

To “Hear the Call of the Singing Firs”: (Re)Reading E. Pauline Johnson’s *Lost Lagoon* as Eco-Elegy

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Abstract

My goal is to bring fresh attention to E. Pauline Johnson’s nature poetry—to “The Lost Lagoon” in particular—in the hopes it may spark further recognition of the complexity of her nature writing and carve out a place for Johnson within the current ecological literary criticism. Scholarship virtually dismisses Johnson’s “The Lost Lagoon” as worthwhile for study. As a “nature poem,” “The Lost Lagoon” tends to be ignored in favour of Johnson’s earlier and more substantial poems that celebrate nature and the harmonious relationship between nature and human beings. However, even her earlier nature writings have been largely overlooked because they do not follow the distinctly Canadian literary tradition of human domination over nature. (Re)reading “The Lost Lagoon” in relation to Timothy Morton’s ideas on eco-criticism in the humanities—his suggestion to approach more texts with an ecological criticism based on the interconnectedness of all things (“The Mesh”), and his specific approach to elegy in “The Dark Ecology of Elegy”—brings a new perspective, helping us to comprehend the poem as an ecological elegy and fully appreciate its significance. Moving beyond the more-obvious interpretations of the poem, this essay argues that “The Lost Lagoon” necessarily brings together the general themes of nature and landscape, the solo female canoeist, intimacy, sensuality, love, and mourning over loss that extend through Johnson’s earlier poetry into a single poem that emphasizes the interconnectedness and intimacy between human beings. In addition, the poem prospectively mourns what would end up being the permanent loss of Coal

Harbour's western tidal basin—a place at the entrance to Vancouver's Stanley Park that Johnson called the Lost Lagoon.

Keywords: Pauline Johnson, The Lost Lagoon, Timothy Morton, Eco-elegy, Eco-criticism, Canadian Poetry

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.*

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

After extensive research and writing on Pauline Johnson over more than a dozen years, early Canadian literature expert Carole Gerson disappointedly remarks, “[n]early a century after her death, the question of how to read Pauline Johnson’s poetry and prose concerns fewer critics than it should” (57) and advocates for more scholars to attend to “the craft and range of her poetry” (45). Like Gerson, my goal is to bring fresh attention to Johnson’s poetry—to one poem in particular—in the hopes it may spark further recognition of the complexity of her nature writing and carve out a place for Johnson within current ecological literary criticism. Taking a cue from Charles Darwin, Timothy Morton offers an analysis of the interconnectedness of life forms and nature as a whole. Ecological science makes this plainly obvious, but Morton considers the philosophical and cultural implications of what he calls “the mesh” and recommends that scholars “reimagine ecological literary criticism” with the “intimate entanglement of all life-forms” in mind. “The surprising result,” he continues, “is that far more texts become available for ecological criticism” (“The Mesh” 29). To demonstrate the value of such an approach, I propose (re)reading Johnson’s mostly-overlooked poem “The Lost Lagoon” from an ecological perspective. Morton’s more specific view that “[e]legy appears to be a quintessential mode of ecological writing”—which incidentally leads him to brand elegy with an ecological concern as ‘eco-elegy’ (“Dark Ecology” 251)—helps us to comprehend the poem as an eco-elegy and fully appreciate its significance. With consideration to the general themes of Johnson’s poetry—nature and landscape; the solo female canoeist; intimacy, sensuality and love; mourning over loss—the following essay explores Johnson’s “The Lost Lagoon” as an ecological elegy that necessarily incorporates all of those

themes together. It recommends moving beyond the more obvious interpretations of the poem by suggesting the poem prospectively mourns what would end up being the permanent loss of Coal Harbour's western tidal basin at the entrance to Vancouver's Stanley Park. I argue that temporality, location, and, by drawing further on Morton's analysis of Percy Shelley's poem "Alastor"—the poem Morton presents as *the* example of eco-elegy—the narrator's very existence are all obscured in Johnson's poem, and it is precisely these ambiguities that allow the poem to function as eco-elegy. Following patterns that inform Johnson's other nature poems, "The Lost Lagoon" emphasizes the interconnectedness and intimacy between human beings and nature, making the loss of 'nature' something to actually be mourned; at the same time, it preserves their separateness, which is critically important to recognizing the human impact on the natural world and the significance of any loss.



Fig 1. Photo of Johnson in traditional Aboriginal dress. "Pauline E. Johnson," ca 1895. Cochran, 1952-010 NPC / C-085125, Library and Archives Canada.

E. Pauline Johnson (1863-1913), or *Tekahionwake*—the Mohawk name she adopted for herself—was one of Canada's major poets during the turn of the 20th century. She was of mixed-race ancestry: her father was a Mohawk chief of the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario; her mother came to Canada from a Loyalist English family in Ohio. Johnson's dual ancestry was something she embraced. Her writing includes a wide array of publications, from adventure stories about Indian life which she published in popular magazines, plays she performed onstage, and poetry which appeared in collected volumes, to traditional stories of the Squamish people later published under the title

Legends of Vancouver (1911). The various modes and styles of her writing are evidence of her skillfulness as a writer. Though her writing fell out of literary favor shortly after her death in 1913, recent reappraisals of Johnson's literary works are restoring her former status in Canadian and First Nations writing.

