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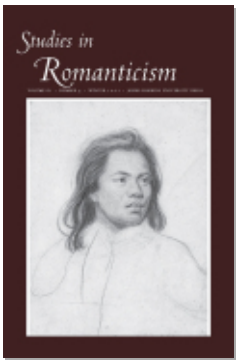

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Laments of the Land: Kinship through Echo in Native American Women's Romantic Complaint Poetry

> Soulless is all humanity to me
> To-night. My keenest longing is to be
> Alone, alone with God's grey earth that seems
> Pulse of my pulse and consort of my dreams.
>
> E. Pauline Johnson, "Penseroso"[1]

Land as an embodied being is an aesthetic familiar to British Romantic literature. Influenced in part by a growing awareness of Indigenous customs and attitudes, the British Romantics mobilized expressions of ecological sympathy and spiritualism, evoking a poetic longing for the natural world which was felt to be no longer valued by the increasingly urbanized British public. For Native Americans, however, land as an embodied being remained intrinsic to their social, political, and spiritual lives, particularly as Europeans made increasingly violent physical and rhetorical attacks to colonize.[2] This essay

1. Johnson, "Pensoro," *Native American Women's Writing 1800–1942: An Anthology*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), lines 1–4. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Nikki Hessell, *Sensitive Negotiations: Indigenous Diplomacy and British Romantic Poetry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), 11; Kevin Hutchings, *Transatlantic Upper Canada: Portraits in Literature, Land, and British-Indigenous Relations* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 14–15. This notion of embodiment is drawn from Chickasaw scholar Chadwick Allen's work on sacred Native American earthworks and mound sites. Allen develops this term to represent the experience and expression of kin relations between Native Americans and their land, particularly in relation to sacred sites like earthworks, which encompass land, energy, life, and death. He proposes that these sites be read as forms of embodied stories, not simply as burials or archaeological structures. In doing so, he outlines an Indigenous-specific way of

explores how the Romantic poetry of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native women preserved and defended their relationship to the land and natural world as kin-based. It argues this is done via the use of the poetic mode of complaint, and suggests their descriptions operate less for aesthetic purposes, but rather to acknowledge ontological kinship and the reciprocity between the poet, speaker, and environment. Reconsidering land and female complaint in Romantic poetry from an Indigenous context, this paper expands the representation of both concepts in the Romantic period by attending to this less studied group of writers.

Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson's "Penseroso" is considered, as well as "The Trail of Tears" (1922) by Ruth Margaret Muskrat, and "Sweet Nowita" (1900) by Mabel Washbourne Anderson, both Cherokee poets. Readers will note these poems post-date the traditional Romantic era, however, I follow Manu Samriti Chander in his rejection of this periodization, which serves "European cultural history" only.[3] The above poems are chosen as they each resemble traditional Romantic poetry in their depiction of lament, but are distinguished by how they represent land and the poet's (or their speaker's) relationship to it as kin-based. I consider the poetic mode of female complaint as a productive frame for observing how this is done, as the mode's "obsessive repetition and amplification of female woe" is reproduced in each of the poems via landscapes which are echoic and embodied, redefining the relationship between the poet, speaker (or poet-speaker), and land.[4] By exploring the complaint mode and its trope, the echo, in the poetry of Johnson, Muskrat, and Anderson, distinctions are made in how they depict the land, as the value of kinship is imbricated with Romantic poetry.

Although little critical attention has been given to uses of the complaint mode in Romantic poetry, several British poets adopted the mode to explore the Romantic figure of the female Indigenous Other. Wordsworth's "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman" (1798) is perhaps the most obvious example. Taking inspiration from a travel narrative by Samuel Hearne, Wordsworth's complaint adopts the mode as a solution to the problems faced

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relating to non-human life forms and expands the literary potential for doing so. See Allen, "Performing Serpent Mound: A Trans-Indigenous Meditation," *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 3 (2015): 391–411. Another example of Indigenous understandings of the living personhood of land is Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich's *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003). Here, she removes the European concept of "place name" from her surrounding environment, and replaces this with Ojibwe-centered narratives and nomenclature in order to relate to her ancestral land as an embodied being.

