

# The Actualities of Experience: Constance Lindsay Skinner's Indian Poems

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## ABSTRACT

Canadian literary historians have identified the turn-of-the-century poetry of Constance Lindsay Skinner as historically significant translations of authentic North West Coast Indian verse. However, as close examination of the poetry in the light of two of Skinner's "feminist" essays reveals, Indian poetic convention operates as camouflage for her central preoccupations, which include her ambivalence about female power, her resentment of male sexual aggression and, most important, her desire to integrate her identity as a woman with her role as poet.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les historiens de la littérature canadienne ont identifié la poésie datant du tournant du siècle de Constance Lindsay Skinner comme étant des traductions historiquement significatives des versets indiens authentiques des régions au nord-ouest du pays. Quoi qu'il en soit, comme étude approfondie de la poésie à la lumière de deux essais "féministes" de Skinner, il nous est révélé que la convention poétique indienne agit comme camouflage à ses préoccupations centrales. Celles-ci incluent son ambivalence à propos du pouvoir de la femme, son ressentiment de l'agression sexuelle mâle et, de plus, son désir d'intégrer son identité en tant que femme avec son rôle de poète.

I am the Elder Brother  
I am the Making-Right (priest)  
I am the Counsellor of Earth  
in the always calm place.  
- Kwakiutl (*Songs xi*)

In October of 1914, *Poetry* (Chicago) published "Songs of the Coast Dwellers," a cycle of ten free verse poems employing North American Indian motifs, by the Canadian-born poet Constance Lindsay Skinner. The poems were singled out for an award by *Poetry*, a decision which outraged one of the magazine's chief contributors, Ezra Pound, who wrote to the editor, Harriet Monroe, telling her that the choice was "peculiarly filthy and disgusting" (Pound, 66). Pound may have been responding to the uneven quality of the poems, although possibly he was upset at not having won the prize himself. The magazine's positive response may explain why Skinner persisted almost exclusively in the same poetic mode for the rest of her career. Her perseverance was rewarded by two more prizes, one from the *Bookman* and the other from *Lyric West*<sup>1</sup>. But interest in her work was short-lived, and fifteen years later, when she published the 1930 edition of these Indian poems, giving it the title under which the well-received original ten had appeared, the book received three routine reviews and was quickly forgotten.

Skinner's interest in native Indian culture is not surprising. She was born and raised at a remote fur trading post in northern British Columbia where her father was a Hudson's Bay Company factor. Among her literary forefathers were the major eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, whose work she read in her father's well-stocked library. In addition, she was personally acquainted with several Indian bards of the tribes with whom her father did business. From them, she learned many legends and an additional set of "literary" conventions which, combined with those she encountered in her reading of English literature, she put to use in all her poetry. She was also a prolific novelist and a social historian of American pioneer life. One of her histories, *Adventures of Oregon: A Chronicle of the Fur Trade* (1920), was, in 1934, on the required reading list of most American high schools.<sup>2</sup> The publishing house of Farrar and Rinehart commissioned her to edit and supervise a historical series on the rivers of America, a task she did not live to complete. Skinner also published nearly 200 book reviews and critical articles. Despite her interest in American history, the content of most of her fiction is Canadian, although all but one of her novels were published in the United States. Unlike other Canadian writers of the day who lived and published in the United States (Bliss Carman, for example), Skinner was not reclaimed by the Canadian critical establishment during her lifetime.

Despite Pound's violent dismissal of Skinner's work, and despite her plunge into obscurity during the 1930s, *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* merits reevaluation. For the poems, described by literary historians as adaptations of Indian verse and hence of anthropological value (Klinck, et al., 239-40), are an outstanding example of the female art of literary camouflage. While apparently conforming to the conventions which characterize authentic West Coast Indian poetry as recorded by ethnographers of the period, Skinner subverts those conventions for her own purposes. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called this literary strategy "palimpsest": palimpsestic works are those "whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (73). Something of this palimpsestic technique is alluded to in Skinner's literary creed as outlined in her third-person account of her childhood: "As both reader and writer it will always seem to her that characters, people, are the heart of all literature (as well as of life), and where those are true no atmosphere, scene or radical colorings can make them alien" ("Hudson Bay Childhood" 8). The spirit of this personal manifesto operates in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, for although the "atmosphere, scene or radical colorings" are derived from the British Columbian Squamish Indian community in which they are set, Indian experience in these poems is secondary to female experience. What passes for a depiction of Indian customs and traditions is below the surface an exploration of sexual politics.

Within the volume's general concern with sexual politics is a specific preoccupation with the problematic relationship between femininity and creativity. This phenomenon has been identified by Suzanne Juhasz as a "peculiar social and psychological situation" experienced by the poet who is a woman: "To be a woman poet in our society is a double-bind situation...For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles." "If the woman poet 'writes like a man,' she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial." Many early twentieth century women poets "striving for public recognition, try to live out the split demanded of them between 'woman' and 'poet' ...This necessitates leaving feminine experience out of art; leaving it home in the kitchen" (1-4).