The scholarly criticism on Johnson directs much of its attention to the way in which her poetry and short stories textually play out her different cultural influences by blending together distinct aesthetics and traditions. In their comprehensive study of Johnson's life and career, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*, Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson explain that Johnson's poems about Canadian landscape, although they only account "for a small portion of her oeuvre," demonstrate "she was well in tune with the canonical poets of her generation"; however, much of her poetry has been overlooked from an environmental perspective because it does not follow the distinctly Canadian literary tradition of dominance over nature (152). Johnson was also recognized as a talented romantic poet, but this, Strong-Boag and Gerson point out, "carried little weight in a national culture that omitted romantic love from its self-definition" (145). Even Strong-Boag and Gerson reveal their own biases toward Johnson: "the sporadic poems from the last phase of Johnson's career," which they date as 1906-1913, "lack the passion of her love poetry, the advocacy of her Indian poetry, and the vigour of her nature poetry"; "In truth," they declare, "as a poet, Johnson peaked early" (154). Not surprisingly, then, apart from the occasional reference to "The Lost Lagoon" as another Johnsonian canoe-poem depicting "the agency of a female canoeist and her harmonious relationship with the outdoor setting" (Gerson 54), the criticism seems to completely ignore the poem.

Given the lack of scholarly attention afforded to "The Lost Lagoon," it is worth pausing to consider some general themes and concerns that extend through much of Johnson's early poetry. "In contrast to the rhetoric of conquest that characterizes much male writing about nature" during the same period of colonial Canada (Gerson 54), Johnson's poetry usually depicts human beings in harmony with nature. There is a vein of romantic poems in the 1880s and early 1890s whose "sexual explicitness" and "powerful assertions of female desire" also reveal Johnson mourning the loss of one or more lovers (Strong-Boag and Gerson 140-144). But perhaps Johnson's "distinctive contribution to Canadian nature poetry," according to Strong-Boag and Gerson, is her expressions of female agency, "usually associated with her mastery as a canoeist," fearlessly navigating a sensual, wild landscape (153).

The canoe certainly figures prominently in her writing. Functioning as a distinctly Canadian "counterpart to the New Woman's bicycle as a physical

symbol of freedom of movement and general independence,” the canoe also provides “a site of sexual liberation” and one in which Johnson puts the woman in control of the vessel (Strong-Boag and Gerson 153-154). Strong Boag and Gerson offer a succinct analysis of Johnson’s best-known poem that demonstrates how the themes of her early poetry assemble around an interaction between a woman, her canoe and nature.



Fig 2. Johnson loved to travel in her canoe. When she retired to Vancouver, she especially liked canoeing around Coal Harbour, the Stanley Park peninsula, and Burrard Inlet. “Pauline Johnson in a canoe,” ca 1890s. Brant Historical Society.

While the canoe is the scene of sexual encounters when occupied by a heterosexual couple, ‘The Song My Paddle Sings’ offers a different erotic relationship, in which nature is the woman’s lover. This tryst, described in strongly sensual language, opens with the canoeist ‘wooing’ the wind to fill her sail. When there is no response, it is up to her to initiate the encounter, by caressing the stream with her paddle: ‘soft is the song my paddle sings.’ The physical intensity increases from stanza to stanza, from the teasing, drifting motion of the third, to the more deliberate thrusts through the foaming ‘breast’ of the waves in the fourth, to enthusiastically negotiating the swirling eddies of the fifth. The climactic sixth and seventh stanzas, in which the canoe ‘reels’ and ‘trembles’ as it fearlessly plunges through the ‘reckless waves’ of the roaring rapid, are followed by the post-coital

peace of the last two verses. At the end, ‘The river slips through its silent bed,’ with nature restored to the comforting metaphor of ‘A fir tree rocking its lullaby.’ (154)

Perhaps Johnson’s best expression of female agency and canoe mastery, in which the paddler and her canoe become one, works in further collaboration with nature, rather than against it, to navigate the landscape in “The Song My Paddle Sings.” More importantly, this sensually romantic partnering, facilitated by the canoe and the canoeist’s paddle, creates an intimate relationship between woman and nature.

Many of the themes coursing through Johnson’s early poetry are obviously at play in “The Lost Lagoon”: nature and landscape; the solo female canoeist; an intimate relationship and mourning over loss. It is equally unsurprising then that the criticism continues to ignore the poem; not only does it come late in Johnson’s career, despite its brevity, the primary concern of the poem is difficult to identify: is it a nature poem? A love poem? Perhaps even an elegy? It is, I believe, best understood as all three.

