

1 Persistence of Violent Delights: “It’s All the Same Bullshit Again”

What’s Theatre Good For, Anyway?

Some years ago, I saw Professor J. Edward Chamberlain (now emeritus, English/comparative studies, University of Toronto) read from *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* During the discussion that followed, Professor Chamberlain passionately asserted that the purpose and function of story is to help us stand and withstand in the face of death (Chamberlain), and this assertion resonated deeply with me, as a mixed-blood, Anishinaabe-Ashkenazi woman fattened upon story when food was scarce. And through the myriad accounts of Creation upon which I have been feasted, I have come to learn that for the Anishinaabeg, the whole of the ongoing creation is a web of story. Each of our lives is a fragile filament in the web. We live forever within story because we have been woven into it. Our tellings of that story on the page, on birchbark, through earthworks, or through our corporeal instruments reflect and affirm this knowledge. With each new telling, we invoke (literally *re-present*) those who continue to live in the story although their sojourn on this earth has been concluded. We recall/re-call them to the present moment because our need to see them is so great. We need to remind ourselves that human life does matter, that human actions do resonate – that we do indeed continue on and that our struggles are not in vain. Indigenous methodologies reflect this understanding. Indigenous reception of the story reminds us of this teaching. The “actors” become subjects of their telling; mimesis is not an art they need to master, a goal they need to pursue; it nests within their bones, awakened by story to activate breath, muscle, tendon. It courses through their blood. And if they weave the story respectfully, the nerve centres of their witnesses respond – tugging at our limbs, prompting us to retrace ancestral steps. As ancient pathways are recharted and

ancient portals opened, a profound transformation – of teller and witness – ensues in the moment of the retelling.

This is the work of re-worlding that so many Indigenous artists (i.e., Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica, Yves Sioui Durand, Jani Lauzon, and Debajehmujig Storytellers, to name a very few) have undertaken. This is the work that concerned the Miguel sisters in 1976 and that has continued for almost half a century with their Spiderwoman Theater. This is work that summons, for a moment, our dead into the circle and that bids them dance. It is work that asserts life in the face of death, that enlists hope to smother despair, that re-members the dismembered and connects the fragments of a dislocated sense of self and personal history. It is work, which knits into our bones the certainty that our Indigenous ancestors dreamed our coming and that they rejoice because we are still here. This is work that reaches back into a timeless Indigenous imaginary to recover traditional epistemologies and practices and to distil from these the aesthetic principles through which to craft communal healing.

Yet, despite all the good work that has been accomplished, doubt slithers to the surface to whisper its unsettling questions – questions that demand address: What precisely do we change as we tell our stories and perform our histories? What shifts do we effect in our own lived reality or the lived reality of our descendants through this dedication of breath and corporeal effort? If the sum of our existence and the ways in which we express existence amount to no more than the stories we have chosen to believe, tell, and retell (King 2), what are we? What do we become? What changes? What remains unchanged? What are the stories we need to be telling – to and of ourselves, to and of our children, to and of each other?

As I write this, it has been some years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its 2015 Final Report on the Indian Residential School System with its 94 Calls to Action. Across the nation, educational institutions, government offices, and public theatres have fallen over themselves to publicly declare their commitment to redress past misdeeds and contribute to the establishment of right relations between the settler populations they represent and the Indigenous Peoples whose lands they occupy. And yet, 2016 saw the publication of an Angus Reid poll that indicated that while most Canadians were happy to support the launch of a national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), the same respondents also voiced their belief that such an inquiry would change absolutely nothing (Global News, “Most Canadians”). This is baffling. The respondents to this poll were advocating for a cosmetically correct

action: They expressed no qualms about investing hundreds of thousands of tax dollars (dollars that could have gone directly to an Indigenous community or to an urban organization that serves Indigenous people) in an investigation that *they believed would bring no justice and that they believed would do nothing* to help stop the slaughter of Indigenous women and girls. For these Canadians, the *gesture* was enough. Its effects held little interest. Two years later, in February 2018, a Canadian jury delivered a “not guilty” verdict in the case of a Saskatchewan farmer who shot and killed a Cree youth – Colten Boushie.¹ And not two weeks after that, a second jury vindicated the man accused of the brutal murder of a 15-year-old Anishinaabe girl.²

In 2019, Canada’s prime minister *mocked* a young Indigenous woman who had raised and paid \$1,500 to attend a fundraising dinner at which

1 In 2016, five Indigenous youths (three young men and two young women) drove onto a Saskatchewan farm when a tire on their vehicle went flat. Were they seeking help, or were they, as the farm’s owner Gerald Stanley maintained, about to commit robbery? Gerald Stanley and his son met these youth with loaded guns, attacking their compromised vehicle with a hammer. The encounter ended with the death of Colten Boushie, a 22-year-old Cree man whom Gerald Stanley shot in the back of the head (Austen). Upon Boushie’s death, seven RCMP officers were dispatched to the home of his mother Debbie Baptiste to inform the family of this tragedy. Accounts of this visit to Baptiste’s home (by the family and noted in the Final Report of the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission) do not indicate that the announcement of Boushie’s death was delivered with any note of compassion or accompanied by any expressions of condolence. Instead, the distraught mother’s home was surrounded by armed officers. She was repeatedly asked if she had been drinking and told to “get it together.” Although no warrant had been obtained, officers conducted a thorough search of the Baptiste home. Less thorough, it seems, was their investigation into the shooting of Colten Boushie: The failure to maintain the integrity of the crime scene; laxity on the part of forensic investigators; and failure to instruct the accused and his son to not discuss the case before being independently examined are some of the concerns noted in a 2018 report published by the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP (see, for example, Civilian Review and Complaints Commission Findings 25, 26, 37, 9, and 13). Throughout his trial, Stanley maintained that he was in fear for his property and that his close-range shooting of Colten Boushie had been the result of an accidental discharge. Given the lack of diligence in the investigation of the shooting of an Indigenous person, the failure to hold his killer to any account whatsoever, and the callous treatment of an Indigenous woman overcome by shock and grief upon hearing the news of her son’s death, is it any wonder that Indigenous people harbour such distrust of law enforcement officials and the system these officials have been tasked with upholding?

2 Despite being wrapped in plastic and fabric and being weighted down with rocks, the lifeless body of Tina Fontaine (of Sagkeeng First Nation) was found floating in the Red River on 17 August 2014. Four years later, the man accused of her murder, Raymond Cormier (53), was acquitted on the grounds of a lack of evidence. The

he was speaking. “Mr. Trudeau, people at Grassy Narrows are suffering from mercury poisoning,” she told him. “You committed [yourself and the nation you represent] to addressing this crisis” (Global News, “Trudeau”). Amid laughter and applause from his supporters, Canada’s leading man answered this witness to a nation’s suffering with a light-hearted quip completely devoid of empathy – a jest, more suited to the court of the last royal family of France than a “progressive,” elected leader of a twenty-first century “democratic” nation. “*Thank you for your donation,*” he responded. Thank you for your donation, indeed!

Later that year, the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was released. In his initial statement of response to the report, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised that Canada would break its historic inertia and begin to act to protect the rights and well-being of Indigenous girls and women and of 2SLGBTQIA people. At a subsequent gathering of women – likely, responding to criticism for his refusal to use the word “genocide”³ in

Crown has not appealed his acquittal; nor have any other suspects been investigated or apprehended. Fontaine and Boushie are only two of thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Children for whom justice (from within Canada’s legal system) is not and will not be forthcoming.

- 3 Throughout this book, I use the terms “genocide” and “genocidal” to characterize the actions and intentions of the European settlers and their governing bodies who eventually claimed “ownership” of Turtle Island (North America). An early reviewer of this book has challenged my use of these terms and has suggested that I define these terms as I intend them to be understood and to offer historical and/or statistical proofs. To build this case with the rigour and gravitas that should be accorded it would require a series of books and/or reports – many of which have already been published and may easily be accessed. That said, I offer my own understanding and some very scant examples for those readers who may be discomfited by my characterization of historic and ongoing relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples within these lands now known as “Canada.”

My understanding and use of the terms genocide and genocidal accord with Article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (PPCG) adopted by the United Nations on 9 December 1948. Article II states that acts perpetrated with the intent to significantly reduce the numbers of or to entirely eradicate an ethnic group are genocidal acts. Such acts include the deliberate murder of individuals from the targeted group; any act that causes “serious bodily or mental harm” to members of the targeted group; imposing untenable living conditions on the group, which have deleterious effect(s) on its members (bodily and otherwise); enacting measures to prevent or significantly reduce births within the group; and removing children from the group by force to place them with another group (see National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered 51).

An intentional series of violent actions and covertly violent legislative policies enacted upon Indigenous Peoples across this continent through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the purposes of “extirpation,” “elimination,” and

“assimilation,” may be traced by reviewing the Indian Act (1876) and its various amendments throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Myriad published historical accounts (too numerous to cite here) may be easily accessed. These speak to massacre, to the deliberation fomentation of distrust and division among Indigenous nations, to treaty negotiations undertaken with an intent to placate and deceive, and to a deliberate and long-sustained campaign to legislatively effect the removal of Indigenous Peoples (as distinct political bodies) from these shores.

The systematic and ongoing destruction of land and waters that once sustained Indigenous nations across these territories; the relegation of Indigenous Peoples to reserves where they would be dependent upon insufficient (and often withheld) treaty payments of basic foodstuffs, tolerable living conditions, and monies; the Residential School System (1884–1996) in Canada by means of which Indigenous children were removed from their homes (by force or coercion) and set apart from their communities during their formative years have been well documented. And this knowledge is readily available to all who wish to better understand this fraught history. One has only to review the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (freely available online) to comprehend the significant damage (physical, emotional, and spiritual) that was visited upon Indigenous children and to further comprehend the trauma suffered by the generations of children and grandchildren who were either snatched up by these institutions themselves or who were raised by survivors.

As Canada’s Residential School System began to crumble, Indigenous children were removed from their homes by state care workers and adopted into non-Indigenous homes in the 1960s and the decades that followed. The Sixties Scoop (as this period is called) has evolved into the “Millennium scoop.” Now, Indigenous children who have been removed from their homes and communities are being placed into state-run institutions and long-term foster care at an increasing rate (Sinclair 68). Such institutions are subject to little oversight, and too many of these young people, placed into the “care” of predators, experience unendurable abuse, exploitation, and sexual trafficking (see, for instance, Russell, Jarvis, and Wroebel). In 2021, Statistics Canada reported that only 8 per cent of children across Canada age 14 and under were Indigenous. Yet, in the same year, 53.8 per cent of all children in care within that age group were Indigenous (Needham).

Further, a concerted effort to prevent the birth of Indigenous children has continued from the 1930s into today. For more information about the ongoing forced sterilization of Indigenous women in Canada, please refer to “Indigenous Women – Forced Sterilization Saskatchewan, Canada,” a fact sheet published by the Saskatoon office of Maurice Law; Yvonne Boyer and Dr. Judith Bartlett’s “External Review: Tubal Ligation in the Saskatoon Health Region: The Lived Experience of Aboriginal Women”; *Sacred Bundles Unborn* by Mercredi and Fire Keepers Collective; Maria Cheng’s “Indigenous Women in Canada Forcibly Sterilized Decades after Other Rich Countries Stopped”; and the 2022 Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights.

