Approaches to Topo-biographies of Indigenous Women:

Race, Spatial Narratives, and the Examples of Pocahontas and E. Pauline Johnson

Alison Booth, Lloyd Sy, Reynaldo Capucao, Jr.

WORK IN PROGRESS. The “live” paper would be shortened to fit correct panel time. Feel free to select figures or sections to read in this modular essay. Thank you.

In lieu of a long paper to be delivered with PowerPoint in person at DH2020 in Ottawa, we share this essay on Humanities Commons for the virtual conference. The initial call of the conference invited digital studies of such matters as settler colonialism, territorial claims, and Indigenous peoples. Our study of prosopography, or selective personification of shared histories, has long been interested not only in printed books of short biographies about cohorts, such as Canadian women, but also national collections of portraits or statues. Honor rolls--like a garden of heroes proposed on July 4, 2020 at Mount Rushmore that sounded like 1920--are always political moves, even in less controversial books addressed to youth or general readers about Heroines of History. Our ongoing work is timely in light of protests over public sites of memory such as the statues of Confederate generals or of explorers standing over kneeling Native Americans in Charlottesville, Virginia. We want to acknowledge that this city and university are on traditional land of the Monacan People. Here, the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities and the Scholars’ Lab, in the Main Library (no longer named after a eugenicist early president of the university), have supported our work on Collective Biographies of Women (CBW), with the help of the English Department, ACLS, and NEH. Other collaborators on this project include Worthy Martin, Sarah Wells, and Rennie Mapp.

Biography is inherently spatial and national, in spite of usually being regarded as chronological and personal. In a new phase of CBW, we have proposed Biographical Elements and Space: Women, Recognition, Latitude, Documentary Networks (BESS-WRLDS), to unite methods of spatial and textual DH with studies of gender, race, sexuality, and class as well as nationality, as encoded in printed biographies about many types of women. For this presentation, we focus on texts and images associated with Pocahontas and Emily Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), centuries apart yet represented in kindred ways. In this paper, we suggest our approaches to topo-biographies or narrative geographies of collections rather than single biographies, and we sketch a comparison of the conventional portrayal of these two relatively famous Indigenous women. This is just a start on our research into typologies and geographies of North American Indigenous women in CBW’s archive, a cultural interpretation of texts in a database rather than in historical experience. Many before us have pondered the issues of appropriating Indigenous cultural heritage in digital archives. In CBW, we study Euro-American texts that reveal the stereotypes and racial frameworks of their publishing context. Yet our database cannot stand outside such problematic representation; any prosopography relies on ontologies which tend to revert to Eurocentric classification systems that identify, collect, and
mis-translate or erase existing ecologies.\(^1\) Susan Brown, leading the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory (CWRC), has recently called for great care and flexibility in what she calls “category work.” How can we “decolonize description,” from the perspective of Indigenous peoples, and yet achieve Linked Open Data (LOD) or standardized, interoperable ontologies? (Brown). Collective Biographies of Women (CBW) shares the mission of LOD on historical women and the goal of “provisional,” ethical representation. Ontologies serve to link any embodied individual to shared categories of identity and vocation that assist today’s perspective on contingent social formations. Data about space and time, apparently more quantitative, are also inflected by systems of power in history, as anyone knows who considers the map of North America’s borders over centuries. In texts discussed here, *Women of Canada* and *Courageous Women*, for example, the movements of settlers and Indigenous peoples across international and provincial borders due to armed conflicts are mentioned in passing as evidence supporting the excellence of certain women and the proud progress of Canada’s civilization. Misnaming of representatives, urging them to become identified with their origins or to assimilate, exoticizing their documented dress and dubbing them royalty or casting them in tragedies—all these moves are at least as old as Aphra Behn’s romance, *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave* (1688). In a database of interconnected short narratives about many kinds of historical women, the representation of Indigenous North Americans can be observed in action.

In this phase of CBW’s inquiry, we pursue spatial and textual DH with a balanced approach between quantitative scale, qualitative nuance, and available evidence.\(^2\) We are excited to investigate the data generated by our Mid-Range Reading method of narrative interpretation (Booth): Biographical Elements and Structure Schema (BESS), stand-alone XML tagging of textual elements in numbered paragraphs, that we have completed for a sample of over 350 of the more than 14,000 short biographies accessible in CBW. In Figure 1 below, we show the BESS Viewer of *one chapter about Pocahontas*\(^3\) that on closer reading is largely about Powhatan, her father, and the various historical events associated with the Jamestown settlement.

