CANADIAN REVISIONIST DRAMA:
PERFORMING RACE, SEXUALITY, AND THE
CULTURAL IMAGINARY

by

Kailin Wright

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Kailin Wright, 2012
Canadian Revisionist Drama:
Performing Race, Sexuality, and the Cultural Imaginary

Kailin Wright
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English, University of Toronto, 2012

Abstract

My dissertation examines how Canadian revisionist plays adapt popular narratives—national histories, Greek myths, Shakespearean plays, and colonial legends—by changing the identities of marginalized characters and cultural groups. While Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as repetition with difference, I define revisionist drama as repetition with politicized difference. It is this politicized difference that transforms the identifications of the original marginalized characters, and, as a result, changes their roles in the cultural imaginary. Canadian revisionist plays critique cultural figures such as Philomela, Othello, and Pocahontas as reductive emblems of necessarily complex, layered racial, sexual, and gendered identities. Though this dissertation concentrates on Canadian literature, it also considers European sources (Ovid, Homer, Shakespeare) as well as theories of historiography (Filewod, Salter), speech acts (Austin, Butler), audience reception (Bennett), and publics (Habermas, Warner). My project ultimately outlines a set of twelve literary and dramatic strategies that are repeatedly used to challenge popular conceptions of what it means to be Black, Aboriginal, Canadian, queer, and female.
Revisionist adaptation is a leading form of political protest in contemporary Canadian theatre. With attention to eight playwrights—Margaret Atwood, Margaret Clarke, Marc Lescarbot, Monique Mojica, Daniel David Moses, Djanet Sears, Erin Shields, and the collective group Optative Theatrical Laboratories (OTL)—this study examines the shared methodologies of late twentieth-century revisionist dramas. While the first two chapters investigate strategies for identifying groups (“they are” and “we are”), the last two chapters examine self-identificatory utterances (“I am” and “I am not”). Through this twin focus, my project investigates the relationship between individual and collective identities and thereby captures the plays’ fundamental duality as they re-identify individual characters (Othello, Pocahontas, Penelope) in order to challenge collective cultural, racial, and gender stereotypes.

While theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Pêcheux, and José Esteban Muñoz conceive of identity in terms of performance, I invert this theoretical relationship by treating revisionist performance as a mode of identification and as a potentially powerful cultural vehicle for changing the way audiences conceive of and partake in cultural groups. Revisionist drama, I argue, performs disidentification by at once identifying with and against a source-text. This intrinsic doubleness—an embrace and rejection of the source—creates a politicized palimpsest in the minds of the viewers that forever layers the original with the revisionist version.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was generously funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship, an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, an Editing Modernism in Canada doctoral stipend, a University of Toronto Fellowship, and a School of Graduate Studies Doctoral Completion Award.

My supervisory committee was boundless in their support. Mary Nyquist went above and beyond in her honest, thoughtful, and meticulous appraisals of my work. Ric Knowles’s critical acumen and insightful questions have been invaluable. And Colin Hill has not only provided essential research opportunities and training but has also advised me in numerous ways over the course of this project. I also want to thank my examining committee, Robert McGill and Heather Murray, whose expertise and critical eyes will continue to push my thinking in new directions. I am especially grateful to Susan Bennett for the thorough and thoughtful examiners report, which, along with her influential work on theatre audiences and feminist theatre, will help shape the future of this project. For their assistance in the course of my research I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Alan Bewell, Dean Irvine, Magdalene Redekop, and Paul Stevens.

I received valuable information from interviews and correspondence with Donovan King, Djanet Sears, and Erin Shields. I would also like to acknowledge my writing groups, colleagues, and friends. Jenny O’Kell was one of my fiercest supporters in the English Department with lattes and chocolate always at hand. Amanda Baker, Laurel Ryan, Jennifer McDermott, Tony Fong, and Spencer Morrison offered their keen editorial eyes. Laura Estill’s endless advice and early morning editing sessions have been
constant sources of inspiration. Thanks also to Christina Garcia, Lauren Olsen, and Morgan Radford whose friendship feels more like kinship.

Finally, I am grateful for my supportive Wright, Busch, Regan, and Relf families. My sister, with her indefatigable work ethic and encouragement, has kept me energized. Many thanks to my husband who has been a partner in all aspects of my life; his patience and good humour have seen me through every stage of this project. I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Sheilagh Regan Busch and Fred Wright, who instilled in me the love of literature, theatre, and the arts.
Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... iv

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................. viii

Introduction: Defining Canadian Revisionist Drama ...................................................................... 1
  Canadian Contexts: Transnational and Postcolonial Traditions? .............................................. 6
  Literary Contexts: Adaptation Studies ....................................................................................... 11
  Revisionist Drama: Adaptation with Political and Politicized Difference .............................. 14
  Charting Revisionist Adaptations on the Adaptation Continuum ........................................... 19
  Figure 1: Hutcheon’s Continuum of Adaptations ........................................................................ 21
  Figure 2: Grid of Revisionist Adaptations .................................................................................. 22
  Twelve Strategies of Revisionist Drama: Process, Form, and Style ........................................... 24
  Conclusion: Cultural Capital ......................................................................................................... 35

Chapter 1: “Theatre in Our Nation”: Performing (Post)Colonial Historiography in Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France and Sinking Neptune .............................................. 37
  Le Théâtre de Neptune ................................................................................................................ 48
  Sinking Neptune: Revisionist Theatre Historiography ............................................................... 57
  Narrowing the Gap?: Le Théâtre de Neptune and Sinking Neptune ........................................ 63

Chapter 2: “We are”: Performing Choric Counterpublics and Dispublics in Margaret Atwood’s The Penelopiad and Erin Shields’s If We Were Birds ..................................................... 66
  Critical Contexts .......................................................................................................................... 69
  Collective Narration ..................................................................................................................... 70
  Performing Choric Counterpublics .............................................................................................. 76
  Opposition to Dominant Mythologies ....................................................................................... 78
  Resisting the Dominant Form: Text versus Performance ......................................................... 82
  Alternative Discursive Methods: Bird Sounds and Parody ....................................................... 84
  We(av)ing: The Poetics of the Choral “We” .............................................................................. 89
  Hostility and Indecorousness ........................................................................................................ 95
  The Theatre Audience as Dispublic .......................................................................................... 96
  Making Publics in the Theatre .................................................................................................... 101
  Chorus as Didactic Agent: Uniting the Inset and Real Audiences ............................................ 104
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 109

Chapter 3: “I am not what I am”: Failed Performances of Identification in Margaret Clarke’s Gertrude and Ophelia and Djanet Sears’s Harlem Duet ................................................................ 112
  Contexts: Shakespeare and Canada .......................................................................................... 117
  Ghosts of Main Characters Past: Failing to Exorcize Hamlet and Desdemona .................... 122
  Theorizing Performative Utterances ......................................................................................... 127
  The “I” that I am is nothing without this you ......................................................................... 130
  The Political Potential of Failed Speech Acts ......................................................................... 144
  Failed Performances of Identification and Counteridentification ........................................... 147
  Revisionist Drama and/as Disidentification ............................................................................ 159
Chapter 4: “I am” Declarations and the Adaptive Self in Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* and Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife*

