"Your Star": Pauline Johnson and the Tensions of Celebrity Discourse

by Lorraine York

Accounts of literary celebrity in Canada often implicitly assume that it is a relatively recent phenomenon, and that this new generation of media-savvy, post-Atwoodian literary stars faces a cultural situation that is significantly different from any that had previously existed. Earlier important literary figures, it is sometimes implied, operated in an economy that was simpler, less publicity-driven and (implicitly) more genuinely driven by literary value rather than by media sound-bites. And yet each new generation of literary stars has struggled with the perception that their stardom is somehow inauthentic or unearned, that it is a product of publicity machines, the decline of public taste, or a host of other imagined cultural ills. Those earlier generations of writers who supposedly provide the standard of earned, authentic literary value have themselves had to struggle with the competing claims of popularity and literary prestige, or what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called, respectively, "economic" and "symbolic" capital. For Bourdieu, these two forms of capital often bear an inverse relation to each other in cultural industries. The more popular and therefore profitable an artist becomes, the less claim she or he has on elite cultural respect or prestige. Early Canadian literary celebrities such as Pauline Johnson, Stephen Leacock, Mazo de la Roche, and Lucy Maud Montgomery struggled mightily with the attractions of these economic and symbolic forms of literary capital, and they formulated a variety of responses, sometimes contradictory ones, to that struggle.

In tracing the struggles, decisions and accommodations of an early Canadian celebrity such as Pauline Johnson, I depart from the pervasive myth that celebrated Canadian intellectual figures, for whatever reason, have tended to be unaffected or unspoiled by fame. Clarence Karr, in his foundational study of popular Canadian authorship in the early twentieth century, suggests that this is the case,

confirming, as he does so, the perception of the Canadian as the culturally unaffected innocent. Writing of **[Page 8]** Nellie McClung, L. M. Montgomery, Ralph Connor and Arthur Stringer, Karr observes that in "spite of all the fame and fortune experienced by these five authors, however, they remained essentially unchanged. Perhaps because they were Canadian, they exhibited little pretension; there was no 'putting on airs,' no inflated egos. Although their lifestyles improved, there would be no exotic, international vacations. . . . They all remained conventional, middle-class Canadians" (56-57). In short, they did not *really* become celebrities, at least not in the globalized sense of stardom that we have inherited from Hollywood culture, because, somehow, it is not in the nature of Canadian cultural icons, those wide-eyed innocents, to become worldly, to be changed by fame. Though that may be truer of Karr's examples, particularly Stringer and Connor, it is less true of other earlier Canadian literary celebrities, like Pauline Johnson, whose fame reified her as a commodifiable "Mohawk Princess" for non-native consumption, or Stephen Leacock, whose fame was caught up in his obsessive drive for conspicuously displayed commodities (money, houses) that would provide him with reassuring evidence of his intrinsic worth. Even Lucy Maud Montgomery, though she ostensibly played the unchanging role of a dutiful minister's wife in Ontario during the same years that an international readership eagerly awaited her next book, was riven by the doubleness of her identity as Lucy Maud Montgomery and Mrs. Ewan Macdonald. On one occasion in 1931, when she accompanied her husband to meet with the administrators of the school where her son Chester was, to her great disappointment, performing poorly, she was shocked at how these men condescended to her as an "ordinary" mother. Afterwards, she mused in her journal, "I wonder if those men had known I was 'L.M. Montgomery' if they would not have been a little more considerate. I have often seen it work out so. But I took care they should not know. I shall always remember just how they behaved to plain, obscure, countrified Mrs. Ewan Macdonald" (Rubio and Waterston 105). The temptation for Montgomery to play the "fame card" must have been strong, and she was, like other early Canadian literary celebrities, aware of the uneasily duplicitous hand that literary fame had dealt her. In general, fame is a much more powerful force in the history of Canadian literature than has been suspected, and its possessors have not been blasé or unaffected by its workings in their careers and lives.