Across the globe there are many Truth/Truth and Reconciliation/Transitional Justice Commissions, and more are being established each year. For each nation within which she rages, genocide wears a different face. She may move carefully and surreptitiously over decades or centuries; she may descend in a lightning strike to devastate a people unashamedly and with brutal rapidity. Her bundle of tactics is immense and varied. My intent here and throughout this book is neither to conflate genocidal events that have historically occurred and that currently occur around the world or

connection with the MMIWG crisis – he observed that the *authors* of the report had “found that the tragic violence that Indigenous women and girls have experienced *amounts to genocide*” (Global News with Connolly, emphasis mine). Questions around how *he* (as this nation’s leader and representative) might characterize the violence *his* nation has visited upon Indigenous bodies, minds, and spirits for the past 150 years remain unanswered.

Despite the Juno Award-winning Indigenous musicians; despite a mountain of Indigenous scholarship, poetry, fiction, film, visual art, theatre, drama, and performance art; despite blockades and occupations; despite declarations by activists; despite all of the stories that have been communicated via myriad media, the living Indigenous body with its immediate concerns has been too often rendered and remains even now, largely, invisible: Entire communities living for generations without potable water in one of the most water-rich land bases on this earth. We are telling these stories, but what changes? Our young men spirited away in the night in police vehicles, stripped of their boots and winter jackets, and left to die on the frozen outskirts of some city or town. We are telling these stories, but what changes? Our girls and women taken, consumed, and discarded without ceremony, without leave-taking, in ditches, over highways, under farmers’ fields, in water. We are telling these stories, but what changes? Our children spirited from their families to be murdered (in body or spirit) by the agents of the state who have been entrusted with their care. We are telling these stories, but who is listening? What changes?

As Monique Mojica asks, “What is it we have to do to be seen?” (Personal Communication 2017). How does the Indigenous body, disrobing to reveal the violence perpetrated upon it, reconfigure colonial sites of viewing – our contemporary *theatrons*? How do we reflect back to our viewers their own *visibility*; their own *complicity* within a system of oppression that, by turns, punishes, spectacularizes, and disappears Indigenous bodies; their *accountability* to the living Indigenous body; and their *responsibility* to respond to that body as witness, not consumer? *What do we have to do to be seen and not eaten?*

to weigh one genocide against another. Nor is it my place here to comprehensively document and enumerate the crimes committed against Indigenous Peoples on this continent and worldwide. My intent is simply this: to discuss the aesthetic strategies of several Indigenous theatre workers who have survived the colonial onslaught on these shores and who have dedicated their lives and art to teaching the rest of us how we might do the same.

Story-ing the Human Being

Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz has stated, “We are not born as human beings; we have to be made into human beings through tradition and ceremony” (“Land”). Teachings from Indigenous nations across the globe identify the pursuit of a way of living that ensures that all created life – with which we interact and upon which we are dependent for the continuance of our own lives – lives well as the primary goal of all human action, interaction, and thought. And a primary function of every ceremonial act – be that the act of storytelling, hunting, planting, gathering, dancing, singing, speaking ancestral languages, praying, or creating – has always been to gradually *transform the individual from a “random,” animated carbon formation into a fully developed human being*, an integral “actor” invested with meaning and purpose, who would walk softly on the earth and work collaboratively to ensure the sustenance of a healthy, productive life for every member of his/her immediate community and the greater community to which we all belong. The process of becoming, then, is inextricably bound up in and beholden to story. After all, as Kiowa novelist and scholar N. Scott Momaday so poignantly reminds us, “*Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves*” (103, emphasis added). Hence, the right to imagine or to recover traditional imaginings of self, the right to control the story, and the right to shape the vessel that contains Indigenous life are central to the ongoing struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. Indeed, the struggle for control over story is as crucial and immediate, in this century, as the struggle for lands and self-government (Weaver 33). Within myriad Indigenous societies globally, story has long been a primary mechanism within the larger matrix of teaching and learning (Cajete, *Igniting* 54). Other mechanisms around which this matrix is composed include experiential learning, ceremony (initiation), dreaming, apprenticeship, and creative synthesis (artistic expression) (Cajete, *Igniting* 55). But it is upon story that these are carried and through story that they are articulated. Story, then, is a container for knowledge, a vehicle of its transmission, and indeed a site of its production. And the goal of education – the goal of the acquisition, preservation, and transmission of knowledge – for Indigenous Peoples has historically been bound up in the search for life (or a way of living appropriately) through an ontological interrogation of individual *selfhood*. The *self* is understood as an integral component of a complex social mechanism, which is itself an integral component of the larger matrix of Creation (Cajete, *Igniting* 54). It follows, then, that if story contains and communicates knowledge, and if the highest form of knowledge is *self*-knowledge and if story is also a site of knowledge

production, then it is within and by means of story that identity may be re-constituted and/or refashioned: Within story, individuals, communities, and nations could conceivably imagine (or re-imagine) themselves into being. And story, at the end of the day, is the archive of a life well lived, or of a misspent existence. The life we “write” for ourselves will become the story that will be written about us and told by the generations that follow us. The process of creating story, then, is not simply the process of “telling” life; it is the process of *doing* it.

Doing, not being, is the cornerstone of human essence. And that essence can only be discovered and fully realized within the context of active relationship to our communities. Such relationships, however, risk undergoing subtle but dangerous transformations if we unwittingly integrate the Western concept of mimesis (in its oral or written manifestations) into our own consciousness as we react to non-Indigenous analyses and disseminations of Traditional Stories. For the Western reader/viewer (informed by Aristotle’s reading of the ceremonial performatives of his Attic ancestors), mimesis constitutes an imitation of an action either fictive or finished. But here on Turtle Island, long before contact, oral transmission was a key component in the greater ceremonial matrix (Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 100); so, it remains.

Engagement in performative or mimetic acts for ceremonial purposes *recreates* action, brings it into the here and now, and effectively transforms the “players” and the world they inhabit in that moment of their re-creation: *Time after time, within each new telling, Nanabozho breathes on a clot of damp earth, and in each new exhalation, the lands and waters that sustain us are made anew.*

Many of the foundational stories that belong to tribal Oral Traditions have been written or are narrated in the third person. And, as Anishinaabe scholar David Treuer observes, this is certainly true of the cycle of stories, which chronicle the life and doings of the Anishinaabe transformer Elder Brother/Nanabozho/Wenabozho/Nanabush (54). So, it is very likely that this is how we will experience these stories if our only point of contact with them is on the page or in the lecture hall. But the Oral Tradition in which these stories were meant to unfold does not simply affect the transmission of words and ideas, which hover in the space between speaker and listener existing independently of either. Rather, the story takes possession of the storyteller who gives it *body*, moving fluidly through the encounter, assuming a new shape with each new moment to become the vessel through which the original actors again live to recreate historical events. In the moment of its telling, this third person narrative simultaneously communicates and comments upon historical actors and their doings even as the storyteller enters the

story to become protagonist, antagonist, and supernumerary acting in the here and now (see Manossa 126–7).

The stories that chronicle the process of becoming fully human in an Anishinaabe sense – that is, the process that transforms an isolate mass of carbon molecules, nerve endings, and warring impulses into a community member working creatively with the collective for the general good – are key pedagogical tools in which personal investment and active engagement, on the part of the learners, are required if they are to remain efficacious catalysts of transformation, healing, and development for tribal individuals. Always, we should remind ourselves that when we encounter characters on the page, they must not be read as “the thing itself.” To do so robs these stories of their efficacy by stripping our culture heroes of their colour and corporeality, thereby reducing them to bloodless spectres forever dancing in a one-dimensional universe. To ensure that the timeless beings on whom the self-actualization of the tribal individual and body politic rests are not diminished to what Anishinaabe novelist and scholar Gerald Vizenor has termed “simulation[s] of survivance” (78), we might foster and cultivate an organic understanding of the textual archive as a notation of kinetic and oral movement – a series of *blocking notes*, as it were – that exist not merely to be read or said but to be done that *we* might become the thing itself and not the stuff of alien imagination.

Gerald Vizenor explains that survivance denotes “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (vii). Survivance stories, then, contain the lives and recount the doings of living human beings who are profoundly aware of and connected to their histories without being somehow “frozen in a time before.” Histories, languages, and lifeways evolve and develop with each successive generation of living cultures, and so it is with the Indigenous Peoples who continue to survive despite a centuries-old onslaught of colonization and conquest.

I liken Vizenor’s “simulation of survivance” to Poundmaker Cree playwright/director Floyd Favel’s concept of the “artificial tree” on stage (Favel Starr 71). With every simulation of survivance, we see a carefully arranged picture of nobility, stoicism, courage, spiritual power, “savagery,” or resistance. Such representations have been so curated because “America embraces romantically not the absence of real people, but the simulated spiritual presence of the Indian in a kind of New Age movement” (Vizenor qtd. in Isernhagen 83). Such simulations on the page, on the stage, or echoing for posterity in a digital universe constitute the erasure of actual life and organic growth and infuse the national imagination with a romantic longing for what no longer exists

(if it ever did) coupled with an aversion to the contemporary survivors of the colonial project who do not reflect the romantic “purity” of their shadowy representatives.

Where Vizenor’s “simulation of survivance” denotes the *literary* reduction and erasure of living humans, Favel’s “artificial tree” denotes the reduction and erasure of the spiritual essence of the humans themselves. A contemporary theatre practitioner, Favel regards contemporary theatre as “the younger brother of tradition” (Favel, “Theatre” 30). Since 1991, he has laboured to draw upon Indigenous Knowledge Systems, cosmologies, and ceremonial praxis to develop a methodology, which is dramaturgically and performatively workable. He does not represent “realistic” fragments of actual ceremonial performatives (oratory, kinetic performance, or opsis) on the public stage. This, he warns us, is an empty exercise. The work emerging from such endeavours will ultimately lack an essential centre – a spiritual core. This empty, spiritless work is, for Favel, an “artificial tree.” And artificial trees can be deadly.

Favel rejects material mimesis, favouring instead metaphysical mimesis. He seeks to draw upon that “animating spirit,” to infuse his theatrical works with that spirit, to place that invisible spirit centre stage, to communicate that spirit to his audiences, and to thereby nourish them from “the source of the river of our cultures, country and ourselves” (Favel Starr 72). Throughout this book, we will encounter Floyd Favel and his investigations into Native Performance Culture within which he has developed long-standing partnerships with such artists as Muriel Miguel and her niece Monique Mojica. However, for the moment, it may prove instructive to illustrate just *exactly* what an “artificial tree” or a “simulation of survivance” might look like and the dangers this presents for storyteller (fabricator) and witness alike.

Some years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate course on Indigenous Theatre in North America. Generally, non-Indigenous students outnumber Indigenous students in the course (which is largely a reflection of the Academy’s demographic as a whole). Hence, students were invited to present something to the class that fulfilled the mandate (for the presenter) of “Indigenous drama” – defined within this diverse context as an expression of each student’s personal landscape. Having studied various instances of contemporary Indigenous theatre as vehicles of healing, facilitators of pedagogy, community-unifiers, transmitters of oral history and language, or avenues of re-writing and re-righting distorted histories and re-appropriating sites of misappropriation, presenters were invited to explore like possibilities in pieces of their own making, arising out of their own personal histories, languages, and cultures, for specific audiences of their own

imagining (mixed audiences, children, senior citizens, or individuals from particular communities), which their “vehicles” would be designed to affect in specific ways.

