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Working on *Blood Relations* and *The Rez Sisters* with an Axe and a Hammer

Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* and Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* are seminal Canadian plays that follow the lives of women who feel trapped and examine how they react to their circumstances. The characters Lizzie Borden and Pelajia Patchnose are both women who desire to escape from the restrictive patriarchal home or the opportunityless reserve. These two women also famously wield weapons: Lizzie Borden took an axe and Pelajia has her hammer. This difference in weapons is reflective of these women's differing approaches to combatting the violence they experience. Axes break but hammers fix. While both women suffer under the patriarchy, Pelajia's experience as an Indigenous, less financially fortunate woman adds different shades of oppression. Despite this, Pelajia has something Lizzie sorely lacks: love for her family. These differences manifest themselves in the women's weapons of choice. Lizzie Borden uses the axe to violently remove her obstacles, whereas Pelajia uses her trusty hammer to slowly repair what is broken.

This difference in function is first seen when each weapon is first mentioned. In *The Rez Sisters*, Pelajia complains she is stuck on the reserve "Nailing shiny shingles with my trusty silver hammer on the roof of Pelajia Rosella Patchnose's little two-bedroom welfare house" (2). While sarcastic, this comment is an example of (incremental) improvements. It is evident that Pelajia looks down on her circumstances as she berates her home, but she is still repairing it. Anne Nothof in "Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway" notes "Pelajia is also well aware of the spiritual and social problems on the Rez, and considers the possibility of a revolution in which the white male authority of

church and state is overthrown.” While Pelajia astutely notes the shortcomings of the reserve, she does not yet desire to dismantle the powers that be – such as leaders like the “invisible” chief or the pervasive presence of White culture and values. Rather, she seeks out Toronto, the centre of colonial power, as the solution. Pelajia thinks she is sitting idle in “boring old Wasayachigan Hill . . . Easy . . . waiting . . . waiting” (Tomson 2), when in reality, the foundation for change lies within her, hammer in tow.

Contrast the hammer’s first mention to the axe’s. In *Blood Relations*, the Actress relays a nursery rhyme she heard children singing. She sings “Lizzie Borden took an axe, Gave her mother forty whacks. When the job was nicely done, She gave her father forty-one” (8). The hammer fixes but the axe was allegedly used as a murder weapon. The form of nursery rhymes minimizes and trivializes the murders. It is just another one of many children’s songs. But it also closely follows the events of the dream thesis.

Lizzie only intended to kill Mrs. Borden. She felt as if her existence in the Borden household was a zero-sum game. In an exchange with Dr. Patrick, she asks, “If war were declared, would you serve? . . . You wouldn’t fight, you would kill– you’d take a gun and shoot people . . . And you say . . . that that stupid cow’s life is precious– *My life is precious!!*” (Pollock 63). Such a question demonstrates her views on the stepmother-daughter relationship. For Lizzie the Borden household, with the Mrs., is a warzone. She is angered that Dr. Patrick thinks her stepmother’s life is precious because that must mean hers is not. In some ways that is true. Mrs. Borden is the wife but Miss Borden is just a daughter. This sentiment can be seen when Mr. Borden considers putting Lizzie’s precious farm in his wife’s name (Pollock 43). Lizzie feels threatened by her stepmother so she has to get “the job done.”

Like Lizzie, Pelajia is not above using violence as a means to an end. However, there is only one instance in *The Rez Sisters* where Pelajia uses her hammer to hurt someone. When

the sisters need funding for their trip to Toronto. Pelajia proposes they go to the band office and request a loan. Pelajia has been arguing over paving roads with the chief for years. She will convince the chief by listing the numerous ways she paved roads, paid for by her prize money, will improve the livelihood of the reserve's residents (Tomson 59). This reveals that Pelajia has been a years-long advocate for the community. She sees how to improve the reserve and now has a plan to put such plans into practice. Pelajia, if she had the means, would make meaningful decisions. The women think her arguments are compelling. But Pelajia has a backup plan. She says "And if he still says no, I'll bop him over the head with my hammer and we'll attack the accountant and take the money ourselves" (Tomson 60). Pelajia will only use her weapon if reason and need are ignored.

Pelajia leads the women to the band office with "her hammer just a-swinging in the air" (Tomson 60). Nanabush follows them merrily. As a symbol of Indigenity, Nanabushe's happy presence signifies that this is the right course of action for the women. Regrettably, the "invisible" chief denies their request, so Pelajia hits him with her hammer. This is arguably an example of using violence for the greater good. The women are united and of course, Pelajia would be putting her prize money back into the community. Pelajia's hammer evens the imbalanced power dynamic between the women and the chief. As the leader of the reserve, the invisible chief dominates the women. He has the power to shut down the voices of his community in as little as "seven beats" (Tomson 60). Though invisible, figureheads like the chief, allow the reserve to dilapidate while they try to silence the women who want to help their community. For the women, their only answer is brute violence.