The elegiac nature of the poem could not be more strangely powerful yet inexplicit. Johnson adheres to the English poetic traditions of idealizing her



Fig 3. Photo of Chief Joe Capilano, a close friend of Johnson’s. The two first met in London, Britain; they became quite close when Johnson retired to Vancouver. BC Archives, “Chief Joe Capilano,” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia. Web 2 May 2017. Digital Image.

subject in the first stanza, making clear the narrator’s melancholy grief in the second, and then turning to nature for consolation and a dream of another canoe trip in the poem’s final stanza. In this, she follows convention—if not specifically in the structure of the poem, then at least by maintaining elegy’s requisite components. But who or what is it an elegy for? The title identifies the Lost Lagoon as the primary subject of the poem, but it remains unclear, at least initially, if the lagoon is the subject of the elegy or the source of consolation. Complicating matters, there is an unidentified person in the poem that initially appears to be the subject of the narrator’s mourning: the ‘other’ of the “we two dreaming” in the first stanza and the “you” that is mourned in the second. One

person in Johnson's life could be the subject of the poem and her mourning: Chief Joe Capilano, Johnson's close friend in British Columbia, who died on March 10, 1910—just seven months before "The Lost Lagoon" was first published. Chief Capilano relayed stories of the Squamish people to Johnson that she would re-tell in the *Legends of Vancouver*. The two spent considerable time with one another before Capilano's death, both during story-telling sessions in Johnson's Vancouver home as well as when travelling around Burrard inlet and the areas of the North Shore where Capilano lived. It is likely the two paddled together around Coal Harbour and the Stanley Park peninsula.

Originally published untitled in the *Vancouver Daily Magazine* on October 22, 1910, as an opening to her story, "The True Legend of Deadman's Island," and later collected in *Legends of Vancouver* as "Deadman's Island" (Gerson and Strong-Boag 318-319), the poem was accompanied by an explanation in the opening lines of legend. Resenting the "jarring, unattractive name" Coal Harbour for her favourite canoeing spot in the Burrard Inlet, Johnson describes how she named the "sheltered little cove" where "the ever-restless tides left the harbour devoid of water" the "Lost Lagoon"—"just to please [her] own fancy" (*Legends* 113-114). In his book, *Inventing Stanley Park*, Sean Kheraj explains that the tidal range of Coal Harbour "was wide, which meant that low tides drained most of its western basin (Lost Lagoon), and high tides pushed seawater as far as Second Beach," virtually turning Stanley Park into an island (105). In the early days of the city of Vancouver, these tides often rendered the Stanley Park peninsula inaccessible by foot, so the Board of Works, the first public body responsible for the park, erected a bridge across the harbour to provide pedestrian, bicycle, horse and carriage access to the park by directly linking it to the city streets (Kheraj 95). This is the same "bridge" on which Johnson and Capilano are "leaning on the western rail" as they watch the sunset across Coal Harbour in the opening lines of "Deadman's Island":

For many minutes we stood silently ... as we watched the sunset across the beautiful little basin of water known as Coal Harbour. ... But the chief, Indian-like, immediately adopted the name [Lost Lagoon], at least when he spoke of the place to me, and, as we watched the sun slip behind the rim of firs, he expressed the wish that his dug-out were here instead of lying beached at the farther side of the park. (*Legends* 113-114)

As they stood on the bridge together, Chief Capilano said to Johnson: “If canoe was here, you and I we paddle close to the shore all ‘round your Lost Lagoon we make track just like half-moon” (*Legends* 114). This prompts Johnson to “look eastward” in contemplation, “following in fancy the course he had sketched. The waters,” she continues, “were still as the footsteps of the oncoming twilight, and” Deadman’s Island floated “in a pool of soft purple” (*Legends* 115). The poem undoubtedly echoes the scene from “Deadman’s Island”: Capilano’s missing dug-out canoe is now “the old canoe” that is gone; the “half-moon” canoe track Chief Capilano sketches around Lost Lagoon imitates “the curve of a golden moon”; the “soft purple” of Coal Harbour’s waters turn to “The purple shade where the seaweed stirs”; Johnson empowers “the rim of firs” with song; and, the “oncoming twilight” of the scene that begins “Deadman’s Island” repeats as the “dusk” that begins the poem. In memorializing this particular moment in the poem, Johnson is clearly mourning the loss of Chief Capilano. Yet, the poem is titled “The Lost Lagoon” and not something else that would obviously identify Chief Capilano, confirming that the primary subject of the poem must, in fact, be the Lost Lagoon.

If the poem is an elegy for the lagoon, it would seem to mourn the changes of “the ever-restless tides” that left the harbour temporarily “devoid of water at [Johnson’s] favourite canoeing hour,” causing her to lose her “pet idling-place” (*Legends* 114). Notwithstanding the obvious interpretation, it is possible that Johnson uses the poem to prospectively mourn a permanent loss of the natural lagoon forever.

After exhaustive working and travelling across Canada, Johnson retired and permanently relocated to Vancouver in the summer of 1909 (Keller 240). Prior to her arrival in Vancouver, the wooden bridge over Coal Harbour linking Stanley Park to the city’s streets was the primary way for ever-increasing stream of visitors to access the park (Kheraj 105).



Fig 4. The original entrance to Stanley Park showing the wooden bridge over Coal Harbour behind the arch—before city development and tram lines approached the park edge and motorized vehicle traffic across the bridge meant the archway was an obstruction. City of Vancouver Archives. “Main entrance [to Stanley Park showing bridge and arch over Coal Harbour],” 1890[?]. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-1---: S-5-1, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 5. The entrance to the park changed as city developments approached the park entrance and traffic into the park increased. “[View of the Coal Harbour bridge and the park entrance from the foot of Georgia Street],” 1898. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-: St Pk P122, City of Vancouver Archives.