One non-Indigenous student chose to create a “restorative justice circle,” in which she revealed herself to be a victim of domestic, childhood sexual abuse. In the past, many deeply personal revelations have emerged from within such presentations within the context of profound trust, a strong super-objective, and the application of artistic process to transform personal struggle into hope, healing, inspiration, valuable life lessons, or community-unifiers. However, this student’s presentation was different from those aforementioned, in that it *explicitly imitated* a “justice circle” in which the audience (comprised of myself and of fellow students in the course) was *compelled* to participate. This student explained that she had heard about such justice circles from a therapist with whom she was working through her abuse. Her therapist had explained that victim, perpetrator, those immediately affected, and those less immediately affected by a particular breach would form a circle “so healing could occur within the entire community.”

Although I was very sensible of the profound trust and courage this student was demonstrating by reaching out and “showing her throat,” as it were, to her classmates, and although I felt deep sympathy for her and profound outrage on her behalf, I was discomfited by the exercise. “Why?” I wondered. “Am I so horrified by the notion of theatre as a vehicle for the artists’ healing as well as for audience healing? Am I the one to judge when and where she should make her disclosures, and to whom? Why do I (a woman who has been abused herself) feel so repelled, so violated? Is her disclosure somehow violating me? Is she endangering her classmates?”

When the exercise was over, many of her classmates hugged her and thanked her for her trust. Others, however, did not. Interestingly, the “huggers” were largely male, and all were non-Indigenous. Those who sought to politely avoid her were female. I was mystified. Upon reading the final journals for this class and reading the students’ responses to the presentations of their colleagues, I was interested to come upon entries (written by females who also revealed themselves to be victims of domestic childhood sexual abuse) that expressed the exact ambivalences I had felt and that expressed the same guilt I had felt for those ambivalences. “What kind of person am I?” they asked. I began to wonder anew. What kind of people were they? What kind of person am I? What was wrong or broken or lacking within us that we could not reach out and unreservedly embrace this young woman, her exercise, and the trust she had demonstrated?

Gradually, I began to apprehend that the “wrongness” lay neither with them nor with me; it lay within the “justice circle” that had been fabricated. The shape and function of a particular communal rite of restoration had been staged. And we were, by this final class, a community of sorts. But this could never be a justice circle: The perpetrator was absent; the family, common to both victim and perpetrator, was absent; others who were linked to this family or who had been affected by this terrible violation were absent; the Elders who would have conducted such a circle (at the time, within a location, and in the manner *they* deemed most appropriate) were absent. *And the community of supportive individuals who formed this circle had been co-opted into a collective, complicit fabrication of an “artificial tree” from which not healing, nor justice, nor restoration were to be had.* This student’s choice to disclose her terrible secret was not the violation. The violation lay in her choice of “container” – in her attempt to literally recreate a frame of which she had no personal knowledge, to which she had no personal connection, and in which she had no personal experience. More troubling, this frame has been carefully constructed by peoples who are not her own and finds its foundation upon a world view of which she has only rudimentary knowledge, to which she had no personal connection and in which she had no personal experience. In attempting to produce a materially mimetic experience (based upon an *oral simulation* of the “Native” model of restorative justice), this student produced a stunted shadow of a shadow and effectively eradicated the affective essence around which the original event has been constructed.

For colonized peoples around the world, the process of healthy self-actualization has been interrupted. Forced relocations, confinement to reservations, re-education in the residential schools and in the churches, and restrictive legislative policies have prohibited the peoples’ speaking and subverted our patent and metaphysical doings. Ironically, this series of colonial interventions designed to re-order the world by re-forming its myriad peoples into second-rate shadows of the colonizing superman has affected little more than New World disorder. We speak his language, adopt his diet, and live in accordance with his laws, but the transformation is incomplete: As Homi Bhabha has observed, we are little more than “the effect[s] of a flawed mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (125). Generations of Indigenous children were forcibly taught the English language not that they might communicate as equals with the settlers but that they might forget their own languages and that they might understand the orders and the dictates of those whom they were being trained to serve. Indigenous

girls were rigorously trained in English domestic arts (cooking, serving, polishing, cleaning, etc.) not to set up their own households in homes of their own but to serve in the households of settler women. Generations of Indigenous people graduated from residential schools as liminal people speaking, dressing, and trained to “do life” in accordance with settler tastes and customs;⁴ like the South Asian colonial subjects, they were being shaped into a “class of interpreters between [the English] and the millions whom [the English] govern[ed] – a class of persons [Indigenous] in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay qtd. in Bhabha 124). And just as it was for the South Asian colonial subject, it must have oft-times felt to those ancestors that “[they] pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing [themselves] for life” (Naipaul 416). Mortal shades cut off from their languages, communities, histories, knowledge systems and lifeways – from the very foundations of their humanness and from the processes of ontological investigation and self-actualization – and struggling against the hegemonic denial of their humanity, they nonetheless struggled to retain and transmit their organic understanding of that humanity and fragments of those foundations from which successive generations might begin to build themselves anew.

In the struggle to recover the Indigenous self, all strategies – be they the reclamation and transmission of ancestral languages; the assertion of intellectual property rights; the assertion of land and Treaty Rights; the generation and control of artistic representations of our peoples; the reimplementing of ceremonial praxis; or the recovery and reinstitution of traditional, social, jurisprudential, and political infrastructures – ultimately require us to negotiate our way through that interrupted process of *becoming*. At every level, the project of re-Indigenization is a creative project through which to transform the chaos that defines a colonized existence; it is a project, which requires us to remember, re-member, recover, and devise effective methods with which to dramatize the ordered existence we imagine for our children and grandchildren. This is a key challenge that has become an integral part of the creative process for Indigenous writers and artists seeking to serve their communities in a meaningful way through their works.

4 I borrow the expression “do life” from Althea Prince (260) whose commitment to participatory action and interaction as a reader, witness, writer, and speaker infuses her work and provides a vital (and commonsensical) model for all scholars who labour to contribute to the project of decolonization (see Prince 259–68).

Spiderwoman Theater: Identity, Survivance and Communitism in Action

Spiderwoman Theater began in 1976 and has gone on to become the longest-running Indigenous theatre company and the longest-running feminist troupe in North America. The story of Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel (the three Guna-Rappahannock sisters who, with Lois Weaver, founded the company) is, in itself, an epic saga of becoming. And the formation of Spiderwoman Theater constitutes a historic act of survivance. Indeed, it may be read as an organic and necessary phase in the trio's process of becoming – first, separately as women, as artists, as wives and mothers, as political entities and feminists; finally, communally as sisters, urban matriarchs, community builders, and Guna-Rappahannock artists in America.⁵ The company not only stands as testament to survivance but also has served as the vehicle of survivance for its founders, guest artists, and audiences. Its service to myriad Indigenous (and non-Indigenous feminist) communities is a manifestation emerging from the performances, which have remembered, united, affected, and empowered witnesses the world over. And this service has been vigorously realized within the Miguel sisters' projects of activism, outreach, community building, and artistic training – projects, which have affected and galvanized Indigenous creative efficacy, presence and, indeed, survivance for nearly five decades.

Jace Weaver has identified “a quest for identity” as a common preoccupation that manifests itself in contemporary Indigenous writing (26–7). As a key factor of survivance, then, the location of identity requires action that remembers and affirms who we are and “that we are” and that simultaneously frees us from the lie of who we are *not* – a lie, which divides, destabilizes, and debilitates us. The “quest for identity” as an act of survivance may be located in the foundational questions that have engendered Spiderwoman's dramatic works, in the aesthetic models that characterize these works, and in the dramaturgical and performative process that underpins them. Meanwhile, an examination of the founding of *the company* provides a map to the generations of young

5 Although the Miguel sisters are also Rappahannock on their mother's side, they ultimately recovered and asserted their Guna heritage throughout their works. Their mother's strong Christianity (and the conflicts this created), her emotional withdrawal from her daughters, their frequent exposure to their father's culture and his uninhibited expression thereof will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Taken together, all these factors may help to explain why it is that Spiderwoman's works ultimately anchor themselves and their creatrices to their Guna inheritance.

Indigenous artists yet unborn: In itself, this history constitutes a specifically Indigenous “morality play” around the true nature of identity in an Indigenous context; it speaks to Indigenous survivance even as it distinguishes the Indigenous quest for self-knowledge from “heroic” individualism, romantic isolation, and/or wrong-headed struggles for dominance that divide and destroy.

The identity that contemporary Indigenous Peoples seek to recuperate is an identity that traditionally has had to be located within the context of community: Individuals found meaning and identified their role within Creation by discovering the “self in society” as opposed to the “self and society” (Weaver 39). Hence, in the struggle to create and maintain a literature of survivance, which properly locates and represents Indigeneity, the artist does not undertake a solitary quest. This quest is undertaken as a “communitist” project – that is to say, it is an activist intervention undertaken with the survival of community as its sole aim (see Weaver 43). Indeed, Weaver’s theoretical lens “communitist” has been engendered through the fusion of the terms “activist” and “community” to indicate that action is required and that the impulse of this action, its affect and effects must grow out of and express a proactive commitment to the continuance of an Indigenous community (see Weaver 43) if it is to effect survivance for the individual artists and for those to, of, and for whom they speak.

Once upon a time, three little brown girls dreamed of escape from the racism that surrounded them in their Brooklyn neighbourhood, from poverty that confined and defined them, and from domestic violence that threatened their peace:

GLORIA: When I grow up, I’m going to marry a man from far away across the sea AND he’s going to take me away from all this and I’ll never come back again.

LISA: I’m going to marry a rich man and he’s going to give me things like a fur coat and a refrigerator full of food.

MURIEL: I’m going to get me an apartment. (Spiderwoman, “Sun” 308)

Each of these sisters had sought escape in the exercise of her creative talents. As each matured, she separated herself from her sisters and her family home and sought her place in an artistic community wherein she might develop and utilize her voice – wherein she might come to self-knowledge and reveal and assert her presence. Ultimately, while each sister began by seeking her identity as an artist apart from the others, it was only within their work together within a collaborative venture spanning almost five decades that each was able finally to come into her

self: "Storytelling is the way you feel and know where you are within your family, your clan, your tribal affiliations, and from there into the history of how you fit into the world. Storytelling starts at the kitchen table, on your parent's lap, on your aunt's and uncle's laps" (M. Miguel qtd. in Haugo, "Weaving" 225).

In the development of a dramaturgical process through which they were able to pose questions, to issue challenges, to answer each other with stories (often opposing versions/visions of a single event) and to weave those stories into a unified design, they were at last able to locate themselves in relationship – as sisters; daughters; granddaughters; Guna-Rappahannock women; wives; mothers; lovers; aunties; grandmothers; healers; teachers; activists; diasporic survivors; and preservers and transmitters of oral histories extending beyond self, family, community, and nation. In reuniting to revisit, re-member, and reconfigure the story that contained their lives, the Miguel sisters found themselves by finding their rightful place within an orbiculate superstructure through which we are all connected within the larger community of all that has been created: "There's [sic] always circles upon circles upon circles," Muriel Miguel asserts. "And that's how Spiderwoman approaches theater, through circles upon circles upon circles" (Haugo, "Weaving" 225).