There was never any doubt or debate about the applicability of the term "star" to the career of Pauline Johnson. In fact, she used the term to refer to herself, signing letters to her promoter Frank Yeigh "Your Star" (Keller, 1981; 65). As a performer (rather than simply a reciter)

of her poems and **[Page 9]** stories, she was given star billing in her numerous appearances throughout North America and England—literally, as shown in publicity posters for her second tour in England that featured, in large letters, her Mohawk name "Tekahionwake" (Miss E. Pauline Johnson in parentheses below), over a large, striking profile photograph of the poet. The name of Johnson's long-time partner on the stage, "Mr. Walter McRaye, Humorist," appeared at the bottom of the page, at a distinct remove from the star attraction. In a humorous photographic representation of this pecking order, another publicity shot of the two performers shows a rather bemused looking McRaye posed lying at Johnson's feet (as Sheila Johnston comments, "The curious pose, of Walter reclining at the feet of the star, Pauline, defines their partnership" 177). Other publicity shots call upon the recognizable iconography of stage stardom of the day; one, a collage of photographs that appeared in the *Toronto Globe* in the early days of her celebrity, in 1894, shows a ring of publicity shots of Johnson, mostly in stylish evening or day dress (only one featuring Johnson's constructed version of Mohawk dress) surrounding a central oval studio portrait of Johnson in an elegant wrap, wearing a tiara (McMaster archives). Although a great deal of recent critical interest has focussed on Johnson's negotiation and performance of her two ethnic identities, there seems little doubt that when Johnson was performing the identity of stage star, it was her non-native and not her native heritage that came to the fore and was served up for presentation to her non-native audiences. Stardom, predictably, disrupted the balanced negotiation of Johnson's ethnic identities.

Johnson's career on the stage so overwhelmed her work as a publishing poet, in fact, that many of the celebrity motifs that mark her literary career seem directly imported from the stage and the screen. Of these, the narrative of sudden success—"a star is born"—is the most pervasive. Almost all of the critics and biographers who survey Johnson's career in any detail draw attention to the recital that she gave at the Young Men's Liberal Club of Toronto on 16 January,1892 at which she performed her poetry so movingly that her performance was met with thunderous applause. Sheila Johnston, in her account of this evening, makes the theatrical metaphor explicit: "[h]er recitation so startled and moved the audience that, in the finest tradition of theatrical lore, a star was born. Pauline entered the collective Canadian conscience that evening, and she never left it" (98). Betty Keller uses the narration of that night to open her 1999 popular biography of Johnson; from that opening chapter, "The Star of the Show," Keller then moves back in time to trace Johnson's life and career, starting with her family history in Brantford. All paths, it seems, lead to the

stereotypical **[Page 10]** life-changing, star-making performance. Even Keller, however, like other more recent critics of Johnson, has revealed this narrative for what it is: a well-worn celebrity cliché that obscures the actual facts of Johnson's earlier literary activities. In the longer biography of Johnson that she wrote in 1981, Keller pointed out that Johnson's promoter Frank Yeigh did much to circulate "the story that Pauline had been an 'instant recitalist,' suddenly transformed from 'the bashful and frightened Indian princess-maiden' to an assured platform performer" (59). As Keller sardonically notes, "Yeigh's instant recitalist story must have amused the people of Brantford and Hamilton who had seen Pauline perform from time to time over the preceding seven years" (59). More recently, in their substantial study of Johnson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe*, Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag add that, in addition to previous recitals that Johnson had given, she was also "quite familiar not only in the Toronto press, but also to readers of the *Canadian Magazine*, and *Dominion Illustrated* and Brantford newspapers" (103). So, as is usually the case, the birth of the star was a more protracted labour than the well-worn celebrity cliché suggests.

