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DECOLONIAL PERFORMANCE PRACTICE: WITNESSING WITH AN ETHIC OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

ABSTRACT

The starting premise of this paper is that our current crisis of environmental degradation is inextricably linked with capitalist, colonial and patriarchal exploitation. If environmental and colonial histories are co-constitutive, then performing ecology needs to attend to structures of power that function to control human relationships to land and the nonhuman world. In this paper, I will explore the act of witnessing another's story in the context of settler colonial Canada through my personal experience as a settler Canadian watching Cree playwright and performer Cliff Cardinal's solo show, *Huff*, which premiered in 2015 and has since gone on to tour nationally and internationally. How do we witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference? Drawing on theories of witnessing and incommensurability, I explore what being an ethical witness to another's story in theatre and performance might look like, especially when a play like *Huff* is situated in Canada's supposed era of Truth and Reconciliation.

Keywords: Decolonial; Witness; Settler-Colonial; Performance; Audience

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal text, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) points out that in the year 1800, Western powers controlled 35% of the earth's surface area (although they claimed more). By 1914, the annual rate they acquired land was 240,000 square miles a year and their combined power covered 85% of the earth (p.6). Although much has changed since 1914, this relatively recent phenomenon in our human history not only inextricably links our current crises of environmental degradation with capitalist, colonial and patriarchal exploitation, but also links issues of social justice with access to, and power over, land. Said argues that,

The main battle in imperialism is over land... when it came to who owned the land... these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative ... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (p.xiii)

The starting premise of this paper is that our current crisis of environmental degradation is inextricably linked with capitalist, colonial and patriarchal exploitation. Who has access to or holds jurisdiction over land (and why) is an urgent tension globally, and I am interested in exploring how narratives that support or challenge this jurisdiction, particularly as they manifest in theatre and performance, are germinated in the settler Canadian imaginary. If environmental and colonial histories are co-constitutive, then performing ecology needs to attend to structures of power that function to control human relationships to land and the nonhuman world. This essay will focus on the role of the audience as witness in sites of decolonial performance, anchored specifically around my personal experience as a settler audience member in Cree playwright/performer Cliff Cardinal's solo show, *Huff*. How does one navigate their own role of being an ethical witness in the theatre? How does our relation to land, or our ontological understanding of human/land relations, shape how we serve as a witness? What is at stake after the performance

ends? Ultimately, I will argue for Eve Tuck & K. W. Yang's (2012) notion of incommensurability, where we are able to locate ourselves within a narrative without undermining the ontologically distinct experience of the other. My discussion in this paper is of my personal experience as a settler audience member: while I interpret Cardinal's interactions with the audience as if he is addressing a group of people outside of the community of his characters, as this was my experience as witness, I make no claim as to the intentions of Cardinal himself or the experience of other audience members. Depending on their background, audience members, especially Indigenous audience members, undoubtedly had very different experiences witnessing this disturbing and powerful performance, yet I can only speak to my own subjective experience. I refer to the audience as "we," to leave open the possibility that this experience was, at least in part, shared by some of the audience members in attendance. While this show was performed to a wide variety of audiences, the "we" I refer to in this paper is a settler-audience-witness.

INCOMMENSURABILITY

In the European settlement of what is now called Canada, the creation of treaties between European settlers and Indigenous nations were frequently used to gain official ownership of land for the settler state, with little to no compensation to Indigenous peoples, and were often created under conditions of deceit or coercion (Jai 2014, p.3). For example, the Williams Treaties, which signed over large portions of land in mostly Southern Ontario (where I live and study) from the Mississauga and the Chippewa First Nations to the provincial government, was made at a time when these Indigenous nations were already suffering from the effects of colonisation – poverty, hunger, discrimination, violence, dislocation from land and culture – and white settlers already owned and controlled property all across the land in question. The government was thus able to legalise the theft of this territory by paying \$500,000 for the land that they themselves had calculated to be valued at a minimum of \$30,000,000 (Surtees 1986, p.19). This is just one of many such examples, as the province of Ontario

alone (one of ten provinces in the country, along with three territories) hosts 46 treaties (Ontario).