- The Palimpsestic "I": Integrating Speech Act Theory with Adaptation Theory .......................................................... 164
- Four Functions of "I am" Statements ......................................................................................................................... 166
- *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* ................................................................................................................. 171
- *Almighty Voice and His Wife* ................................................................................................................................. 178
- Understanding the Self as Adaptation ........................................................................................................................ 189

Conclusion: Afterthoughts ............................................................................................................................................ 203

Works Consulted .......................................................................................................................................................... 206

.......................................................... 210
List of Figures

Figure 1: Hutcheon’s Continuum of Adaptations ................................................................. 21
Figure 2: Grid of Revisionist Adaptations ........................................................................... 22
Introduction: Defining Canadian Revisionist Drama

“For this is what stories do: they compete to shape the world — to impose narrative order on disparate or uncertain events — all the while prompting fresh narrative possibilities in the imagination.”

—Neil Bissoondath, *The Age of Confession*, p. 15

“Theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art” – Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.188

From 1994 to 2005, the famous “I am Canadian” advertisement campaign marketed Molson products and nationalism. Among the most popular ads was “the rant,” which featured an average “Joe” who proudly defined his Canadian identity: “I have a Prime Minister not a President. I speak English and French not American. And I pronounce it about not a boot. I can proudly sew my country’s flag on my backpack. I believe in peacekeeping, not policing, diversity, not assimilation, and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal . . . My name is Joe! And I am Canadian!”1 With a playful parody of America’s national superiority complex and Canadian stereotypes, Molson’s “Canadian” brand used “I am” declarations to promote both its product and its consumers. Provinces in Canada quickly adapted the slogan, urging regional pride—“I am Albertan,” “I am British Columbian,” “I am a Newfoundlander”—and further filled

---
1 The CBC Digital Archives provides a news report on “just how huge a phenomenon” the “I am Canadian” and Joe’s “rant” had become in the new millennium: http://archives.cbc.ca/economy_business/the_media/clips/8738/
the marketplace with self-defining statements. But what purpose do these declarations serve and how do they resonate with identity issues in Canada today? Canadian literature also participates in this national chorus of “I am” declarations. Duke Redbird’s poem “I am a Canadian” (1977) and Raymond Filip’s poem “The Mighty Buck, the Immigrant Fuck, and Melting Pot Luck” (1978) use anaphora by beginning each line with “I am” statements, such as “I am French / I am English / And I am Métis” (Redbird 121) and “I am the Canadian Mosaic” (Filip 15) as the numerous “I am” declarations illustrate the multiplicity of what it means to be Canadian. In these national campaigns and in many Canadian literary works, “I am” statements construct and often commodify national, racial, and gendered subject-identities. In doing so, they at once maintain the speaker’s individuality and form collectives. My exploration of self-defining declarations in Canadian revisionist drama, that is, drama that retells an earlier narrative for a political purpose, contributes to a larger project of understanding subject-making strategies such as “I am Canadian” in the context of a changing sense of nationalism.

The widespread repetition of “I am” declarations in popular campaigns and Canadian literature is symptomatic of a renewed interest in the question “Who am I?” and in the legacy of national-identity queries. In his Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada (edited by Carl F. Klinck, 1965), Northrop Frye argued that Canadian literature

---

2 A recent federal “Campaign for Diversity” used “I am” statements in order to help unite people from divergent backgrounds and encourage viewers to “think different.” The televised and billboard advertisements showcased a Black man saying, “I am a woman when I am confronting inequality in the workplace,” a Chinese man proclaiming that “I am a Jew when I am learning about the Holocaust,” and an able-bodied woman asserting, “I am a person with special needs when I am realizing how inaccessible our world is.” The campaign serves as a cautionary example of the assimilative potential of “I am” declarations when used to define a group. See the Canadian Centre for Diversity website for information about the campaign and national diversity issues at http://www.centrefordiversity.ca/

3 See chapters three and four for extended examinations of “I am” assertions in four Canadian revisionist plays; these chapters explore the self-constituting function of “I am” declarations when they are performed on stage. However, further research is needed to compare the different functions of “I am” statements across various genres, such as poetry and fiction.
is “less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (Bush 222).⁴ For Frye, “to feel ‘Canadian’ was to feel part of a no-man’s-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen” because Canadian national identity was, in a sense, unknowable (Bush 222). In the 2004 edition of Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, by contrast, Atwood explores the many changes in the literary scene since the book’s first edition in 1972 and since Frye’s The Bush Garden in 1971; most notably, Atwood’s new introduction explains that though Canadian literature is still framed by vast questions of identity, the “former Canadian-identity question, ‘Where is here?’ has been replaced by ‘Who are we?’” (10). The new question of collective identity, like its “Where is here?” predecessor, underlines the unknowability of this “we” and finally leaves behind the thematic criticism and geographical determinism of the 1970s; a shift touted by Frank Davey in Surviving the Paraphrase (1983) and exemplified by Neil Bissoondath’s critique of Canadian multicultural politics in Selling Illusions (1994). Describing the transition from national geographical determinism to an increasing interest in what have been called minority literatures, Smaro Kamboureli’s Trans.Can.Lit (2007) defines Canadian literature as “a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural byproduct of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices” (vii). In engaging with the “Who

---

⁴ The Conclusion to A Literary History of Canada was later reprinted as the final essay in Frye’s The Bush Garden (1971).
are we?” question, my project analyzes the shifting definitions of the collective Canadian “we” in relation to and as a result of changing representations of the individual “I.”

Canadian drama’s current trend of examining post-colonial identities and the repetition of self-defining utterances in revisionist theatre reflects this larger literary shift from riddles of place to questions of selfhood. This dissertation takes as its primary source of study Canadian revisionist drama from 1990 to 2008, with consideration of the Canadian theatre from 1606 to the present as well as international sources dating back to ancient Greece and the Judeo-Christian Bible. My project asks how contemporary Canadian drama is changing inherited stories as well as accepted notions of race, gender, and sexuality. With attention to the dramatic strategies of eight playwrights—Margaret Atwood, Margaret Clarke, Marc Lescarbot, Monique Mojica, Daniel David Moses, Djanet Sears, Erin Shields, and the collective group Optative Theatrical Laboratories—my study defines revisionist drama and investigates current strategies for transforming the cultural significance of popular representational figures. Many of these playwrights, to return to my opening example, use “I am” declarations as a shared strategy for self-definition and for rejecting cultural assumptions, but these proclamations accrue different meanings in relationship to the respective sources. When Moses’s Cree characters repeat “I am” declarations they are re-appropriating the biblical “I AM” and drawing attention to the history of forced Christian education on national reserves in Canada. The last two chapters of this dissertation examine “I am” utterances in four revisionist plays by taking into account the contexts of the speech acts, such as the speaker’s delivery, physicality, and staging as well as the reactions of the on-stage audience or inset addressee. Canadian drama, unlike Canadian fiction or poetry, makes manifest the physical contexts of the
theatre house as a political institution, the audience’s attendance, and the characters’ racialized or gendered bodies.