Gerson and Strong-Boag read Yeigh's discovery narrative in a postcolonial mode, noting that it "fits into the colonial paradigm, in which he [Yeigh] performs the role of patriarchal European explorer, while she serves as the feminized indigenous 'virgin land' awaiting his intervention and identification of her value" (103). This is undoubtedly true. The narrative also partakes, however, of an increasingly popular discourse of celebrity discovery that is about to gain force in North America with the rise of the motion picture industry, a discourse that is also permeated by colonizing impulses (most obviously when one considers genres such as the western). What is important for my purposes, however, is the way in which this particular form of celebrity discourse obscures apprenticeship. As Richard Dyer has observed of fan magazines, their representations of stars' lives as consisting mainly of leisure activities obscures "the fact that making films is work" (39). So too with literary celebrities from Johnson to Atwood: the sudden fame motif obscures the fact of an often long, hard period of apprenticeship work.

The factor of star visibility, the idea that celebrities must necessarily consign aspects of themselves that they might prefer to remain private to the public realm, was as evident in the celebrity of Pauline Johnson as it is in contemporary stardom. In fact, as Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag argue, Johnson's star visibility may have taken certain private options or decisions out of her hands altogether. Citing the possibility for métis women of Johnson's time and before to "pass"

as a non-Native **[Page 11]** settler in a marriage to a non-native man, Gerson and Strong-Boag note that this was not possible for Johnson: "[u]nlike many other Mixed-race women, however, she became far too famous to set aside readily the racial heritage that the age frequently considered problematic and to reappear as a respectable settler matron" (68). Having made the decision to perform her mixed heritage publicly, Johnson was denied the option of performing either racial identity privately to the apparent exclusion of the other.

This sort of heightened public scrutiny also limited Johnson's ability to present herself as evolving into a professional artist. Since much of her instant fame depended precisely upon a presentation of Johnson as a culturally innocent child of nature to a non-native audience, when Johnson did hone her professional stage skills, audiences reacted with disappointment. Betty Keller reveals that by 1902, audiences found Johnson more professional, less innocent-seeming, and she correctly ascribes this negative response to the workings of celebrity culture: "It is the fate of those rising to fame from obscure beginnings to be constantly examined by their public for signs of change. They are expected to remain unaltered even thought the most pedestrian personality within the common mass is allowed to lose innocence and become hardened and moulded by the stresses of life. But a celebrity is victim of the I-knew-her-when game, and it always turns out that she was a nicer individual when they knew her" (191). In turn, this celebrity phenomenon is cross constructed by variables of race and gender; in addition to audience expectations that Johnson remain some version of the naive child of nature, they also expected a late Victorian woman, as a supposed inhabitant of the private sphere, to remain untouched by exposure to public life.

If increased public scrutiny brought with it a diminished repertoire of life performances in some respects, it also allowed for special rules and dispensations that expanded the limits of what was possible for Pauline Johnson. Keller points to Johnson's brief engagement with Charles Drayton, a man eleven years her junior, as an example of a type of relationship that late Victorian Canadian society would have disapproved of in the case of a non-celebrity, but the "public made a special allowance, however, for one category of female: the celebrity who married a younger man" (134). Keller cites the examples of Lillie Langtry and Jenny Churchill, among others. So here we have the paradoxical relation of celebrity to personal agency or power: like the stereotypical film star who does not have the privacy or freedom to walk down a street unmolested but whose brushes with the law are likely to receive lighter punishment, Johnson found that celebrity was both a restriction and a ticket of passage. **[Page 12]**

After Johnson's death, her star visibility continued to shape the way in which her career has been understood. As a number of critics have recently pointed out, discussions of Johnson to date have emphasized her biography, her personal star narrative, at the expense of her writing. Reviewing Gerson's and Strong Boag's *Paddling Her Canoe*, Janice Fiamengo opens by observing that "scholars have usually been more interested in Johnson's life than in her writing or the content of her stage performances" (174), a trend that she sees Gerson and Strong-Boag as reversing. George W. Lyon argues that such a biographical obsession seems inevitable with Johnson, because she tended to "mine her own past for content and for image" and "asserted that her genetic history gave her the privilege of addressing certain subjects" (136). There is a point here, even if it does tend toward the reductive; Johnson's star image tended to represent herself as a subject of her discourse and of her theatrical presentation, the embodiment of that self on stage. Again, as with the exercise of personal power within celebrity, that star image both freed Johnson to signify on her identity in her works and on stage, and it also acted as a restrictive force, tempting audiences and later generations of critics to see her biography as both the starting point and the horizon of her art.