The story of Spiderwoman Theater offers a window into a contemporary, urban context of an ancient process of becoming. It is a story that is powered by the generations that precede its principal actors and that provides a power source for the generations that follow them. This book, which attempts to disseminate their story, also attempts to disseminate their *process* – a process, which imagines into being, a pathway to becoming. The story I hope to transcribe here is not simply the story of "a life in art"; *it is the story of an art well lived*. This is a story of three women who severally sought to transcend personal circumstance, family history, and the external limitations imposed upon them, as American Indians and as women.⁶ This is a story of three women

6 Throughout this work, I will refer to the three founding members of Spiderwoman Theater and to their family members as they have chosen to refer to themselves. When speaking of themselves or of other Indigenous people in terms of general ethnicity, they often use the term "Indian" or "American Indian." They also use the term "Native" – particularly when they are speaking with interviewers who are speaking with them from the territories commonly referred to as "Canada." Although it is crucial that this work addresses and refers to their specific Guna and Rappahannock nations, it is also crucial to note that their art and activism speak to and work for a pan-Indigenous community. Since its inception, Spiderwoman Theater has been called to perform for, empower, and partner with Indigenous peoples from Alaska to New Zealand and everywhere in between.

who severally sought to transcend the denial of Indigenous humanity and suppression of Indigenous and female voices by the colonial and patriarchal forces that have governed this continent for more than two centuries by gaining entrance into its paradoxically exclusive margins – the artists’ training grounds – and forcefully asserting their individual lives in art. As each sought to discover, affirm, and assert her own humanity, she found her way back to her sisters, her family, her clan, her community, her nation. She came to know and to occupy her rightful place within the larger story. This is a story of three women who sought to find their unique and separate lives in art, and who instead found their art in community. This is the story of three American Indian women who imagined themselves as artists and of three artists who, in the exercise of their life’s work, found a way to imagine themselves as Guna-Rappahannock women and to show other First Peoples who have been disaffected by separation, loss, self-hatred, and forgetfulness, how we may do the same.

Communitism and “Critical Generosity” as Pedagogical Models and Research Methodology

As a young urban woman of mixed ancestry (Anishinaabe-Ashkenazi), I began to find myself in the stories that the Miguel sisters publicly shared, in their powerful performances, and in the Storyweaving Workshops facilitated by Muriel Miguel and her niece Monique Mojica. Their works gathered me into a community of active witnesses: Their stories intersected with ours; ours, with each other’s, and the threads that bound individual to community manifested themselves within the theatrical event. As I began to perceive the intersections, those commonalities of experience that connected each Indigenous individual in the theatre on a given night to others – present or absent, vocal or silent, living, dead, or yet to be – I began to discover and to accept my responsibility to the stories and to those who live within them. With such a sense of connection and responsibility came the realization of my own “self in community.”

As a theatre practitioner, I sought to learn from them that I might share with others what they have given me. As a scholar, within this work, I seek not only to discuss the works and life’s work of Spiderwoman Theater as communitist projects, but also to create a communitist project of my own. I hope that this endeavour will work to tighten the weave in the fabric of a growing and vibrant community of Indigenous culture workers insofar as it encourages our artists to document aesthetic process and to come together to discuss, exchange,

and develop methodologies based on specific objectives pertaining to specific communities for and with which artists wish to create. As well, it is crucial that my own process (research) and performance (archived/published document) are undertaken and realized within a communitist model. I regard the Miguel sisters and their daughters, Monique Mojica and Murielle Borst-Tarrant, as *research partners* as opposed to research “subjects,” and I undertake this quest to comprehend, analyse, and record a body of Indigenous Knowledge as an Indigenous woman in partnership with other Indigenous women who have held, developed, and shared this knowledge over several generations.

Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Marlene Brant Castellano reminds us, “The ultimate test of the validity of knowledge is whether it enhances the capacity of the people to live well” (33). The knowledge these artists hold has already been tested on the stage, on the page, in workshops, studios, and sharing circles. They have used their knowledge to enhance the lives of Indigenous people globally, and this will be discussed and demonstrated at length throughout this work. The questions remain: How can I ensure that my own work “passes the validity test?” What must I do to not only honour but also to reciprocate the myriad gifts these Elders, teachers, and artists have given so freely? Partnership, after all, necessitates reciprocity.

The late Anishinaabe Elder Art Solomon often utilized the image of fire as a metaphor for Minobimaatisiwin (the way of living well within the Creation), which is the body and purpose of Anishinaabe Knowledge. As we seek to discover identity – our own meaning and purpose – we must sift through the embers of a fire that has been all but smothered by the forces of colonization (see Castellano 25). But sifting through embers is perforce slow, painstaking work. Stir too vigorously and a conflagration may spring to life. Sift with too heavy a hand, and the fire might be forever extinguished. Mix it up too rapidly and crucial sparks may be overlooked or even lost.

In November 2006, I was driving Muriel Miguel back to her residence from one of a series of workshops she was facilitating at the University of Toronto’s Graduate Centre for Study of Drama.⁷ During the drive, I asked her to comment upon something I had read about her former colleagues in *Split Britches*. The conversation began to turn towards academic scholarship in theatre in general. Laughing heartily, she offered a rueful observation around her encounters with articles,

7 Since 2011, the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto has been known as the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies.

which purported to analyse and clarify productions of artists whom she admired: So often, she noted, the scholars' theories bore little relation to the artists' work as it was realized on stage. She could not recognize the production(s) she had witnessed in the theoretical work that she was reading. Rather than outrage, what Muriel Miguel expressed that evening was sympathy, sympathy for the artists whose work, she felt, the "experts" had so grossly misrepresented. It is important to note here that the artists and theorists Miguel spoke of that evening were white women with feminist leanings. These artists and scholars shared (at least, some) commonalities of gender, life experience, cultural cosmology, political philosophy, and commitment to political activism. The ubiquitous misrepresentation of Indigenous experience by non-Indigenous "experts" is a phenomenon, which Indigenous artists have come to expect. And it is a phenomenon against which contemporary Indigenous culture workers are now actively fighting, as scholarly misrepresentation has historically provided grounds for legislative strategies designed to contain, assimilate, and oppress Indigenous Peoples and to suppress our languages; spiritual praxis; and traditional societal, pedagogical, and governmental structures.

As an Indigenous culture worker and researcher, I remain very aware that I must guard against any hubristic assumption that the danger of misrepresentation would "naturally" be eradicated with the replacement of the non-Indigenous scholarly "expert" with the Indigenous "expert." Inspired by Hawaiian scholar Leilani Holmes's reconfiguration of the research paradigm, I position myself within this project as the *research subject*. As I assume this position, the requisite analysis, and interrogation, so integral to this field of endeavour, will turn their lenses not only upon the knowledge communicated to me by my research partners but also upon myself as I am forced into a transparent reckoning with my own understandings of and responses to the works I have encountered and the experiences I have been granted. This research/learning paradigm, then, will contribute much to my own location of "identity" as it will force my discovery and public revelation of the "non-neutral and limited nature of my own language and perspectives" (Holmes 39). Furthermore, repositioning the researcher as subject in the research project will, I believe, go far to realize a manifestation of the "critical generosity" called for by David Romàn. It will, I hope, transform the isolate scholarly quest to acquire, document, analyse, and quantify knowledge systems into a "cooperative endeavor and collaborative engagement with a larger social mission" (Romàn xxvii). And such, I believe, is what traditional models of Indigenous pedagogy have always been structured to be.

As African Canadian scholar Njoki Nathani Wane reminds us through the revelation of her own experiences as a researcher in Kenya, active engagement within the community from which one seeks to learn is a crucial requisite of any research undertaken in an Indigenous community (56). Indeed, apprenticeship, as a processual pedagogical element in traditional Indigenous societies, may afford, for the contemporary researcher, a way into critical generosity. To be sure, the apprentice often begins her “tour of duty” with her own assumptions, her own questions, and her own agenda. But she very quickly learns humility: Her research partners direct her investigations and unfailingly lead her down paths she may never have discovered for herself. They answer the questions they deem important, often revealing the emptiness of her own pre-prepared questions, and they answer those questions when *they* deem it appropriate – when they are satisfied that the learner is ready for the lesson. They follow a “lesson plan” of their own making, regardless of the learner’s preconceived agenda or timeline. As Leilani Holmes has observed, “Knowledge is given through the context of relationships and for the purpose of furthering relationships” (41). And all relationships are ultimately orchestrated within and negotiated through action. So, while the more formal interview certainly plays a part in this research process, its importance to the overall project has been eclipsed (even as it has been informed) by the more “prosaic” activities and lessons related to apprenticeship. Action and relationship are certainly required to generate critical generosity; however, the catalyst that will ensure its realization is intellectual humility without which true creative growth cannot occur.

Sylx writer Jeannette Armstrong is a contemporary artist who teaches other artists and who rigorously sifts through her own language and traditions to create a specifically Indigenous pedagogical model within which to train and nurture her students. She has named the creative writing school she founded for this catalyst *Enow’kin*. This is a verb that privileges a dualistic principle by inviting opposition. The gift of opposing perspectives allows us to “understand how [we] need to challenge [our] thinking to accommodate [another’s] concerns and problems” (Armstrong 283). Rather than simply recording research and a singular analysis of my “findings,” I strive to employ Armstrong’s “Enow’kin Principle” by approaching this project as a dialogue between artist-mentors and apprentice. Where my interpretations do not coincide with the artists’ original intent, both sides of the discussion will be included, so as not to privilege the student’s interpretation over that of her Elders and teachers. A story about storytelling, about the stories that make and unmake us, and about the traditional, contemporary, and specifically

Indigenous methodologies around making those stories must perforce be as dialogic, collaborative, and communitist as the Oral Traditions from which the contemporary Indigenous human draws inspiration, identity, and survivance.

This project is not my story; nor is this solely the story of the Miguel sisters and their family. This story begins at a kitchen table in a “house of mirrors” in Red Hook, Brooklyn. But like a stone tossed into quiet waters, it reverberates across and within the stories of so many others, catching them up in endlessly extending ripples, and weaving them together in a living biota ... So, while the story of Spiderwoman Theater begins at the kitchen table in a modest house in Brooklyn; while it begins in the stories told around that table, I am choosing to begin its telling in an uncertain time – a time during which I am still mourning the death of the eldest Miguel sister (2013) and witnessing the physical decline of the two sisters who survive her; a time during which I am witnessing not the creation of Spiderwoman Theater but its re-creation, as a new generation of Indigenous artists enters the performative web to rework old stories; a time during which I have watched as Indigenous people have achieved some significant success in the struggle to claim a platform from which to voice our own stories; a time during which I have (with many friends and colleagues) wondered, “Who is listening?” (see Nolan, *Medicine Shows* 16); and a time during which I am caught between a pull towards silence (to refuse any attempts to be understood by the settler demographic) and a pull towards keeping the channels of communication open.

What is theatre good for? I ask in this time. Of what possible benefit are our stories if nobody is listening and nothing changes? Perhaps, I am asking the wrong question. Perhaps, I should be asking this: For whom is our theatre good? Whom does our theatre serve? And so it is from here that I shall begin this story almost five decades after its beginning – with a re-creation story that carries us into a performative space of refusal, an “irreconcilable space” from which to bear witness in a time of “reconciliation.”

Mean Men and Material Witnesses: A Re-Creation Story

Imagine a woman

A wife with two daughters

A sibling with two elder sisters

A daughter with two parents ...

Her mother silenced by a husband whose

voice booms with intoxicated rage, as his fists fly ...

