

Before Yesterday: The Long History of Native American Writing

*This book originated in a symposium in honor
of LaVonne Brown Ruoff and in recognition of
her long commitment to the study of American
Indian literature*

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Contemporary Anticolonialist Reading and the Collaborative Writing of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (her English name) or Bamewawagezhikaquay (her Ojibwe name, which she translated lyrically as Woman of the Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky) was born in 1800 in Sault Ste. Marie, at the northern tip of what is now the state of Michigan. By the time she died in 1842, she had produced a large body of writings. Eclipsed from the historical record by her famous husband, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793-1864), Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was nevertheless among the first American Indian writers. She was also the first known American Indian literary writer, the first known Indian woman writer, the first known Indian poet, the first known poet to write poems in a Native American language, and the first known American Indian to write out traditional Indian stories (as opposed to transcribing and translating from someone else's oral delivery, which she did also). Her stories became a key source for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's sensational bestseller *The Song of Hiawatha*. With *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*, her writing is finally available, most of it drawn from manuscripts and appearing in print for the first time.

While Henry Rowe Schoolcraft won great fame as a founding figure of American ethnography, I hope that with the emergence of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's writings she will become "Schoolcraft" and he will become "Henry." Nevertheless, when speaking of them both, for clarity's sake I sometimes refer to her as Jane or as Jane Johnston Schoolcraft.

This paper contrasts what we might want to find in an early American Indian writer, in this case Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, with what we do find, and it asks how what we want to find might shape what we do find. In that sense, this paper reflects on the desires of contemporary American Indian history and literary studies in relation to the crusty recalcitrance of a past

that does not always tell us as much as we want to know, or tell us what we want to hear, or speak in the vocabulary of words and ideas that we expect from ourselves and our colleagues today. On the other hand, that is part of what makes the past compelling. It differs from the present, yet we can only see it through a present that risks recasting the past in the present's image, recasting it as what we already know.

More specifically, this paper contrasts two versions of Schoolcraft's poem "The Contrast" (Schoolcraft 116-18). The poem survives in four manuscripts that break down into what I call two versions, which for clarity's sake I will refer to as the first version and the second version. The first version, dated March 1823, is a 38-line manuscript in Jane Schoolcraft's hand, memorably titled "The Contrast, a Splenetic Effusion." The second version, called simply "The Contrast," is a 54-line copy in the hand of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Jane Schoolcraft's husband, the colonialist federal Indian agent who helped impose the treaties that took land from Indian people across what is now Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Henry Schoolcraft was the first person to publish traditional Indian oral stories on a large scale, and he did so with the encouragement of many Indian people, including Jane Schoolcraft and her Ojibwe family. In the process, however, he often changed the stories drastically, and he minimized and obscured the role of individual Indian people in the production of the stories, including Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, her younger brother William Johnston, other members of the Johnston family, and many others. In Henry's publications, the stories come across not only as the legacy of many Indian people collectively and individually but also as Henry's own heroic productions salvaging the ruins of a disappearing race in the nick of time before they fade over the sunset's horizon. Yet for the most part we would not have Jane Schoolcraft's writings if her colonialist husband had not saved some of her manuscripts and copied others, borrowing time from his busy schedule of stealing Indian land and all but stealing Indian stories—as well as, I should acknowledge, such more creditable tasks as helping to vaccinate thousands of Indian people.

It appears that when Henry copied Jane's writings, such as "The Contrast," he sometimes revised them. It appears, as well, that she invited him to revise them. In one case, when she sent him a manuscript by mail, she wrote "I hope ... you will be pleased with it, and correct whatever you find amiss" (Schoolcraft 187). Ordinarily, however, her thoughts about Henry's revisions would not have survived in any written record. She would not need to write such things down, because she and Henry could talk about them. For that reason, it is not clear how much Henry revised or in some cases whether he revised at all. The differences between, for example, the two versions of "The Contrast" might come from Jane's revisions or requests for revision, and even changes that she did not make herself she may still have seen and approved. We do not know.

Both versions of "The Contrast" begin by recounting what Jane Schoolcraft saw as her idyllic childhood in Sault Ste. Marie. Then each version pivots into the contrast it sees between her idyllic childhood and the anxious confusion that she finds in the present, but the two versions paint provocatively different pictures of the uneasy present.

In the first version, Schoolcraft anguishes because she has fallen in love, presumably with Henry, who arrived at the Sault in 1822 and whom Jane married in October, 1823. In the second version, she never mentions love. There, instead of falling in love, she falls into colonialism.

