

Rosina Nicolazzo

03/30/23

Julius Caesar and *The Death of a Chief*: The Deconstruction of Colonial Knowledge and
Reclamation of Indigeneity Through Theatre

Within the greater Canadian cultural context, Indigenous communities have been engaged in a constant effort to reclaim, preserve, and foster their diasporic “pan-Indian” community against the genocidal and assimilationist projects of the settler colonial state. Through imperial logics of disenfranchisement and discourses of violence, Indigenous women have been recurring targets for their held cultural, communal and spiritual power. By reducing and silencing that authority, Canadian white nationalism has asserted its governmental dominion and jurisprudence over all Indigenous wellbeing—with Indigenous women intersectionally marginalized due to white supremacy *and* patriarchal supremacy.

Theatre is used as an avenue to assert cultural resistance and the rejuvenation of Indigenous spirit, in order to counter the cis heteropatriarchal hegemony. As an additional counter to Canadian nationstatism, Indigenous communities translate existing texts from the language of the colonizer into one that embraces the multiplicity and continuing histories of Indigenous languages. This acts as a methodology to affirm that the attempted erasure of Native cultures through the residential school crisis and Sixties Scoop was a failure.

These framings join synergistically in the Native Earth Performing Arts production of Yvette Nolan’s *The Death of a Chief*. An Algonquin director and playwright, Nolan took William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and cohesively blended Western staging with pan-Indigenous

traditional practices—all while ensuring that Indigenous languages, semiotics, and authority continue the dictorial progression of the narrative. By recognizing the everpresent power of Indigenous women within *The Death of a Chief*, Nolan cultivates the inclusive female gaze. Additionally, Nolan recentres Indigenous self-governance and stewardship through metonymic translation and adaptation of Shakespeare beyond the threshold of its original, British, colonial form.

In Ric Knowles' *Performing the Intercultural City*, he notes that the rupturing “of the relationship between Native peoples and their land, languages, cultural forms, and traditional practices” through colonial processes of “prohibitions, removals, reserves, and residential schools” have been key to the technological advancement of imperialism (Knowles, 66-67). Despite Indigenous sovereignty and stewardship having taken faculty over the land for generations, settler theories of *terra nullius*—literally “vacant land” in Latin, and the doctrine of discovery attempted to supersede Indigenous practices. Nolan writes that she is particularly “wary of who gets to say what tradition is...what those traditions are, and who they’ve learned them from” as the result of this imperial procession of knowledge accumulation (Knowles, 68).

In interrogating the “contingent locust” of theatre, often known for “reaffirming hegemonic social structures” (Miller, 4), Nolan asserts that ““every text adaptation is about trying to find resonance in your community”” (Mackenzie, 118). To marry Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* with Indigeneity, Nolan found a point of thematic cohesion to arc from. This commonality is noted by Brutus, in the declaration that “Th’abuse of Greatnesse is when it disjoynes/Remorse from Power” (*Death*, 394; *Julius Caesar*, 2.1.18; Mackenzie, 118-119)

Brutus is one of the few main characters within Nolan’s adaptation who does not engage in cross-genderization. And yet despite what an external male colonial lens might assume, Brutus

was incredibly “feared” when “the People chose Caesar/for their Chief” (*Death*, 389). Many Indigenous communities pre-contact and influence of The Indian Act upheld matriarchal power structures and lineages. Despite Brutus’s love for Caesar, he is instead beholden to patriarchal authoritarian values, and is quickly swayed at the thought of being considered a mere “underling” (392). Cassius plays upon Brutus’s fear of emasculation and lack of authoritarian diction, questioning why Caesar, a woman’s name, “might be sounded more than yours...yours is as faire a name...Brutus will start a Spirit as soone as Caesar...Rome hast lost the breed of Noble Bloods” (392). Brutus is representative of the early-modern standing of the patriarchy seeking to legitimize itself within the “Canadian” and Indigenous consciousness. Through his later betrayal and violence against Caesar (*Death*, 404; *Julius Caesar*, 3.1.85), readers and viewers witness the mirrored degrees of violence Indigenous women are continually subject to—even when in positions of power. As written about by Sorouja Moll, “violent racial gendering was enforced in policies such as the Indian Act, in which Native women...were physically, emotionally, and politically displaced and disenfranchised with their loss of status [and often, their lives]” (Moll, 390).

Cassius’s earlier musings to Brutus are underscored by Caesar’s own to Antony: “let me have [sleeke-headed] men about me that are fat...Yond Cassius has a leane and hungry looke/She thinkes too much; such ones are dangerous” (392). Unlike Brutus, all three of these characters have been cross-gendered and are played by women. The hunger Cassius exhibits is not dissimilar to colonist ideology. Her spun rhetoric that “Noble Bloods” must lead their people carries connotations that bear “representational, discursive [...likeness to] colonial tropes that have misrepresented Indigeneity” (Mackenzie, 111). The upholding of these imposed tropes has contributed to the perpetuation hegemony against Indigenous women, and often leaves them

subject to systemic racial and sexual violence. As the result of Cassius's display of internalized settler hunger, Caesar becomes both a matriarchal figure of power, and the subject of an onslaught of targeted generational, gendered, political violence (120). By targeting decision makers, one can ensure their own dominant ideologies sit in the locus of control—as had been Cassius, Brutus, and the other conspirators' primary objective.