After years of use and exposure to “ever-restless” harbour tides, “the Park Board and city council launched a project to improve the park entrance after the wooden pilings of the Coal Harbour bridge started to decay” (Kheraj 107).



Fig 6. People crossing the Coal Harbour bridge as they enter and leave Stanley Park. “The Coal Harbour bridge to Stanley Park,” 1912. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-: St Pk 128, City of Vancouver Archives

The harbour, Kheraj explains, “challenged public expectations of the ideal landscape”: low tides drained most of Coal Harbour’s western basin—the area Johnson named “Lost Lagoon”—leaving it a muddy marsh that was “decidedly unappealing” (105-106).



Fig 7. As Vancouver grew and tourism to the young city increased, thousands of people crossed this bridge to spend their weekends at the Coal Harbour entrance to the park, putting increased pressure on the bridge and the surrounding area. C. Bradbury, “Crowds leaving Stanley Park over Coal Harbour Bridge,” 1905[?]. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-: SGN 1583, City of Vancouver Archives.

Consequently, when the Park Board appointed a committee to develop alternative solutions to crossing the harbour’s muddy flats, they suggested “constructing an artificial land-bridge, or causeway, across the harbour” that would keep water in the basin and do away with the mud flats permanently (Kheraj 107). From 1910 to 1912, the board invited architects, including famed British landscape architect Thomas H. Mawson, to design a causeway and improvements to the park entrance before ultimately handing the project to the city’s chief engineer who, in contrast to Mawson’s grand scheme originally accepted by the board, made a modest proposal for a simple causeway that was approved in 1913; and so, “between 1915 and 1917, a causeway was constructed to close off Lost Lagoon from the ocean waters of Burrard Inlet” (Kheraj 107-114).



Fig 8. The original “Lost Lagoon” was a tidal basin, part of Coal Harbour between Stanley Park and Vancouver. Prior to the construction of the causeway, a chief complaint about the area was that low tide turned the basin into unattractive mudflats. In this photo, the tide is in. “[Coal Harbour view from Denman Street],” June 30, 1914. City of Vancouver fonds, COV-S632-: CVA 789-123, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 9. Another view of Coal Harbour, this one a little further east showing the wooden bridge to Stanley Park and the Vancouver Rowing Club building. “[Coal Harbour],” 1914[?]. City of Vancouver fonds, COV-S632-: CVA 789-124, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 10. A rendering of one of the suggested “improvements” to Coal Harbour’s mudflats and the entrance to the park, showing the bridge replaced by a causeway and the tidal basin turned into a

human-made, architecturally landscaped lagoon. “Coal Harbour Improvements Suggested Treatment of Inner Basin,” 1910[?]. City of Vancouver fonds, COV-S632-: CVA 789-122, City of Vancouver Archives

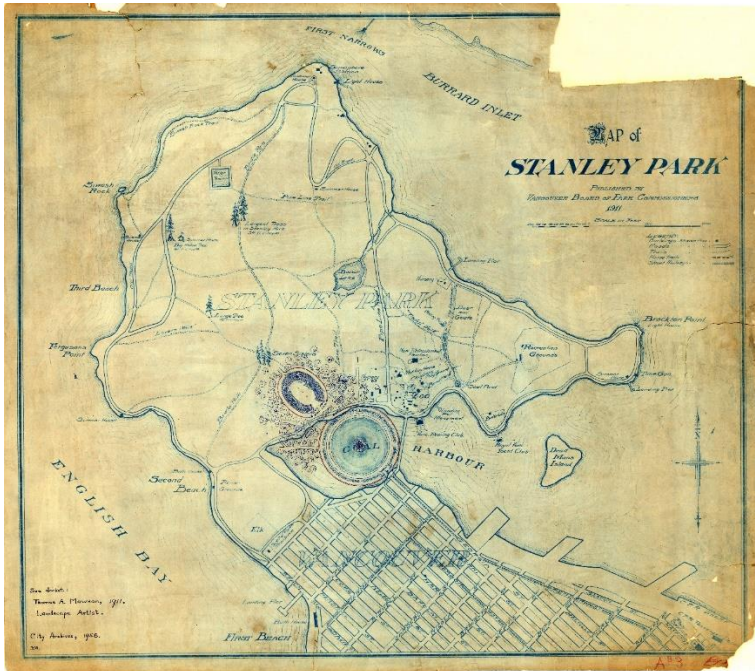


Fig 11. A larger map of Stanley Park showing another suggested “improvement” complete with an artificial pond and fountain in the western tidal area of Coal Harbour, an amphitheatre and other structures, and new landscape treatments. An annotation on the bottom left-hand corner of the map reads: See docket - Thomas A. Mawson, 1911, landscape artist. “Map of Stanley Park,” 1911. City of Vancouver Archives technical and cartographic drawing collection, AM1594-: MAP 62, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 12. On July 13, 1914, council approved a plan for a new “Coal Harbour causeway” designed by city engineer F. L. Fellowes. Abandoning Mawson’s grand scheme, Fellowes prepared a simple causeway to separate the lagoon from the rest of the harbour. This artist’s concept of the causeway ran on the front page of *The Vancouver Sun*, which said “it will conform to the surroundings of the place more than any of the other schemes of improvement.” “City Engineer’s Plan for Coal Harbour Causeway.” *Vancouver Sun*, July 14, 1914.