Sometimes.

Sometimes.
 Imagine that.
 Imagine her
 Tall and strong
 Fierce and dark
 Rich of voice
 This activist
 This activist's wife
 A brown woman capsizing in the first white wave
 A brown woman with a brown husband with brown, angry fists
 Imagine this activist
 This activist's wife – he of the brown, angry fists
 Imagine her eyes
 Dark and deep,
 Looking into you – right into you
 Unafraid
 Imagine this activist,
 Who would carry the world
 With her ready hands,
 Who would comfort the world
 In deep, honied tones
 And easy laugh
 If only we were listening ...
 Imagine this woman
 Who has travelled from far
 To be part of a moment in history
 A moment to change everything
 Imagine this brown woman who has travelled from far
 To make coffee for the activists who want to change everything
 To make coffee for those brown men with their brown, angry fists.
 They are handsome and strong
 Like her husband
 Like her father
 They are intoxicated by rage
 With booming voice
 And booming fists
 Like her husband
 Like her father
 Imagine one evening
 This activist
 With other women
 Brown women

Who have travelled from far
 To be part of a moment
 A moment to change everything.
 Brown women like her
 With honied voices, ready hands, easy laughter, and soft, dark eyes.
 In this moment
 Within a moment to change everything
 Imagine this evening filled with soft laughter and soothing voices
 Broken by a cry
 Followed by another cry
 Crying in the dark,
 They stop their chatter
 They cease their laughter
 Listening hard.
 They hear weeping
 Begging
 "Please, don't hurt me"
 That crying woman who is not with them in this moment is just like them.
 A sister, a daughter, a lover, and soon-to-be wife
 She is speaking with a brown man
 A leader of men who will be remembered as one who changed everything.
 She begs him to stop
 She begs him to calm his angry fists
 To save that anger for those who oppress those he has come into this
 moment to
 Defend ...
 Defenseless against her defender she weeps
 And the brown women
 Listen silently
 Hands covering mouths
 Breaths short and shallow
 Breasts heaving
 Rage mounting
 "In a revolution, women are equal"
 Enough!
 It is enough.
 They have had enough
 Of bad men
 Of angry fists
 Of defenders who
 Rend and
 Wreck and

Wreak their havoc
"We heard her pleading."
"We heard her crying."
Muriel tells us.
They heard the bad man drag his lover, his partner, his beautiful brown
soon-to-be-wife
Outside
To the River
His angry fists, sated with blood and bone, with spit, and salt tears
Itched to drown the witch
"In a revolution, women are equal"
The women flew to her
They tore her from his grasp, as he threatened
And spit curses at them all
At these brown sisters
Who had travelled from far
To land in a moment that changed everything.
Imagine a woman
A brown woman
From Red Hook, Brooklyn
Who travelled to dance beneath a burning sun
To stand against violence
To say, "Enough!"
To dedicate her body in dancing and prayer
To a ceremony of re-creation
In a site of old violations
Remembered woundings
To be part of a moment that would change everything.
Imagine Muriel Miguel – a young mother
A woman in violence
Once again
A woman in violence
Once again ...
A woman ...
Violence ...
Once again ...
Imagine a beater of women
A mean man
A man of violent means
Progenitor
Destroyer
Imagine a moment within the moment that changed everything ...

Out of the emergency

Emergence ...

Out of an ending

New beginnings

Muriel tells us, "That was the beginning of Spiderwoman Theater because something had to be done."

Reiteration, Redemption, Regeneration: A Re-Creation Story

During a public talk in January 2020, Muriel Miguel declared that "The beginning of Spiderwoman started because of [a celebrated Indigenous rights activist who laid hands on his romantic partner]" (M. Miguel, *RedTalk*). She then went on to tell the late Mi'kmaq host and interlocutor Candy Palmater this story of redemption and regeneration – of the birth of Spiderwoman Theater in an irredeemable moment. She was attending her first Sun Dance – an historic first Sun Dance hosted at Wounded Knee, the site of violent colonial invasion, the site of murder and massacre. It was 1973, and American Indians from tribal nations across Turtle Island had gathered to participate in this re-creation story. A leading activist had brought his fiancée to the camp and "disappeared" one evening. During his absence, his fiancée had been visited by a male acquaintance in her tent with whom she talked for some time. When the activist finally returned to the tent, he attacked her physically, accusing her of infidelity – of sleeping with her visitor. "We heard her pleading. We heard her crying," Muriel told us. Finally, he dragged her outside of their tent and dragged her towards the nearby river, threatening to throw her in. Miguel and a group of women who had heard everything ran outside and intervened, tearing the wounded woman away from her attacker, packing her things, and driving her to Rapid City where she presumably caught a bus for home. Muriel Miguel never saw her again. But out of this catastrophic male-on-female violence, something was born: Enough was enough; Muriel Miguel was determined to assemble a troupe, build a theatre company, and take a place at the table.

But where are you when you have fought bitterly for that seat at the table only to discover (after more than 40 years of concerted effort) that "Now all you have is a black eye" (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmi-taagzi)? I began this chapter with this question, writing in a fraught time, where the trending project within Canada (up until COVID-19) has been "truth and reconciliation" and where an ever-growing chorus of Indigenous voices calls for resistance and refusal. Why should Indigenous people participate in the life of the settler state, which has been

built upon the theft of Indigenous lands and unconscionable acts of violence perpetrated on Indigenous bodies and minds (Simpson, "Savage")? Why should we sit at a table that is not of our own making? What will it profit us to stay? With *Material Witness*, Spiderwoman Theater joins a growing cohort of Indigenous artists, scholars, and activists in a retreat (both material and spiritual) from this proverbial "table."

Indigenous protocols, globally, 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. In this historical moment, across disciplines and within myriad media, a mounting impulse to curate spaces of retreat – spaces in which the Indigenous Peoples will be able to identify and get on with the work we need to do to strengthen ourselves and our communities and in which non-Indigenous Peoples might discover the work they need to accomplish before the project of relationship building can be realized – is being activated. Before restor(y)ation, re-treating, or re-imagining can occur, we need to retreat from each other into what Métis Curator David Garneau conceives of as "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" (26–7). Such spaces are spaces, Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson explains, "outside of Indigenous knowledge extractivism, where our knowledge is not simply a resource used to Indigenize" (20). Perhaps, too, these are spaces in which to re-integrate, what Stó:lō-Cree/Métis scholar, writer, and Knowledge Keeper Lee Maracle terms, the "split mind" and affect relational repair.⁸

On a sunny afternoon in late May 2016, I enter an "irreconcilable space" curated by Spiderwoman Theater. Here at La MaMa ETC, a

8 I first encountered the term "split mind" while curating a performance intervention *Medicine Walk: Breath Tracks* on the University of Toronto (St. George) campus for *Scotiabank Nuit Blanche* 2011. Lee Maracle contributed the "Breath Track" in the form of a recorded story, which provided the heart of the project's soundscape. The story introduced listeners to a fragment of the Stó:lō origin cycle, recounting the history of a Double Headed Serpent, which for me (a listener) came to embody the warring impulses of creation and destruction, rage and forgiveness, selfishness and selflessness that exist in all humans. Later, in 2019 when I directed the collective creation *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods,"* Maracle offered a much longer and more detailed telling of this story during early workshops that she co-facilitated with her daughter Columpa Bobb. This telling became a *call* to which each member of the company was invited to respond by telling "the story back different but the same." The "split mind" work accomplished with Maracle during *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods"* will be discussed in the final chapter of this book.



Figure 1.1. *Material Witness* fabric installation at La MaMa ETC, 2016. Photo: Théo Coté. Courtesy of Spiderwoman Theater.

historic hub of performative exploration and creation, I will witness a historic re-creation. As my eyes adjust to the sudden gloom of the performance space, I find myself surrounded by a fabric installation, collectively created by community members in Aanmitaagzi Big Medicine Studio from personal items representing each fabricator's story and from items donated by individual women from other communities (see [fig. 1.1](#)). This is more than installation; it is set overspilling itself, breaking down the liminal threshold between stage and house – between performer and witness. No family, after all, remains untouched, no nation remains healthy when its women are being attacked, when its mothers are weakened, wounded, dying. I am swathed, on all sides, in a “story-quilt” (Ozawabinesi) – a fabric world formed of items that have been solicited from and contributed by Indigenous women from across Turtle Island. This material world has been formed of the stuff of myriad stories, myriad hopes, myriad acts of care. It carries and communicates a collective testament offered by living women in this historical moment – an offering of mutual support through which the stories of both witness and performer are upheld (Ozawabinesi).

Grandmothers smile out at us from a snug nest of soft layers, lush fabrics, and bright colour. Hands reach up to catch or cradle a beloved mother, aunty, or sister. Hands reach up and out to touch a girl-child lost somewhere in a grand and terrifying darkness. “Have you seen her?” the material witness cries out to us. “She’s 12 years old.”

Here, I find myself borne up by a multitude of sister-artists who join the actors to speak back from the stage through the backdrop to which so many have contributed for the over four decades of Spiderwoman Theater's life; to speak back through the story-quilt, which has been created by participants in the various Pulling Threads Fabric Workshops that travelled to various First Nations communities 2012–16 (as the production was being developed) and to tell their stories from a place of witnessing during the several panel discussions and talkbacks that follow various performances during this run. I am borne up too by the company's invitation to contribute a scrap of my own story to this quilt – to leave a material trace of myself, my family, my spirit in this world built by female agency. Sewn into the larger backdrop, perhaps, these fragments may aid me as I attempt to re-member “what has been torn apart” (Couchie and Miguel 227), layering pieces of my own story into a larger story, which envelops me and which invites me to anchor these fragments of self – invested now with worth and meaning – in the long ago, in the current moment, and in the time to come.

Onstage, the quilted backdrop, like the theatre company with which it travels, has been almost five decades in the making. Like the

performers to whom it has been entrusted and like the work that it supports and upholds, these lovingly assembled fabric fragments testify to the beauty that may be conceived within and birthed in the aftermath of violence and ugliness – to new worlds that might emerge from the emergency. So welcomed, I enter a dimly lit theatre space and claim my seat. Something is beginning ...

Onstage, a fabric mound – rich and brown as the soil it represents – begins to heave – folding and rolling, as if moved by the shifting of its ancient, tectonic bone structure. Slowly, cautiously, a woman – herself ancient and mound-like – emerges. She pulls against gravity, rising to her feet and leaning on her cane. Walking the land of the stage, this Elder composed of earth and stardust and received knowledge and earned knowledge walks the stage, blessing it and inscribing a circle of protection. She addresses the children, the Warriors, the biota that protects us, and ancestral spirits whom she calls upon to enter, witness, and protect the storytellers on stage: “Don’t be afraid / Here in this circle you are free to tell your story” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi).

So begins the world premiere of *Material Witness*. Here, a new generation of performers has been invited to revisit and enter into conversation with Spiderwoman Theater’s historic bombshell *Women in Violence* – the 1976 production that thrust Spiderwoman Theater onto the world stage.⁹ Joined on stage by original cast members Gloria Miguel and Donna Couteau under the direction of troupe-progenitor and guiding artist Muriel Miguel, an *all-Indigenous* feminine collective¹⁰ wrestles with the bundles of stories belonging to preceding generations, converses with their former tellers, and engages with contemporary witnesses (many of whom are, ourselves, Indigenous women in violence) to weave all of our experiences into a greater whole. Together, we revisit an urgent project, as we (all of us – in house or on stage – *witnesses*) work to untangle a web of violence that continues to be a defining experience for Indigenous women today. The thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and

⁹ *Women in Violence* will be discussed at length in [chapter 3](#).