In performing the experience of a troubled national, ethnic, or gendered identity, many Canadian novels and poems also use “I am” statements not only to describe an identity but also to help constitute it. Patrick Anderson’s “Poem on Canada” (1946) proclaims, “I am the wind that wants a flag. / I am the mirror of your picture” and “I am one and none, pin and pine, snow and slow” (42-43). In Audrey Thomas’s Mrs. Blood (1970), the narrator repeats “I am not what I am” at the height of her psychological breakdown and self-disassociation following an abortion (196, 199, 200). Atwood’s narrator in Surfacing (1972) also experiences a crisis of self-loss after an abortion, but identifies with the landscape around her in climactic “I am” declarations—“I am a tree leaning,” “I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow,” “I am a place”—as she finally channels the strength to face the ghosts of her past (210). While these textual “I am” statements have self-defining functions, they are inevitably much more descriptive than their theatrical counterparts that enact the scripted lines on the stage.

Unlike the textual examples, Canadian drama’s performed “I am” proclamations function as self-constituting speech acts, which is why I treat the plays as not only literary scripts but also as performed events. With identity politics being so invested in the constructedness of the racialized, sexualized, and gendered self, theatre more so than any other genre offers the opportunity to consider the performativity of identity in the context of a national space like Canadian theatres. My project at once considers individual identities as well as the larger representational significance of these identities
as constitutive of a collective Canadian “we.” As Ric Knowles contends, dramatic adaptation “is a process of subject formation, of working out—negotiating—who, as a collective, ‘we’ is. And there is no better site for such a negotiation than the live, public forum that is theatre” (Shakespeare’s Mine vi).

**Canadian Contexts: Transnational and Postcolonial Traditions?**

Canada’s notorious identity problem—the inability to define Canada as a concrete, unique, and individual entity—seems to be the new *topos* for a post-national twenty-first-century literary culture that not only troubles but often altogether rejects nationality as a stable identificatory category. As other countries begin to question the value of nation states, it is fitting that Canadian strategies of cultural definition, such as literary adaptation and mythologizing narratives, have become prevalent international literary strategies because Canada has long been predisposed to questioning national identity. Canada’s national identity crisis, then, enters the transnational and global age as a widely shared issue. “Searching for the national identity,” W.H. New contends, “is a kind of congenital art form in Canada” (101). Irena R. Makaryk explains that Canada is

---

5 For further articulations of Canada’s innate transnational and even postnational status, see Frank Davey’s *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel Since 1967* (1993). Kit Dobson’s *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization* (2009) provides a comprehensive study of shifting representations and constructions of Canadian national identity in a context of transnationalism and postcolonialism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004) offer inaugural articulations of the field of transnational studies, and the fact that these works have been critiqued for their failure to consider feminist and postcolonial perspectives gestures towards the changing concerns within the field.

6 Canada has long been tortured by what Frye’s *The Bush Garden* (1971), Atwood’s *Survival* (1972), and D.G. Jones’s *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), among others, describe as the national identity problem; these three seminal works and the tendency to try to provide a comprehensive study of Canadian literature during the 1970s are symptomatic of the anxiety over what it means to be Canadian and participate in a Canadian literary tradition. I see Canada’s long-standing anxiety over a lack of a unified national identity or nation state to be an earlier version of the theoretical questions at the heart of transnational studies today.
in a word “elsewhere” and asks, “is Canada the Corioles of immigrants fleeing from somewhere else?” (3). Canadian literature, in short, tells the stories of people from “elsewhere” and is defined by other nations. “This elsewhereness inscribed in CanLit,” argues Kamboureli, “intimates that Canada is an unimaginable community, that is, a community constituted in excess of the knowledge of itself, always transitioning” (11). It is with this tension in mind— with a consideration of a Canadian national literature predisposed to international contexts, writers, and cultures—that I explore Canadian dramatic adaptations of popular, international narratives. My study of literary adaptation and of dramatists’ propensity for telling borrowed stories offers a new way of engaging with Canada’s from-elsewhereness. In examining playwrights’ strategies for retelling and changing borrowed narratives, my project explores the issues of self-representation and the representation of others in a way that no longer dichotomizes an us-them dynamic because narrative difference is an inevitable and celebrated result of revisionist adaptation. After all, it is through political and narrative difference that new meanings are exposed.

It is not surprising that adaptation is a prevalent literary mode and process of creation in a country so openly indebted to its Euro-colonial predecessors. Whereas Frye defines Canada in terms of a garrison mentality and Atwood imagines Canada in terms of the survival theme, a profitable way of reading Canadian literature is with attention to adaptation. Adaptation is the perfect expression of Canada’s political relationship to its colonizing nations and to America. Adaptation theorist Robert Stam explains that literary adaptations are often vilified as parasites of the life-giving source texts through

---

7 Frye even presents Canadian culture as inevitably derivative when he argues that “many Canadian cultural phenomena are not peculiarly Canadian at all, but are typical of their wider and Western contexts” (216-17).
what Marshall McLuhan calls the “rear-view mirror logic” that older arts are necessarily better arts (4). Similarly, Canada is often approached as a second and therefore secondary version of other countries’ political systems and cultural heritage, including those of England, France, and America. As “New France” and the “New World,” Canada was set up to be a national adaptation of its Old World European colonizers. The popularity of William Shakespeare’s plays on Canadian stages, not to mention Stratford Ontario’s replica of London’s Globe theatre, speak to Canada’s strong and continued lineage of borrowers. As Knowles relates, “Ever since the Europeans first ‘discovered’ Canada (much to the chagrin of the people inhabiting the land at the time), residents of the particular slice of Turtle Island constituted by the settler/invaders as Canada have of necessity been adapting to Shakespeare and everything that he has come to represent. Adaptation, therefore, is an ongoing and self-perpetuating process in Canada rather than a canon of works” (Shakespeare’s Mine vi). Adaptation is particularly relevant to Canada on a thematic, political, and literary level because it captures Canada’s settler-invader narratives, colonial ties, and long-standing literary tradition of retelling European mythologies, respectively. The act of literary and political adaptation, then, can be seen as a dominant mode of cultural creation in Canada.