The Indian setting of Skinner's *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* functions as a vehicle for transporting female experience out of the kitchen, the nursery, the female community, and into art. It does this by providing an alternative kitchen, nursery, and community which are suitably exotic and therefore poetically "legitimate." Most important, it provides Skinner with a variety of *personae*

who function as poetic masks. For example, one of Skinner's masks is based on *Dzo'noq!wa* — or D'Sonoqua, as the Canadian painter Emily Carr was to call her (52) — a Kwakiutl mythical figure whose story the ethnographer Franz Boas translated and published in 1902 (Boas and Hunt, 507-8). Another mask is the Kwakiutl poet-priest, whose song appears as the epigraph to this paper. The *personae* through whom Skinner speaks are described in her Foreword to the volume:

There are the lovers and the women they mate with, or fail to win, the young mothers, the lonely maidens who still wait for love, and the women forsaken: the dying hunter, the village dandy, the aged man, the chief and his braggart little son, the priest, the man who weds money, the bear-killer, the poet whose songs begin to seek the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience and whose name, Kan-il-lak, is that of the divine culturist of a coast tribe; and the Four Seasons and the Earth, which appear as persons of the group. (*Songs ix*)

This is a catalogue of the various *personae* Skinner assumes in the thirty-four dramatic monologues contained in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers*. But despite this wide variety of poetic masks, there are only two significantly different points of view expressed in the volume: male and female. Skinner's description of the male poet Kan-il-lak's songs is an apt description of these points of view, for it is the female *personae* who articulate "the actualities of experience," while the male *personae* transcend those actualities and enter "the realm of imagination." For the female characters, man is the reality which defines their experiences as sexual objects, wives, mothers and muses. But for the male characters, woman is merely a symbol of a greater, more permanent reality; she is the agent of male transcendence into the realm of poetic imagination. For the most part, these two realms are mutually exclusive throughout the volume. There are, however, some interesting exceptions, in which Skinner attempts to integrate female experience and poetic experience. Several of the female characters are unacknowledged poets of the community in that their monologues also seem to "seek the realm of imagination" beyond the realities of the female condition. It is these women who reveal the conflict between the roles of "woman" and "poet."

In order to understand the poems which reveal that identity conflict, we need to examine in some detail a pair of articles which reveal Skinner's preoccupation with the geography of the female psyche. For *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* is representative of its times, in its treatment of

sexual politics, in that it is informed by Skinner's knowledge of current trends in psychoanalytic theory, specifically the Freudian notion of anatomy as destiny. Indeed, many of the poems are marred as a result of her vacillation between acceptance of, and rebellion against, this theory. In 1927, the year in which the last of the Indian poems appeared in literary magazines, she published an article which suggests that she had finally come to terms with current psychoanalytic thought. "Cheating at Solitaire" dismisses any "scientific" theory which attempts to explain the origin and nature of sexual difference. (The term "scientific" refers also to the social sciences which, in the early decades of the century, was not yet differentiated from the more traditional scientific disciplines.) With regard to female identity formation, Skinner rejects biological determinism, which she condemns as a male construct. In its place, she advances a theory of self-determinism.

The article discusses the evolution of female consciousness and self-determinism as a gradual movement through history away from male definition and towards self-definition. The thesis is never stated quite this clearly: with its tangle of metaphor, analogy, and oblique references, the article is a classic example of the female art of literary camouflage, or subterfuge. Skinner begins by denouncing "literary cartographers" (a metaphor borrowed from geography to describe critics) and their "prevalent passion for turning the simple into complexities," a habit "born of shallow wading in the sciences" (676). She then proceeds to emulate the critics by launching into a complex series of scientific metaphors without stating her subject. She borrows an analogy from physics to describe sexual differentiation in the human species as a process by which "Sameness" eventually reaches its "Pole of Divergence." This scientific phenomenon, she insists, has never been adequately explained. "Although science has now practically accepted the theory that the sexes' pole of divergence is in the realm of psychology, no scientific mind has yet been able to stabilize it." Presumably this reference to the then widely accepted Freudian theory of sexual identity was less oblique to Skinner's 1927 readership than it is to the reader of the 1980s. Skinner dismisses this "now practically accepted" psychoanalytic wisdom in favour of a theory she chooses to express through the metaphor of the "solitaire deck." Her proposition is that "All women cheat at solitaire sometimes; men, never" (676).

The solitaire metaphor, like the scientific ones which precede it, is never made literal. However, solitaire seems to be Skinner's analogy of the game of life, and what she says about this game is that men do not have to cheat because they made up the rules, whereas women must

cheat in order to win. Over the centuries, women have obeyed the rules which govern what it is to be female: to be female is to be destructive rather than creative, unconscious rather than conscious, and passive rather than active. These definitions of femaleness arose out of "a mass of misconceptions."

For, strangely, less is really known about the mind of woman than about any other chemical which man employs in his formulae of joy. Wine, song and stud poker are far better documented. To be sure, there is an immense amount of literature on the subject but, as nearly all of it is based on masculine research, it must be classed as secondary, and not sources, material, and is to be used only with the greatest discretion. (676)

Patiently wading through centuries of "masculine research" and carefully removing the "mass of misconceptions," Skinner proceeds to trace the evolution of female creativity, consciousness, and activity from ancient Greece, through the Middle Ages and the pre-scientific modern era, to the present.