\(^1\) For examples of projects and related critiques, see O’Neal; Cascadia Underground, “New Field Guide”; Bliss, Latin American Digital Initiatives (LADI) repository; Bordalejo and Risam.

\(^2\) On the “spatial turn,” see Ryan et al, 101; Liu, “Diversity Stack”; on intersectional feminist DH, see Losh & Wernimont; D’Ignazio & Klein. See Prince.

\(^3\) BESS, explained in detail here, works with samples of text. So far we have completed BESS of only one biography of Pocahontas in CBW. The viewer is found by clicking “View BESS analysis” on the “one chapter” biography page, linked above.
In the corpus of digitized texts and accompanying BESS analyses, we are noticing suggestive collocations of controlled values related to clothing, renaming, race, and nationality. We might assume that details of characterization of the protagonist, especially PersonaDescription, would be unrelated to the broad dimensions we refer to as “space” or cultural geography. But we’re beginning to look at recurrent conceptual (BESS) and verbal patterns for just such relations between personal description and contact zones.

Of course there are direct, open-access ways to visualize social and spatial dimensions of networks of biography using available mapping and timeline software, as we have begun to do (see Figure 2). Like other printed texts, biographies may be geolocated using gazetteers of toponyms, as we have tested with LocateXT (in ESRI’s ArcGIS), but this naturalizes place-name conventions that are part of continental history. For sets of individual biographies collected in books, one approach we have used is to develop spreadsheets of “timepoints”: GIS + standardDate for birth, death, and a third central event, for each biographical subject in the collection. We can map these trajectories and relate them to publication place and date; titles and prefaces; other textual indications of space.

Lloyd Sy and Drew MacQueen have experimented with mapping toponyms in a single, all-African American text in the CBW bibliography of 1272 collections of women’s lives:
As noted, we are interested not only in mapping biographical data as above, but also in our textual interpretations of space, gender, race, and nationality, using BESS and otherwise garnering patterns from textual data. For this presentation, we raised the research question, How are Indigenous women and “Canada” represented in a database of English-language biographical collections? For brevity: What do we find in looking more closely at two examples, Pocahontas and Pauline Johnson, both often included in books with the title designation Native American? Of some 1500 publishers in the bibliography, 19 were based in Toronto, 3 in Montreal, and two each in Ottawa, Victoria, and Markham, Ontario. Researchers on our team have given the collection type “Canadian” to nine books, that is, the biographical subjects share this nationality. (By way of comparison, there are seven “Australian” collections, and six publishers located in Australia). CBW leads users to diverse narratives (beyond reference-work summaries of fact) in shifting networks of types: the same figure can be placed in different tables of contents. As a database of a specific genre, CBW shows us how biographers and publishers deployed female types for different purposes over time. There are only 60 women identified as Canadian in our database; given the history of this colony, then dominion, then constitutional monarchy, we might say the attribute of being Canadian is time-sensitive (as is the tendency of nations, e.g. “Italian,” “French,” and so on). “Canadian” certainly doesn’t depend on birth, if Anna Jameson and Catherine Parr Traill, for example, can be canonized as Canadian writers.

The biographical collections in CBW’s list usually show no embarrassment claiming that Anglo-Saxon Christian womanhood represents the forefront of civilization. Notice of African American women is more likely to emerge from African American authors as early as the 1890s, whereas books featuring American Indian Women (e.g. Gridley 1974) from a community perspective await the latter half of the twentieth century. There are a range of volumes featuring US pioneers that include some recognition of individual people already on these lands, but usually as nameless groups. CBW’s database includes 47 person records that have been assigned the “American, Native” type, some recurring in several collections. This type includes five anonymous persons, e.g. “A Kind-Hearted Chippewa,” and two collective subjects such as

---

4 Birth and death locations and dates vary widely for the more than 400 African American women in CBW’s database.
“Mohawk Women.”) A spreadsheet of their birth and death locations would be likely to produce a rather inert map confirming that most Native American women noted in such publications remained local, where the law had assigned them to live, though they had become newsworthy beyond their reservations. Yet the identity typologies and geolocation that we use for research purposes are labels of matters that are far more than facts. All these lives call for deep research beyond CBW’s narratives and behind any referential data: what about tribal genealogies and competition for resources, land claims, water rights, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and forced or voluntary education; the many political forces shaping spaces in different times?