3. Chander, *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2017), 12.

4. Sarah C. E. Ross, "Complaint's Echoes," *Early Modern Women's Complaint: Gender, Form, and Politics*, ed. Sarah C. E. Ross and Rosalind Smith (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2020), 183–202, 184.

when placing this unfamiliar woman within a Romantic setting familiar to British audiences.[5] His prosopopoeiac speaker has been deserted in an icy, barren landscape which offers no relief, left alone in "weary pain" hopelessly wishing her body would "die away."[6] There is no relationship facilitated between the woman and her natural environment, which instead only augments her aloneness.

Wordsworth does not use the trope of echo in "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman," ensuring his female speaker has no reply. Although I do not want to dwell on Wordsworth's complaint in this essay, preferring to devote the rest of my attention to Johnson, Muskrat, and Anderson, this forms a key distinction between the representation of land and female lament in British Romantic complaint poetry, and the complaints of these three Native American women. In their poems, echo is a key trope used to conceptualize the land as active, personifying its sympathetic responses as a display of kinship. This reciprocal relationship is common in complaint poetry authored by women, as the trope of echo was used to redefine a failure of dialogue—the bemoaning, isolated woman overheard in unanswered apostrophe—which overwhelms male-authored, female-voiced complaints like Wordsworth's "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman." Echo becomes the tool to facilitate a sense of "echoic female collectivity" between the speaker, poet, and landscape, which becomes dynamic and resonant in its representation, rather than empty and forlorn.[7]

Concentrating on the use of this mode and its trope of echo in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native-authored poems speaks to an Indigenous representation of the female laments and natural imagery which saturated the Romantic literary environment of the long nineteenth century. Though these poems appear quintessentially Romantic, when read with an Indigenous lens they implicitly or explicitly advance a literal and metaphorical engagement with the land that is kin-based. For example, Muskrat's "The Trail of Tears" portrays her Nation's displacement and forced removal by personifying the pine trees remaining on Cherokee land, imbricating Romantic tropes with the shared sense of kinship reflected in the trees' echoed moans of lament. So, when encountering the echoic landscapes of Muskrat and the other poets, I do so with Robert Dale Parker's warning that "even poems that might sound like routinely Romantic evocations of the landscape take on specifically Indian meaning."[8] Engaging with these

5. Tim Fulford, *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 166–67.

6. Wordsworth, "The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman," in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 105–6, lines 53 and 2. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

7. Ross, "Complaint's Echoes," 186.

8. Parker, ed., *Changing is Not Vanishing: A Collection of American Indian Poetry to 1930* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 17.

poems calls for a stepping out of a British or European consideration of Romanticism and into one that localizes the questions of kinship which Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice poses as fundamental to Indigenous authorship and literature: "How do we learn to be human?"; "How do we behave as good relatives"; "How do we become good ancestors?"; and "How do we learn to live together?"[9]

Johnson's "Penseroso" poses a good example of this need for close, Indigenous-informed analysis. Where Wordsworth's "forsaken" Indian woman is estranged from anything resembling kinship, "[f]or ever left alone" (line 59) and abandoned "[t]oo soon" (line 49) by her friends, Johnson, the poet-speaker, similarly bemoans her human kin; however, her own isolation from others is self-imposed and her sole desire is to be "alone with God's grey earth" (line 3). While this solitude is familiar to both Romantic and complaint aesthetics, her relationship with the surrounding natural environment depicts the "grey earth" as a sympathetic being, rather than merely an imitative symbol of her isolation. As the "[p]ulse of [her] pulse and consort of [her] dreams," earth is the only entity that Johnson permits as her companion, and the rhythmic flow of human blood is echoed by the beating of Nature's own heart in honor of this kinship (line 4). Rather than simply deploying a literary device to create a Romantic aesthetic, this personification of the natural world operates more distinctly as an exploration of alternative kinship with that which is not human. Nature's soul throbs alongside Johnson's, and her "waters beat" (line 19), her "seas and thunders roll" (line 18) and her "torrent[s] dash" (line 10) in solidarity.

It is important to clarify that my interpretation of echo looks further than just assuming a literal representation of direct speech, marked perhaps by prosopopoeia or quotation marks. Rather, in each of the poems studied I am interested in the inflections and embodied movements of the speaker's natural surroundings. In "Penseroso," what appears at first as a rather conventional Romantic pastoral complaint—Johnson retreats within a sublime natural scene to lament her woe—in fact relies on an ontological reciprocity between herself and earth. The beating of their two pulses, the breathing of their two souls, and the dynamic movement of earth becomes echoic, as nature offers not "cheap counterfeit" (line 20), but rather a sustaining and supportive response to her emotional calamity, in a way that the "touch of human hand" or "voice" cannot (line 12).