In the 21st century, these atrocities, whether in Canada or in international settler colonies such as New Zealand, Australia, or the United States, are becoming less acceptable to the mainstream conscience, credit for which goes to decades of activism by Indigenous peoples and their settler allies. Canada is not alone in taking steps towards reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the state to try and remedy some of the past violence. This is surely a step in the right direction, yet reconciliation's ultimate goal is unclear, as the Mississauga and the Chippewa First Nations have not received their land back or been compensated the \$30,000,000 (if accounting for inflation since 1923, this number would be closer to half a billion dollars, according to the Bank of Canada's inflation calculator). There has therefore been increasing debate about the relationship between reconciliation and decolonisation, and whether or not the former is merely used to placate calls for the latter. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014), drawing on previous work by Taiaiake Alfred (year)?, argues that mainstream discourse on reconciliation (a term that the majority of Canadians find more palatable than the term decolonisation – this is apparent in the fact that reconciliation is now a popular buzzword for Canadian politicians, whereas decolonisation is never mentioned) serves as an apology for past harms and for the continued ramifications that these harms have on Indigenous peoples in Canada but does not challenge current structural power imbalances in any significant way. There has also been recent critique in academia around the use of the word decolonisation, in particular from Eve Tuck & K. W. Yang (2012) in their article 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor,' in which they argue that decolonisation must not be made into rhetoric that refers to Indigenous rights in general, but rather must entail actual repatriation of Indigenous land. Instead of a premature reconciliation that serves to alleviate settler guilt but maintain hegemony, Tuck & Yang argue for an ethic of incommensurability, where difference is fostered instead of sacrificed in the name of inclusivity. Dylan Robinson (2016) expands on this idea in his essay 'Welcoming Sovereignty,'

where he puts theories of incommensurability into practice by requesting that non-Indigenous readers skip a certain section in the middle of his paper, thereby carving out a rare space for Indigenous sovereignty within an academic work. As settler audiences, perhaps we can work to hold space for distinct cultural differences, even (or especially) when it means decentering and excluding ourselves from certain spaces or conversations. As intergenerational beneficiaries of colonisation this is not a familiar concept for us; yet, as these authors point out, decolonisation is and should be unsettling. Stepping back in this case is distinct from inaction and apathy; it is first and foremost about actively listening and responding to the expressed needs of Indigenous communities.

Incommensurability, as outlined by Tuck & Yang or Robinson, must be understood as distinct from recognition, which entails publicly acknowledging and respecting cultural distinction and implementing policy that upholds this. Glen Coulthard (2007) follows Frantz Fanon's (1952) critique of Hegel's politics of recognition by arguing that recognition is almost always implemented by the colonisers and so will ultimately be used to benefit them. This sort of recognition assumes that a 'privileged' group (the coloniser, or settler-colonial state) should generously offer the 'gift' of recognition to an underprivileged group. While in the past a lack of recognition, or a mis-recognition, has caused harm to marginalised groups, this current type of philanthropic recognition reifies the hierarchy that is causing marginalisation in the first place (Coulthard 2007, p.6).

How does the act of witnessing another's story manifest around ideas of decolonisation in the settler colonial state of Canada? How do we witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference? How can we actively avoid the proliferation of liberal discourse that, through claiming multiculturalism as a Canadian identity, collapses difference and so strategically works to assimilate sovereign peoples?

HUFF

In the past 30-50 years, there has been a surge of theatre and performance works from Indigenous practitioners across Canada and Turtle Island (see Appleford 2005; Carter 2016; Nolan 2015; Nolan & Knowles 2016; Osawabine & Hengen 2009; Reder & Morra 2010). Cliff Cardinal's solo show *Huff* is one of the many recent works contributing to this resurgence of Indigenous languages, practices, communities and traditions which Indigenous writers have claimed as a crucial aspect of decolonisation (Nolan 2015; Recollet 2015; Simpson 2011; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). *Huff* premiered in 2015 at Native Earth Performing Arts, the longest running Indigenous professional theatre company in Canada, currently in its 37th season, and continued in the following two years to tour across the country, as well as to Australia and England. I saw the show in Toronto, where I live, during its first run at Native Earth. The play follows the story of the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of a boy named Wind and his younger brother Huff. Growing up on a reserve in rural Ontario, they struggle with the ramifications of past and ongoing colonialism. Their access to, and relationship with, the land has been severed with the forced removal to reservations, the removal of children to residential schools or white foster families and the outlawing of cultural practices and languages. The characters we meet include Wind, his little brother Huff, his older brother Charles, his dad and his new girlfriend, his Kohkum (grandmother), his dog Angelina, their teacher and peers, a Skunk, and the embodiment of Smell (all played by Cardinal), almost all of whom are battling with issues of abuse, alcoholism and suicide. The narrative, relayed to us by an older Wind, begins shortly after Wind's mother has committed suicide and his dad has moved in with another woman. Wind and Huff skip school, siphon gasoline, get sprayed by Skunk and accidentally start a forest fire. We realise near the end of the play that they are both targets of sexual abuse by their older brother Charles who has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Cardinal 2017). Cardinal and director Karin Randoja depicted these awful events with a dark and disturbing wit, making the audience laugh and then abruptly stop laughing within seconds, causing us immediately to wonder what we ever found so funny.