But in a sense, "love's mazes," as she calls the anguish of love, and the anguish of colonialism are the same thing, because the man she loves is the powerful agent and official representative of the colonialist power, the United States. Each morning, just outside her window, Schoolcraft could see the soldiers of Fort Brady raise the American flag. In 1820, when American soldiers arrived, Sassaba—an Ojibwe chief who, like Jane Johnston's family, had fought with the British in the War of 1812—hoisted a British flag in protest. Lewis Cass, Governor of the Michigan Territory, leader of the American expedition, and a future Secretary of Defense and presidential candidate, trampled on Sassaba's British flag and almost set off a war. Cass compelled the Ojibwe leaders of Sault Ste. Marie to sign a treaty relinquishing some of their land, the first of what would turn into many installments of forced land sales. Jane's family played a major role in that treaty, as her mother, Ozhaguscodaywayquay or—as her Irish husband dubbed her—Susan Johnston, preserved the peace by convincing skeptical Ojibwe male leaders to sign the treaty. As Ozhaguscodaywayquay argued with the reluctant Ojibwe leaders, Jane's brother George watched and listened, and perhaps the twenty-year-old Jane watched and listened too. Whether she was in the room or not, she must have been nearby and closely engaged in the fraught emotions surrounding the decision to sign away Ojibwe land. To the local Ojibwe people's horror, the soldiers broke their agreement and built Fort Brady on a sacred burial ground, just one of the federal republic's many shattered promises. (In 2005, the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, together with their neighbors in the Bay Mills Indian Community, a community founded in part by Jane's uncle Waishkey, succeeded in restoring the burial ground to their control.)

Readers in our own time often gravitate to those passages where Schoolcraft writes about colonialism—rare though they are—more readily than to poems where she writes, for example, about a flower, a rain shower, or her love for her colonialist husband. In another poem with a notably anticolonialist passage, "Lines Written at Castle Island, Lake Superior," a poem written in Ojibwe but surviving only in English translations copied by Henry, Schoolcraft celebrates the pleasure of traveling far "from the haunts of men":

For here, there are no sordid fears,
No crimes, no misery, no tears
No pride of wealth; the heart to fill,
No laws to treat my people ill.

(Schoolcraft 92)

That final line—closing the poem with its conclusively one-syllable, end-stressed completion to the rhyming couplet—seems irresistible to contemporary readers. We appreciate the implicit resentment of legal abuses and treaties. Many readers also appreciate the first-person identification with local Indian identity: not “the Indians” or even “the Ojibwe,” but “my people.” Those closing words say what anticolonialist readers in our time want to hear from Indian writers, especially Indian writers from an earlier time, and especially the first-known Indian literary writer, whom we yearn to read as a model for all that follows. It threatens our anticolonialist desires, therefore, to own up to the possibility that Henry—the patriarchal colonialist whom it is so easy and so necessary to despise—wrote or contributed to the anticolonialist words in Jane’s poem. Such a possibility pokes a finger in the eye of twenty-first century anticolonialist readers, if their anticolonialism makes them want to cast Jane Schoolcraft in the role of model woman writer and anticolonialist exemplar.

Even so, the manuscript presents this poem copied by Henry as Jane’s poem, so that there remains more cause to read its eloquent protest as Jane’s words than as Henry’s words. And even if Henry contributed, he would have done so in the spirit of trying to paraphrase and pretty up what he understood Jane to have thought. Such an act would come steeped in patriarchal and colonialist presumption, and I do not want to minimize Henry’s presumption.

We might ask, then, why would Henry voice anticolonialist ideas in Jane’s poems? The prospect might seem farfetched. But Henry might voice anticolonialist ideas in Jane’s poems because he genuinely sought to say what he thought she believed. He might have found a thrill in playing Indian, found a kick in a rural, north-country version of slumming, of dressing up in the angry, almost stereotypical voice that his colonialist expectations projected as what an Indian might say. He might also have felt that an occasional anticolonialist jab in her poetry would authenticate her Indianness and, in the process, provide him the scholarly and emotional capital of privileged access to Indian bodies and Indian truth. He might have felt any or all of these things, but he might not have. Again, we do not know. Nevertheless, these possibilities suggest that to acknowledge that Henry may have contributed to the anticolonialist moments in Jane’s writing does not mean that we have to turn away from reading Henry as a colonialist. Moreover, if we think of Jane as living with these possible spirals in Henry’s colonialism, then perhaps we put together a more intricate

picture of the spirals, compromises, and understated braveries of her daily life and her writerly imagination.