The female-authored, female-voiced complaint frequently offers these types of responsive textual environments.[10] In the complaints of Johnson,

9. Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, CAN: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 28.

10. In the European tradition for example, see Mary Wroth, Sonnet 1, *Urania* (1612). Here, Urania "alone complaine[s]," but in "the sad Echo" finds a "friend of mine

Muskrat, and Anderson, their use of the trope reveals a firm grounding of their work in specifically Indigenous contexts, which they imbue alongside the rich imagery of Romantic literature. Thus, a landscape which imitates and responds, such as in Johnson's complaint, is not simply an evocation of popular Romantic expression, but rather a reflection of the inherent relationship each poet feels toward their natural environment. Echo may therefore embody these reciprocal kin ties felt between the writer, the complainant (or poet-speaker, as in "Penseroso"), and the natural environment, or its use may refer to specific myths or ancestral stories.

This is true of Anderson's "Sweet Nowita," a complaint which inhabits the third-person (rather than the mode's preferred first-person pronoun "I") to convey the lament of Nowita, a "Cherokee maiden" who is courted and then abandoned by a "young professor from the East."[11] As the tale is recounted by an unknown narrator (possibly Anderson herself), we are encouraged to pay specific attention to the qualities of speech and song, and silence and echo, which resonate throughout the poem, as Nowita's literal and rhetorical silence requires different vocalizations of lament, which the land itself fulfills on her behalf. Establishing a Romantic setting, Anderson puts emphasis on the pastoral environment to complement both Nowita's "sweet and child-like" countenance (line 4) and the scenes of romance which have passed between "the sweet singer" and the young professor (line 24). The role of speech and sound in the poem is revealed, as the couple are depicted in a mellifluous environment where "their voices sweetly blending, / [Can] be heard" (lines 17–18), until Nowita, "[f]illed with new and dreamy music" (line 29) must return to her homeland equally characterized by its melodious effusions. Anderson has the young maiden placed between two worlds defined by their orality: the "honeyed speeches" (line 26) of her lover, and the "singing brooks and rivers"; "the breath of bursting blossoms"; and "the calling . . . pine trees" of her homeland (lines 54–57). This cacophonous environment in which the romance is set is not to last, however. The "pale and handsome stranger" (line 68) breaks his promise of returning, leaving Nowita a "sad-faced woman" (line 184) whose hopeful song fades from "[sad] singing" to eventual silence (line 163).

The silence of Nowita offers a significant formal distinction from the complaint mode's conventional use of prosopopoeia and the first-person "I." And yet, complaint has the capacity to extend itself to this poem, not only because Nowita's silence becomes a powerful semblance of Anderson's

owne." For further discussion of echo in early modern female-authored complaints, see Sarah C. E. Ross and Rosalind Smith, "Beyond Ovid: Early Modern Women's Complaint," in *Early Modern Women's Complaint: Gender, Form, and Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 11, and Ross, "Complaint's Echoes," 183–202.

11. Anderson, "Nowita, the Sweet Singer," in *Changing is Not Vanishing*, 24. Henceforth lines from the poem are cited parenthetically in the text.

complaint itself, but because of the numerous complaint tropes which are present throughout the poem: the lamenting woman figure, tearful aesthetics, and, most distinctively, the echo. Nowita is cast in a landscape that is rich in its responsiveness, the echoic resonances of rivers, birds, caves, and other natural sources not there simply to amplify her woe, but to figure a dialogue in which empathy and friendship is offered. While the maiden awaits her lover's return, the "song birds" who reside in the forest where Nowita waits "[mock]" her "happy echo" in cautious warning (lines 157–58). Once she has "passed away in silence" (line 218), it is the Spavinaw river (which runs through the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma) and caves which "[repeat]" and echo the "sad, unhappy story" (line 210). When set alongside Wordsworth's own abandoned Indian woman, the passive and barren wilderness she is depicted in offers a stark contrast to the active and generous presence of Nowita's natural environment. Bringing her Cherokee understandings of kinship to Romantic literary aesthetics, Anderson composes a complaint against the treatment of Cherokee women by white men, conveying a protest that is collectively felt by both human and non-human Cherokee relatives.

