

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

Americans should desire to separate themselves from it." Furthermore, Logan "scorned [the term] 'black' because in his view it glorifies '*Negritude*' and disdains the European origins of Negroes".

Ironically, contemporary integrationists and assimilationists would also find Logan's views alien to their ideology, for Logan felt the civil rights movement "had no concept of the history of the struggle for racial equality and the progress made since the nadir." Thus, the movement appreciated neither the achievement of legal equality nor the importance of legal methods for achieving it. In short, according to Janken, Logan's "self-appointed role as movement gadfly was a balm for the wounds he suffered by being denied a permanent seat at the leadership summit".

Despite the brilliance of Janken's work, I have two reservations about this well-crafted biography. First, the volume is poorly copy edited. The editor made numerous comma splices; and he/she could not determine whether or not African American should have been hyphenated. Second, when Janken attempts to account for Logan's mental breakdown during his tenure as a United States serviceman during World War I, he becomes involved in simplistic and amateurish psychoanalysis, stating: "The cause of his [Logan's] outburst, while ostensibly a bombardment, was in fact the accumulation of racial insults and harassment Logan had to bear".

Nevertheless, Janken has provided us with a beautifully sensitive portrait of a second-tier African American intellectual and activist whose contributions to his times and our own had been previously ignored.

Vernon J. Williams, Jr.  
Purdue University

**Basil Johnston. *Ojibway Tales*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 188 pp., \$9.00 paper.**

Moose Meat Point Indian Reserve is the home of about seven hundred Ojibway in Canada. Intended as "an amusing account of Indian-white man relationships," Basil Johnston's *Ojibway Tales* presents twenty-two true stories of mishaps and confusion resulting from Ojibway and white people's inexperience with or misunderstanding of each other's culture. Indeed many of the tales are quite amusing, poking gentle fun at Ojibway and white man alike, but often the humor is that of slapstick comedy—the foolishness of the characters is the reason we laugh *at* rather than *with* them. On the back cover, it is suggested that both Ojibway and the whites are "gently satirized," but often that which is here termed "gentle" actually becomes off-putting to the reader. The stories range in quality, some of the tales are only minimally humorous or entertaining,

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

and one wonders whether Johnston may have benefited from a more selective approach to compiling the book. This and other somewhat disturbing elements within the tales detract from the book's purpose—to illustrate, albeit partially, "that sense of wit and humour that forms an integral part of the Ojibway peoples and their character." Ultimately, *Ojibway Tales* is a text that may be better enjoyed in part than as a whole.

Such tales as "They Don't Want No Indians" and "Sign of the Times" are delightfully funny illustrations of bureaucracy and cross-cultural misunderstandings. In the first tale, an Ojibway's attempt to bury a fellow Indian who has died becomes a tangle of red tape that rings true in its frustrating buck-passing, and the critique of that bureaucracy is communicated through humor quite effectively. In the second, a government plan to subsidize upgraded housing on the Moose Meat Point Indian Reserve goes awry when the delayed shipment of toilets and lumber to build outhouses is misinterpreted by the Ojibway as equipment to build ice fishing houses. The surprise of the government official when he finds the Indian fishing through the hole in the toilet seat is the winsome note on which the collection of tales ends.

Unfortunately, there are elements to the collection that detract from Johnston's stated purpose. A disturbing trend of characterization throughout the book adds to this reader's sense that the intended "gentle" satire actually verges on rather vindictive portraiture. Specifically, the recurring descriptions of white female characters becomes distracting and disturbing. Throughout the text, Anglo women are described as "scrawny," "quivering," "scruffy," "frowzy," "ignorant," "unwashed," and often hostile "little" creatures. We see them almost universally as women who "scurry," "sulk," "lisp," "splutter," and scorn their way through the tales, and they are sent repeatedly into fits of quivering lips and blanched or flushed faces as a result of their interactions with Ojibway. While Ojibway women are often portrayed as strong and responsible, their male counterparts are usually quite the opposite—drunk, greedy, headstrong, closed-minded. For example, in "Moose Smart: Indian Smart," a foolish attempt to copy white man's ways—if a cart can be pulled by a horse, why not a canoe by a moose?—seems motivated both by laziness and by pride. One male character named Whistling Wind chortles, "if [whites] could see us now the wouldn't think Indians were so stupid." In the end the Indians lose both the moose and the canoe. Again, the gentleness of this satire needs to be questioned.

Two of the tales in this collection are autobiographical, and it is in these that Johnston's tone is most successful, for in each he is recounting his own experiences. (It is interesting to note, by the way, that the negative characterizations of white women mentioned above are found particularly evident in these two tales, told from the first person perspective.) It is when he retells the stories collected from others that his tone becomes intrusive at times. There is a sense in some of the tales that

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

Johnston's attempts to make a passage or descriptive phrase more "literary" has actually altered the original, informal tone of a funny tale told among friends. For example, describing a proposal scene between two young Ojibway, Johnston writes: "Bezhinee allowed herself the luxury of gazing briefly at the sparkling diamond on her finger before shoving her hand in the pocket of her cardigan. Her fingers constantly explored the unaccustomed outline and hardness of the first ring she had ever owned." Such lines are evocative and would serve to strengthen a short story, but here they are counter-productive, unnecessary. The voices of unique, individual Ojibway storytellers are difficult to distinguish because the tone of most tales is similar to that of the autobiographical selections. Johnston does acknowledge that the act of translation is a problematic one that creates a barrier "to a fuller exposition of Ojibway humour."

Johnston notes in the foreward that the tales collected here reflect a point of transition for the Ojibway of Moose Meat point; the people of these tales struggle with the tenuous balancing act between assimilation and progress and cultural and spiritual preservation. Certainly the tales are valuable in that they offer a look at the everyday manifestations of the white man's effect on native peoples. In his forward, Johnston dedicates the collection to storytellers and to the people of Moose Meat, and "especially to the white man, without whose customs and evangelistic spirit the events recounted would not have occurred." His tone is sarcastic here, and when Johnston later takes a conciliatory stance toward the white man, describing Canadian government policy reform beginning in the 1960's as "enlightened," he seems not entirely comfortable in doing so. He begins the book with a list of dichotomies, adjectives describing the Ojibway in positive terms—having "individualistic, resourceful, informal, proud, imaginative"—and the white man in negative—having "haste, overbearing, force, and decisiveness." Such description is predictable and understandable in light of recent history, but the tales do not serve to acclaim the Ojibways' qualities as much as they do to mock them. The collection of stories in criticizing the white man, but *Ojibway Tales* fails to illustrate the Ojibway character Johnston set out to celebrate.

Vanessa Holford Diana  
Arizona State University

**Sidner J. Larson. *Catch Colt. American Indian Lives.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 162 pp., \$21.00.**

*Catch Colt* describes Gros Ventre writer Sidner J. Larson's experience as a mixed-blood Native American looking for his heritage, identity, and personal direction. Although minority fiction writers (such as