The men of ancient Greece defined women as unconscious and destructive. This is apparent in the male construct of the Three Fates. With "little consciousness and less volition," these three women unravel the fabric of life and snip it off. A female version of this configuration might include five women, two of whom would be imaged as taking up these threads of destiny and "crocheting them into antimacassars of original designs" (677). The male-defined woman of the Middle Ages is similarly uncreative. To man, she is "static mind in so far as he concedes that she is mind at all" (678). Trapped within granite walls and locked into her chastity belt, she passes the time by making tapestries, "weaving glowing threads in designs that are not of her own making." She "draws her stout threads about the figure of knightly man" as he engages in "his adventures, now hers at second hand...." But behind her passive outer aspect, medieval woman is beginning "to dream of action." Just what form that action might take is eventually discovered by the woman trapped in the mirrored halls of Versailles. As "Crystal Gazer," she "gets several different slants on herself at once," and one of those slants is a view of herself walking away from male definitions of herself and toward self-definition: "once woman herself had become willing to leave man behind her, her moral and spiritual leadership was assured" (678).

Before explaining this radical notion of power reversal, Skinner returns to the solitaire metaphor. Despite the first

inklings of female self-knowledge acquired in the pre-scientific era, woman was reluctant to convert that self-knowledge into action. This reluctance to “cheat at solitaire” in order to escape the prison of man’s definition of her derives from superstition. By breaking the rules of the game of life, she would risk incurring the wrath of occult powers as represented by the symbols on her deck of cards. But now, in the scientific age, woman “feels no awe of kings nor love of knaves” (678). “And since no occult power, other than her own will and fancy, direct the cards, no bane dogs the cheater; so she plays with them as she pleases...

...Inevitably her mind...will advance with increased force and subtlety to the creation of her own patterns. Let man consider that: however helplessly. The Three Fates he invented, plus the two he never guessed, are upon him. In the tapestries which woman will weave hereafter, man—in so far as he may appear at all—will be in complete subjection to her original design of life and society. (679)

This prediction regarding man’s “complete subjection” to woman’s “design of life and society” goes beyond mere female self-definition. It suggests an inevitable shift from male to female cultural hegemony. Skinner’s use of the tapestry metaphor is a kind of smoke-screen behind which this female supremacist fantasy attempts to hide, for it creates the illusion that her subject is woman’s control over her own art rather than ultimate female control over the entire “design of life and society.” Given the radical nature of this vision of the future, it is hardly surprising that Skinner feels constrained to bury it under several layers of metaphor. But more important, the reversal of power which she prophesies is evidence of her inability to imagine an alternative to the epistemology of opposition which governs gender arrangements and perpetuates the notion that artistic creativity is gender encoded.

The note of confidence on which “Cheating at Solitaire” ends is absent in a sharply satirical article which Skinner published two years later, entitled “What Well-Dressed Women are Reading.” Within these two short years, her faith in the emergence of women’s creativity and individuality has been radically modified: now she represents women as fundamentally shallow and frivolous. This later article is ostensibly a critique of radio as a prime factor in the decline of reading habits but the target of Skinner’s criticism is the female consumer of books. The woman who emerges in this article, far from having a mind which is advancing “with increasing force and subtlety to the creation of her own patterns,” has no mind of

her own at all. In her mindless conformity to the dictates of fashion she has given up any claim she might have had to self-definition.

Women have fallen victim to what Skinner describes as the “Style Merger.” For the woman who listens to and obeys the voices that speak to her across the airwaves, literary style and current styles in hair, clothing and interior decoration have become synonymous. The radio announcer, in an oracular voice which recalls the chorus of a Greek tragedy, ominously warns the fashion-conscious woman against the *faux pas* of appearing in public with the wrong book under her arm:

Well-dressed Women were reading *this* season’s best sellers. They selected the best sellers in preference to novels less successful financially, though equally seasonable, even as they chose, out of the several modish tricks of the *couturieres*, the one which was already blazoned upon the girdle and neckline of millions. The new Style Merger, it seemed, was well in progress: hat, choker, hand-bag, and brains to match. (432)

The woman who, in “Cheating at Solitaire,” spent centuries breaking out of enslavement to the male voices which defined her, is here enslaved by the voice of fashion. Far from creating a uniquely female “design of life and society,” she is not even capable of originality in the creation of her own outer image but must imitate the designs mass produced for women by the fashion industry.

But it is not only her personal appearance with which her reading material must be coordinated. She also chooses her books with her room decor in mind. Books are now accent pieces chosen for the colour of their bindings and purchased by the yard to complement the interior design of her home. This new development in female literacy taste has “enlarged...the author’s field....”

I had cherished the common dream of authors: that my bright fancy might reflect in the hearts of Gentle Readers, but I had never thought of its putting lustre on their fingernails. I had not even considered bindings in relation to sofa pillows. The obvious link between Freudian fiction and inverted plaits had escaped me. (433)

Lurking behind the biting satire of this statement is a certain tone of bitterness with regard to the disappearance of Skinner’s primary audience. By the time this article appeared, Skinner had already devoted almost a whole

career to the writing of novels and poems, directed at an audience which, she now realizes, prefers to be fashionably up-to-date rather than enlightened. While this is in part a rationalization for her waning popularity with the reading public, her allusions to the fundamental shallowness of the female mind are nonetheless revealing in terms of the female poet figures depicted in her poems: if woman is this dependent on external voices, she can hardly be expected to articulate a voice of her own.

Skinner's description of *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* as a "succession of lyrics" presenting the interwoven lives of several characters (*Songs ix*) suggests that her intention in bringing the poems together is narrative. Narrative continuity is achieved through grouping most of the poems into a number of recognizable sequences, all of which are governed by one dominant metaphor. This controlling metaphor is the courtship-marriage ritual, which is treated in full in the opening sequence and repeated in part in subsequent sequences. The customs that make up the ritual include the lover's journey, the quenching of the torch, and the whip-plaiting. Interestingly, these are three of the ancient customs which Skinner admits to having reinterpreted for her own purposes: "I doubt that the Indians gave those customs my interpretation of them" (viii). For example, Skinner turns the whip into a symbol of violent male sexuality, and in doing so betrays the intensity of her rage at the patriarchal conventions which victimize women. As we have already seen in "Cheating at Solitaire," she eventually used that rage to fuel her perverse fantasy of man's "complete subjection" to woman's "design of life and society."