¹⁰ The core creators of this work (esp. in its forthcoming published iteration) are Cherish Violet Blood, Penny Couchie, Donna Couteau, Ange Loft, and Gloria Miguel under the directorial and dramaturgical leadership of Muriel Miguel. In the May 2016 performance, which I address in this chapter, Tanis Parenteau was a cast member and co-creator.

Girls bear silent witness to only one arm of a genocidal campaign, which has been characterized on every front (academic, institutional, jurisprudential, educational, environmental, societal, and personal) by a targeted onslaught of extractivism, voyeurism, and opportunism that has persisted throughout the centuries since first contact.

Nine decades into this onslaught, Gloria Miguel observes, "I don't protect myself as much anymore. What have I got to lose? [...] You've got to lick your wounds and go on" (*Segal Talks*). Onstage, this Elder has shed the protective layers she had assembled for *Women in Violence*. Emerging from a fabric cocoon to prepare the space for her collaborators and their witnesses, she takes up her Guna name Du Tu Kapsus ("Flower of the Night"). And in her acceptance of this identity, Gloria Miguel takes up all the responsibilities that name carries. Here, on a twenty-first century stage, she "initiates the crack in the fabric/sky/earth," inviting her younger colleagues "towards voice and those initial steps towards health and wellness" (Couchie and Miguel 224). As the fleshly interface that draws past, present, and future into ceremonial conflation, Miguel/Du Tu Kapsus presences hope – the hope that birthed Spiderwoman Theater almost half a century ago and the hope with which this generation of storytellers will be able to stand in the face of the relentless violence and enduring danger that assail them. She has, after all, lived to tell and tell and tell again ...

As in the original *Women in Violence*, a ragtag group of clown figures who "wear [their] trauma and survival within [their] costumes stitched and glued together" (Couchie and Miguel 27) conduct a performative search for self, revisiting the violence that has fragmented their lives and struggle to story order, reason, and hope out of chaos, unreason, and despair. Like its 1976 progenitor, *Material Witness* indicts women (and those who identify as women) for the violence we inflict upon each other (in thought and word and deed) with the selfsame vigour it exercises in its indictment of those who identify as male for the violence they visit upon the female body.

From the instant the accusing "clowns" (Cherish Violet Blood, Penny Couchie, Donna Couteau, and Angela Loft) tumble onto stage and begin introducing themselves to each other, witnesses are swept into the siege, as one clown sabotages another's attempt to create order by undoing the neat piles of fabric she has frantically been sorting and folding. Moments later, disruption and sabotage escalate into violence, as Loft's "Entrance" (the one who struggles to maintain order within the chaos) is punched by Couteau's "Warrior Woman" because "she deserve[s] it" (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). And suddenly, whimsy turns to dark reality ...

A little girl is constantly groped by a little boy at school because she “want[s] it.” Teenage girls bully their schoolmates, pulling off the clothing of some to humiliate their victims by exposing their underclothing for public display and administering brutal beatings to others. Drunken fathers humiliate their wives; then, smash their faces. Women slice up other women because “you don’t fuck with anyone else’s boyfriend” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). Little girls are fondled by their mothers’ boyfriends; young women are brutally raped because their attackers “love” them; and missing daughters are “plucked” lifeless and violated from dank waters, as the numbers of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Girls and Women spiral ever upwards (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). It gets very real, indeed.

Woven into the palimpsest of this testimonial weave are the shameful jokes – delivered as were the jokes of *Women in Violence* – to indict those who tell and retell such jokes, those who receive such jokes with permissive silence, and those who receive them with laughter, signifying the hearers’ sympathy and approbation. Now, more than ever, as real and virtual spaces have become the sites of actual, irreconcilable struggle (#BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #MeToo, #ThisIsZeroHour, Idle No More, #MMIGW, or #IWearRed), perpetrators and their targets alike understand all too well how rapidly and with what ease violent, ugly words are driven home with violent, ugly deeds.

In 1976, the members of Spiderwoman Theater introduced a specific methodology (informing story creation, dramaturgy, design, and performance) by which to navigate a series of questions around the roots of violence that had been visited upon their own bodies, their own collusion in violence against other women, and their positioning as women within both the American Indian Movement and the feminist movement. The resultant performative intervention (*Women in Violence*) emerged as an answer – sounded as a public alarm – to the very personal questions they had posed to themselves. And while it delivered an uncompromising indictment of the very liberatory movements, which promised to uplift them, it concluded with a declaration of certain hope: “*In a revolution, a woman is equal*” (Spiderwoman, *Women in Violence*, italics added) and a plea for positive change in the famous words of Oglala Sioux Spiritual Leader Wallace Black Elk:

The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the soul of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers [...] The second peace is that which is made between two individuals, and the third is that which is made between

two nations. But above all you should understand that there can never be peace between nations until there is known that true peace, which, as I have often said, is within the souls of men. (qtd. in *Ya-Native*)

Encountering *Material Witness* almost 50 years later, I found myself overwhelmed with questions: What peace have we achieved between then and now? What has changed for Indigenous women? What has changed for our children and grandchildren? While *Women in Violence* extended its artists' reach beyond the stage into the real world, affecting significant change in specific instances (see [chapter 3](#)), has the centuries-old assault on the bodies and minds of Indigenous women ceased? Have incidents of violence against Indigenous women lessened in the intervening years? Have the interventions curated and activated by earlier generations of Indigenous women been enough to facilitate the peace and safety of the women born after them? Are these what *Material Witness* shows us?

On the surface, it may seem that very little has changed for Indigenous women and their children. The young "clowns" who pull us into the same violent worlds their creatrices have been navigating for much of their lives attest to this fact. They bear material and corporeal witness to the epigenetic transgenerational legacy of trauma, which has been visited upon racialized bodies by colonial agency since first contact. Temporally and spatially unbounded, this web of trauma has altered the shape and course of ancestral life as it continues to alter the shape and course of the lives of the descendants who live today and the lives of those yet unborn. The weight (material and immaterial) of this legacy seems only to have increased and accumulated density in the years between Spiderwoman Theater's 1976 performative intervention and its twenty-first century reiteration. As was true in the very beginning of Spiderwoman, "something [still remains] to be done." And there are questions that still require answers: When it is done, what will have changed? And if nothing changes, why do it at all? How are we to receive and interpret this insistent revisitation of a performative intervention, this re-creation story – as an inspiring exemplar of perseverance or as a fruitless and fatal exercise in perseveration? And if the second, then to what end does the troupe continue its labours? What good has been produced?

Redeemable Moments in Irreconcilable Space

Du Tu Kapsis [sic] holds the space for us to tell our stories [...] We accept that in this space, the "holding cell," we are safe to tell our stories. We

witness one another's stories so that we can begin the process of putting down what makes it difficult for us to move forward. (Couchie and Miguel 228)

Since that moment in 1976 when *Women in Violence* burst onto the world stage, violence against women (and particularly against BIPOC women and girls) has seen no decrease. Certainly, the autobiographical accounts of violence upon which Spiderwoman Theater's twenty-first century ensemble has built *Material Witness* attest to its escalation in frequency and ferocity. And yet, for me, it is heartening to reflect on a profound shift that I believe is occurring. For some, the stories told in *Material Witness* may present themselves as iterations of a very old story, but the intent of the storytellers in this historical moment has changed, as has the affect they have engineered.

In 1976, the troupe's founder Muriel Miguel gathered a *multi-ethnic* cast to shake the complacency of their "socially aware," "progressive" audiences by reflecting their bigotry, hypocrisy, and violence back to them through a performative mirror glazed in memory and mimesis. At that time, a newly divorced Gloria Miguel was struggling to assert herself as artist and as human being. Gloria's struggles, fears, and fantasies played themselves out in Spiderwoman's inaugural production through the clown that she created and embodied for *Women in Violence*. To explore the violent forces that shaped and defined so much of her offstage life, Gloria's clown donned a hard hat to protect her head, sported a plethora of mirrors to deflect cruel assumptions and distorted views of her person, and carried a flashlight to aid her as she searched for herself – a whole and healthy self in the detritus of the onstage chaos that was merely an extension of her offstage life.

More than four decades have passed; still, the violence has not abated. While the searing consequences of a genocidal colonial project continue to story themselves upon this erstwhile clown and upon the bodies of the Indigenous women born throughout these decades, Gloria Miguel no longer requires a clown persona to protect herself. Surrounded by the younger women, confronting and navigating their own stories of violence, she gracefully shrugs on the mantle of Elder who tethers her younger colleagues to the "holding cell" she has prepared and holds safe with blessings, prayers, and guardians. This space is a space of display upon which the material witness to the continued assault on Indigenous bodies is laid bare – a body to be scrutinized and known for the price of a theatre ticket. At the same time, it is a protected space, an Indigenous space – rendered impenetrable to all except those who meet the actors as fully engaged witnesses, as compatriots, as helpers who



Figure 1.2. Gloria Miguel as Du Tu Kapsus in *Material Witness*. Courtesy of Spiderwoman Theater.

have come not to observe a spectacle but to engage in a collaborative process of healing. Here, in this space, Du Tu Kapsus reminds us, the voice reverberates; through our words, we extend ourselves outwards to others, mingling with other essences contained in other words. But there is always a return to self: “Don’t be afraid / Here in this circle you are free to tell your story” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). In this space, the teller is safe; she will not lose herself; she will not be left vulnerable. Here, Du Tu Kapsus embodies and enacts a dramaturgical process, which Dione Joseph terms “cradling space” (8). Within this process (and on Spiderwoman’s stage), her ministrations, her words, and her very presence “gift life into [Spiderwoman’s] practice, enabling it to extend outwards to serve, heal, shift and empower, and move space” (Joseph 8).

As both material witness to and fleshly container for nine decades of injustice and abuse, Miguel announces herself with her Guna name. She wears the Guna regalia (see [fig. 1.2](#)), which has been made for *her* – for Gloria Miguel, for Du Tu Kapsus.¹¹

¹¹ Gloria Miguel wears a mola in this production. Molas will be discussed at length in [chapter 3](#).

The events of her life – the violent incidents with which she has had to contend – have not altered. And the conditions under which, the tenor and the frequency of the violence she has endured remain unchanged (where they have not worsened). As she carries her traditional name onto a twenty-first century stage, Du Tu Kapsus re-presents Gloria Miguel. No longer searching for a missing part of self, she is now fully plugged in to the agency she wields within the communities she serves (Couchie and Miguel 224). In this historical moment, as the numbers of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls continue to mount; as Indigenous children continue to be removed from their parental homes and communities on the thinnest of pretexts; as lateral violence continues to destroy more women and their children; and as legislative policies continue to sever the connections between those women, their children, and their communities, Gloria Miguel's recovery of her traditional Guna and Rappahannock names signals hope. This woman has walked through fire, sifted through the embers, stitched the fragments that could be salvaged and emerged as Du Tu Kapsus to continue a difficult conversation that Spiderwoman Theater began as a revolutionary intervention upon revolution.