Canadian literary adaptations’ approach to their sources has changed over time from a respectful indebtedness and method for mythologizing Canadian heritage to, more recently, a political desire for change and a critique of the inherited stories of Canada’s

---

8 As one of the most produced playwrights in Canada, “Shakespeare,” Makaryk asserts, “reigns supreme as one of Canada’s pre-eminent playwrights” (5). Critical of Canada’s investment in a national theatre dominated by the British Bard, Denis Salter explains that “as an unimpeachable symbol of Old World cultural superiority,” Shakespeare is often “regarded as a Canadian playwright” (“Idea” 79-80).
cultural imaginary (shared and inherited narratives). It comes as no surprise that
Canada’s literary adaptations reflect the larger artistic and theoretical trends of their
times. Analyzing dramatic adaptations is especially apt in Canada because it allows for
a consideration of Canadian literature in the context of a vibrant international discussion.
For instance, there is an abundance of recent scholarship on postcolonial adaptations of
Shakespeare in transnational contexts, such as Thomas Cartelli’s Repositioning
Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations (1999) and Melanie
Ann Stevenson’s Re-Settling the “Bard”: Postcolonial Parody in Canadian and
Australian Appropriations of Shakespeare (1998). Recent critical anthologies further
demonstrate a twinning consideration of postcolonialism and transnationalism with
works like Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage (2008);
Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres, and Cultures (2003);
Shakespeare and Appropriation (1999); Shakespeare’s Legacy: The Appropriation of the
Plays in Post-Colonial Drama (2005); and World-Wide Shakespeares: Local
 Appropriations in Film and Performance (2005). The anthologies’ use of plural
“Shakespeares” rather than the singular “Shakespeare,” in Native Shakespeares and
World-Wide Shakespeares, emphasizes the sheer volume and diversity of literary re-
imaginings of the playwright’s work across the world. Shakespeare’s The Tempest, in
particular, has been a popular source of postcolonial adaptations. The ‘Tempest’ and Its

9 See Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1983) for his founding definitions of collective
imaginaries as a constituting force behind nations and nationalism.
10 Amy Green’s The Revisionist Stage charts a similar trajectory in American theatre over the last century
from the use of Shakespeare as a bastion of high culture to an adaptable subject for “fusions of high and
popular cultural and multicultural casts” (180). Green concentrates on the director’s choices when adapting
what she calls classical theatre for a contemporary American stage, coining the terms “rewright” and
“rewrighting” to distinguish “a director’s revision from a new author’s ‘rewriting’ of an old play (as
Brecht, Anouilh, Stoppard)” (xi). My study, by contrast, takes into account directorial choices of different
productions, but focuses on the playwrights’ retelling of an earlier, popular narrative for a decidedly
political purpose.
Travels, by Peter Hulme and William Sherman, explores contemporary dramatizations and translations from abroad, including the Mediterranean, Caribbean, North America, and South America. Peter Dickinson’s “Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre” discusses adaptations of Shakespeare for an African diasporic context by examining Sears’s Harlem Duet alongside Aimé Césaire’s Une tempête and Murray Carlin’s Not Now, Sweet Desdemona. What these many works exemplify is not only the transnational popularity of Shakespeare adaptations and adaptation studies, but also the pronounced postcolonial and international dimensions to this established field. These adaptation studies suggest that Canada’s propensity to borrow earlier narratives is no longer a weak anomaly in the field of world literatures but rather a significant political strategy for effecting cultural transformation.

Adaptation is an especially pertinent form of postcolonial art and, in a nation as multicultural and heterogeneous as Canada, its postcolonial emphases are particularly useful for exploring individual and group identities and the intersections between them. In “Performing Modernism: Adaptation and its Discontents,” for instance, Linda Hutcheon suggests that an adaptation unavoidably threatens to colonize the imagination by presenting one view of the source text, thereby prompting the audience to share in the adaptor’s singular imaginative response. In other words, the adaptation re-colonizes the viewer’s imagination. Adaptation, as a literary form and as a theory, is thus already situated within the dynamics of colonial conquest and of re-colonization. My focus on revisionist adaptation responds to and takes account of Canada’s contribution to the worldwide phenomenon of political adaptations.

11 For further discussion of postcolonialism in Canadian literature and how it engages with British, American and First Nations literatures, see Laura Moss’s (editor) Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature (2003).
Literary Contexts: Adaptation Studies

Despite the long-standing popularity of Canadian dramatic adaptations, there have been relatively few critical works on the politics of Canadian retellings or re-identifications of canonical narratives and characters. This lack of critical attention may be due to the fact that these adaptations are not perceived to be utterly Canadian. Ironically, however, these adaptations are perhaps more Canadian because of their announced ties to international sources. Due in part to the popularity of Ontario’s Stratford Shakespeare Festival, the relatively few scholars who do study Canadian drama adaptations tend to concentrate on Canada’s burgeoning field of Shakespeare adaptation studies. The digital Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (2004), headed by Daniel Fischlin at the University of Guelph, identifies over five hundred Canadian plays that adapt Shakespeare, dating back to 1848. And when Ann-Marie MacDonald recast Desdemona as a powerful warrior in her play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) in 1988, she helped destabilize gender roles and popularize a long-standing literary trend of Canadian Shakespeare adaptations. Clarke’s Gertrude and Ophelia (1992), Ken Gass’s Claudius (1993) and Michael O’Brien’s Mad Boy Chronicle (1995) adapt Hamlet by exploring the character of Ophelia as a motherless young woman, a sexually-charged subject, and as a determined agent of revenge, respectively. Sears’s Harlem Duet (1997) approaches Othello as an example of North America’s long-standing fascination with miscegenation narratives and the promised danger of interracial relationships. Yvette Nolan and Kennedy Cathy MacKinnon’s Death of a Chief (2006,
2008) adapt *Julius Caesar* with an Aboriginal cast that explores cultural issues of betrayal with the “Indian” Brutus. These rewritings of Shakespeare’s plays that foreground previously marginalized characters, victims, and racialized figures are part of a larger movement in Canadian drama and abroad to reconfigure canonical works from a different, contemporary or marginal perspective.

Even the scholarship on Canadian Shakespeare adaptations, which is the most popular subject in adaptation studies, underscores the need for further research. Fischlin and Knowles edited a 2002 issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* exclusively on *Adapting Shakespeare in Canada*, and Diana Brydon and Makaryk’s book *Shakespeare in Canada: ‘a world elsewhere’* (2002) marked the “first book-length study of Shakespeare in Canada” but noted that there are still many unanswered questions in the “little-explored archive” (Preface xi). Knowles’s *Shakespeare and Canada: Essays on Production, Translation, and Adaptation* (2004) is the only single-author text to date that explores dramatic Shakespeare adaptations in Canada. In 2009, Canada Playwrights Press published two anthologies on Canadian Shakespeare adaptations: one on Anglophone Canada (edited by Knowles) and one on Francophone Canada (edited by Leanore Lieblein). Although these recent works signal the popularity of theorizing Shakespeare adaptations and invite further inquiry, they do not discuss non-Shakespearean adaptations. The focus on Shakespeare is far too narrow and despite the postcolonial theoretical framework of many of these studies, they inevitably privilege the colonial heritage by focusing exclusively on the Bard. This is not to say that Shakespeare adaptations are not fruitful subjects of scholarship but rather that the scholarly net needs to be cast wider to take into account the full range of Canadian adaptations.
My study expands the scope of source texts from Shakespeare, where it appropriately began, to include adaptations of Canadian history (Sinking Neptune), colonial legend (Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, Almighty Voice and His Wife), and Greek myth (The Penelopiad: The Play, If We Were Birds).\textsuperscript{12} The Canadian preoccupation with reclaiming popular narratives and identificatory acts is not restricted to Shakespearean sources and my research represents this significant range in sources. Canadian literature, as my project demonstrates, is also invested in French, American, and ancient Greek narratives to name only a few. Expanding the scope beyond Shakespeare sources also builds on the current field of literary adaptation by further demonstrating the widespread preoccupation with revising narratives in Canada.