The courtship ritual takes place in spring when a young brave descends into the forest in search of a virgin squaw who has hidden herself there in the hope of being found and claimed by a husband. The young woman is eventually discovered and taken by her lover to his hut. The morning after the "quenching of the torch" — the couple's first sexual union—the woman plait a whip to present as a marriage gift to her husband in a gesture of sexual submission. The opening sequence of eight poems follows the young couple through the ritual to the birth of their son. Five of these eight poems are in the voice of the woman, who moves from the euphoria of sexual anticipation, through bewilderment as a result of painful sexual initiation, to resentment of her fate, and finally, to resignation and the sublimation of her longings in motherhood.

Two of the poems in this opening sequence can be seen to illustrate the biology-as-destiny theory of sexual identity. "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" features a male persona,

while "Storm-Dancer" herself is the speaker in "The Wild Woman's Lullaby." These two poems depict the sexual act as both beautiful and violent but the purpose of sexual union is very different for each of these speakers. In "Love Song to Storm-Dancer" (11-12), the urgency of male sexual desire is conveyed through the beating of the "Drums of Night" which open the poem and the "Drums of Dawn" which close it. The eternal persistence of the male sexual drive is suggested by the fact that sexual encounter does not bring fulfillment in this poem but only the kindling of "new desire."

This unresolved state of sexual excitation is carried over into "The Wild Woman's Lullaby," which is similarly stormy in mood. Storm-Dancer recalls the mythical figure D'Sonoqua, the wild woman of the woods who steals children and carries them away to her cave; she is an articulate monster-woman, through whose open mouth a terrifying "Ooo-ooo-ooo" is released into the forest (Carr, 33-40). Skinner's domestication of this traditionally free spirit is perhaps a reflection of her anxieties about the patriarchal definition of woman as destructive and beyond the reach of culture's civilizing influence. Not only is the wild woman tamed and turned into a nurturer rather than a destroyer of children, words in praise of male domination of women are put into her mouth. Here, Storm-Dancer describes the father of the child she sings to as

Fiercest in war, wisest in council, swiftest in hunting,  
Harshes and fondest in the tent of his woman! (13)

Significantly, sexual harshness is counted among the male virtues and is valued equally with fierceness, wisdom, swiftness and capacity for love. This celebration of male sexual violence is in startling contrast to "Song of the Whip-Plaiting" (4-6), where the persona expresses a wistful longing for a gentler touch.

But Storm-Dancer has more to celebrate than the fact that her mate is the most brutal of men. The longing for release from silence and isolation through motherhood, a longing expressed in "Song of the Basket-Weaving" (7-8), is here fulfilled, for the fact that mother turns poet seems to suggest that motherhood can release the powers of the imagination:

What shall I sing to thee, babe on my back?  
Song of the Eagle that mates with the storm!  
*Hi-i-ri-i-ki! Ri-eeek*  
The wild gale is weeping, driven before him  
To his nest on the black lone mast of the night;  
Swinging, swinging, far out, high out, over the sea!

.....

... Thy mother is Storm-Dancer, daughter of Winds.  
 What art thou, Little Chiefling, babe of my heart?  
 The star that I plucked from the mast of the night,  
 When the wings of thy father outstrove me! (13)

The young mother recreates for her son the story of his conception in images of pursuit and capture. Clearly flight and freedom haunt the imagination of the “wild” poet-mother. But more interesting than the images of flight and freedom, pursuit and capture, is the poet-mother herself. Her portraiture reveals Skinner’s ambivalence, for it is not at all clear what keeps this “Wild Woman” wild in her state of domestic captivity. Can she be seen as an imperfect transformation of D’Sonoqua? Or is she perhaps “wild” in one or more sense of the word: uncivilized, ostracized, alienated, or maybe even slightly insane? As a woman who presumes to be a poet, she is an outsider, yet her possible mental instability excuses her poetic pretensions. On another level, she can be seen to represent a reconciliation between the domestic and artistic realms: she is a woman poet whose poetry is “permissible” by virtue of the fact that it is a lullaby, a poetic form which falls within the realm of the domestic. This wild, unconventional poet-mother stands in opposition to the more conventional poetic concerns expressed through Kan-il-lak, Skinner’s male poet figure, who is featured in the second sequence of the cycle.

The Kwakiutl figure D’Sonoqua is not the only legendary figure Skinner’s Storm-Dancer recalls. Insanity, ostracization, and alienation are all suggested in the Nootka legend of “The Jealous Woman.” Jealous of her husband’s second wife, this woman flees into the forest taking her infant son with her. Exposure to the elements transforms her into a wild creature and in her rage and jealousy, she neglects the child she carries on her back. The only clue to her whereabouts is the wailing of the starving baby. By pursuing this pitiful cry, the child’s father and his fellow tribesmen finally locate the woman but by then the baby is nothing more than a bag of bones on its mother’s back. The wild mother is taken back to the village, and, with the bones of her infant still fastened to her back, is locked in a pen in her husband’s house (Sapir and Swadesh, 67-9).