At many points throughout the show, the audience is directly referenced by the characters: at the start of the play Wind muses that we are an imaginary friend he has hallucinated due to his oxygen-starved brain, and later on Huff considers our relation to the two boys:

WIND: That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard

Wanna know why?

HUFF: Why?

WIND: Because no one cares about us

HUFF points to the audience

HUFF: What about them?

WIND: Them?

They're not even real.

HUFF: Yes they are.

WIND: No they're not

(Cardinal 2017, pp.49-50)

The fact that Wind and Huff are being heard – that they have witnesses – is therefore an important part of their story. But what sort of witnesses were we?

THE PLASTIC BAG

The show opened with Wind speaking to us from within a clear plastic bag duct taped around his head. When he told us that one can survive for about six minutes this way before suffocating, I began to realise the possibility that the actor in front of me didn't have invisible holes poked into this bag so that he can breathe, rather, he simply hadn't reached the six-minute mark yet. When Wind, panicking about his attempted suicide, asked us, the audience, to take this bag off his head someone quickly obliged and, thankfully, the main character was saved. At the end of the play the same audience member followed her initial instructions and refused to give the bag back to him when he asked for it and so again, thankfully, he was saved. Wind, however, simply pulled out another plastic bag from his pocket and repeated the suicide attempt. The audience, it turns out, was not an all-powerful source that could swoop in to save him, no matter how much

we might have wanted to. It is interesting to note that the stage directions specify what the actor playing Wind should do whether or not the audience member gives the bag back. In both cases the actor is directed to refuse the audience and take out his own plastic bag hidden in his pocket. Through these interactions between spectator and subject, Cardinal has created a relationship where the audience bears witness to this character's story but is not allowed to take on the role of an all-powerful outside cure come to save his community, regardless of how badly we might want to play the hero. As Dian Million (2014) remarks in her book *Therapeutic Nations*, Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination "were not derived from any state or western power," which, for me, was represented in Cardinal's play by the audience, "nor could they be granted by them" (p.128). What does it do to an audience when we can't help?

TOMATOES AND CATHARSIS

According to Augusto Boal's interpretation of the function of catharsis, famously developed by the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, an audience should vicariously live through the drama on stage, find an emotional release through empathising with a character, and then reach a point of equilibrium with which they leave the theatre. As critics such as Bertolt Brecht or Augusto Boal argue, this structure, which has thousands of variations today, effectively depoliticises audiences by satiating in the theatre any possible drive for action in the world outside of the theatre (Boal 1985, pp.46-7). For example, in *Huff*, imagine the audience was able to 'save' the character Wind by withholding the plastic bag. We would empathise with Wind's struggle and then feel catharsis at his victorious survival that we generously guided him through. We might leave feeling a sense of closure and release that reassures us that whatever atrocities our ancestors may have committed against Indigenous nations is now in the past. If we are not able to help, however, then the real work starts as we leave the theatre. Dissatisfied with the lack of narrative closure, we are pushed to harness our energy towards an actual transformation of our society. This option is Brecht's (1978) alternative to Aristotelian catharsis.

Boal builds off Brecht, going one step further: the spectator actually becomes part of the action and is able to fully shape the outcome of the narrative (p.122). Cardinal's *Huff* was a mixture of Brecht and Boal's structures – as an audience member, I felt invited to shape the narrative by having been given a choice over whether or not I wish to save the character Wind; yet I stepped into this role only to be denied the power to create any change that easily. We were invited to be part of the story but we did not get to decide the narrative; we were instead reminded that we must continually work against ongoing colonisation in our own communities after the show has finished. In this way, Cardinal brilliantly asserted an ethic of incommensurability within one brief interaction. As an audience member, I was filled with a desire to help while simultaneously being reminded of my limited place in this particular narrative.

I came into the theatre ready to be the good Aristotelian audience member that my acting conservatory training had taught me to be; notebook and pencil in hand, ready to take some astute notes as a passive observer. Yet the only notes on my page by the end of the performance were those made by the performer himself; when the lights came up my white lined paper was speckled in tomato juice, which flew off Cardinal as he high-fived audience members while covered in crushed tomatoes. These tomatoes had recently been used for the characters Wind and Huff to both battle skunk smell and (again startlingly demanding an end to our laughter) jokingly reenact their mother's recent suicide. For the rest of the play, the tomatoes (now invoking images of blood, guts, or a heart) were left squished all over the floor, a visceral reminder of the death that is rarely discussed in Wind's family.