If adaptation theory teaches us anything it is that there is never a singular or authoritative source but rather an ever-expanding corpus of intertextual networks and literary transformations. After all, Shakespeare was himself an adaptor. The organization of my dissertation—with chapters on distinct revisionist strategies and a range of sources—offers an alternative to the common focus on one source and thereby reshapes adaptation studies by engaging in a methodology that reflects the multiplicity of sources. In this way, my project speaks to the newer turn in adaptation theory that no longer privileges a singular ur text.

\textsuperscript{12} All references to The Penelopiad indicate Atwood’s play rather than her novella version unless otherwise noted.
Revisionist Drama: Adaptation with Political and Politicized Difference

My study investigates a specific form of adaptation: revisionist adaptation. Revisionist works are politically charged adaptations that seek to reframe a popular and widely accepted narrative with a new critical perspective. In particular, I explore how Canadian drama adapts popular narratives—national histories, colonial legends, Greek mythology, and Shakespearean plays—by changing the identities of minority or marginalized figures. Canadian revisionist plays critique cultural figures such as Penelope, Othello, and Pocahontas as reductive emblems of necessarily complex, layered racial, sexual, and gendered identities. My chapters, which are organized according to source texts, establish a set of literary and dramatic methodologies (speech acts, verbatim theatre, audience participation) for writing back to the original. Revisionist adaptations ultimately reproduce earlier strategies of oppression, as well as earlier narratives of marginalization, in order to destabilize these methods. For instance, Lescarbot’s *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* (1606) and OTL’s *Sinking Neptune* (2006) expose red face—a simple trick of stage makeup—as a not-so-simple performance of colonial conquest. My project analyzes twelve methodologies, as outlined below, that are repeatedly used to challenge popular conceptions of what it means to be Black, Aboriginal, Canadian, queer, or female.

These strategies of racial, gender, and sexual identification are of particular interest to the playwrights I examine because they were writing at a time when there was a strong demand for representational narratives told from a distinct, marginalized
The critical emphasis on literary “firsts” during the 1980s and 90s exemplifies the demand for representational works from an authoritative point of view at the time: Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* (1986) was received as part of the “vanguard” of “Native theatre artists” writing their own stories “for the first time” (Wasserman, *Modern* 183); Sears’s *Afrika Solo* (1989) was touted as the first play published by an African-Canadian woman; and Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas* (1993) was celebrated as the first play from a Latino-Canadian perspective. By at once resisting this demand for totalizing narratives that capture a cultural heritage and trying to offer a new version of the Pocahontas legend, Mojica’s “Contemporary Woman #1” character asserts that “I do not represent all Native women” at the end of *Princess Pocahontas* and makes it quite clear that “I am one” (59). My project’s primary

---

13 Canadian politics have informed and shaped the literary and scholarly focus on identity constructions in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Canadian drama. With the 1971 federal policy “Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework” and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1981), race moved to centre stage in the Canadian theatres. For further analysis on the contexts and effects of multicultural policies in Canada, see Raymond Breton’s *Ethnic Relations in Canada: Institutional Dynamics* (2005).

14 In reaction to the growing popularity of Indigenous playwrights, Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* asserts that “the most exciting development in the 1980s has taken place in Drama” (170). The 1980s also saw the creation of theatres dedicated to producing work by and about Native people, such as Nakai Theatre (1979) in the Yukon, De-ba-jeh-mujig Theatre (1981) at Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island, and Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto (1982); more recently, Crazy Horse Theatre opened in Calgary in 2000. In addition to Highway (Cree), many other Native playwrights have been performed across Canada, including plays by Marie Clements (Métis), Floyd Favel (Plains Cree), Margo Kane (Cree, Saulteaux), Mojica (Kuna, Rappahannock), Moses (Métis), Nolan (Algonquin), Ian Ross (Métis, Ojibway), and Drew Haydon Taylor (Ojibway). The two volumes of *Staging Coyote’s Dream* (2003, 2009), edited by Mojica and Knowles, offer anthologies of English plays by First Nations writers.

revisionist plays, written between 1990 and 2008, engage in this historical and political moment with its interest in representational and racial narratives.  

While theorists, such as Judith Butler, Michel Pêcheux, and José Esteban Muñoz, conceive of identity in terms of performance, I invert the theoretical relationship by treating revisionist performance as a mode of identification and as a potentially powerful cultural vehicle for changing the way audiences conceive of and partake in cultural groups. In Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, Muñoz elaborates on and politicizes Pêcheux’s concept of disidentification by defining it as a strategy that “works on and against dominant ideology” (11). Muñoz defines three identificatory relationships with mainstream culture: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. With identification, a subject chooses to identify with dominant ideologies. With counteridentification, by contrast, a subject refuses to participate and instead isolates him or herself from the dominant society. Lastly, with disidentification, the subject participates in society but with an intention to change it from within. These identificatory subject positions lend themselves to literary adaptations because the adaptor negotiates a relationship with a narrative that is often mainstream and highly recognizable to the public. I build on disidentification theory by not only applying it to individual characters but also to the mode of literary adaptation itself.

---

16 Dobson argues that the postcolonial writings of the 1980s and 90s, or “the proliferation of what has been called ‘minority’ writing,” challenge Atwood’s and Frye’s articulations of national identity (xiii).

17 Muñoz’s analysis of disidentificatory strategies builds on Pêcheux’s theories of the “discursive formations on the subject-form” (Language Semantics and Ideology 155). In Language Semantics and Ideology, Pêcheux defines three modalities of the subject: “good subject,” “bad subject,” and a “non-subjective position” (157-58). The “good subject” consents to dominant ideology, whereas the “bad subject . . . turns against” it (157). The “bad subject” effectively “counteridentifies with the discursive formation imposed on him” (157).

18 Identification, as distinct from identity, is the process of identifying oneself or others.
Revisionist adaptation, I argue, performs disidentification by at once identifying with and against a source text. Understanding literary adaptation in terms of identification theory helps to account for the political work of the revisionist adaptor and provides terminology for analyzing the relationship between adapted and adaptive narratives. The adaptation’s intrinsic doubleness—an embrace and rejection of the source—creates a politicized palimpsest in the minds of the viewers that forever layers the original with the revisionist version. At the end of Shields’s *If We Were Birds* (2008), an adaptation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (8 AD), Philomela speaks to her own personal trauma and the audience’s memories of Shields’s bloody play, explaining, “the memories are forever wedged in our thoughts. / There is no escape or release” (65). More than a mode of re-narration, revisionist drama is a popular form for political works that seek to change dominant identity structures of race, gender, and sexuality, among others.