Expanding once again to assess *The Death of a Chief* from a craft standpoint, Sarah Mackenzie notes that while Nolan does not talk back to Shakespeare in the traditional sense, she has enacted a dramatic reordering and restructuring of the original play to consider the “immediate,” “communal,” “political prerogatives” that are most salient to the Indigenous diasporic community in Toronto and their interlocutors (117). While some critics argue that Shakespearan adaptation must make the Bard alien within the sociocultural landscape it is being retold in, Nolan maintains Shakespeare's language while questioning his authorial authority, and disrupting the “culturally embedded ideas of gender hierarchies” (Miller, 9) normative society maintains.

For example, an intonation of “civil strife in heaven...[that] incenses [the gods] to send destruction” by Casca, one of the conspirators, in Shakespeare's original play (1.3.10) carries entirely different connotations than what is spoken by Nolan's regendered Antony in *Death*. Following Caesar's murder, she cries “ I am meeke and gentle with these Butchers...A Curse shall light upon the limbes of men;/Domesticke Fury, and fierce Civill strife,/Shall cumber all the parts of *Canada*” (*Death*, 409; *Julius Caesar*, 3.1.281, 288–290).

It is not the wrath of the gods that the people of the nation state should be worried about. Through a patriarchal insurrection and the murder of a “domesticke” steward of the land, the strife that will “cumber” Canada is the result of imperial assertions of control and epistemology.

Through the direct translation of Shakespeare, the notion of “heaven” is evoked by Casca, a man in the source text. This ecclesiastical influence is incongruent to Indigenous belief systems pre-contact—the patriarchal conspirators, acting not dissimilarly to the federal government structure, evoke the breadth of the gods and heaven. In contrast, the women evoke a naturalistic fury, and curse the men who believe they are above the domestic tidings of the earth and nature. When viewing translation as a transactional currency, that is “usually [carried out by] the translator over the translated material...[it shows how] language has the capacity to unsay the world and to speak it otherwise” (Moll, 176). In this context, religion encapsulates disparate powers set in opposition.

Additionally, now that Rome, a geopolitical seat of imperial conquest, has been metonymically aligned with *Canada*, the land itself becomes a politicized spatial body, subject to the conflicting notions of Indigenous sovereignty and the colonial doctrine of discovery and *terra nullius*—as previously noted. This is, again, another notation invoked through the translation of Shakespeare’s source text within the Indigenous spatiality of Nolan’s work.

Despite this imposition of heteropatriarchal control asserted over Caesar by the conspirators, Caesar and Antony, though “meeke and gentle,” do not eskew their agency and bow before their oppressors. Instead, Antony alongside Caesar’s Ghost rally their community members in a haka, or a ceremonial Māori war dance (*Death*, 410). In doing this, along with the Plebeians cries of “Awas, go. Húnh nyo” on the following page, there is a porous, pan-Indigenous, and pan-cultural decree of unity against the oppressive regime. No matter the disconnect colonists impose upon Indigenous Peoples and their land, there will always be a re-empowered matriarchal warrior in the next generation, who will find a connection to it, and who will not leave the land as unprotected, apolitical space (Moll, 390-391).

Additionally, through the transnational evocation of the haka and polylinguistic vocality of the text, there is an open heterogeneity that exceeds the reach of colonial violence and genocide. When language, memory, and ancestry cohabit the cultural medicine wheel—the opening and closing image the audience sees during a performance of *The Death of a Chief* (387 and 427), genocide and imperial ideology attempt to target the wealth of that symbiosis. Nolan says that since all of these concepts exist on the same axis of time, a culture cannot “get over” a genocide that is still actively taking place (Moll, 385). That violence inflicted upon Caesar and the violence inflicted upon women prior to the amendments made to the Indian Act in 1985 still impact Indigenous women of today through the community held within the medicine wheel, generational trauma, and hegemonic institutional apparatuses.

With further regard to translation, to alter or adapt Shakespeare in any capacity is often met with push back or outrage depending on audience perceptions. Given *Death's* maintained authenticity to its general Shakespearean source text, its shifted foci were through the historical racial refractions of its characters, and the female gaze.

Lauren Cline writes that the empirical milieu of the “offstage should register onstage, and the prevailing performance tradition of the [present] moment should mirror [what is present in a historical context]” (112-113). Should audiences or readers view theatre devoid of racial signifiers, semiotic codes, or discursive constructions of race (114), means to relegate performance within a liminal, colourblind, ahistoricized space devoid of language, tension, and methodologies of visibility. Without an available, analytical vernacular to assess Nolan’s work through an intersectional framework, language itself remains “one of the most basic markers of colonial authority” (Moll, 392). Without an ability to describe race or notate why Shakespeare is

presumed to be raceless, imperial knowledge without the social construction of theatre cannot be articulated and deconstructed.