This aberrant wife and mother is almost certainly one of the Nootka versions of D’Sonoqua, and it really matters little which figure is the inspiration for Skinner’s wild poet-mother.<sup>3</sup> What is important is the way in which Skinner reimagines her. Flight, pursuit, capture and incarceration characterize the Nootka legend, and while these elements are also apparent in “The Wild Woman’s

Lullaby,” they are romanticized and rendered benign. Female rebellion and infanticide are replaced in Skinner’s version by maternal nurturance and devotion to one’s mate; female destruction in the Nootka legend gives way to a modest and feminine form of literary creativity. In short, what Skinner does with this highly threatening female figure is to confine her within the same set of social and literary conventions in which Skinner herself, as a woman and as a poet, is entrapped. As the Kan-il-lak sequence reveals, her male poet figure operates under no such physical or creative restrictions. Although “Love Song to Storm-Dancer” and “The Wild Woman’s Lullaby” seem to work together as a pair in the opening sequence, they were not part of the original sequence of ten poems published in 1914. “The Wild Woman’s Lullaby” was first published in 1916, the same year in which four of the eight poems in the Kan-il-lak sequence appeared in *Poetry*. This suggests that it may have been written at about the same time as the Kan-il-lak poems, with which it has a thematic relationship. But Kan-il-lak is neither “wild” nor female, nor are his songs covert or unofficial contributions to the cultural heritage of his community. Despite his official status, his songs are not concerned with the interpretation of Indian legend but with the assertion of his own poetic identity as “divine culturist.” Like the Romantic poets, he seeks communion with Mother Nature, and like the poets of an even older European tradition, he courts a muse.

Kan-il-lak represents one of the ways in which Skinner attempts “to live out the split demanded of [her] between ‘woman’ and ‘poet.’” This sequence resembles the Medieval tapestry she describes in “Cheating at Solitaire” into which woman weaves male experience, “now hers at second hand.” Indeed this adopting of a male persona—or, more specifically, the powerful mask of the male poet—allows Skinner to slip comfortably into the traditionally male poetic role, and most of her perceptions from this point of view are decidedly male. Through Kan-il-lak, Skinner indulges in poetic abstractions, asserts the superiority of male symbols (such as the sun) over female symbols (such as the earth and the moon), treats male sexuality as the life-giving, life-sustaining force, and praises an omnipotent male god. The sequence is presented as a variation on the courtship motif and follows the poet-lover on his journey in search of “the Desired,” Nak-Ku, who is clearly the poet’s muse. This relationship between poet and muse is conventionally erotic, and the muse traditionally elusive at first and then submissive. Skinner subverts the convention briefly by allowing the muse interiority, making her the speaker of one of the poems, “Nak-Ku Answers,” in which she expresses her

jealousy of her sister muses and her triumph over them as Kan-il-lak's favourite:

I have given dreams to Kan-il-lak, the Singer.

Oh what care I, Kan-il-lak,  
Though thy hut be full of witches,  
Thy lip's melody flown before their kisses?  
Know I not that all women  
Must to the Singer bring their gifts?  
Know I not that to The Singer comes at last  
His hour of gift-judging?

I will lie, like a moonbeam, in thy heart.

A hundred gifts shall fall, regarded not.  
But where, among the dust of forgetfulness,  
The one pearl shell is found again;  
The deeps no man has seen  
Brimming its lyric mouth with mystical murmurs—  
There shalt thou pause,  
And render *me* thy song! (20)

The publication of this poem predates the appearance of "Cheating at Solitaire" by eleven years. Yet by giving the muse a poetic voice of her own, Skinner has already created one of those two conscious and creative Fates which she adds to the mute and unconscious three created by men. The Medieval weaver of tapestries is also present here in Nak-Ku's realization that female "gifts" are utilized exclusively in the service of male art. As muse, woman is denied creative power of her own and is merely the agent of male transcendence into the realm where the "lyric mouth" brims "with mystical murmurs"; this is "the realm of imagination above the actualities of experience."

Throughout the Kan-il-lak sequence, the images of pursuit and capture which inform "The Wild Woman's Lullaby" are repeated from the male perspective. The muse, symbolically associated with the moon, is a creature of the night, and Kan-il-lak, associated with "the man-strength of sun-light" (24), pursues her through the night and encounters her at dawn. The symbolism around the muse figure expands in the later songs to include the swift-pinioned bird, snared in Kan-il-lak's "nets of song," and the chaste stars upon which the poet focuses in his attempt to transcend into the upper realms of the imagination. The climax of his poetic experience is articulated in "A Prayer of Kan-il-lak" (27), which contains no trace of a female presence. Moon and stars of the earlier poems have been transcended, and here, "Above the dust of barter and the murk of fame," the poet comes face to face with "Kia-

Kunae, God." It is significant that Skinner images the ultimate imaginative experience as a confrontation between male poet and male god, for attempts by her female characters to transcend "the actualities of experience" rarely get off the ground.

Almost all of the male *personae* in *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* exhibit Kan-il-lak's positive male self-assertion. "Indian Spring" is perhaps the most remarkable example of the way in which Skinner asserts her creative powers through a male character:

I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!  
I the song of his lips and the light of his mirth,  
I the wind between his frontlets, the desire to his children,  
I the sure arrow of his heart!  
.....