Fig 13. An aerial view of the causeway under construction showing Lost Lagoon separated from the rest of Coal Harbour. “Showing Entrance to Stanley Park looking East,” May 27, 1919. Stuart Thomson fonds, AM1535-S1-: CVA 1123-6, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 14. Crews working on the construction of the causeway. Detail from “Coal Harbor Vancouver. Height of Water in Upper End 9 ft. above. Zero,” November 6, 1917. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-3-: PAN N54, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 15. The completed causeway, shown here in 1921. Detail from “[View of Stanley Park causeway showing Lost Lagoon and the Vancouver Rowing Club building on Coal Harbour],” July 27, 1921. Major Matthews collection, AM54-S4-3-: PAN N199, City of Vancouver Archives.



Fig 16. An aerial view of the West End of Vancouver, Stanley Park, and the North Shore mountains. It shows the completed causeway and the new “Lost Lagoon.” Notice, this is well before the construction of the Lions Gate Bridge and the extension of the causeway through the park that will connect the North Shore to Vancouver. “CVA 374-181 – [Aerial view looking northwest of the West End and Stanley Park],” 1927. Union Steamship Company of British Columbia fonds, AM75-S1-: CVA 374-181, City of Vancouver Archives.

From 1909 to 1913, there was plenty of discussion about the future of Coal Harbour and access to Stanley Park—and much of it was public. The major Vancouver newspapers (*Vancouver Daily Province* and *Vancouver World*) and the smaller community papers (*Western Clarion* and *The Western Call*) provided regular and ongoing coverage of the proposed harbour and causeway ‘improvements.’ National and even international papers (*The Globe and Mail* and *New York Times*) were attentive to Mawson’s visit to the young city. According to Kheraj, the proposals were not without “public controversy” and the debate “tended to follow class lines”: the elite favoured a naturalistic landscape plan with a causeway to be constructed in place roughly the same place as the wooden bridge; the middle-class were drawn to Mawson’s grandiose plan to spectacularly alter the landscape with a large ornamental pool, encircled by a wide boulevard, stadium, natural history museum, and a restaurant; the labour class preferred a plan to fill in

and convert the entire harbour basin into a series of playing fields (109-110). Given the public attention and argument over the proposals, all of which involved substantial alterations to the landscape, Johnson must have been aware that her “pet idling-place” would be permanently changed. Therefore, it is not just possible, but likely that Johnson memorializes the moment she stands on the old wooden bridge at sunset looking over Coal Harbour with Chief Capilano in her poem which serves as an elegy for the Lost Lagoon. Similar to what Jesse Oak Taylor describes as a key feature of Tennyson’s poem “In Memoriam” that allows it to serve as an elegy for the Anthropocene—a ‘period’ that is not dead yet—Johnson’s poem “is an exercise in imagining a future retrospect” (Taylor 230)—it imagines a future when the natural lagoon’s “depths of haunting blue” are gone forever.

With the title, then, Johnson immediately names the poem’s subject and location, and the narrator goes on to describe the environs; combined with references to “dusk,” “dark” and “to-night” that provide temporal specificity and sequencing, Johnson attempts to firmly plant the poem in place and time. Yet, temporality is almost immediately in question. “It *is* dusk on the Lost Lagoon” (emphasis added), begins the poem, suggesting that it occurs in a present moment; this seems to be reinforced by the active engagement of the narrator and an ‘other’—the “we two” of the poem—in “dreaming.” However, the very act of dreaming muddies the temporal waters when we consider that dreams, whenever they occur, may be either reminiscent of things in the past—directed backwards in time—or, more typically, contemplative of things yet to come—directed forwards in time. A silent ‘are’—as in “we two *are* dreaming”—would complete the durative aspect of the verb, indicating continuing action, something that is going on now; however, the continuing action necessarily involves a passing of and

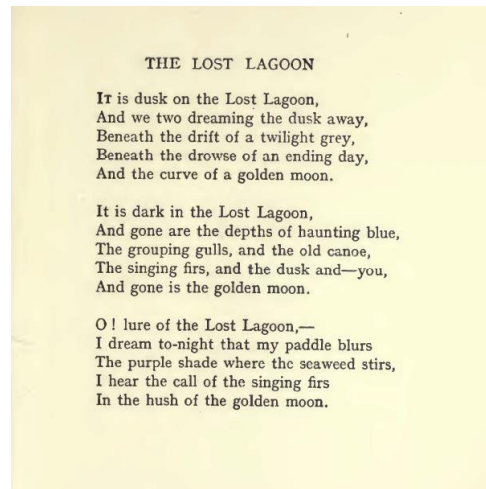


Fig 17. Copy of Johnson’s poem, “The Lost Lagoon.” *Flint and Feather: The Complete Poems of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*, 1922, Musson Book Co., Toronto, p. 147. Internet Archive.

