Jill Carter and The Collective Encounter, *Retreating to Re-Treat: A Performative Encounter at the "Edge of the Woods*". Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2024. 232 pages. ISBN 978-0369104649. $21.95 paperback

Retreating to Re-Treat: A Performative Encounter at the "Edge of the Woods," by Jill Carter and The Collective Encounter, documents a collaborative performance project staged at Hart House Theatre at the University of Toronto over two nights in early September 2019. The project was intended to mark the centenary of Hart House; before the production of *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods*,*"* not one play written or performed by an Indigenous person had ever been produced at the Hart House Theatre. As Carter points out, institutions like Hart House and the University of which it is part were initially intended to exclude Indigenous Peoples (4). For that reason, putting *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods"* on the stage of Hart House Theatre was a remarkable example of Indigenous theatrical resistance and resurgence, one important enough to merit being documented in this book, which contains the text of the play as well as reflections by some of the project's participants and by audience members. Some of those reflections take the form of dialogues between Indigenous participants, or between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. There are also brief prose memoirs and poems, including two in honour of the late Stó:lō/Cree-Métis author and activist Lee Maracle. She gifted the production with a Stó:lō sacred re-creation story about a treaty that ended a brutal war between human beings and a giant Double-Headed Snake, which became the underpinning of the performance. Together, all of these texts give a sense of the process through which this devised, collective performance was created, as well as the outcome of that process, the play itself.

Métis visual artist David Garneau's essay, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing," gave Carter, the play's director, a theoretical orientation and a methodological framework. The theoretical orientation comes in the book's rejection of the federal government's term, "reconciliation," in favour of "conciliation". The goal of the project, Carter states, was "to imagine into being a world in which future generations of Indigenous Peoples and Canadians might begin a process of conciliation powered by acknowledgement, redress, and reciprocity" (25). Reconciliation, Garneau argues, presumes that there was some pre-existing harmonious relationship that can be restored; conciliation, on the other hand, rejects that "false understanding" (30). Instead, it is "an ongoing process, a seeking rather than the restoration of an imagined agreement" (31), a process Garneau sees represented by the Two Row Wampum, which depicts two boats (one Indigenous, one not) travelling in parallel down the same river without interfering with each other's progress (31-32). Honouring the treaties between First Nations and settlers, according to Garneau, "requires a continuous relationship, which requires interpretation, reinterpretation, and renegotiation. This is perpetual conciliation" (32). That notion is the source of one of the key words in the book's title: "re-treat." A footnote explains: "Re-treat here is used to signal the necessity of reassembly to repeat the process of renegotiating treaty and/or to begin a new process of treaty-making" (26)—an idea that's too important to this book for it to be relegated to a footnote.

The title's other key word, "retreating," also has its origins in Garneau's essay, in his idea of "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality": "gatherings, ceremony, nêhiyawak (Cree)-only discussions, kitchen-table conversations, email exchanges, et cetera, in which Blackfootedness, Métisness, and so on, are performed without settler attendance," without their "shaping gaze," which can trigger "an inhibition or a conformation to settler expectations" (27). This idea gave Carter a methodology for working with the participants in the performance, who were Indigenous

people, settlers, and newcomers. They were sometimes divided into groups, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and encouraged to develop stories separately that might be woven together in the play. That methodology seems to have been successful. In "Second Thoughts: A Postmortem at the Edge of the Woods," in dialogue with Indigenous cast member Jennifer Alicia Murrin, Grace Phan-Nguyen notes that the use of irreconcilable spaces helped her to reflect on her own biases and gave Indigenous cast members an opportunity to explore stories about their own experiences in safety before returning to the more neutral, liminal site imagined by the metaphor of "the edge of the woods." "This practice centring irreconcilable spaces brought so much personal and creative value to the play's development," Phan-Nguyen notes. "I really think I would like to see it practiced more" (94).

Carter suggests that the book invites readers to retreat into "those spaces in which to repair the split mind and from which we might re-encounter each other and the biotas that sustain us with generative action powered by good intention" ([xix]). Indeed, the notion of "encounters at the edge of the woods" refers to Indigenous protocols which have required us to pause in a liminal space, never touching that place where water kisses land, never venturing into the clearing beyond the dense forest, never stepping off the tarmac until we have sent out the call announcing our presence and intentions and until we have received a response—an invitation to step into the territory of another. ([xix])

The notion of "the edge of the woods" as a neutral or liminal space in which Indigenous Peoples can build relationships with settlers (people like me) and newcomers is central to the book. Its first chapter begins with an epigraph from Yvette Nolan's *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture* about the need for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to work together, even if it means that the former must "risk asking questions that may expose an uncomfortable ignorance," or that the latter must "practise patience, generosity, and humility, and keep answering questions" (Carter [3]; Nolan 129). Those questions and answers, those calls and responses, take place in the space at "the edge of the woods." This idea reminds me of nêhiyaw scholar Willie Ermine's notion of an "ethical space of engagement": a neutral zone between cultures, "a venue to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur" (202). There is a need for such spaces, which may now be more essential than ever. As Murrin and Phan-Nguyen state in the conclusion to their dialogue, "Canada is forced to face the edge of the woods. And it's time that Canada chooses to listen" (97).

Retreating to Re-Treat: A Performative Encounter at the "Edge of the Woods" documents the creation of one opportunity in which such listening could happen. Through the inclusion of the play text, it also gives people who did not see the performance, like me, an opportunity to imagine what it was like. The play juxtaposes the personal stories of cast members with Maracle's Double-Headed Snake narrative and a lecture on the history of Canadian settler colonialism by Professor Weetahgo, a nêhiyaw professor who, in order to succeed as an academic in a university focused on settler experience, has become a wîhtikow, the cannibal monster who appears in Cree and Anishinnabe sacred stories. As she justifies ecological devastation, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the concept of *terra nullius*, the ravenous Professor Weetahgo chews on her own flesh.

Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods" weaves together all these narrative strands. It is earnest and didactic, but perhaps those qualities are necessary for it to work; as Beka Morrison, a student who attended the performance but did not participate in it, suggests in her contribution to the book, "I learned more about Canadian history in this performance than I did in any of my history classes" (196). I wish I had seen the play, which seems to have been productive and provocative, and I'm glad this book exists, as will anyone with an interest in performance projects

that bring together Indigenous people, settlers, and newcomers in explorations of what it might mean to live together outside of what Carter describes as "the colonial edifice that contains us all" (5).

Works Cited

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