colonial life?²⁴⁷ In the hands of settler writers, in other words, Indigenous life is all too often reduced to mere spectacle.

But how do we square these comments with Johnson's stage career, which seems to contradict them at every turn? Is it not precisely this stereotypical, pan-Indigenizing fantasy of the exotic cultural other that she enacted every night on the stage? In a certain sense, her performances could be read as an elaborate inside joke, a performance of caricatured Indigeneity for an audience too ill-informed to know better or be open to dissuasion. Her performances also played up the fluidity of what her audience presumed to be clear and sharp demarcations between non-overlapping identity categories such as 'white' and 'Indigenous'. Her switching from one guise to another makes a point of just how porous these boundaries could be, especially in the context of a long colonial history in which the settler state aggressively pursued the assimilation of Indigenous people into a hegemonic settler culture. Further still, her nuanced practices of self-fashioning imply that the Victorian gown and the buckskin dress are in fact both costumes, as if to say that the refined attire and cultivated affectations of bourgeois women at the fin de siècle are as theatrical and confining as the vision of Indigenous womanhood she invoked on the other side of the intermission. Perhaps most complicatedly, though, Johnson's recitations made a spectacle of the fact that what seemed to be the most real and authentic elements of her persona (and thus those that seemed most to promise vicarious access to a world of vivifying nature, the integrative holism of Indigenous life, and so on) were in fact the most profoundly artificial and crafted. Though the paying public might have envisioned Johnson as a symbol of anti-decadence, the implication of her performances is ultimately not unlike the view that Wilde famously puts in the mouth of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying": 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.'²⁴⁸ It was never likeness to life, after all, certainly not to Indigenous life, that her audiences desired. To be sure, Johnson's position differs meaningfully from the one Wilde places in Vivian's mouth. For Vivian, what is deplorable in a world reduced to 'careless habits of accuracy', in which 'the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction', is its excruciating boredom.⁴⁹ For Johnson,

the stakes are different: the decadent cultivation of artifice is not seasoning for the bland gruel of life but a tactic for living amid discourses that alternately presume or anticipate her demise.

The appeal and importance of incorporating a figure like Johnson into the decadent canon is that she crafts for us something that cannot be understood as a mere imitation of the canonical sensibilities, aesthetics, and thematic investments of European, American, or even Canadian decadence, but which we must nevertheless understand as being in dialogue with these varieties. Furthermore, her work cannot be fully grasped without a sense of how settler ideas about Indigeneity at the fin de siècle were bound up with ideas about decadence. Johnson's affiliations with the decadent literary world were surprisingly deep, and her poetry and recitals participate meaningfully in a decadent aesthetic of artifice while extending this aesthetic to speak to areas of concern that settler decadents seldom engaged with at length. When Johnson took to the stage, she satirized not just the roles that she was compelled to perform but her audiences' inability to see them as roles. These performances startled the logic by which anti-decadence and Indigeneity could appear as coextensive terms. They did so not only by insisting on the survival and perpetuity of Indigenous life despite the myth of the vanishing Indian (as she does in poems like 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket') but also by showing the supposedly decadent figure of the Indigenous woman to be indistinguishable from and capable of trading places with its antithesis, the figure of the Victorian lady, since neither image grants real or immediate access to what they claim to represent. Ironically, it is by a decadent aesthetic practice of artifice and self-fashioning that Johnson shows her audience that no intrinsic decadence clings to either of these images, that decadence is not a cultural fact *per se* but a discourse, a method of narrating – and of performing.

¹ Hector Charlesworth, 'Miss Pauline Johnson's Poems', in *Tekabionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, ed. by Margery Fee and Dory Nason (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2016), pp. 262-66 (p. 262).

² Elissa Zellinger, 'E. Pauline Johnson's Poetic Acts', *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 62.2 (2019), 331-80 (pp. 332-33).