These tomatoes became an affective force that permeated the walls of the Aki Studio at Native Earth, refusing by their persistent red spots to let us return to our homes the same way we had left them. The name of the studio, *aki*, is an Ojibwe word, which Anishinaabe writer and poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) defines as "land – place, power, relation," specifying that "it is the opposite of land as commodity" (p.254). In Cree, the word for land is similar: *askîy* (Arcand 2019, pp.159). The floor of the set which the tomatoes

seeped into resembled tree roots that linked two backdrop paintings of trees, reminding us of *askîy*, *aki*, of the ecology that this theatre is located on and is a part of. While Cardinal's characters never talk self-consciously about the relation between ecological devastation and colonisation, this play was nonetheless deeply rooted in questions of the land. As Simpson reminds us, land is not just defined by trees, grass or water; land is inextricable from the political, historical and social processes that humans rely on it for. Similarly, the haunting power of Huff and Wind's recently deceased mother, a central character to the narrative who is never portrayed onstage, becomes glaringly evident through the hypervisibility of the red tomato chasm that was left running through the stage, through the family, the community and the settler colonial country, representing the loss of Indigenous women's rights and lives through colonisation. As Dian Million (2014) points out, in opposition to the enforcement of Western patriarchy that was part of Canada's colonisation of Indigenous people, Indigenous women have traditional roles as "the heart of the nation" (p.127). In the last third of his play, Cardinal showed us this matriarchal heart, now squished all over the floor, representing not just the mother character or the loss of over 1,200 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada (see Dean 2015; Martin & Walia 2018; Razack 2016) but also the loss of the land itself through colonial theft, degradation and pollution. Once the comparison was made between the mother's blood and the crushed tomatoes, they could not be disassociated from each other. The tiny red spots that fell on my paper also would have appeared on many audience members' programs, skin, or clothing, tying us all to this story, to this ecology, from our witness of it.

WITNESSING

Looking around at the audience by the end of the performance of *Huff*, I wondered what sort of witness each person imagined themselves to be. While so many Indigenous scholars are doing the vital decolonial work of contributing to Indigenous resurgence through the arts, how, as settlers, can we best respond when we are asked to be witness as well as when we create and perform our own work? Julie Salverson (2006) draws on

ethics philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to discuss the role of being an ethical witness to another's story in theatre and performance, asking how to witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference but calls the witness into an obligation to that which they witness. Rejecting a totalising, assimilationist philosophy of inclusion, we must "declare that I can never know (and thus erase through my assuming to know) the Other; I can only respond, attend, and remain willing to hear beyond my own conceptions" (p.147). How does witnessing allow for recognition of responsibility in ourselves? Salverson describes two difficulties in bearing witness. The first is when we romanticise the pain and suffering we witness and thus allow a tragic circumstance to be the singular defining characteristic of a person. "What this looks like in practice," Salverson cautions, "is either an almost hysterical adoration of the victim, or a self-congratulatory finger pointing at the oppressor" (p.149). The second difficulty for the witness occurs when we are afraid of engaging in an unethical way and so decide that disengagement is safest; we are unproductively paralysed by the fear of accidentally causing harm. Instead we must find a balance between our desire to help and our paralysis of guilt, what Salverson calls "putting ourselves in the picture or making the picture about ourselves" (pp.150-151).

As an audience, were we romanticising and othering the suffering that was portrayed by Cardinal in *Huff*? Or were we so consumed by debilitating guilt that we let this guilt become the main subject of the story? Although we could not change the course of the narrative during *Huff*, we were heavily implicated in the events unfolding. In her recent talk at York University, entitled 'Activism, Archives and Performance' and presented by the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, feminist theatre scholar Diana Taylor (2018) was asked how identity politics and positioning of oneself come into play when we are watching or telling a story that is not solely our own.¹ Taylor argued that we are all part of the story of destruction and/

or theft of land, but we have to understand *who we are* in that story. Some of us may be victims and some may be beneficiaries, but we are all still part of the story. That shared fact does not invisibilise our differences; by following an ethic of incommensurability, it might in fact make them productively more pronounced.

CONCLUSION

In witnessing a story like *Huff*, we may find ourselves caught on an ethical teeter totter, hopelessly trying to balance between paralysis and romanticisation, overcome by the ceaseless violence of imperialism that haunted the story and that is a part of each of our identities. Following Taylor, we might begin by figuring out who we are in relation to this story *and* this land and honouring what is incommensurable about these relationships. A group of settler Canadians watching *Huff* may be tempted to sit back in the comfortable seat of detached but sympathetic observer and I'm sure there were audience members of *Huff* who chose to do so. Another option is to take the role of a witness who recognises themselves in the story – not to parallel our own circumstance with those of Wind and Huff, but to place ourselves in the historical context that created this story. In this way, our very presence on the land that the theatre sits on implicated us as active witness-participants in the narrative: we were part of the same theatrical ecology.

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¹ Taylor's talk centered on the performance artist and activist Regina José Galindo's 2013 piece, *Tierra*, where Galindo stood in a field for an hour and a half while a bulldozer cut up the land around her.

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