movement through time that is confirmed by the poem's characters "dreaming the dusk away." Almost certainly, Johnson did not intend for the line to be read in the future continuous tense, but her omission of any form of the auxiliary verb *to be*, which would be required to properly locate the continuous tense in time, leaves it ambiguous: should the line be read as "we two *are* dreaming" or "*were* dreaming"? Any temporal tether offered by the poem's opening line—"It *is* dusk"—that would seem to locate the act of dreaming in the present immediately snaps when the second stanza begins "It *is dark* on the Lost Lagoon" (emphasis added). Like the first stanza, the second stanza also wants to be located in the present. But, with the attending movement from "dusk" to "dark" (read: night), Johnson consequently displaces the first stanza to a point in time that is prior to the second stanza—to a point that is now necessarily in the past.

The temporal complexities continue in the second and third stanzas where the past and the future co-exist with the present. Within the context of the second stanza's seemingly firmly-planted present, the narrator remembers the past and memorializes all the things that are now "gone":

And gone are the depths of haunting blue,
The grouping gulls, and the old canoe,
The singing firs, and the dusk and—you,
And gone is the golden moon.

Similarly to how "dreaming" brings the past or future into the present in the opening stanza, the reflection and mourning of the second stanza brings the past into the present moment, for in remembering, the past co-exists with and within the present. The active presence of the narrator's declaration "I dream to-night" makes it clear that the third stanza continues in the dark of the here and now established in the second stanza. But again, dreaming raises questions of time: is the narrator dreaming of a future time? Or, in recalling "the singing firs" that were previously gone, is the narrator perhaps dreaming of a past now remembered once more? Without any readily apparent answers to those questions, the only conclusion to be drawn is that either the past or future, or possibly even *both* the past *and* future, co-exist in the poem's present moment. All of this, of course, says nothing of the reality that all art is ultimately about the past—we read what someone wrote a year or a century ago; we look at a Renaissance painting,

hundreds of years old; we look at a photograph of an image captured from moments already gone by—and any attending complex relationships of time between the acts of writing poetry (by the poet at one moment in time) and the experience of reading it (at another moment in time). While all of this impedes a clear sense of time—exactly *when* does the poem take place?—the bridging of past, present, and future simultaneously dissolves temporal barriers to create a sense of timelessness.

Despite Johnson's attempt to locate the poem in place, its precise location is also obscured. When the poem was originally published as a prelude to "Deadman's Island," the opening of the legend specifically locates "Lost Lagoon" for Vancouverites and those familiar with the area; however, when the poem is published separately from the legend in the subsequent anthology of her poetry, *Flint and Feather*, in 1913, and titled "The Lost Lagoon," those crucial locating details are severed from the poem. And, without those details, the location of the "Lost Lagoon" is almost entirely unknown: the area of Coal Harbour that would eventually come to be officially known as "Lost Lagoon" was not actually named until 1922. Until then and at the time of its original publication, "The Lost Lagoon" could have referred to just about any lagoon.

If time and place are in question, then surely the narrator's very existence must be as well—the uncertainties certainly prompt the question, '*when* and *where* does the narrator exist?' In "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," Morton offers an insightful eco-analysis of Shelley's poem "Alastor" and an essential—though potentially complicating—component of his examination seems especially useful here. According to Morton:

Shelley broaches the existential isness of the Poet [in *Alastor*], the sense of what Emmanuel Lévinas calls the 'There is' (*il y a*). What is the 'it' that rains in the phrase 'It is raining'? What is the 'it' or 'there' that is the Ancient Mariner [in Coleridge], the boy [in Wordsworth's lyrical ballad 'There was a boy'], the Poet?" ("Dark Ecology" 257)

Johnson's poem prompts similar questions about the existential "is-ness" of her narrator: what is the 'it' of "It is dusk" or "It is dark," or even the 'we' of the "we two" that are "dreaming the dusk away"? It is important to understand that the *il y a*, according to Lévinas is a frightening neutrality devoid of meaning. It is exposed through engagement with what he calls "the Other", a presence separate, foreign and superior to the individual's current state of being. Once exposed to

the *il y a*, individuals can go through a process Lévinas calls hypostasis: a process of substantiation and awareness, developing consciousness, and becoming a subject of the situation—a being. This process can repeat as an individual is confronted again and again by “the Other,” leading to new states of consciousness and being, but it never removes the *il y a*. The seemingly Lévinas-ian “other” of Johnson’s poem will turn out to be “The Lost Lagoon.” It is no wonder then that Johnson determinedly names the lagoon and identifies the environs in the poem—even if only to please her own fancy:

It is dusk on the Lost Lagoon,
And we two dreaming the dusk away,
Beneath the drift of a twilight grey,
Beneath the drowse of an ending day,
And the curve of a golden moon.

In doing so, the narrator—one part of “we two”—and the environment—the Lost Lagoon—are imagined together.