On this occasion, what can we find in the representation of Pocahontas and of Pauline Johnson in racial and national terms? We should plainly state that these two famous women affiliated with the English have little in common—women associated with this northern hemisphere, centuries apart and figuring in very different narratives. CBW’s tables of contents provide some measure of relative rates of recognition (RR). The most famous subjects appear as many as 50 or 60 times, yet nearly 6500 of over 8500 persons appear only once. Pocahontas, with RR=20, served many purposes in collective biographies across more than a century. Pauline Johnson (RR=3), much nearer to our day, has a very different presence in this discourse as a writer of one of the chapters in Women of Canada; there are three short biographies of her in copyrighted books (1934; 1974; 2000; our bibliography is exhaustive only through 1940). As topo-biographies, they overlap in space if not historically, and in theme and narrative features there is a striking homology. They serve similar pretexts and cultural scripts: benevolent Indigenous women transformed into much the same Indian Princess, whose race gracefully concedes to the history of a new nation and opening continent that is beloved for its lingering wilderness and native genius. Johnson made a career of the performance, and in action and print was an advocate for women’s and Indigenous rights. And we have her own perspective in writing as to the dangers of collapsing all kinds of difference into one type.

Pocahontas

The famous, enduring icon, Pocahontas, deserves full investigation, and we plan BESS of her narratives. Here we consider two collections evidently addressing white readers, published in the 1880s in the US: E. S. Brooks’ Historic Girls and S. W. Williams’s Queenly Women, Crowned and Uncrowned. Both texts blend playacted indigeneity with ostensible allegiance to accurate national histories.

---

5 They can be configured as women of the frontier; both were situated geographically to engage with European cultures as they resided in the eastern-most tribes of the Powhatan and Iroquois Confederacies respectively. Both must have been conversant in codes of English and Indigenous cultures and both were feted in London as model Indigenous women.

6 Heroines That Every Child Should Know features 13 famous women, from Alcestis to Joan of Arc to Florence Nightingale; the authors, Mabie and Stevens, acknowledge “Mrs. Elizabeth E. Seelye for material adapted for Pocahontas” (Pocahontas [New York: Dodd, Mead [1879]). Complete BESS on the operatic lives, many facing political executions, will afford interpretation of spatial and other data for Pocahontas in comparison to the Greek, Roman, Scots, French, and English women in Mabie and Stevens’s book.
In *Historic Girls*, the subjects may be immediately recognizable to readers today: saints, queens, a Chinese woman and a Native American woman; more than a few whose pursuits are described as “boyish,” who renounced heterosexual bonds. Brooks misplaces these historic women by renaming them as inhabitants of supposedly authentic lands remote from the urban site of publication, or the probable setting of the child reader. The preposition “of” is an immersive device in the epithets of female missionaries at this period, to suggest their acceptance or assimilation with the foreign people. As usual, for the woman whose language is not English or who represents some ethnic, national, or historical distance from middle-class Anglo-America, naming is a gargled transliteration of monikers with false etymologies. Brooks heads the chapter: “MA-TA-OKA OF POW-HA-TAN, Generally known as ‘The Princess Pocahontas’ AD 1607.”

Brooks presents himself as an advanced thinker, aware of anthropology. Pocahontas’s people, between “savagery and civilization” in a state of barbarism (210), might have advanced further if left to themselves (208). If only we were all as advanced as this supposed barbarism! (We omit here Brooks’ admiring physical description of the “race.”) They were “what is now termed communists.... Their method of government was entirely democratic” (209). The text exoticizes as it entertains and instructs girl readers about “the agile little Indian girl.” Yet in the final words of the chapter: “The white race has nothing to be proud of in its conquest of the people who once owned and occupied the vast area of the North American continent.... [S]ome figures...relieve the darkness, the treachery, and the crime,” high among them “Ma-ta-oka, friend of the white strangers, whom we of this later day know by the nickname her loving old father gave her Po-ca-hun-tas [Brooks claims this means “tom-boy”], the Algonquin” (225). In the tragic inversion of the tale of her rescue of the Captain Smith, she is rescued for conversion, brought to England for a brief celebrity, and dies of disease before she can know the sequel of the decline and obliteration of her people.