But to where does the conversation turn if nobody is listening? In 1976, Spiderwoman Theater held up a mirror to its audiences, inviting them to reflect upon their complicity in a centuries-old campaign of colonial violence, to shift hateful attitudes, and to cease hate-fuelled behaviours. As company member Penny Couchie has observed, "When you come from a culture that has those values, and that worldview, and you try to engage with another society and culture with an opposing worldview, that's where the problems start" (Couchie and Miguel 233). More than 40 years since, the violence persists. And it seems that the conversation has redirected itself and turned inward. With *Material Witness*, a new generation walks away from the violence and refuses to be penetrated by an ossifying, colonial gaze. Instead, it weaves a circle of protection in sovereign territory, inviting the Indigenous witness into this irreconcilable space of condolence to begin to map the first steps of a journey towards healing.

At once heartbreaking and strangely empowering, this graceful refusal – manifested in the development/re-development of its inaugural production – is a most significant development in the life of Spiderwoman Theater. And it is a phenomenon that is being enacted across Turtle Island by multiple generations of Indigenous artists, thinkers, activists, and leaders who have come to accept a bitter truth: Amid the political posturing and empty gesturing towards redress and "reconciliation," political, institutional, and personal violence upon

Indigenous lands, Indigenous minds, and Indigenous bodies has not abated. Certainly, in the realms of theatre, drama, and performance, publishers, pedagogues, funding agencies, and institutions continue in their failure to “provide safe working environments for BIPOC and marginalized members of [the] artistic community” (Harvey, “To: Arts Leaders”). It is unsurprising, then, that a significant shift in intention and praxis among a growing number of Indigenous culture workers is occurring. A “time of reckoning” has indeed arrived (Harvey, “To: Arts Leaders”).

The exercise of reckoning the *immense* investment of time, labour, and goodwill that has been required of Indigenous culture workers to show institutional leaders exactly how they might make these spaces of knowledge creation, if not “safe,” at least safer provides a distressing proof. Indeed, Spiderwoman Theater has invested over four decades of labour to the task of performative bridge-building – crafting those liminal spaces in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples might meet to begin a collaboration built upon the foundations of active listening, generous reception, reciprocal compassion, and mutual understanding. And Spiderwoman Theater has not been alone in this. Across the decades of this troupe’s existence, numerous Indigenous culture workers have laboured to build like bridges of understanding between the peoples who co-habit these lands. All to no avail, it seems. Our audiences never quite cross that bridge. And this wilful refusal to do so – this disingenuous insistence on endless reiterations of lessons that could quite easily be grasped by open minds and willing hearts – has edged Indigenous culture workers onto a hamster wheel on which we rush to create and recreate in an endless cycle that numbs minds, strains hearts, tears muscle, and breaks bone. As Toni Morrison has observed, this wheel upon which Indigenous, Black, or other racialized culture workers have been relegated to iterate and reiterate their humanity to others who refuse to see and hear has been deliberately engineered to “distract” us from the more vital, life-affirming, and life-preserving work we need to do within, with, and for our own communities (Morrison 7). And in this observation is a dire warning: We collude (unwillingly) in our own imprisonment, as with each new project, in each successive generation we dedicate our efforts to the crafting (and then replication) of bridges of understanding, which the colonial mind refuses to cross.

When it becomes apparent that healthy perseverance has morphed into toxic perseveration, the only course remaining is self-preservation: “One foot in front of the other, in front of the other, in front of the other. Walk, keep walking, walk away” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmi-taagzi). In this moment, historic colonial refusal is increasingly being

met with *Indigenous refusal*. Scholars such as Kanien'kehá:ka activist Audra Simpson asks why Indigenous Peoples should continue to entertain the promises of occupying states – promises of “redress,” “restitution,” and “reconciliation” (A. Simpson, “Savage”). Such promises (popularly expressed as “diversity,” “inclusion,” “equity”) might best be represented by the acronym “DIE.” And to DIE is not to decolonize. Apologists for the diversity, inclusion, and equity agenda require from the Indigenous body – as payment for its admission into colonial institutions – a series of cognitive, corporeal, and ontological contortions – or outright amputations – by means of which we may, however awkwardly, squeeze ourselves through their doors. So, the question remains: Once the Indigenous body arrives, what of that body will remain? We can be reconciled, and right relations can be established, they seem to say, if *we* are willing to change to fit ourselves into their machinery. But true “[d]ecolonization is about how [these institutions shake their foundations and shift their shapes] *to fit into us*” (Blight qtd. in Maracle, emphasis added). As Indigenous artists experience this subtler series of assimilative tactics, they have begun to devise means – *material and immaterial* – by which to refuse the very institutions that once prevented Indigenous entry and that now constrain Indigenous agency.

Such refusals take myriad forms. Increasingly, we are seeing Indigenous, Black, and Artists of Culture remove themselves (and the work they have produced) from settler-run theatre companies, training grounds, and production houses. Others refuse to conform to time-honoured conventions and praxis within these organizations. Still others enact subtle subversions that reconfigure the spaces of viewing into spaces of dual reception where the affect and messaging absorbed by the Indigenous witnesses differs markedly from that received by their non-Indigenous neighbours (see Carter, “My!”; Carter, “Indigenous Rage”). Each fraught experience brings in its wake a new mode of refusal, and each refusal carries a significant cost.

After a lifetime of working in theatre, the octogenarian founder of Spiderwoman Theater, Muriel Miguel (Guna-Rappahannock), has issued a public refusal of colonial control over her work. In recent years, she has called for a curation of space “that is not colonized – [a space] for Native people, taken care of by Native people” (*Segal Talks*). And until the COVID-19 pandemic initiated a global lockdown, Miguel’s dream of an Indigenous theatre space in New York City seemed to loom large and clear on the horizon. A gathering of Indigenous theatre-makers and Elders (who would discuss the space, its design and upkeep) had been scheduled for May 2020. A meeting via Zoom occurred a year later, but this is the beginning of a project that will take much time to be realized.

And yet, even in this moment – a moment of suspension in which she feels herself “frozen,” Muriel Miguel imagines herself as an Indigenous artist leaping “over the hurdle” to a time and space where she is not continually being reshaped, constrained, and instructed “how to” by the very people who invite her into settler-controlled spaces to speak, to teach, to create, or to perform (*Segal Talks*). The only way through is over. The vehicle of transport is the story, and the fuel is *listening*.

Spiderwoman Theater began almost half a century ago as an act of faith engendered by the realization of “how many women were being beaten” (*Segal Talks*) and a desire to do something about it. It continues today despite an added layer of institutional violence, but in this historical moment, something has changed: The violence continues – escalates, even – *but the story has shifted*. Where hope may have once been sought in telling the story, affecting the sensibilities of witnesses, and calling upon them to re-right that story, hope now manifests itself within the lens of clear-eyed self-reliance. This story will not be re-righted by outside agency. *Indigenous hope resides, not in the appeal, but in the refusal*. “Hope is getting out of a bad situation,” Du Tu Kapsus tells us (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). When all else has failed, our best hope may lie in simply walking away.

Leanne Simpson and Elder Edna Manitowabi remind us that the cycles of Indigenous origin stories provide the “lens” through which we can see beyond what has been devastated in the wake of colonial invasion and through which we can imagine a process through which to repair, rebuild and re-world (280–1). These are not only stories of human-to-land relationships; *they are the stories that teach us to survive ecological disaster*—the utter collapse of a once-thriving world. Indeed, as Muriel Miguel reminds us, those origin stories that sprout, flower, seed, and re-root themselves in the communal hearts and minds of diverse peoples the world over are stories of exile – of a fall from the familiar into an alien landscape in which the exiled must learn to sustain herself, build a home, and nurture functioning relationships with her host community. Wheresoever they are told, in whatever language and with whatever narrative flourish or discrete detail, their essence remains the same: “[S]ky woman falling, and all the stories of daughters from the stars, your Anishinaabe stories about coming from the stars, and our [Guna] version of the star family; I think they are the same thing” (Couchie and Miguel 226). These Creation Stories – lessons in recovery from an epic fall – are iterated and reiterated in each new generation. The human body is a vessel holding, in its deepest recesses, the muscle memory of an originary fall – the fall of human beings from Eden; Sky Woman’s plummet to Earth; the eviction of the

human child from her mother's womb and her sudden slide into the world in a rush of water; our first steps – falling, falling, and then, thankfully, fall recovery. In each new life stage until that final slide from this existence into an unknown plane, these stories teach us we must continue to “land” – to recover from the fall and set ourselves to rights. But in each new generation, as we reiterate that originary fall, something changes, and we “land” differently.

And, as Karyn Recollet (Nêhiyaw) and Jon Johnson caution us, “‘land-ing’ [...] entails radical relations of care with the land, the stories, and one another” (178). In 1976, Spiderwoman Theater landed – first in North America and then in Europe – armed with a performative mirror with which to incite change. Four decades later, a new generation, scrambling to recover from the fall refuses the ongoing and escalating violence against Indigenous women on this continent and curates, within the spaces of public witness, an irreconcilably Indigenous space of healing for Indigenous storyteller and witness alike. Subtle as this shift may be, it is powerful: In this generation, after decades of effort, Spiderwoman's storytellers walk away from the fruitless task of confronting settler audiences with their “failure to uphold relational obligations” (Recollet and Johnson 186), evidenced by the ongoing and intensifying assault on Indigenous Peoples and the biotas they have stewarded over millennia. In focusing their intervention on the healing of Indigenous dis-ease, rather than on trying to redirect ingrained patterns of colonial thinking, the artists of Spiderwoman Theater refuse perseverance and model, instead, a dogged perseverance that is so necessary to hold on to hope, to hold on to life.

Outside of Spiderwoman Theater, these young artists and their cohort persevere in their escalation of refusal. No longer interested in educating settler audiences or tailoring its works and modes of working to garner the approbation of those audiences, this generation of Indigenous culture workers is enacting its own re-creation story. Stepping/falling away to “land” outside the colonial “theatre estate” (Kershaw 32), its artists focus on communal health and healing. Playwright/director Kim Senklip Harvey, for instance, has emerged as a potent and revolutionary voice with *Kamloopa: An Indigenous Matriarch Story*. She has publicly declared that she would rather forgo professional advancement (e.g., a national tour of her work) than risk the safety of the Indigenous artists (cast, crew, and designers) who make up her team. If she has been characterized by arts leaders in particular spaces as a “contrarian,” it is because she will not back down in the struggle to ensure that the Indigenous individuals with whom she works are not subjected to “spiritual wrongdoing” (*Kamloopa*). Meanwhile, playwright/performer

Yolanda Bonnell (Anishinaabe-South Asian), who has worked with Muriel Miguel, is also part of *Kamloopa*'s creative team. Bonnell shares Harvey's contention that the "industry of theatre" in Canada has been and continues to be unsafe for all racialized artists.