With regard to regendering and the female gaze, Nolan explains that they “‘had to shift the gaze, from that of [a patriarchal, Eurocentric gaze] to an Aboriginal, largely female gaze’” (Moll, 384). An audience or a reader’s act of witnessing a narrative unfold establishes both an ideology of voyeurism vis-à-vis an ideology of visibility. The voyeur is defined as the dialectic inequality that presents itself between a female performer—turned subordinate subject of “projection, identification, and (inevitable) objectification” (Miller, 11)—and a male spectator. This inequality cannot be replicated when the female body cannot be staged in a representational manner “without challenging the hegemon[ic paradigm] of patriarchy” (12)

In the capacity of *The Death of A Chief*, the only distinguishable character the male gaze might attempt to impose his values onto is Brutus; he is the only character specifically noted within the cast list as being played by a man. Yet Brutus fears Caesar and is manipulated by Cassius. His rhetoric is spoiled by Antony, and his wife died by fire off-page (*Death*, 419; *Julius Caesar*, 4.3.165-181). Finally, as opposed to facing Antony in battle he had one of his friends hold his sword so he could run onto it (*Death*, 426; *Julius Caesar*, 5.5.55-56). He did not die a dignified death of a warrior in combat, yet could not hold the blade to take his own life either.

Despite the ironic assertions that Brutus “is an Honourable man” (*Death*, 409; *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.91), the all-powerful cis heteropatriarch cannot instill his values upon him. He becomes the abject within the text, in the same way women are typically depicted as in male dominated narratives. In order to “recuperat[e] the feminine ‘other’ from the margins,” Nolan enables “a direct challenge to the masculinist hegemony” by facilitating restrictive “political and theatrical structures” likened to “early modern patriarchy” upon her stand-in for the hegemonic

status quo (Miller, 6). Brutus and in turn, the structural apparatuses that have harmed and forcibly governed Indigenous women for generations, appear as fools. Both plays are less so tragedies befalling Caesar, and moreover depict tragedy after tragedy afflicting Brutus for his betrayal. This disillusionment with the male gaze allows for the reclaimed agency of the text's characters and the intersectional feminist framework. Through the gentle emasculation of the male-object, feminine autocracy pervades all aspects of the adaptation.

To conclude, Yvette Nolan's *The Death of a Chief* is an instrumental piece of Indigenous theatre. Within the greater sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape of the Canadian nation state, the cross-gendering of Caesar, Antony, and Cassius aids in deconstructing the assemblages of colonial power foisted upon Indigenous women. By placing these women in authoritarian positions, they are able to reclaim power vested from them through settler sanctioned genocide, and be placed in positions untouched by the objectification of the male gaze. Through ethnographies of Indigenous customs and rituals, the normative orders and imperial knowledges upheld in Shakespeare's text are better assessed, and stripped of their hegemonic influence.

In contrast, by presenting the one visible male character as the subject of failure within a cyclical, matriarchal driven society, one can realize that the failings of the cis heteropatriarchy are doomed to continue. However, confined within the macroscopic paradigm or framing device of the medicine wheel, it is clear that these failings will come to the detriment of those who occupy the same political, spiritual, liminal space—those being the women engaging in the intersectional challenging of heteropatriarchal values. Nevertheless, the settler state failed to erase Indigenous knowledge and theatre traditions. Within the wheel, and within all time, the women of power within Nolan's text have proven that Indigenous feminism will continue without faltering, beyond the Anglicized conceptions of both death and time.

Works Cited

- Cline, Lauren Eriks. "Audiences Writing Race in Shakespeare Performance." *Shakespeare studies (Columbia)* 47 (2019): 112–116. *ProQuest*, <https://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/audiences-writing-race-shakespeare-performance/docview/2303665935/se-2>
- Knowles, Richard Paul. "Multicultural Text, Intercultural Performance." *Performing the Intercultural City*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, pp. 66-68. Print.
- Mackenzie, Sarah. "Performing 'Indigenous Shakespeare' in Canada: The Tempest and The Death of a Chief." *Shakespeare and Canada: Remembrance of Ourselves*, edited by Irena R. Makaryk and Kathryn Prince, University of Ottawa Press, 2017, pp. 111-121. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n2tv7r.11>
- Miller, Gemma. "Cross-Gender Casting as Feminist Interventions in the Staging of Early Modern Plays." *Journal of international women's studies* 16.1 (2014): pp 4–13. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A413709445/AONE?u=yorku_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=a4c745eb
- Moll, Sorouja. "The Death of a Chief: Translating Shakespeare in Native Theatre" *Translation Effects: The Shaping of Modern Canadian Culture*, edited by Mezei, Kathy, et al. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014, pp. 382-396. *Scholar's Portal*, <https://books-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks3/umcgill-queen/2014-12-09/1/9780773590588#page=399>
- Nolan, Yvette and MacKinnon, Kennedy. *Death of a Chief. The Shakespeare's Mine: Adapting Shakespeare in Anglophone Canada*, edited by Ric Knowles. Playwrights Canada Press, 2009, pp. 385-427.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, from *The Folger Shakespeare*. Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. *Folger Shakespeare Library*, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/julius-caesar/>