---

7 Matoaka, known as Amonute (Wikipedia) or Pocahontas takes shape in topoi-biography of early American linkage to England. A statue of her located at the reconstruction of historic *Jamestown* is paired with a replica at Gravesend, *where she died*. Like many Confederate statues, these were placed after World War I. *Pocahontas Island*, in what is now Petersburg, Virginia, claims to be “the oldest Black community in America,” a town of free African Americans.
In the preface to *Queenly Women* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1885), Professor S. W. Williams, M.A., affirms the usefulness of biography as a “mirror” for readers, and lists the instructive examples of women artists, writers, missionaries, philanthropists, rulers, and politicians. “Simple goodness appears in Martha Washington and the Duchess of Orleans, while womanly affection shines forth in Mrs. Osgood and the Indian princess Pocahontas. ...Others ...might well take their places in this noble sisterhood of names. Worth is not confined to a class nor to the few.” Many of these biographical lists invoke high status yet openness to all (“noble” is a character trait rather than a rank). As Williams’ title suggests, you can browse women’s history, eat your royals-watching cake, and enjoy a healthy middle-class diet too.

Williams offers another version of Pocahontas, sandwiched between Greek and Roman matrons and modern poets, in a book where even queens and celebrities are chosen for their goodness. He is much less interested in historical accuracy or anthropology of race than Brooks, and entirely accepts the story of her preventing her father from ordering the execution of Captain Smith. After her conversion and adoption of the name Rebecca, she marries John Rolfe—all points in favor of the verdict of her goodness. Here we get pretty much the script for Disney, and a commonly reprinted image of Pocahontas (not the historic engraving of her in England). Williams, too, calls her “agile”: “She was then about thirteen years of age, tall, sprightly, agile, full of feminine tenderness and affection, and, for one of her race, exceedingly beautiful.” (184).
Fig. 5   Queenly Women
Describing the fashions of the wedding: “The bride was arrayed in a simple tunic of white muslin, leaving her arms naked; over her shoulders was loosely thrown an elegant robe, presented by Sir Thomas Dale, and fancifully embroidered by herself and her maids. A rich fillet bound her hair, and from her head drooped a vail [sic] of gauze and the plumage of birds. Her arms were encircled with simple bracelets and her feet covered with slippers of her own handiwork. Rolfe was attired as an English cavalier....” (186)
This imaginary portrait by J. C. Buttre circulated widely, with variations including the single bare breast. You can almost see Cinderella’s talking birds.

See Pocahontas as Featured Subject in the first phase of CBW, the annotated bibliography (“Library List”); series of portraits and online research sources, with biographical study by Julia Fuller.

E. Pauline Johnson

Poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson (10 March 1861 – 7 March 1913), Tekahionwake, has been widely studied more recently; her work is well represented in Canada’s Early Women Writers, part of CWRC. In CBW, as noted, she appears in three texts and contributes to another, as one of 60 CBW persons typed “Canadian,” and one of 47 “Native Americans.” There was a 1961 postage stamp in her honor, and a stone memorial stands in Stanley Park, Vancouver, the city where the activist for women’s rights died of breast cancer, having never married. CBW includes two editions, 1900 and 1930, of a volume that is more history than biography called Women of Canada. Its final chapter, entitled “Indian Women,” consists of short amateur-sociology pieces, written by local witnesses identified by their residences. Brantford, in Southwest Ontario, was named after the Mohawk chief who settled the Six Nations nearby, where E. Pauline Johnson was born:


A profile portrait of Johnson is cropped from the photograph in Fig. 5; her Indigenous name is given here as “Tekahiyoucoaka.” She writes, “the average Englishman would take some offence if anyone were unable to discriminate between him and a Turk—though both are ‘white;’” and yet Europeans are surprised that Native Americans resent being mistaken for each other. Undeniably, Johnson asserts, “the Iroquois stand far in advance of any Indian tribe in America” (by which she means US and Canada; 440). Having vividly described a typical older Iroquois woman in traditional dress and her modern-dressed daughter, she notes matrilineal rank and female participation in councils, and concludes: “I think the reader will admit that not all civilized races honour their women as highly as do the stern old chiefs, warriors and braves of the Six Nations’ Indians” (442). As “D. Boyle and others” write in the previous piece, “Many of the Iroquois of the ‘Six Nations’ were among the ‘United Empire Loyalists’ who left their land and all that was theirs at that time, migrating to Canada from what had become the United States, in order to remain British subjects” (439), implying Canada’s superiority in treatment of Indigenous peoples as in earlier abolition of slavery than the US.