By imagining the narrator and environment together, Johnson disrupts further barriers, this time between ‘being’ and ‘other,’ subject and object. Imagining them together involves closeness between humanity and nature; it also implicitly involves understanding nature. The Lévinas-ian view pushes this further by proposing the narrator’s consciousness and sense of being are only realized by confronting and actually incorporating the ‘other.’ In a ‘green’ reading of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” Onno Oerlemans focuses, in part, on the “profound interconnection between consciousness and the physical world” (104) and explains the heart of the poem’s argument: “the sensations of pleasure one has in the presence of natural beauty are more than simply moments of experience which can be recalled with pleasure; they become as well a part of one’s being, so that one has literally ‘taken in’ an aspect of the external world” (105). Johnson offers a similar statement in her poem when the narrator literally takes in the Lost Lagoon.

This ‘taking in’ requires an intimacy that Morton suggests is “a fundamental category of ecological thinking,” what he calls “the thinking of the interconnectedness of all beings, in the most profound possible way” (“Dark Ecology” 257). In as much as Johnson’s poem is an elegy for nature, it is also a

love poem; and, on account of both of these themes, then, intimacy—the key to this interconnectedness—is the principle topic of the poem. “Beneath the drift of a twilight grey, / Beneath the drowse of an ending day, / And the curve of a golden moon”: Johnson immediately blankets the poem in soft intimacy. If not directly invited to participate, Johnson certainly invites her readers to observe the tender closeness as “we two” dream the dusk away. The drowsing day, stirring seaweed and the hushing moon could all be loosely seen to anthropomorphize the surrounding nature, but it is the singing trees that truly enable an intimacy to open up with the environment. “I hear the call of the singing firs,” says Johnson’s narrator, suggesting the trees have the capacity not only to sing (or even to “finger faintly on the strings” of the night wind’s “rare violin,” as they do in Johnson’s “Autumn’s Orchestra”), but the more profound ability to direct their call to someone in particular. The narrator rejoins with her own address: “O! lure of the Lost Lagoon.” Calling out to each other, both the narrator and nature want something. But their calling seems innocent—it is chaste and fraternal. Yet, there is a sense that they will be unable to maintain a safe, cool distance within their intimacy. “I dream to-night that my paddle blurs / The purple shade where the seaweed stirs”: these lines may not be as overtly sexual as those describing the canoeist that caresses the stream with her paddle in “The Song My Paddle Sings,” but their chastity barely conceals the sensuality of the narrator’s desire. The last stanza of “The Lost Lagoon” also reverberates with the post-coital peace of the last two verses of Johnson’s earlier poem. Corresponding to how “The river slips through its silent bed” while nature offers the comfort of “A fir tree rocking its lullaby” at the end of “The Song My Paddle Sings,” “The Lost Lagoon” ends with “the call of the singing firs / In the hush of the golden moon.” The effect is similar to what Strong-Boag and Gerson observed in “The Song My Paddle Sings”: through the sensual language of “The Lost Lagoon,” Johnson presents an erotic relationship between nature and the narrator of the poem. Furthermore, in her account of nature as a comfortingly-soft and intimate lover, Johnson retains the mythic identity of nature as female.

The poem, then, is not just about love and nature, but about the subject position from which nature is known and viewed—from which it is experienced. The personification of nature denotes an essential ‘nature’ that exists somewhere ‘out there’ and as something ‘other than human.’ However, the poem’s intimacy enables a sensuality, and this “sensuality impedes access to the concept of nature as

an independent thing that is decisively ‘yonder,’ ‘over there’” (Morton 252). In breaking down the aestheticization that would normally reinforce the dualism of subject and object, by bringing the narrator and nature intimately close together, “The Lost Lagoon” makes the relationship between human beings and nature more than harmonious. The poem also presses the relationship beyond the tryst of that in “The Song My Paddle Sings.” In “The Lost Lagoon,” Johnson brings the narrator and the Lost Lagoon—the individual and nature—together to become the “we two” that dream the night away.

Erasing the difference between subject and object, or between consciousness and the ‘other’ of nature, runs the risk of reducing everything to sameness. According to Morton, however, it should not have this effect; rather, recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence in nature “raises everything to the level of wonder” (“The Mesh” 27-28). Yet, he also points out, “the more we try to escape the dreaded Cartesian dualism (bugbear of ecological thought), the more we find ourselves back where we started” (“Dark Ecology” 267). In Johnson’s poem, something strange happens to elegy’s usual organization of time: when it was written, it mourned for something that had not yet passed. Traditionally, elegies weep for that which is already passed. Reading the poem now restores the usual sense of time—the original Lost Lagoon has long since ‘passed’—but reading the poem in 1910 required occupying two places in time at once: projecting through imagination into the future and looking back on the present; and reading the poem in the time of reading, in the ‘here and now’ of 1910. The double position reproduces dualism. More problematically for the poem as an elegy: it struggles to present the loss of the lagoon as an actual elegiac event and, therefore, undermines mourning at the very moment mourning should occur. To further undercut the elegiac mode, Johnson plants intimacy and sensual love between a human being and nature.