The negative manifestations of fame in turn-of-the-century Canada went beyond the merely restrictive. In the stereotypical fashion of contemporary celebrity culture, with its narratives of star suicides and drug addictions, fame was often invoked as a destroyer. Nowhere in Canadian literary history of the period is this more emphatically the case than in representations of Pauline Johnson. As Peter Unwin maintains, the "standard critical line on Pauline Johnson is that of a young talent destroyed by a career of travel and stage recitations." Certainly she often presented herself as at the mercy of her celebrity; in a letter that she wrote describing how she had to go on stage instead of travelling to her brother's funeral, she bitterly described herself as "the mere doll of the people and slave to money" (qtd. Johnston 126). Loss of control is at the basis of many of these representations of fame as a destroyer. Film theorist James Monaco has suggested that "control is obviously a major determinant in the celebrity formula" (12) and, in that spirit, he has categorized stardom in terms of the degree of control that a celebrity has over his or her stardom. "Quasars," in his typology, are stars who "almost never have any real control over the image they project" (11). In many stories about Johnson, this lack of control over image resurfaces as a major motif. Sheila Johnston, for instance, recounts the remembrance of one of Johnson's friends, Jean Stevinson, from near the end of Johnson's life: "'Fame is nothing, Tommy,' she told me one day. **[Page 13]** 'Remember, it's not worth that!' snapping her fingers in front of me. But she could not stem fame, which was to

roll and billow around her" (216).

An influential critical interpretation of Pauline Johnston is built upon a similar perception of her relationship to fame: the idea that, like a quasar, she ultimately lost control over her self representations and, instead, slavishly fed her public whatever image they desired. This argument lies at the heart of Daniel Francis's analysis of Johnson as one of the forms of "imaginary Indian" he calls the "celebrity Indian." This figure is, like the quasar, a star who has lost control over his or her signification. As Francis explains, a celebrity Indian "gains a wide audience among non-Natives, who then project onto it the voice of the 'typical Indian' in the non-Native imagination" (109). Besides Pauline Johnson, Grey Owl and Long Lance are Francis's paradigmatic Canadian examples. Like many recent critics of Johnson, Francis sees her as caught between two desires: her avowed project of representing "the glories of my own people" (qtd. Francis 116) and her need to satisfy a non-Native audience's preconceptions about Native people. As a result of this dilemma, Francis argues, Johnson was "ambivalent about her Indian 'image'" (116), and this ambivalence, in effect, destroyed her career: "This need to satisfy the demands of a White audience stultified Pauline Johnson's development as a writer and limited her effectiveness as a spokesperson for Native people" (120). Critics might disagree about the extent to which Johnson was muzzled by her fame, but the fact remains that, far from having little effect upon the popular writers of the time in Canada as Karr suggests, fame was a key variable in how those writers interacted with their audiences.

Amidst all the negative connotations and reflections that fill theoretical and critical discussions of celebrity, it sometimes needs to be recalled that celebrity can also bring pleasure, that it is as frequently enjoyed as it is decried as the destroyer of privacy, happiness and personal freedom. As Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag note, touring exhausted and sometimes frustrated Johnson, but "she frequently appears to have enjoyed the new experiences and new people, not to mention the fame, which stage life brought" (79). Again, fame could act as a liberatory as well as a restrictive force; as Gerson and Strong-Boag aptly observe, fame allowed Johnson to participate "in the beginning of a period of independent travel for women" (79), in a way that a woman of her class could not otherwise have done. There were other, less noble pleasures afforded by fame; as Betty Keller notes, Johnson "revelled in being lionized by the wealthy" in her tours across Canada, and she would manage to stay in the finest hotels no matter how full her concert halls were (1981, 106-07). In fact, Keller is **[Page 14]** rather sceptical about Johnson's famous outcry against the "literary 'pot-boiling'" and "brain debasement" that her popularity

forced upon her; she argues that Johnson continued to perform not just because she wanted to finance her first book of poetry but because she "had discovered that she needed the limelight. She loved the applause, the recognition in the streets, the bouquets of flowers from admirers, the special status of the star" (1981; 73-74).