I the seed in his spilling pouches, I the spear that wounds to harvest;  
I the life-bringer, I his servant to the law that is forever;  
I the linked hands of unborn children—  
Mystic fetter round the loins of men and women;  
I the sober splendour of their fusion, I the paean of their hope!  
Oh, I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!  
(59-60)

As Gilbert and Gubar have observed, "For all literary artists...self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the Creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (17). In "Indian Spring" the "I" is clearly male and, more specifically, phallic. Furthermore, this phallus, situated as it is "on the thighs of God," is the divine instrument of creation and as such engenders art. Almost certainly—to invert the question explored by Gilbert and Gubar—the penis in this poem is a metaphorical pen. Only once in the cycle does a female character move toward a self-assertion corresponding in strength to that exhibited by Kan-il-lak and the persona of "Indian Spring." This woman, "The Jealous One at Berry-Picking," is one of the cycle's most negative figures and is severely punished by Skinner, who allows the woman neither love nor recognition as an artist.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" is a derisive portrait of the village spinster. It is a vindictive attack by the speaker, Kot'-e'-o, on the three young female companions who accompany her on the berry-picking expedition. The companions all have suitors, while Kot'-e'-o has none. Kot'-e'-o's sour-grapes attitude toward the situation is the

source of the poem's high humour, for although she denies it, Kot'-e'-o has earned in full her reputation as the "Jealous One." She tries to redeem herself in the eyes of her companions by establishing herself as the champion teller of the "Tale of the Berry" but finds that she is as unsuccessful at accomplishing this as she is at attracting a lover:

You will not listen to me?  
That is foolish, for none tells the Tale of the Berry  
better than I.  
This I know; for I have heard all the maidens tell it.  
*La'n'ya!* It was a poor tale!  
(They laugh! They wag the head!) (41)

The derisive laughter of her companions elicits a venomous attack on each of them in turn:

Who is Whalaka,  
That she should catch old Noan's son?  
Why did he run to her with his fire?  
*Tst-st-st-st!*  
Because her house is the next house to his—  
But for the ten little houses between—  
And mine is too far. That is all!  
Certainly I will kick over your basket, Whalaka. (42)

Kot'-e'-o carries out her threat and kicks Whalaka's basket down a hill. All three maidens flee, leaving Kot'-e'-o alone in the darkening forest. She is eventually fetched by her mother, who drags her daughter kicking and screaming out of the woods:

*Ak! Ak!*  
Nay—wait, my mother, till I tell thee.  
It is true I have no berries—  
Nay—wait—*ak! ai-hi! oi-ick!*  
They lied! I did not so!  
They ran and told thee lies!  
The berries? Na— 'Tis true I have none; they took—  
*Ai!-ak! ak-i-hi! ak! ak! ah-k-k-k!*  
*Ah-k-k-k! oi-eek! O-i-eek-ow-ow-oo-yah-yah-h-h-h!*  
(46)

Kot'-e'-o's monologue is intended as a comic piece. More interesting than the humour, however, are the contradictions and ambivalences on Skinner's part in presenting so unsympathetically a character who so clearly embodies the conflict experienced by women who do not fit the role assigned them by society. Kot'-e'-o's inability to compete on the marriage market and her failure to achieve recognition as the teller of the "Tale of the Berry" make

her the object of derision rather than sympathy. Yet there seems to be an unconscious attempt by Skinner to convey some of the fears and frustrations which plague this enraged social outcast.

"The Jealous One at Berry-Picking" may have been inspired by the Tsimshian legend of Gunachnishemgad, translated by Franz Boas and published in 1912. The occasion of the legend is a berry-picking expedition. It features a haughty princess, a basket of berries which is repeatedly spilled down a hillside, and several female companions, who desert the princess in the darkening woods. During the course of the tale, the princess's excessive pride is broken. She goes on to earn the respect of the tribe, and is rewarded with a noble husband. Through a series of trials which test her courage, she earns her new husband's devotion and bears him a son, whom she names Gunachnishemgad. Although her father's tribe is hostile to the boy, the princess is fiercely protective. As a result, he grows into a great hero, who becomes the progenitor of the Raven Clan (Boas and Swanton, 147-93).

Temperamentally, Skinner's Kot'-e'-o resembles the heroine of the Tsimshian legend but the two women clearly do not share the same fate. Both stories emphasize punishment and redemption in the eyes of others. But while the Tsimshian princess proves her worthiness in the role of wife and mother and is rewarded by becoming the matriarch of a great clan, Kot'-e'-o seeks in vain to redeem herself by adopting the male role of poet. Not only is she unsuccessful, she is severely punished for this offence. Unable to assume the role of wife and mother or the role of poet, she is effectively denied both biological and artistic creativity.

Like the "Wild Woman" poet, Kot'-e'-o is an outsider, and the notoriety she has achieved is clearly not the kind of attention she seeks:

O Maidens—  
O Whalaka, Udz, Aidzumka!  
Hearken while I sing the Tale of the Berry.  
It is I, Kot'-e'-o—they call me Jealous One  
(It is a lie: I am not so!) (49-50)

Kot'-e'-o would rather be known for her abilities as a poet than her inability to attract a male suitor. Indeed, the lyrical description of the berry-picking which opens her monologue challenges some of Kan-il-lak's most poetic flights:

Berries are ripe.  
 Oh, *hi na-na-ya*—  
 Berries are ripe!  
 In the green shallows of the bushes  
 The leaves flutter-flutter,  
 Like little sea-waves,  
 When Yu-ahte, the Young Wind, treads lightly,  
 Laughing, laughing, with eyes shut,  
 Saying, saying, what he speaks not—  
 (*Tst—st—st—Little Wind—st!*)  
 Flutter, flutter little leaves,  
 Whisper and be very angry!  
 Yet shall the ten brown fingers of the maidens  
 Strip your green boughs of the ripe pink berries!  
 Salmon-berries, Salmon-berries,  
 Hiding in the leafy shallows,  
 We will catch you without nets,  
 We will spear you with our little sharp nails,  
 We will snare you with our ten brown fingers. (39)

This opening section establishes Kot'-e'-o as a self-conscious poet/interpreter of nature. In keeping with Skinner's definition of the poet as listener, who hears nature's whispers and hears the leaves "clap their hands" (*Songs xi*), Kot'-e'-o is attuned to the whispering of the leaves and the laughing of the wind.<sup>4</sup> But there is more on her mind than just artistic creativity. She perceives the act of berry-picking in terms of the courtship ritual and sexual initiation depicted in the opening sequence, where expectant young virgins hide in the forest awaiting discovery by their eager bridegrooms. However, in this image, not virgins but "ripe pink berries" are "Hiding in the leafy shallows" to be discovered by "ten brown fingers," which will snare and spear them with "little sharp nails." This oblique allusion to sexual violence suggests that rage and a desire for retaliation may also be present here, for it is not men but maidens who are performing this violent act.

Not only does Kot'-e'-o's special talent for hearing nature's voice define her as a poet, her "Tale of the Berry" suggests that she, rather than Kan-il-lak, may be the "divine culturist" of the tribe:

Once, once, far, far, long back,  
 When that old man the Sun was a baby,  
 Rocking on the tree of Heaven;  
 And the earth sat still and fed him strength  
 From the thousand gushing mountain-tips  
 Of her warm brown breast—  
 That so he might grow swiftly strong  
 To run every day across the great world

And carry the Kettles of Light—  
 .....  
 All this forest was a river,  
 A flowing green river of the sea.... (40)

Unlike the male poet Kan-il-lak, who limits his repertoire to dialogues with his muse, with his (male) maker, and with the landscape, Kot'-e'-o assumes the official task of Poet Laureate of the community, a task which involves the interpreting of tribal history and myth. Significantly, Kot'-e'-o's creation myth abounds in maternal images. Unlike the "Sun-Song of Kan-il-lak," which asserts the omnipotence of "the man-strength of sun-light," Kot'-e'-o gives the highest honour in creation to Mother Earth, to whom the sun owes its existence and its strength. Indeed, the image of the sun as both "old man" and "baby" seems to undercut the notion of superiority of a male sun over a female earth. Kan-il-lak's image of the sun as a ravisher of the female is contrasted here by Kot'-e'-o's image of the sun as a kind of servant to the "great world" for whom he daily carries "Kettles of Light."

It is perhaps not surprising that Kot'-e'-o's tale, like the legend of Gunachnishemgad, is informed by matriarchal power, for the most impressive image of power in her monologue is her mother: "My mother is a Haida woman; / The Haida women are most big and strong and fierce." Long before her actual appearance on the scene at the end of the poem, we are introduced to the formidable Haida woman:

...Aidzumka!  
 I would you were my sister,  
 That I might tell your unbecoming thoughts  
 To my strong, fierce mother.  
 Ayl there would be music in the village,  
 A roaring and a dancing!  
 You would sing like the wind through a rock.  
 She would beat out the wild shrill sound  
 Like Man-es-tet-su, the Priest's Drum-beater. (44)

The most hateful curse Kot'-e'-o can hurl at her companion is the wish that she might have a mother like the Haida woman. The pride in and fear of her mother expressed here by Kot'-e'-o is in keeping with the ambivalence of mother-daughter relationships.

The Haida woman is one of a pair of frightening images which haunts the final section of Kot'-e'-o's monologue:

What is that? there—there—stalking?  
 It is tall. It is silent.  
 It comes swiftly through the black pines.  
 It is the Woods-ghost with the long hissing serpent  
 in his hand,  
*Ai-i! ai-i! Oh-ah!* the Woods-ghost. *Oi-ick* the—!  
 Nay—nay—Nay-y—it is my mother—!  
*It is my strong, fierce mother, the Haida woman.*  
 (46)

The “Woods-ghost,” armed with “the long hissing serpent,” is clearly some kind of representative of male sexual power. He is set up here in contrast to the Haida woman, who, as the italicized line at the end of the verse suggests, is the more fearsome and powerful of the two. Indeed, by meting out Kot'-e'-o's well-deserved punishment, this awesome mother figure becomes the true hero of the poem.

The link between poetic imagination and punishable conduct in a woman is also suggested in Skinner's fiction. In 1927, the same year in which “The Jealous One at Berry-Picking” appeared in *Southwestern Review*, Skinner published her novel, *Roselle of the North*. Aimed at an adolescent female audience, the moral of this novel is that immodesty in a woman is not only unfeminine but extremely dangerous and should be punished. Modesty and bravery are compatible qualities possessed by Roselle, a young white girl, who is adopted by a tribe of Cree Indians. Equally brave but lacking in modesty is Roselle's closest companion, the Indian maiden, Unripe Nut. She is inordinately proud of her bravery, which she comes by honestly: she is descended from a long line of exceptionally strong women. This vain Indian girl and her mother Matilla closely resemble the mother-daughter pair in “The Jealous One at Berry-Picking.” Matilla is a large woman, whose “strong bony frame suggests a man's,” and whose “face was like a warrior's, with its stern mouth, piercing eyes, and eagle nose” (45). Despite her warrior-like aspect, all Matilla's battles are fought on the domestic front. She is a stern disciplinarian, who beats her daughter regularly for her vanity, her lack of feminine modesty, and her jealousy of the other girls which is an inevitable symptom of her extreme egocentrism.