Violent as these women can be, they are not the only characters who use weapons. Which characters "borrow" and how they use the axe and hammer reveal different family dynamics. Rather than Lizzie, the first person to wield the axe is Mr. Borden. Mr. Borden uses the axe to kill Lizzie's prized birds after she refuses to meet potential suitors. Enraged,

he says, “You and those god damn birds! . . . *Grabs the hand hatchet from Harry, turn to Lizzie*. There’ll be no more of your god damn birds in this yard!!” (Pollock 46). Mr. Borden is upset Lizzie will not be a good daughter, but he is more bothered that he can not make her. When he swings the axe at the table, and then off-stage at the birds, he attempts to assert dominance over his daughter. But Graham Wolfe in *Black Holes in the Mask: Looking Awry on the Feminine Subject* in Sharon Pollock’s *Blood Relations* points out that “a truly strong paternal regime does not need to take an axe into the barn and hack away at its subject’s secret pleasures” (29-30).

I would argue that the patriarchy compels all participants, oppressors and oppressed alike, to violence. Mr. Borden’s violent outburst was a consequence of his feelings of emasculation propelled by Harry. Supposedly people in town think that because he can not control Lizzie, he is incapable of managing a business (Pollock 30). Mr. Borden is failing to adhere to male expectations. He is falling short as a father and this shortcoming is, according to Harry, affecting his business. Mr. Borden’s show of machismo, as Wolfe argues, is the result of a lack of control. More importantly, Mr. Borden only becomes violent when his wife and brother-in-law see him as weak. Wolfe writes, “The violence thereby functions as a desperate and doomed attempt to conceal impotence” (Wolfe 30). If Lizzie’s abundance of freedom emasculates Mr. Borden, then his only option is to kill the symbol of freedom, thus revealing his lack.

In *The Rez Sisters*, Pelajia lends Emily her hammer (62) which she then uses like a gavel in the women’s meeting. While the women plan to win THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, Pelajia lends her hammer to Emily which she bangs throughout the meeting (62). Unlike Mr. Borden, when Emily uses the hammer, there is no violence. Rather, she has a judge-like quality. The hammer represents order among the women. The hatchet kills blood relations but the hammer brings people together. The women see something is missing in

their lives, be it money or resources, and come together to try to improve their livelihood.

*Blood Relations* is rich with women-to-women violence but *The Rez Sisters* depicts a literal sisterhood working together.

Without diminishing the oppression she faces, it is important to note the additional intersections of oppression women like Pelajia experience. The two women suffer under the patriarchy, but Pelajia is also an Indigenous person who is of a lower socioeconomic status. While Lizzie Borden may live in a patriarchal home, Pelajia faces similar plights in her “welfare house.” The violence Pelajia exerts is for the betterment of the reserve and its inhabitants. Pelajia wants to improve the state of living for her people. Lizzie on the other hand, seeks (a limited type of) freedom for herself to the detriment of her family.

Both play’s final scenes include the two weapons. *Blood Relations*’ ending takes place in the present (1902). Emma, annoyed by the noise from the actress and Lizzie’s dream thesis, returns to the question of, whether or not Lizzie did it. Lizzie responds, “Oh Emma, do you intend asking me that question from now till death us do part? . . . For if you do, I may well take something sharp to you” (73). She asks this while holding the hatchet behind her back, which Emma later notices. Such veiled threats and seeing the hatchet greatly disturb and agonize Emma. Even without striking, Lizzie continues to use the hatchet to terrorize yet another family member. Lizzie, despite getting rid of the patriarch, becomes the de facto domineering presence in the house. She then goes on to shift the blame onto Emma, only distressing her further.

As for *The Rez Sisters*, just as it began, the play ends with Pelajia nailing shingles onto her roof. She thinks “If that useless old chief of ours was a woman, we’d see a few things get done around here. We’d see our women working, we’d see our men working, we’d see our young people sober on Saturday nights, and we’d see Nanabush dancing up and down the

hill on shiny black paved roads” (114). Then, Annie Cook suddenly appears and cries “Pelajia for chief! I’d vote for you” (114). Pelajia has always seen what has gone wrong on the reserve. All hope has been lost because of failing leadership but Pelajia may just be what her people need. Fittingly, when Pelajia resumes hammering at her roof, Nanabush “dances to the beat of the hammer, merrily and triumphantly” (118). For the women of *The Rez Sisters*, the spirit of the hammer so to speak is pivotal to change.

Violence begets violence and the characters Lizzie Borden and Pelajia Patchnose are exemplars of such a notion. These are two women, who compelled by their limited circumstances, resort to violence. Yet, *The Rez Sisters* leaves audiences hopeful for the changes to come on the reserve and *Blood Relations* blames its audience for Lizzie allegedly murdering her father and stepmother. Such differences can be looked at through the lens of weaponry. Pelajia will continue to fix and build up her community but Lizzie is condemned to perpetually hold the hatchet in fear of her next threat.

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