My project offers the first theorization of revisionist adaptation as well as the first dissertation-length study of Canadian adaptations that explores multiple sources. The revisionist strategies, not an individual source, function as my overarching organizational model. This study also contributes a new theorization of adaptation studies by integrating it with disidentification theory. Revisionist theatre transforms the source narratives on a macro level with revised plots and updated historical contexts as well as on the micro level with characters’ individual self-defining statements. My research at once examines the plays’ larger political goals as well as their inset identificatory utterances, such as the definition of the self (“I am”), the definition of the self in relation to others (“they are” and “I am not”), and the self-definition of individual groups (“we are”). While the first two chapters investigate strategies for identifying groups (“they are” and “we are”), the
final two chapters examine self-identificatory utterances (“I am not” and “I am”).

Through this twin focus, my project investigates the relationship between individual and collective identities and thereby captures the plays’ fundamental duality as they re-identify individual characters (Othello, Pocahontas, Penelope) in order to challenge collective cultural, racial, and gender stereotypes.

Chapter one considers Lescarbot’s *The Theatre of Neptune* (1606), which is often celebrated as the first play written in what is now called Canada, alongside OTL’s critical remounting *Sinking Neptune* (2006). OTL uses collective creation, slide projections, intertextuality, and audience participation to challenge the historical significance of Lescarbot’s play as a national first. Chapter two examines adaptations of Greek myth and the privileging of a collective “we” in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and Shields’s *If We Were Birds*. This chapter applies theories of publics (Habermas), counterpublics (Warner), and disidentification (Muñoz) to theatre audiences. Because the current theoretical binary of dominant publics and subversive counterpublics is too stratified to capture the theatre audience as a political entity, I argue that *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* transform the audiences into what I call a dispublic—a group of people that simultaneously participate in and transform the dominant public imaginary. Chapter three turns to Shakespeare adaptations and the repetition of “I am not” statements in Sears’s *Harlem Duet* and Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia*. In at once aligning with and separating from previous “I am” utterances, these “I am not” declarations function as microcosms for the plays’ larger disidentificatory relationship to their literary sources. Chapter four ends the study with a consideration of “I am” statements in Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* and Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. Mojica and Moses’s plays move
beyond disidentification and revisionism by successfully reclaiming the Indigenous myths of Pocahontas and Almighty Voice. In short, I examine revisionist adaptations’ identifications of the self, not self, and collective, as well as their transformation of the popular imaginary. My chapter alignment reinforces a spectrum of revisionist adaptations that range from verbatim retellings, to spin-offs, to works that effectively discredit the sources: chapters one and two begin with works that engage in absolute fidelity with their sources, chapter three examines a prequel and an expansion, and the fourth chapter turns to plays where narrative fidelity to the source is no longer a relevant issue because the revisionist works replace the originals as the more accurate versions of the colonial legends. My fourth and final chapter reveals a goal of revisionist adaptation—to displace the original—while my sequence of chapters demonstrates the significance of political infidelity, more so than narrative fidelity, to a source when examining revisionist adaptation.

**Charting Revisionist Adaptations on the Adaptation Continuum**

As indicated by my chapter organization, the sub-genre of revisionist drama complicates the criterion for defining literary adaptation: the adaptation’s degree of fidelity to the original. Because adaptations are judged based on their faithfulness to the source(s), Stam explains that the language of critical commentary on adaptations is “extremely judgmental,” including accusations of parasitism with pejoratives such as “‘infidelity,’ ‘betrayal,’ ‘deformation,’ ‘violation,’ ‘vulgarization,’ ‘bastardization,’ and ‘desecration’” (*Literature 3*). In a 2004 review of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning*
Juliet), for example, Murray Bramwell denounces the play’s parodic comedy and asserts that “There have been plenty of instances of scripts which use the bard as their subject—Shakespeare in Love, for instance and Stoppard’s masterly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But intertextuality is an essentially parasitic business and there are pitfalls for the writer” (emphasis added, 23). “In many—perhaps most—cases,” Russell H. Hunt generalizes, “the theatrical adaptation remains parasitic on the fictional text.”19 These negative assumptions about adaptation as “parasitic” have motivated recent theories of adaptation and are especially threatening to Canadian literary adaptations given the national anxiety of influence. Along with Stam, Hutcheon explains that she “want[s] to challenge that reductive, negative rhetoric—and theorizing—that see adaptations as inevitably derivative and unfaithful to the adapted works” (“From Page” 50). The attacks on adaptation as “parasitic” or “derivative” are not only being taken up by theorists such as Stam and Hutcheon, but also by literary adaptors themselves, such as Clarke and Sears, who anticipate derogatory comparisons to their paternal forbearer (see Chapter 3). Parasitism, however, is not much of a concern with revisionist adaptation because this form of adaptation emphasizes a political remove from the original. While adaptors often value narrative fidelity, revisionist adaptors place a premium on political change.

To help distinguish types of adaptation, Hutcheon charts a continuum of adaptation that ranges from a focus on fidelity to infidelity with prior texts. As Hutcheon says, “At one end, we find those forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility,” such as translations and transcriptions (171); at the other end of the continuum, we find spin-offs, sequels, prequels, and expansions

19 Hunt assumes the parasitical nature of literary adaptation in his review of a Canadian stage adaptation of David Adams Richard’s novel Nights Below Station Street.
“Adaptation proper” falls in the middle of the continuum, along with retellings and revisions of popular narratives, where “stories are both reinterpreted and rerelated” (Hutcheon 171):

![Figure 1: Hutcheon’s Continuum of Adaptations](image)

Though this continuum is extremely helpful in visualizing the spectrum of adaptation types, Hutcheon’s placement of revisions in the middle of the continuum needs to account for the fact that political infidelity is a theoretical ideal for revisionist works.

Revisionist adaptations are difficult to chart on this continuum because they are often faithful to the original’s plot but are unfaithful to the original’s political structures and representations of marginal or minority figures. OTL’s *Sinking Neptune* (2006), for example, adapts Lescarbot’s oceanic masque *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle France* (1606) in protest against Lescarbot’s portrayal of *les sauvages*. *Sinking Neptune* includes the complete original script of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and could thus be charted on the repetition end of the continuum. In fact, as a piece of verbatim theatre, the entire play repeats existing texts and passages. But, aside from this fidelity to earlier scripts and texts, OTL adamantly critiques *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as an agent of cultural genocide. *Sinking Neptune* thus complicates Hutcheon’s adaptation continuum: the play aims to change the cultural reception of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, while at the same time repeating the original script verbatim. Charting *Sinking Neptune* on Hutcheon’s continuum as an
“adaptation proper” does not capture the play’s political aims, which are essential to its genre. In short, the continuum does not take account of the complexities that emerge from turning a single-layered text into a dual layered political allegory that resonates with the earlier work as well as with the present-day context and readers.