At the same time, however suspicious we may be of the lens that Henry looked through when he looked at Jane, we also look at her through lenses. We do well, then, to keep in perspective the excitement we may feel in uncovering the private manuscripts of this long forgotten writer and thus to keep in mind that Henry knew Jane better than we can know her, even though we also do well to look with suspicion on the appropriations and distortions of his “knowledge.”

Similarly, in the second version of “The Contrast,” we may feel dismay to read Jane—or Henry’s vexed ventriloquism of Jane—referring to “the simple Indian” and to “The long rich green, where warriors *played*.” At such moments, “The Contrast” succumbs to the infantilizing fantasy of Indian people that colonialists hold dear. Colonialists use that infantilizing fantasy to repress the regressive colonialist history of childish needy conquest. They use it, as well, to repress the trauma and responsibility that come from living off the fruits of conquest. When Schoolcraft engages in colonialist language like that, I suspect that she does not live up to our own fantasies of what we, as anticolonialist readers, want to see in the stirring precedent that her writings have bequeathed us.

But why would she match what we expect from her? And how interesting it is that she does not sound like us. She was complicit in and enjoyed the fruits of the colonialism that she also regretted, just as her mother convinced other Ojibwe leaders to sign the treaty that marked the onset of federal power but also saved her people from war. To see Schoolcraft invest in competing visions of an uncertain future tells us about conflicting commitments in her world that may interest us just as much as it would interest us to see her sounding more like ourselves. For the second version of “The Contrast” also shows Schoolcraft as anything but oblivious to colonialism. As she watches “the star flag, raised on high / Discover a new dominion nigh,” she welcomes “the proud Republic here” “half in joy” and “half in fear.” In that way, when she faces colonialism in the second version, she finds herself tangled in the same mazes of love that she faces in the first version. If in one version the object and architect of love’s mazes is named Henry, and in the other version it is named the United States, then each version figures the other, for Henry was the official representative and agent of the United States, so that the national and the personal merge into versions and figurations of each other.

But of course, Henry might have tinkered with the text. It might be Henry who wrote the words about simple Indians and playful warriors, or even Henry who wrote the words about joy and fear at the flag-strewn military dawn of the new American republic. I suspect that many readers may feel inclined to see the possibility of Henry’s interference, editing, or contributing as a loss, and I cannot help sharing in that feeling.

Even so, I would like to suggest that much as it is a loss, it is also—and I do not say this easily—in another sense something like a gain. Even if Jane Schoolcraft did not have a white parent (the Irish John Johnston, a fur trader) and did not speak and write in English as well as Ojibwe, we could not expect her to live in a quarantined, static, Indians-only world. By 1823, Europeans had been part of the Great Lakes Ojibwe world for 150 years, and of course even before Europeans arrived, the world of Schoolcraft's Ojibwe ancestors was in constant change. To position herself as unequivocally representative of things Indian or Ojibwe and not at all representative of the Euro-American world or the United States would be to enact the colonialist fantasy of Indian blood purity, the same fantasy that colonialist popular culture and governments would use to help justify the continuing myth of Indian disappearance and to see that supposed disappearance as a rationale for colonialist conquest. When Jane Schoolcraft speaks equivocally, then, "half in joy, half in fear," she represents part of the Ojibwe world that she lived in. And when her legacy includes texts that might have involved the meddling hand of her colonialist husband, that too, odd as it may seem, represents part of the Ojibwe world that she lived in. No writer, Indian or not Indian, writes in isolation, free from editors or the suggestions of other people and free from the ideas that swirl consciously and unconsciously through the languages and ideologies that shape our daily lives and our profoundest imaginations. To expect that Schoolcraft would differ on those counts from every other writer would be to romanticize her into an imaginary purity that tells us nothing about Indian people in 1823 and instead tells us what we already know about colonialist fantasy.

In that way, we should not see the irritating possibility of Henry's interference in Schoolcraft's manuscripts as an obstacle or a mark of inauthenticity. Instead, we can see the sometimes indecipherably mixed legacy of Schoolcraft's manuscripts as representing the cacophonous medley of internal contradictions that she lived in. The uncertainties offer a revealing representation of the colonialism that was an integral part of Schoolcraft's world and the world of many other Indian people around her, a colonialism that in her daily life and in her writing she collaborated with even while she resisted it. In that way, as well, and despite what I have written here, she and many other early Indian writers may, after all, sound more like us today than we find it convenient to acknowledge. After all, like her, we are complicit in and enjoy the fruits of the colonialism that we nevertheless lament and seek to change.

WORK CITED

Schoolcraft, Jane Johnston. *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*. Ed. Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.