Morton suggests that to truly love nature is to love it, “not as a mirror of our mind, but as sheer otherness” and advocates admitting “to the perversity of our desire” to enact “a kind of enlightened Cartesianism” in its “ecological awareness” (“Dark Ecology” 267). Maintaining the difference between narrator and nature, between subject and object, he adds, is critically important to recognizing the human relationship to and impact on the natural world; abolishing those differences too quickly to conceive of nature and humanity as part of an organic whole inevitably leads to a kind “of narcissism—the utopian edge of which are the

oceanic poetics of absorption into Nature beloved by ecological thinking; and whose dystopian qualities include letting other beings suffer while soothing background music bathes us in an ambient aquarium of sound (“Dark Ecology” 268). So, and perhaps in direct opposition to Jason W. Moore’s campaign to end Cartesian paradigms (“Double Internality”), Morton realistically advises that the more appropriate approach would be to “linger with this difference for as long as possible,” returning to—or maintaining, as the case may be—Descartes, “and the so-called ‘Cartesian dualism,’ the whipping boy of all ecological discourse” (“Dark Ecology” 268). The love of nature Johnson presents in “The Lost Lagoon” would seem, in all of its intimate connectedness, to not be a love of its ‘other-ness,’ but instead a love of nature as part of a fully-conscious, individual being—as a mirror of one’s mind. In vivifying nature and making it one with the narrator, does Johnson get caught in a narcissistic bind? No. Despite the intimacy she creates between nature and narrator, it is still contingent and Johnson pays high regard to nature *as nature*, vividly distinguishing it and its parts as separate from the narrator. In as much as she breaches barriers of time and blurs the subject-object dualism in the poem, Johnson continues to preserve two distinct parts of the “we” that are “dreaming the dusk away” on the Lost Lagoon: the narrator and nature. Nature, for the narrator, remains as a sheer otherness, and their shared intimacy reflects their admission—perhaps even submission—to their desires; the narrator’s admission of desire, Morton would argue, reflects her ecological awareness and an “enlightened Cartesianism.”

Nature, and more importantly humanity’s relationship to nature, runs as a thread through much of Johnson’s work, yet her nature poetry receives little critical attention. (Re)reading “The Lost Lagoon” from an ecological perspective brings new understanding to the poem and Johnson’s work as a poet. Generally, an eco-reading reveals Johnson’s use of the conventional form of elegy to establish her own poetic authority and it continues to reinforce hers as a distinctly unique voice—particularly as it is heard in her nature poetry—within the cannon of Canadian poetry. Like Wordsworth and Shelley—and almost completely unlike her Canadian contemporaries—Johnson demonstrates her mastery of the ecological elegy—what Morton dubs the ‘eco-elegy.’ More specifically, it underscores Morton’s suggestion that, in order to be ecologically aware, nature writing must break with the solipsism of which it is all too capable and, instead, involve an openness to other beings, nature, and the environment (“Dark Ecology”

257). Johnson's poem expresses an intimacy between humanity and nature that is not only fundamental to writing ecologically, but, as Morton suggests, is also key to recognizing and appreciating the interconnectedness of all things. By forcing empathetic identification with the poem's narrator, it forces the reader to confront the *il y a* of nature; as a result, it brings reader and nature closer together.

"The Lost Lagoon" is successful as eco-elegy because it disrupts elegy's conventional sense of time. Originally, the poem managed this disruption in the Oerlemanian sense by being prospectively retrospective in conveying its mourning for the loss of something that was not yet gone. But those same temporal disruptions make the poem timeless: the Lost Lagoon is now literally lost and the poem still functions as an elegy—perhaps even more so. In "The Lost Lagoon," Johnson also breaks the subject-object dualism. Yet, it remains. And, according to Morton, it absolutely must remain when the something-being-mourned has not yet passed so that the grieved is not entirely consumed by the act of mourning: the grieved, at this point, is not something to be digested and 'gotten over'; to be effective, he says, eco-elegy must remain suspended in perpetual mourning ("Dark Ecology" 256). Although that may be important for the prospectively retrospective elegy, what about when the something-being-mourned, like the Lost Lagoon, actually passes? Should eco-elegy continue to dip its paddle into the heart of humanity only to perpetually stir the purple shade of melancholy? Surely, mourning has to end—there must come a point when the grieved, if not actually set aside, is consumed and 'gotten over.' If not, perpetual mourning would seem to be a barrier to moving on. While Morton would reply that is precisely the point when it comes to eco-elegy, moving on seems necessary in order to be able to do something different, whether that is to avoid losing what is being prospectively mourned or it is to ensure the circumstances and activities that led to an actual loss are not repeated. This exposes a potential problem for all eco-elegy.

Morton admits "[e]legy works as much against ecology as for it," but it nevertheless remains "eminently suitable for conveying ecological awareness" ("Dark Ecology" 256). In this, in at least raising ecological awareness, Morton is unquestionably right about eco-elegy. At the same time, he points to another of its dual aspects: it works both for and against ecology. The dualisms of ecological thinking can clearly never be kept completely apart, nor can they be wholly resolved. It is fitting that Johnson, a woman whose name *Tekahionwake* translates as "double life," never reconciles those dualisms herself.

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