It was that very status, however enjoyable it was for Johnson, that ensured her decline in the country's literary canons. Pauline Johnson is, indeed, a perfect example of Pierre Bourdieu's reflections on the way in which an artist's accumulation of economic capital tends to deplete any symbolic or cultural capital that he or she has managed to build up over a career. Carole Gerson's article, "The Most Canadian of All Canadian Poets: Pauline Johnson and the Construction of a National Literature," charts this inverse evolution of popularity and prestige in some detail. Calling to mind Earle Birney's mid-century dismissal of Johnson ("I don't read her"), Gerson argues that Birney, "having read Pauline Johnson's identity as the commodified Indian princess of popular culture . . . rejected the notion that her poetry could deserve his attention" (93). One of the reasons why modernists like Birney dismissed Johnson, according to Gerson, was their "conflicted attitude toward material success" (95), the same conflict that Pierre Bourdieu discerns in the fields of cultural production when producers of large-scale cultural productions (popular art) are "*symbolically* excluded and discredited" because they are making profits rather than stocking up on symbolic capital (39, emphasis Bourdieu's). Gerson makes this conflict between popularity and prestige clear: "[t]o the mind of the academic modernist, poetry presented in costumed performances aimed at audiences of the semi-washed could not possibly inhabit the same realm as poetry published in small university-based magazines" (96)—one of the classic venues of Bourdieu's field of restricted production. Even in Johnson's day, according to Mary Elizabeth Leighton, reviewers of her written poetry dismissed the dramatic first-person performance poems that "guaranteed box-office returns for her performances" in favour of "her plotless landscape descriptions" in her lyrical nature poems (153). Gerson and Strong-Boag also report that from 1892 onward, "Johnson's literary work was almost always received and assessed in relation to her performance," whether the intent was to praise the written works by associating them with the material success of her performances, or to denigrate the texts by contamination with large-scale (and therefore non-serious) production (117). So even well before the heyday of modernism, Johnson's **[Page 15]** celebrity occasioned a conflicted response toward material success and a hasty juggling of the values of symbolic and economic capital.

The decline that Johnson's work experienced, therefore, was, as Gerson and Strong-Boag phrase it, "a dramatic downward slide" "at the level of elite culture" (122). As Gerson points out in her article and in the revised version that appears in her book with Veronica Strong-Boag, however, that narrative of decline must be read against a narrative of persistence at the level of popular culture, a "presence that kept her books in print and preserved her name in schools and schoolbooks, a chocolate company, and almost in a major Vancouver theatre" (91). Recent scholars like Melanie Stevenson are pursuing the way in which Johnson persisted in these popular and pedagogical forms, in educational materials, for instance. As Stevenson observes, "[a]fter her death, Johnson's life and work became popular sources of educational material for teaching state-sanctioned values to children and teenagers. . . . In the latter part of the twentieth century Johnson was re-appropriated to teach children seemingly very different values associated with feminism, multiculturalism, and racial tolerance." The power of Johnson's star image to transfer itself, in John Ellis's terms, to other media or "subsidiary forms of circulation" (91), has been considerable, even at the time that most critics have spoken of her as forgotten or neglected. "Johnson's name," Gerson and Strong-Boag add, has "been attached to a machine-gun" as well as a "luxury yacht" (12), and she was also the first Canadian author to have her image commemorated on a Canadian postage stamp in 1961 (Gerson 90): a mixed bag of popular acclaim indeed. Generalized descriptions of Johnson's decline, therefore, need to be specified as issuing from the realm of élite culture. Though she may have suffered a significant loss of respect in the literary academy, at the level of popular culture, Pauline Johnson the celebrity has rarely been absent.

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