In early 2020, Bonnell excited controversy by enacting a courageous refusal and requesting that *only* non-Caucasian writers review her recent production *bug* at Theatre Passe Muraille.¹² It was a risky move. Mainstream critics – by and large, white males (see Nolan, "Why it Matters") – have historically held and continue to wield no small degree of power over the reception and lifespan of a production. But Bonnell enacted this "contrarian" move because she is driven by the need to carve out spaces of "safety for artists of colour" rather than the desire to appease the "gatekeepers of success" (Bonnell, "Why"). With this refusal, Bonnell has flipped the script, restoring respect to the communities for whom she creates this work and investing them with rightful authority as the final arbiter of a production's merit: As a performative mechanism of healing for and by Indigenous people, *bug* requires and invites community consultation and feedback, rather than a colonial stamp of approval or disapprobation. And, as Bonnell has testified, the personal cost for this refusal has been inordinately high.¹³

Nonetheless, with director/playwright/performer Carmen (formerly, Cole) Alvis (Métis) and their manidoons collective, Bonnell continues to push back against institutional constraints that may endanger the health and safety of her colleagues (Sur). Characterizing her work as "artistic ceremony" (Bonnell qtd. in Nestruck), Bonnell advocates for the engagement of Elders and Traditional Healers at every performance to support all of those who come to witness her work (Bonnell, *bug* 29). She and Alvis curate the spaces of devising and rehearsal as ceremonial sites. Here, action is governed by Respect, Love, Humility, Honesty, Bravery, Truth and Wisdom – the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinaabeg.

12 Bonnell credits Harvey for her inspiration here. With the 2018 production of *Kamloopa* (in which Bonnell performed), Harvey did not invite reviewers. Instead, she sought community feedback by soliciting "love letters" from Indigenous women who had seen the show (Nestruck).

13 Threats, shaming, and violently racist vitriol have constituted key weapons in online assaults aimed at Yolanda Bonnell and at Kim Harvey Senklip in the wake of Bonnell's request that white critics refrain from reviewing *bug* (Sur). And such incidents are not rare. Racialized artists and students of the art have been and continue to be subjected to microaggressions and macro-assaults within the "theatre estate," as are Indigenous individuals and communities in the larger Canadian context.

As it has always been with Spiderwoman Theater, the artists of the manidoons collective are encouraged to bring their lives and entire human experience into the space of co-creation and to share their whole selves with their colleagues in the talking circles with which the rehearsal day begins. The places in which manidoons' artistic ceremonies unfold are entered with protocol and appropriately acknowledged, as their caretakers are honoured (Sur). So too are all witnesses cared for. Each time I have attended a performance of *bug*, those Elders and Knowledge Keepers engaged to care for the audience stood with Bonnell and Alvis to welcome all of us into the space and ensure our comfort. We were invited to leave cell phones on (in case of emergency) and to leave and re-enter the space as needed. Just as this generation of storytellers who are carrying forward the legacy of Spiderwoman Theater have done with *Material Witness*, so Bonnell and the manidoons collective have carved out a "holding cell" – an "irreconcilable space" – in which to presence and address the epigenetic transgenerational legacies of embodied trauma (Indigenous) and sustained perpetration (non-Indigenous). In performance, Bonnell's scripting of an irreconcilably Indigenous, *protected* space flips the colonial centre, as, heretofore, *marginalized* bodies are invited to join Bonnell and to occupy an inner circle from which to fulfil the role of witness and so travel with her through those dark spaces where trauma is born into the luminescence of hope.

Non-Indigenous witnesses are invited to seat themselves in the margins *outside* the ceremonial circle. From here, they are invited to witness this healing work and to use this teaching to heal the very specific epigenetic transgenerational dis-ease that took root in the bone and swam in the blood of European refugees fleeing plague, starvation, oppression, and a thousand years of violence visited by one European body upon another. This is a dis-ease those refugees brought to these shores, a dis-ease that moved their bodies and directed centuries of crimes against those adjudged by the White Body to be other-than-human (Menakem). There is a healing that needs to occur in this space also. And the responsibility to intervene upon and eradicate this destructive condition rests solely on the shoulders of its carrier – the European settler.

Aanmitaagzi: "S/He Speaks" in Mounds

Throughout *Material Witness*, there are heaps, piles, and mounds. They are sacred and irreverent, beautiful and ugly, profound and mundane. It's all piled one on top of the other, our storied lives, and very long histories. It's all woven together. (Couchie and Miguel 228)

Spiderwoman Theater's "holding cell" is an irreconcilable space in which to speak in safety. As welcoming and comforting as it has been curated to be, it is, nonetheless, a space of preparation, not a permanent home. It is a space in which the most secret and sacred truths emerge, are painstakingly layered one atop another, and shaped into a performative earthwork. And through this collective labour, it becomes a crucible in which to uplift the voices of Indigenous storytellers and Indigenous witnesses who are a part of (or apart from) the communities they have invited to collaborate with them on this healing work. Co-producers Penny Couchie (Anishinaabe) and Sid Bobb (Stó:lō) of Aanmitaagzi ("S/He speaks") have successfully collaborated with Muriel to transport their Big Medicine Studio to any site upon which *Material Witness* is performed, and thereby to transform the storytelling event into a rite of healing. The protected space here has been extended beyond the stage to include and envelope the *theatron* (the place of witnessing) itself. Onstage, Du Tu Kapsus walks the space, blesses the space, and sings in spirit guardians from all four directions. Offstage, Indigenous women from across Turtle Island have stitched their stories and memories of the women whom they miss – women missing from their lives – into a "material witness" that greets us upon entry, envelops us, and invites us into the conversation. Like the fabled backdrop¹⁴ that has travelled with Spiderwoman Theater since its inception and that has extended itself and thickened with each new scrap of fabric that has been offered by a collaborator, a grateful community, or an affected audience member, this installation also fulfils the function of binding fragments into story, of repairing what has been torn, and of mapping the greater constellation(s) of which we are all a part (Couchie and Miguel 227). This installation is a material call that demands response. It reminds those who have come to see a show that the one who sees is charged with responsibility: We are *material witnesses* to former, current, and ongoing crimes of violence against women. Perhaps, some of us have played the part of perpetrator; others, perhaps, have only colluded with the perpetrator – bearing witness and burying our knowledge within the folds and layers of the myriad skeins of fabric with which we all adorn our bodies, our homes, our playthings, pets, and children.

Imbedded in these adornments, too, is the trauma of the violated body. Entrance simultaneously prepares and protects her fists, as she

14 This too is "mola," and I will be speaking at length about this signature backdrop in [chapter 3](#).

wraps them in fabric, readying them for violence. Penny Couchie carries us into the memory of a little girl, desperately trying to protect herself from the sexual advances of an adult visitor to her home on the night of her kindergarten concert: Her dress, the dress her mother made with such love, cloaks her vulnerable little girl body, even as it invites predatory eyes – “Little red and white flowers, pearly white buttons, a scoop neck” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). In yet another memory, Cherish Violet Blood’s character Cholula remembers tearing off a schoolmate’s shirt, shaming her in front of her teenage peers by revealing the torn bra beneath (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). The fabric itself bears witness to these violent acts and to their resultant scars. Masking the scarred body or proclaiming (in its colour and cut) profound psycho-spiritual truths, this fabric may also bear the tokens of violence – tears, stains, loose threads. In such tokens, a dark history may be read. And in loose threads, such tangled histories may be unravelled, rendered visible, and/or woven into a larger history of survivance (Couchie and Miguel 227).

In a particularly potent moment Penny Couchie recounts an exciting period in her life when, finally, after many years of training as an actor and a dancer and too many years of playing “too many trees and too many whores,” she receives the opportunity to dance as an *Indigenous woman in an Indigenous story*. Here, Couchie quips, she “danced genocide, danced smallpox, and danced Indigenous reclamation.” During the rehearsal period, the choreographer tells her that she must lose weight to fit into the costume. But throughout her telling (in the present moment of performance), Couchie keeps dancing, demonstrating the power, beauty, and grace with which she was originally able to illuminate the story she had been hired to tell. As the pressure to lose weight mounts, her movements become more panicked and inchoate. The scene peaks as Couchie dances herself to the ground, madly shimmying to get into an unseen costume, while a chorus keeps time by madly chanting “Go fatty! Go fatty! Go fatty!” Once the beautiful dancer’s body has been squeezed into the unsuitable costume, Couchie struggles to her feet, constricted and hobbled, her natural grace and dignity stifled. “Fuck, why didn’t you just get me a bigger costume? Like, seriously, how hard was it?” she asks (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi).

How difficult is it for the settlers who occupy Indigenous lands to acknowledge and desist from an historic campaign of violence perpetrated on these lands and the Indigenous Peoples who have stewarded them? How difficult is it to listen to Indigenous humans, to acknowledge Indigenous humanity, and to agree that “this” – land theft,

femicide, eugenics, re-education, child theft, starlight tours, language suppression, spiritual prohibition, racist policies, etc. – “isn’t normal”? (M. Miguel qtd. in Commanda).

Fifty years after *Women in Violence*, this new generation of storytellers continues to sift material mounds and memory in search of “humanity in these stories and how to heal” (M. Miguel qtd. in Commanda). What has changed, however, is that these carriers of Indigenous story have taken up this work solely for themselves, for their communities, and for their children. This work is not presented for the entertainment or edification of its non-Indigenous audiences. The “material witness,” which dresses Spiderwoman’s set and envelops the house, both proclaims and protects the story of its makers. Collaboratively created by Indigenous women across Turtle Island during the Pulling Threads workshop series hosted by Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi, each embroidered inlay and each loose thread cradle answers to these questions: “[W]hat piece of material reminds you of yourself? What is your darkest secret? What is your legacy? What do you want to leave behind?” (M. Miguel qtd. in Commanda).

Work-worn hands. Hands that have cradled babies, tanned hides, stroked fevered brows, braided hair, warded off blows, cleaned fish, stirred broth, stitched hides, mended clothing, dug roots, picked berries, and/or clasped each other in prayer have pulled at loose threads, worried them, and ultimately reconfigured the personal stuff of darkness, of heart break, of incalculable loss into a living document that orders the chaos of desperate thoughts and fevered imaginings. And in so doing, these hands teach us how to “make hope actionable” (Morrisseau qtd. in Annie Smith 85). The secret lives of these hands are written into the layered fabrics that constitute this living document and they may be read in the fleshly witnesses on stage who endlessly fold and mound clothing to create order in the chaos, who craft love medicine, who hold a finger to the lips or clamp a hand on their own mouths to hold back dangerous utterances and who raise wrapped fists to ward off violence or to deliver it, all the while reminding themselves that “In a revolution, a woman is equal. In a revolution, a woman is equal” (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi).

As these women make the decision to refuse the violence of their domestic partners, declaring that they will run “to the mountains,” “to my mum’s,” to “a bunker,” “to Canada,” it is well worth reminding ourselves of the refusal out of which Spiderwoman Theater was engendered: “I found rape; I found abuse. And I could not be with [countenance, or tolerate such violence any longer]” (M. Miguel, *RedTalk*). It is significant also

that Spiderwoman Theater began with a *working of the hands*. Indeed, as is discussed in the next chapter, Spiderwoman Theater accomplished its North American emergence with a performative weave of Creation Stories, underscored by one Hopi artist's practical "gest" of finger weaving. Weaving, interweaving. Creation, re-creation. More than 40 years since the company's inception, its outreach, growth, and influence are apparent in the many, many hands that craft emergence from within the emergency – that weave re-creation for Indigenous Peoples five centuries after incalculable catastrophe battered this continent. These hands still remember to hold on. As Du Tu Kapsus reminds us, "That's instinct. Long ago, that's the way a baby stayed on its mother's body" (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). Skin to skin. Hand to hand. Within and, perhaps, despite the wrappings that swaddle and contain us. "You look into a palm. You see the future" (Spiderwoman Theater and Aanmitaagzi). Perhaps, you make that future for yourself.