Like her counterpart in “the Jealous One,” Unripe Nut is a self-appointed poet of the tribe. She causes much dismission among the other young women by declaring herself the “best story-teller” among them and by selfishly seizing the prized task of introducing Roselle to the legends of the Cree people. Roselle's favourable response to Unripe Nut's legend of the origins of warpaint feeds the

young poet's vanity and tempts her to pass off some of her own imaginative creations as ancient legend; these stories are, however, received with the considerable suspicion. Her “wonderful, true story” about what happens to the ripples made by a canoe paddle is, like Kot'-e'-o's “Tale of the Berry,” a woman-centered fantasy, in which a demi-goddess is credited with the control of daylight and darkness, the blowing of the wind, and the destination of the ripples on the river. But Unripe Nut's tale is a dismal failure because she selfishly refuses to give it a satisfactory ending. Consequently, her story elicits only disappointment: “It tells everything but what you promised to tell!” (154), Roselle complains.

No more “legends” are forthcoming from Unripe Nut. Instead, she tries to turn herself into a legend by attempting the heroic act of rescuing Roselle from the wicked white traders who have kidnapped her from the tribe. Although her ancient and exceedingly vain grandmother had once won the honorary title of woman warrior for a similar act, this kind of task is not normally within a Cree woman's purview, and Unripe Nut succeeds only in disgracing herself by almost bringing about Roselle's death. Now she must endure the humiliation of being whipped by Matilla in the presence of several male members of the tribe whose derisive laughter only intensifies the girl's humiliation. Cured of her unwomanly pretensions, Unripe Nut is imaged in the last scene of the novel reciting upon request from her betters a poem in honour of the virtuous Roselle; significantly, it is a poem written by Tataka, a young male poet of the tribe.

The portrait of the frustrated female poet, Unripe Nut, is far more ambivalently drawn than that of her twin Kot'-e'-o. Despite the fact that Unripe Nut's behaviour becomes increasingly more alienating as the novel progresses, the narrator insists throughout that she is at heart, an admirable individual, if somewhat “Unripe.” Kot'-e'-o has no narrator to contradict the negative impression created by her conduct; further, Skinner allows us no sympathy for Kot'-e'-o's inability to achieve full identity with either her female or her poetic roles—harsh treatment, considering this is the dilemma Skinner herself must confront as a woman poet.

Jean Mallinson recognizes Skinner as a precursor of contemporary women poets who work within what she calls the Indian Fictions genre. However, almost certainly under the impression that Skinner's poems are interpretations of Indian experience rather than original works, Mallinson concludes that the difference between Skinner and her successors is that her work is not a rendering of her

own sense of being a woman (99). Yet it is extremely doubtful that Skinner made any ethnographical studies of North West Coast Indian women; furthermore, during the early twentieth century no such studies were available for her to consult. Indeed, the female Indian community has only just recently been recognized as a potentially valuable area of anthropological investigation.<sup>5</sup> But as this paper has demonstrated, it is not the depiction of Indian culture but, rather, the inscription of female poetic experience that makes these poems historically significant. Skinner's profound ambivalence about female creativity is evidence of the enormous difficulties confronting women who attempted to enter the male-dominated poetic tradition of the early twentieth century. But curiously, despite her ambivalence about female poetic power, and although she requires the male mask of poetic power to achieve it, she does succeed in identifying herself with the role of poet. Most important, whatever one thinks of the quality of the poetry, *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* does represent a bold and interesting experiment in the integration of female experience and art.

## NOTES

1. Skinner herself writes of receiving these prizes ("On Writing," 95).
2. Skinner wrote four histories of American pioneer life for Yale University Press. She mentions the use of *Adventures of Oregon* in American high schools in "The Reviewer Replies" (17).
3. Among the Nootka, the "Wild Woman of the Woods" seems to have been splintered into three legends. In addition to her incarnation as "The Jealous Woman," she appears briefly as "the great Woman of the Woods" in the myth entitled "How Andaokot First Came to this World" (Arima, 50-54); in that myth she catches children, hangs them over the fire alive, and smokes them to death (50). She appears again as "Pitch Woman" in "The Stealing of Children by Pitch Woman and their Rescue" (Sapir and Swadesh, 89-91), in which she carries children off into the woods. Emily Carr received the legend of D'Sonoqua from a Kwakiutl Indian when she asked him to tell her the story of the woman she saw carved out of a cedar tree. Like Skinner, Carr reinterpreted the "Wild Woman of the Woods" as having a protective as well as a destructive aspect because when Carr saw the huge D'Sonoqua carving in the forest near Alert Bay in British Columbia, a bird was nesting in her open mouth and a cat was sleeping between her feet (52).
4. For a fuller definition of the Indian poet as listener/interpreter of nature, see Skinner's two articles on Indian poetics, "The Rainbow Path" and "The Indian as Poet."
5. Feminist anthropologist Margaret Blackman laments that Indian ethnographic sources "chronicle a male world seen through the eyes of male writers, a bias present in most earlier ethnographic literature from all areas of the world. The lives of women are described primarily as they impinge upon or complement the lives of men" (25).

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