Nowita's story of deceit and loss is preserved by the Spavinaw and surrounding land, carrying the echo of her voice to those who listen. The landscape extends its sympathy to Nowita by seconding her song, but it also (even more strikingly) adopts her voice once she passes, so that

> If you go alone at twilight
> To the cave beside the river
> . . .
> You may hear the repetition
> Of the songs as they were uttered,
> By this charming Indian maiden,
> By Nowita, the sweet singer.
>
> (lines 214–21)

Unlike Wordsworth's "forsaken" Indian woman, who is estranged from both human and non-human connection, Anderson has Nowita's voice absorbed by the Spavinaw so that her echo lives on in both a memorialization and a warning to other young Cherokee women. This is linked directly to Cherokee folklore, as a note to line 215 locates a particular place "on the shores of the Spavinaw," where, "borne on the waters" in the cave, "a low sound as of singing may be heard."[12] This is attributed to "De-cu-na-gus-ky-skilly," a "Singing Spirit" in local tradition, therefore grounding Nowita's story firmly within both a Cherokee literary history

12. Parker, *Changing is Not Vanishing*, 250n7.

and a local history of the Spavinaw, circling the poem back to a Cherokee environmental kinship. In this light, echo as both a rhetorical technique and a literal presence serves as an enactment of kinship, intimately linked with storytelling and Cherokee relations, which Anderson synonymizes with the Romantic literary aesthetic.

The echoes encoded within the poem's natural environment are not only rhetorical, but literal too, as Anderson reflects the possibility of dialogue between the human and non-human which kin ties makes accessible. So, while her complaint is at times stylistically divergent to traditional complaint conventions, "Sweet Nowita" offers up a protest and lament specific to Indigenous women's post-contact experiences, using echo to do so. Muskrat achieves a similar affect in her complaint "The Trail of Tears," which combines the multivocal tones of native pine trees, Cherokee ancestors, and her own voice to tell a story of the prevailing strength of kinship in the face of forced removal. It is Romantic in a specifically Indigenous context, looking to the natural world for solidarity, with echo and personification used to create a literary enactment of this kinship. Symbols common to Romantic elegy—graves, trees, time passing—are profuse throughout the poem, but the context in which they occur points to the real political and social crisis of Cherokee removal. As a result, these Romantic signifiers become the tangible emblems of loss and destruction which prompt "The Trail of Tears" to be read as a complaint, Muskrat conflating the experience of grief as one felt synchronously by both her Cherokee relatives and the land they were forced to leave behind.

Complaint's repetitive rhetoric operates in full force throughout this poem, but particularly in the first stanza, as Muskrat uses echoic repetition to emulate her Cherokee community's kinship with the pine trees. While the trees do not speak through prosopopoeia, the profuseness of "moan" and "groan" throughout the poem becomes almost onomatopoeic, the long sound created by the assonance of *oa* evocative of creaking trees.[13] A shared feeling of "broken hopes" and "broken hearts" is emphasized across a wide kin network, as the "forefathers that fell" and the pines that moan on their behalf "shriek an echoed groan," while the Cherokees, "a quivering mass of broken hearts," are "driven over the trail" (lines 9, 6, 10, and 11). Again, the vocal layering of this lament is evidenced, as those who travel the trail are depicted "Stifling back the groan that starts, / Smothering back the moan that starts" (lines 12–13). While Muskrat depicts the Cherokee people as voiceless on account of being worn down to defeat, the repetition of "groan" and "moan" affiliates their internal cries

13. Muskrat, "The Trail of Tears," in Parker, *Changing is Not Vanishing*, 327–28. "Moan" on lines 1, 2, and 13; "groan" on lines 4, 5, and 12. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

with those of the trees, whose echoic personification stands for both the non-human and ancestral suffering caused by forced removal. Just as the river carries the story of Nowita's sadness in Anderson's poem, the pines resolutely uphold their kin ties, supporting and bemoaning the removal of their human relations.

Johnson, Anderson, and Muskrat each offer expressions of lament that are not only supported by the Romantic landscapes and natural environments in their complaints, but embodied within them too. Feeling as keenly Johnson's solitary woes as the abuse and displacement of Indigenous bodies in Anderson's and Muskrat's complaints, the trees, rivers, birds, and storms which texture the environments in each of the poets' complaints are encoded via echo to reflect their kinship relations. Through this trope, the three poets present and preserve their relationships to the land and natural world by expressing this reciprocated kinship, demonstrating a distinctly Indigenous contribution to the Romantic literary environment of the long nineteenth century.

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