³ For a discussion of the distinction between exoticism and autoexoticism, see Xiaofan Amy Li, 'Introduction: From the Exotic to the Autoexotic', *PMLA*, 132.2 (2017), 392-96 (p. 394).

- ⁴ See Zellinger, 'E. Pauline Johnson's Poetic Acts', for the fullest treatment of the complex agency involved in Johnson's autoexoticism.
- ⁵ Carole Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 46.2 (2012), 45-61 (p. 56). See also Elaine Showalter, 'Introduction', in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), pp. vii-xx.
- ⁶ Charlesworth, p. 263.
- ⁷ Gilbert Parker, 'Introduction, *The Moccasin Maker*', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, ed. by Margery Fee and Dory Nason (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2016), pp. 276-79 (pp. 277-79).
- ⁸ Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'In Memoriam: Pauline Johnson', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 281-86 (p. 285).
- ⁹ The Latin phrase, meaning 'nobody's land', has historically been used in colonial legal contexts to designate territories that are (allegedly) unoccupied by any state and therefore free for occupation.
- ¹⁰ Charles Mair, 'Pauline Johnson: An Appreciation', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 269-76 (pp. 271-72).
- ¹¹ Mair's identification of Johnson with Romanticism, though intended as a judgement of her anti-decadence, is unintentionally perceptive of her relationship to the aesthetic discourses of decadence, given that many scholars have understood literary decadence as a development or mutation of Romanticism. If, as David Weir argues, the Romantic artist 'looked at nature from a distance and saw something sublime, something behind or beyond nature', the decadent took the next step of displacing nature with the very apparatus by which the artist envisions or understands it: art itself. As I argue later in this article, Johnson's poetry and stage performances enact and exploit a similar displacement. See David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. xv.
- ¹² See Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), p. 38.
- ¹³ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 29. See also Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1979), pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁴ Mair, p. 271.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 99.
- ¹⁶ Ernest Thompson Seton, 'Tekahionwake (Pauline Johnson)', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 279-81 (p. 280).
- ¹⁷ See Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900*, trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 25-27 and 72-74.
- ¹⁸ D. M. R. Bentley, *The Confederation Group of Poets, 1880-1897* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 20-22.
- ¹⁹ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 101-02.
- ²⁰ Nick Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 74. See also Bentley, p. 221.
- ²¹ Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 76 and 119.
- ²² Betty Keller, *Pauline Johnson: First Aboriginal Voice of Canada* (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 1999), p. 37.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
- ²⁴ Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 144.
- ²⁵ Keller, pp. 97-98.
- ²⁶ Charlesworth, pp. 264-66.
- ²⁷ Jerome McGann, 'Swinburne's Radical Artifice; or, The Comedian as A. C.', *Modernism/modernity*, 11.2 (2004), 205-18 (p. 213).
- ²⁸ Lauren Grewe, "'To Bid His People Rise": Political Renewal and Spiritual Contests at Red Jacket's Reburial', *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 1.2 (2014), 44-68 (p. 49).
- ²⁹ For a detailed account of the background and implications of the re-interment, see Grewe, pp. 47-51.
- ³⁰ Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 147.
- ³¹ E. Pauline Johnson, 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 38-40 (p. 39).
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁷ Grewe, p. 61.

³⁸ I do not consider here the links between decadence and the intermediality of Johnson's stage work (which involved recitations of original material and thus operated at the juncture of physical performance and textuality), but this strikes me, given Katharina Herold-Zanker's recent account of intermediality in the performances of Anita Berber, as another profitable avenue for considering Johnson's relation to the decadent *milieu*. See Katharina Herold-Zanker, 'Intermediality and Decadent Performance in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (1923)', *Volupté*, 4.2 (2021), 64-88.

³⁹ Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', p. 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴² Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁴ Grewe, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', p. 48.

⁴⁶ E. Pauline Johnson, 'A Strong Race Opinion', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 155-63 (p. 156).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems*, intro. by Terry Eagleton (Toronto: Everyman's Library, 1999), pp. 69-99 (p. 87).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.