Hutcheon herself explains, “the political, aesthetic, and autobiographical intentions of the various adapters are potentially relevant to the audience’s interpretation” (107). While Hutcheon contributes an organizing structure to adaptation theory and acknowledges that political intentions are central to the tenor of the adaptation, *A Theory of Adaptation* does not account for the adaptor’s political motivations. I would like to build on Hutcheon’s continuum by adding a vertical axis that measures the adaptation’s political fidelity to the source:

![Figure 2: Grid of Revisionist Adaptations](image)

The vertical axis transforms the horizontal continuum into a grid, which enables a more accurate graphing of revisionist adaptations’ narrative fidelity and all-important political infidelity. The grid now accounts for *Sinking Neptune*’s political work as well as its
verbatim re-enactment of the original. Furthermore, charting Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, Shields’s *If We Were Birds*, and Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia* on the grid calls attention to the plays’ political reframing of the sources, which may otherwise have been lost on Hutcheon’s continuum. These feminist works fall in the middle of the narrative fidelity spectrum and near the top of the political infidelity axis.

The grid also helps to distinguish examples such as Sears’s highly political spin-off, *Harlem Duet*—a prequel to *Othello*—from the other more celebratory and commercialized spin-offs that Hutcheon discusses, including musicals, television series, and video games that focus on a specific character or element from the original work. Hutcheon credits the popularity of spin-offs to their “financial appeal” (5) because spin-offs, like all adaptations, can capitalize on the pre-established popularity of a specific story or character. There are many examples of spin-offs in popular culture, such as Winnie Holzman’s novel, and subsequent Broadway musical, *Wicked* (1995) that tells the story of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) from the perspective of the so-called Wicked Witch of the West. Jean Rhys’s novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a spin-off of Charlotte Brontë’s canonical *Jane Eyre* (1847) and it expands on the life of Bertha Mason (the mad woman in the attic). These two examples, however, are very different in that *Wicked* celebrates its relationship to *The Wizard of Oz* with cameos by Dorothy, whereas *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial critique of Brontë’s clichéd *other* Bertha Mason. The category of revisionist drama and my grid of adaptations manifest these differences.20

---

20 In addition to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Canadian plays already discussed, other revisionist works that take colonial legends, Greek mythology, and historical narratives as their sources include but are not limited to J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986) and Derek Walcott’s play *Pantomime* (1978) both of which adapt Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) from a postcolonial perspective. Taking Sophocles’s *Antigone* as their source, Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s play *The Island* (1973) protests apartheid in South Africa and Jean Marie Lucien Pierre Anouilh’s play *Antigone* (1943) attacks the Vichy
As my chart demonstrates, when revisionist plays become so successful in their transformation of dominant myths, their narrative fidelity to the earlier works is no longer a defining factor because the adaptations replace the sources as the authoritative works. How, for instance, would you chart Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* and Moses’s *Almighty Voice* on Hutcheon’s continuum when these two plays reclaim, rather than merely retell, popular myths of Indigenous folk heroes from non-white authors? The plays’ success as revisionist works can be more accurately reflected by the political fidelity axis because the earlier versions of the two legends—such as John Smith’s letters to the Queen about Pocahontas and Leonard Peterson’s children’s play about Almighty Voice—are now considered to be highly problematic and untrustworthy reductions of Indigenous culture. My fourth chapter concludes this study with its analysis of two plays that go beyond the category of revisionist adaptations and do much more than critically reframe earlier narratives—they reclaim them.

**Twelve Strategies of Revisionist Drama: Process, Form, and Style**

While each of the chapters focuses on two plays and specific performative strategies, such as the Greek chorus or “I am” utterances, the plays I have selected for examination demonstrate a larger set of revisionist methods. The creative process, production elements, discursive form, and style all contribute to the playwrights’
overarching efforts to transform the political relevance of popular source narratives. Below, I outline twelve potential strategies and characteristics of revisionist theatre. Although revisionist playwrights do not all utilize the same set of strategies, these twelve techniques begin to define a set of revisionist methodologies particular to drama. These twelve techniques not only offer a model for future analysis of revisionist plays but also for future generic distinctions between dramatic, fictional, and poetic revisionism as the field of revisionist adaptation develops.

1) Collective Creation and Versioning

As revisionist playwrights adapt the original’s genre, narrative, and political structures, even the creative and rehearsal process can contribute to the revisionist project. In challenging the celebrations of Lescarbot’s *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a historical first with the play *Sinking Neptune*, OTL’s creation process contributed to the de-hierarchizing project in three significant ways. Firstly, *Sinking Neptune* is a piece of verbatim theatre, which means that all of its content is taken from other sources: it cites numerous news reports of the quadricentennial anniversary, theatre criticism, theatre mandates, Lescarbot’s historical documents, and of course, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* itself. But because the play re-enacts press scrums and academic lectures, Lescarbot is not the single driving voice or source and is instead only one of many. Secondly, OTL uses collective creation—a democratic process that refuses to privilege one individual as the leading author or authority. This democratizing creative method goes hand in hand with *Sinking Neptune’s* emphasis on cultural equality. Finally, OTL constantly updates *Sinking Neptune* with new sources, which means that there is no singular authoritative script. This perpetual versioning anticipates and essentially precludes the valorization of
the written document above the performative event. With their multiple scripts, OTL
treats theatre as a live event that is necessarily changing with every production. Whereas
the value of *Sinking Neptune* comes from its live performances, the value of *Le Théâtre
de Neptune* emanates from its survival as a document. This practical process correlates
with OTL’s overarching argument that celebrating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as Canada’s
first documented play effectively hierarchizes French colonists above the indigenous
Mi’kmaq tribe and written documents above performed orality. Nolan and MacKinnon’s
*Death of a Chief* and Richard Rose, Maggie Huculak, Duncan Ollerenshaw, Rick
Roberts, Maria Vacratsis’s *Hysterica* (2000) are further examples of revisionist
adaptations created by collective authorships that celebrate the collaborative creation
process at the heart of all adaptations.

2) Multiple Sources and Intertexts

A revisionist play often features multiple sources and intertexts, which effectively
avoids reifying a single text as the original. In addition to OTL, Atwood, Mojica, and
Sears also call attention to the multiple sources of inspiration for their revisionist plays.
In her introduction to *The Penelopiad*, Atwood explains that she adapts Homer’s *The
Odyssey* as well as many other Trojan War materials including post-Homeric retellings
by Ovid, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Tennyson, James Joyce, Derek Walcott, Barry
Unsworth, Lewis Hyde, and many others. Similarly, Mojica’s printed version of *Princess
Pocahontas* includes a list of works consulted. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears begins each scene
with music—it is, after all, what Sears calls a “rhapsodic blues tragedy”—and sound
recordings of interviews and speeches (“nOTES” 14). These recordings include several
specimens of American popular culture: readings of the Declaration of Independence and
the emancipation proclamation; news reports on the Million Man March, the OJ Simpson trial, Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley’s marriage, the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings; and speeches by Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Paul Robeson, Louis Farrakhan, and Jesse Jackson. The play’s final sound recording features a reading of Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem.” These many intertexts signal over a dozen sources of inspiration for *Harlem Duet* in addition to Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Revisionist playwrights not only use many intertexts but are careful to draw attention to this plurality, which avoids privileging any one text as the authoritative original source.