One collection, Courageous Women (a579), co-authored by pre-eminent Canadian author L. M. Montgomery, is predominantly Canadian in its biographical subjects, though it begins with Joan of Arc and includes Helen Keller. The perspective is strongly pro-British Empire, with biographies of Queen Victoria and Edith Cavell (the World War I nurse who was executed by the Germans). One biography, of Elizabeth Louise MacKenney Mair, “A Loyal Pioneer of the West,” depicts her imprisonment by rebels and her escape “dressed as a man in the costume of the Metis” (103). “Caring for Indians: Anna J. Gaudin” depicts a missionary wife and nurse whose daughter is ceremonially adopted by the Cree tribe, and who served the ill during the “great influenza epidemic of 1918” (113). In short, a loyalist, interracial but hierarchical collective biography affects the book’s admiring chapter “The Princess of the Paddle: (Tehahionwake) Pauline Johnson.” According to systemic racial typologies, the praiseworthy model of a race is somehow royal (as in fairy tales). The chapter opens with a pretty girl’s sensuous inspiration to write a famous poem in a canoe, before explaining that this natural poet was the youngest daughter of “full blood Mohawk” Chief Johnson, and Emily Howells, “a relative of Dean Howells, the American novelist” (150-1), yet she was (by vocation?) “far more
Indian by nature than white, and she was proud of it” (153). To an editor in London who was looking for voices of Canada, Johnson’s “In the Shadows” seemed “the music that belongs peculiarly to the Red Man” (149). His review and their correspondence are just the beginning of the British-Indigenous union celebrated in this figure. For sixteen years she toured, twice in England, a beloved sensation as she came on stage “in the historic dress of Minnehaha [Longfellow’s heroine], fringed and embroidered buckskin, with beaded moccasins and belt of wampum.” (The details of her costume match the photograph in Figure 6.) The obligatory blanket/cape is here “the very robe that Prince Arthur of Connaught stood upon” when he “was made a Chieftain of the Six Nations” (157). “She moved with the grace and lightness of an Indian” (157). People called her “The Mohawk Princess,” and princess she was “by Indian standards” (157), singing dreamlike from her canoe, “with a note new and strange and all of the wild” (159).

Tribes have been circumscribed in areas of the continent, if not exterminated, while at the same time, as Johnson observed, North Americans blur all Native Americans into one race. The uses and abuses of geopolitical terms and ethnic or tribal labels emerge in a close look at the topo-biographies that advance the concept of Canada as a nation through the history of Indigenous people who chose to join it. A closer inspection of the narratives in Historic Girls, Queenly Women, Women of Canada, and Courageous Women indicates porous borders and changing nationalities of the same person or community, the ongoing interaction of international events such as the War of 1812 or the Spanish flu, and a predilection for female epitomes of native spirit. Prompted by this comparison of narratives about two iconic Native American women who affiliated as well with the English, we are considering that biographies, once again, show where the personal connects with geopolitical histories. What does description of an “Indian princess” in her “native” costume have to do with spatial DH? Initial exploration of the sample corpus of BESS analyses and texts finds similar fascination with details of renaming and dress (seen in our readings of Pocahontas and Pauline Johnson) in passages featuring Native American men (see Figure 1), Latinx settlers of “old California,” Catholic missionaries, and explorers (beads, feather, agile), long journeys and wild settings. Clothing appears when a persona is recruited to uniformed service (as a nurse), or in ceremonial cross-race encounters.

We look forward to using varied DH approaches to the short biographies in CBW’s database to gain further insight into the semantics of race and nationality in spatial and physical representations of the lives of women of color.

---

8 Pauline Johnson is partly known for trochaic meter echoing Longfellow’s trochaic octameter in Hiawatha, a meter he chose as both epic and indigenous. Lindsey E. R. O’Neil has linked Johnson’s dramatic monologue, “A Cry from an Indian Wife,” to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Cry of the Children” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” stressing Johnson’s critique of racist othering of Indigenous women and demand that Canada live up to its claims of moral superiority.

9 Western travel accounts such as Anna Jameson’s Winter Studies and Summer Rambles place great value on the ceremonial induction into a tribe with honorary title; here the ambassadorial significance is manifold.

10 The Mohawk tribe served as the “Keepers of the Eastern Door” to the Iroquois Confederacy, considered one of the most powerful Native American nations. Its geographic location led to many interactions with Europeans and made the Mohawk more susceptible to Western influence. The racial and spatial frontier inhabited by Pauline Johnson made her relatable to a Western audience yet distant enough to be exoticized as an Indian princess.
Works Cited


Latin American Digital Initiatives (LADI).


