

CULTURE IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

A Look at Indigenous Writing in Canada

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Abstract

In this article, I will be exploring how the blending of Indigenous cultures in Canada is represented in Canadian Literature. In particular, I will be exploring the representation of two separate cultures coming together in writer and poet E. Pauline Johnson's work. In a time of colonisation and settlement, Johnson's mixed heritage offers an interesting perspective on the cultures that form part of the backbone of Canada today. Throughout this article I will refer to the poems 'Canadian Born', 'Brant, A Memorial Ode', 'A Cry from an Indian Wife' and 'Happy Hunting Grounds'.

Today, Canada is known to be a country accepting of all cultures. This can be seen in the Canada Multiculturalism Act; a legal declaration of Canada's promise to protect the diversity and heritage of the land.¹ However, as a land that was colonised, can there really be one, connected Canadian literature? As the daughter of a British mother and Mohawk father, E Pauline Johnson's poetry captures the relationship between the Indigenous people and the British colonisers.

Before the French and the British came to Canada, the land was occupied by three groups, collectively known as the Aborigines. There are the Inuits, the First Nations and the Métis. After the British defeated the French, the country fell under the rule of the Crown and all Canadian Aborigines were made citizens of Canada.² For many, this poses no problem – loyalties lie with the land, not with the political leader. Johnson's poem

¹ "Canadian Multiculturalism Act", *Laws-Lois.Justice.Gc.Ca*, 2022 <<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/page-1.html>> [Accessed 12 January 2022].

² News, I. and Awareness, I., 2021. *Trying Hard To Be Equal - Indigenous Awareness Canada Online*

‘Canadian Born’ showcases this in the metaphor ‘We are the pulse of Canada, its marrow and its blood’.³ She paints the citizens of Canada as intrinsic parts of a whole – they are key components to Canada’s ‘body’. This could be perceived as expressing commitment to Canada, as Johnson is uniting both counterparts equally under the country name; this is also referenced in the inscription where it is stated that the ‘White race and Red are one if they are but Canadian born’.⁴ This harmonious ideal tie in with the Multiculturalism Act. Despite a difference in heritage and culture, both parties come together to advocate one unified Canada. It can be argued that this proves there is one connected Canadian literature, as, although there are many cultures involved, they are inextricably intertwined.

Further reference to this is found in the poem ‘A Cry from an Indian Wife’. The poem is from the perspective of the wife of an Indian

who has gone to battle to protect his tribe from colonisers. She voices her despair at the dire situation but almost deviates from this midway through the poem, pleading for her loved one to not go to battle as her ‘heart is not the only one // that grieves the loss of husband and of son.’⁵ Johnson subtly preaches a unified Canada by recognising that the ‘rivals’ are going through a similar pain, thus finding common ground. The idea that if they did not fight, then they could peacefully assimilate and avoid the loss of life - in addition to their land.

But this is not a sentiment felt by all. For some, to be a member of the state is to lose their cultural independence – they will have assimilated into the culture of the people that took land from them.⁶ Assimilation was, and still is, a source of discord amongst some Indigenous peoples of Canada. It is defined as the process where those of differing heritages are absorbed into another.⁷

Training. [online] Indigenous Awareness Canada Online Training. Available at: <https://indigenousawarenesscanada.com/indigenous-awareness/trying-hard-to-be-equal/>

³ E. Pauline Johnson, *Canadian Born* (Toronto: G.N. Morang, 1903), p. 1.

⁴ E. Pauline Johnson, *Canadian Born* (Toronto: G.N. Morang, 1903), p. 1.

⁵ E. Pauline Johnson and Margery Fee, *Tekahionwake* (Broadview Press, 2015), p. 133.

⁶ FOCAL, *A Study On The Relationship Between Canadian Aboriginal Peoples And The Canadian State*, 2006, pp. 1-3.

⁷ Definition Of Assimilation | Dictionary.Com", *Www.Dictionary.Com*, 2021 <<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/assimilation>>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Canada implemented 'Indian Residential Schools', where young aboriginals were prevented from using their own language and any native traditions.⁸ Many of the children were also abused, in multiple ways. In 2015, Canada's Chair of Commission and aboriginal Judge Murray Sinclair spoke at an event that presented the findings of an investigation into abuse at these schools. After reading out the horrors faced by indigenous children, he condemned the past, labelling it a 'cultural genocide'.⁹ Recently, in June of this year, 751 unmarked graves were found at an Indian Residential School.¹⁰ There are still many legal disputes regarding treaties and agreements made by the government.

In the past, the indigenous cultures were forcibly absorbed into the Canadian culture. Should we be doing the same to their literature?

⁸ Laurence Butet-Roch, "The Bitter Legacy Of Canada'S Forced-Assimilation Boarding Schools", *The New Yorker*, 2015
<<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-bitter-legacy-of-canadas-forced-assimilation-boarding-schools>>

⁹ The Schools That Had Cemeteries Instead Of Playgrounds", *BBC News*, 2021
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33099511>>

¹⁰ Canada: 751 Unmarked Graves Found At Residential School", *BBC News*, 2021

Johnson echoes this opinion in 'A Cry from an Indian Wife'. The 'Indian Wife' speaks to the reader, saying 'They but forget we Indians owned the land ... Was our sole kingdom and our right alone'.¹¹ Particularly interesting is the use of the noun phrase 'sole kingdom'. In a paper found on the website Indigenous Awareness Canada, a point is made that the Aboriginals had no choice but to assimilate.¹² There was no other option available to those who would not have wanted to claim citizenship – there is nowhere for them to 'go back to' as their sole home has been taken under the state.

Johnson brings a similar tone to her poem 'Brant, A Memorial Ode'. This poem was commissioned to be read at the unveiling of a statue of Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, in front of a crowd of various cultures. Initially, the poem comes across as patriotic, however the language used hints at a sadness around the

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57592243>>

¹¹ E. Pauline Johnson and Margery Fee, *Tekahionwake* (Broadview Press, 2015), p. 133.

¹² Indigenous News and Indigenous Awareness, "Trying Hard To Be Equal - Indigenous Awareness Canada Online Training", *Indigenous Awareness Canada Online Training*, 2021
<<https://indigenousandnesscanada.com/indigenous-awareness/trying-hard-to-be-equal/>>

assimilation of the Indian culture to the British. She pays tribute to Brant, recounting how he 'bade his people leave their valley home ... And love the land where waves the Union Jack. What though that home no longer ours!'.¹³ Johnson explicitly says that Canada, for some, is no longer their home. This begs the question; if Johnson does not fully consider Canada her home, should her work fall under the umbrella title of Canadian Literature? And if not, what should it be considered as?

Although this article only looks at one Aboriginal culture, it could be agreed that at least one Aboriginal culture, to a greater or lesser degree, has influenced and informed the totality of Canadian Literature. Whilst 'Canadian Literature' is defined as the body of written works produced by Canadians, it does not address the cultural differences felt by some writers of Aboriginal descent.⁹ There is a distinct sense of unity, but enough comparisons and distinctions are made to ignore that they are separate cultures, and so demand separate recognition.

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