

BOOK REVIEWS

Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber, Kathleen Irwin, and Moira J. Day (eds.), *Performing Turtle Island: Indigenous Theatre on the World Stage*. Regina: University of Regina Press. 2019. 256 pages. ISBN 9780889776562. \$29.95 paperback.

We dedicate this review to Daniel David Moses ba.

Indigenous performing artists create work prolifically and across great distances. Every so often, it is good to hear from our theatre artists, and *Performing Turtle Island* offers perspectives on performance practices from seasoned performers and newer voices that converge to create a distinctive text for studying Indigenous performance on Turtle Island. The book's focus on Indigenous creative practitioners' voices is one of the marked strengths of this book and *Performing Turtle Island* is a collection that celebrates Indigenous performance with intergenerational and disciplinary scope. As co-authors of this review, Marrie Mumford (Chippewa Métis) and Jenn Cole (mixed-ancestry Algonquin Anishinaabe) also bridge generations of artists, representing the experience of a professional actor and long-time champion of Indigenous arts, who has worked with many of the practitioners and playwrights in *Performing Turtle Island* and an emerging performance scholar and performer being mentored into Anishinaabe creative community.

Performing Turtle Island: Indigenous Theatre on the World Stage arises out of a gathering held at the University of Regina in 2015 connected with Performance Studies International, "Performing Turtle Island: Fluid Identities and Community Continuities," which "brought together over one hundred established and emerging scholars and artists to focus on how Indigenous theatre and performance are connected to Indigenous Ways of Knowing and well-being, while also considering the role of Indigenous identity in shaping the country's [Canada's]" (xv). Editors Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber, Kathleen Irwin, and Moira Day situate *Performing Turtle Island* as the next book in a short line of Indigenous theatre texts, including Robert Appleford's *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre* (Playwrights Canada Press, 2005) and Yvette Nolan and Ric Knowles's *Performing Indigeneity: New Essays on Canadian Theatre* (Playwrights Canada Press, 2016), which they refer to "as the first in which all the pieces were written by Indigenous scholars, artists, and academics" (xiv). Archibald-Barber, Irwin, and Day remark, importantly, that this is only a beginning for theorizing Indigenous performance in Canada (xiv). *Performing Turtle Island* is also framed as a collection making a "decolonizing

effort" (xix) and responding to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Report's recommendations, specifically, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process." (vii) While the chapters in the book rarely take up narratives of reconciliation directly and since, as Indigenous kwewag, we cannot review this book in the context of the nuanced and fraught discussions about reconciliation across Indigenous communities in detail, we instead would like to highlight how *Performing Turtle Island* amplifies "importance of land and territory, language and language revival, centering of culture and experience in the body, survivance, and creative sovereignty, all of which are critical in understanding the role of performance in Indigenous cultures." (xx)

In *Performing Turtle Island*, we first hear from established actor Michael Greyeyes about new modes of training that ignite his practice; his "uneasy relationship with period film-work," (7), which threatens to represent Indigenous people as belonging essentially to the past; and his excitement about versatility with Indigenous languages and how becoming multi-lingual is one way to "recuperate what was lost in the fire or denied us" (17). It is significant to begin a book like this with a seasoned performer excited by learning and growing with rigour and commitment to culture. Next, Armand Garnet Ruffo shares a trickster tale about difficulties in filmmaking in a way that points to broader and historic troubles with funding structures for Indigenous filmmakers, who have worked for decades to advocate for self-determined narratives and resources. Also offering a window into the politics of Indigenous performance practice in a nation where colonialism is ongoing through elaborations of their personal process, Sky Dénomme-Welch and Catherine Magowan reflect on cross-cultural collaboration in their opera practice as they point to racism within music training and performance in Canada.

In a particularly vibrant chapter, Carol Greyeyes offers a deft history of Indigenous theatre and cultural education aimed at preserving and revitalizing First Nations cultures, including Native Theatre School and Native Survival School. Greyeyes shares resonant stories that express the power of the circle and the gifts Indigenous young people bring while she shares epigraphs from her course syllabi, a real treat. Another offering that lifts up the histories of Indigenous theatre workers is Annie Smith's interview with Daniel David Moses, who uses the opportunity to draw attention to the work of Indigenous women playwrights. In the interview, we glimpse some of Moses' writing process, hear some of his meditations on two-spiritedness and we witness, perhaps above all, his thoughtful generosity.

Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber offers a reading of the bingo game in Tomson Highway's *Rez Sisters* via French theorist Jacques Derrida, which, for us, signaled the sometimes deceptively vast distances be-

tween languages of Cree cosmologies and deconstruction. Marrie Mumford remembers reading Highway's play at the Native Canadian Centre in Tkoronto and how Highway's fluency in four Indigenous languages and his time working in community, learning womens' stories at Manatoulin Island were central in the creation of the now famous play. For a playwright who ignited Indigenous Performance and who has culturally supported many new Native artists, we wonder if Derrida is an adequate companion. Nonetheless, we find Archibald-Barber's assertion powerful that "Highway uses the structure of the game to dramatize the predicament of finding oneself inside a system outside of which one cannot think" and that the Trickster figure offers transcendence rooted in Indigenous spiritual tradition (111). The stories we tell and the manner in which we tell them matters. The power of a good story comes through in Kahente Horn-Miller's insightful reflection on her exploration of the Haudenosaunee Skywoman story. Horn Miller shares the intergenerational purpose and reclaiming power of storytelling, moving quickly from how retelling old stories with the purpose of picking up some of the threads that were dropped through settler colonialism and its selective storytelling practices to sharing how she has come to understand, by returning to this story in the context of motherhood, how stories land differently each time they are told, how they, the teller and the audience transform together in the telling (152). She powerfully expresses how, within Haudenosaunee specific and broader Indigenous paradigms, Indigenous knowledge moves through the body and the voice when we share stories.

Yvette Nolan's contribution to *Performing Turtle Island* is, unsurprisingly, a gift, in which she begins with early memory of attending a ballet version of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. She writes that this was, as a Native child, the first time she saw her history on stage. About Dan George's voiceover, she expresses, "I had never heard an Indian man's voice that loud before" (114). Nolan's chapter offers a reflection on staging George Ryga's play at the National Arts Centre in 2009, including tensions among cast members around how to stage Rita Joe's rape and murder. Was Nolan's decision to have Rita step out of the material into the spiritual world letting the audience off the hook so that they did not have to witness the literal representation of violence that disproportionately continues against Indigenous women or was it a prayer, honouring the life and personhood of the character Rita Joe and the women she represents? There are deep process notes here, generously shared.

Dione Joseph's lateral meditation on Indigenous dramaturgy points to the limitations of white settler reviews of Indigenous works and pulls away from the notion that Indigenous performance acts as education for settler audiences and moves towards a dramaturgical model where audience and stage stories merge so that each Indigenous person has a place (140-1). Megan Davies similarly notes the potential for settler

audiences and reviewers to consume Indigenous performance from within the frameworks of their settler entitlements, often with an anthropological gaze. In her analysis of the performance by Tunooniq Theatre, *Changes*, at Upfront Festival '91, Davis warns against, "politics of recognition" as colonialism with a different face" (172) and determines through study of settler reviews of the play that reception of the performance was hugely limited by racism. Her chapter points to how Canadian theatre scholarship has missed accounting for the more than two millennia deep traditions of Inuit performance cultures despite the presence of many northern community members in southern parts of Turtle Island. Davis' chapter also illuminates how limited research can be when the materials come from colonial perspectives, rather than out of long and slow relationship with the communities who are the research subjects.

Performing Turtle Island ends with a taletelling allegory about Indigenous Performance by Floyd Favel. *Coda* might offer a point of resistance to scholarship "about us without us." It is vivid and opaque at once, symbolic and personal, rollicking and nostalgic. It does not spell out an educational history about colonialism and performance in academic slides. I feel invited and dared to understand it. I struggle to find myself in the story. But I am with it, staying with its logic, maybe clinging. I learn to open myself to the many stories that may become present as we resurge together.

Performing Turtle Island is indeed a beginning. There are voices yet to come. The book demonstrates some of the richness of what can be thought through and expressed when we encounter Indigenous performance, especially from Indigenous perspectives. At its best moments, the book lifts up the work that had been done by Indigenous performers and gives space for honouring our teachings and relations.

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