3) **Identifiable yet Politicized Source**

Adaptations, as Hutcheon explains, often announce their adaptive relationship to a specific original work either through the title itself, such as Julie Taymor’s film *Titus* (1999), or with recognizable characters, as in Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966). Revisionist adaptations also use titles and character names to announce their source, but perhaps more importantly, the titles and names simultaneously signal an overt political approach to the source(s). The titles of Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia*, MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, and Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* announce the playwrights’ feminist adaptation of Shakespeare and Homer through their focus on the famous female characters. Comparatively, *Harlem Duet*’s characters Othello, Mona, and Yago are recognizable figures from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, but the title, in turn, gestures towards Sears’s focus on race relations in America’s Harlem. In short, while adaptations’ titles and character names immediately establish a narrative connection with the sources, revisionist adaptations also emphasize a political approach.
4) Didacticism

The inclusion of recognizable elements from the sources also serves a didactic purpose. Revisionist adaptations tend to instruct the audience about the source, its critical reception over time, and the political implications of its enduring popularity. The effects of this didacticism are two-fold: on the one hand, it avoids constructing a hierarchical audience of knowing and unknowing viewers, and on the other hand, it is a key component to the adaptation’s political work because it shapes the audience’s knowledge of the original. *Sinking Neptune* teaches its audience about *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, the colonial context, the scholarly treatment of the masque as Canada’s first production, and the 400th anniversary debates about the contemporary value of the play. *Harlem Duet* teaches its audiences about the history of separatist and assimilationist politics, as well as the performances of *Othello* in blackface. Atwood begins *The Penelopiad* with Penelope’s summary of the cultural reception of *The Odyssey* and her literary role as an unrealistic ideal of female loyalty, monogamy, and patience. Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* teaches its audience about Indigenous naming ceremonies and the inheritance of blue spots. *Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* parody the commodification and hyper-sexualization of Indians in popular culture, which provides an instructive catalogue of contemporary stereotypes, such as the Cigar-Store Indian, the sexy squaw, and Tonto. In instructing the audience on the source narratives, revisionist playwrights do not punish audience members with little to no prior knowledge of the targeted source and stereotypes; instead the playwrights equip their audiences with knowledge of the political issue at hand—such as racial, cultural, or gender stereotypes—and with strategies for how to counter the mainstream narratives of oppression.
5) Staging

Revisionist adaptations sometimes keep the source’s main character offstage as a way of spatially inverting the relationship between the original’s central and marginal characters. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood’s Odysseus only appears for the briefest of moments whereas Penelope and her Handmaids dominate the centre stage. In *Harlem Duet*, the audience only ever sees Mona’s gloved white hand as she waves to Othello from offstage. Clarke battles to keep Hamlet offstage via her inset playwright who insists that Shakespeare’s title character will only interfere with her focus on Gertrude and Ophelia. In these plays, the conspicuous absence of the source’s main characters spatializes the playwright’s struggle to diminish the presence of these iconic figures in our cultural imaginary.

6) Casting

Casting can also reinforce the playwright’s revisionist mandate and political approach. Nightwood Theatre’s 2012 production of *The Penelopiad* does more than shine a spotlight on *The Odyssey*’s female characters; it features an all-female cast that applies Atwood’s narrative focus on female characters to the casting and leaves no opportunity for male intrusion. While *The Penelopiad* does not explicitly call for only female actors, the script to *Harlem Duet* necessitates an all-Black cast in order to reverse the racial dynamics of the earlier productions of *Othello* that featured all white actors. With a playful nod to and reversal of the minstrel tradition, at Tarragon Theatre’s premiere production of *Harlem Duet*, it was a Black actress who, with the wave of a

---

21 While cross-racial casting remains a controversial issue, Ken Gass’s 2011 production of *The Rez Sisters* at Toronto’s Factory Theatre experimented with casting actors from diverse racial backgrounds. This casting choice is part of Gass’s SSHRC-funded project that tests cross-racial casting, which responds to Highway’s complaint, in *Prairie Fire* magazine (2001), that his plays would see more productions if directors were not as concerned with casting only Aboriginal actors to play the parts.
white-gloved hand, played the minor role of Mona. *The Penelopiad*’s all-female cast and *Harlem Duet*’s all-Black cast enact the play’s political agendas: to bring to centre stage those who have been previously marginalized.

7) **Audience Participation**

In order to stimulate a politically active audience, the revisionist plays feature audience involvement either by casting the spectators in specific roles or by breaking the fourth wall with a plea for change. When plays like *Sinking Neptune* and *Almighty Voice* cast the audience as part of the problem rather than the solution, they draw attention to this issue and highlight the need for change. In the first scene of *Sinking Neptune*, we are cast in the role of news reporters who applaud celebratory re-enactments of Lescarbot’s racist play. In the second act of *Almighty Voice*, the racist Interlocutor treats the audience as “good friends” (40) who think that “the only good Indians are the dead ones” (40). In casting the audience as overtly racist onlookers, OTL and Moses emphasize our complicity in the continuing narratives of Aboriginal people’s cultural and historical inferiority. In a more direct request for the audience’s activism, the opening scenes of *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* begin with pleas for the audience to listen to the Greek myths from Penelope’s and Philomela’s perspectives. Penelope and Philomela each struggle to get through to the audience even though they “want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!” (*Penelopiad* 4). In this way, the revisionist playwrights do not cast the audience in a comfortable and congratulatory role, but instead challenge the viewers to actively participate in the protests against *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, Indian stereotypes, or idealized icons of female passivity as the case may be. Revisionist adaptations call for
activist audiences to carry on the goals of change.\textsuperscript{22}

8) Metatheatricality

The direct addresses to the audience are just one example of revisionist plays’ common use of metatheatricality. \textit{Sinking Neptune, Harlem Duet, The Penelopiad, If We Were Birds, Gertrude and Ophelia, Almighty Voice, and Goodnight Desdemona} all feature inset performances that draw attention to the play’s own theatricality. In each case, the metatheatricality emphasizes the performativity of prescribed racial or gender roles. \textit{Sinking Neptune}, for example, emphasizes the flimsiness of racial stereotypes as fictional performances with little basis in reality by showing an actor transform into a red-faced savage through costume and face paint alone. Similarly, \textit{Harlem Duet} features an inset actor from 1928 who reluctantly applies blackface and argues against the typecasting of Black actors. \textit{Gertrude and Ophelia} and \textit{Goodnight Desdemona} reveal the performativity of masculinity and femininity, and use Shakespeare’s play-within-a-play method to debunk the serious Shakespearean sources and male characters as comedic subjects of ridicule. Clarke and MacDonald also show how women can combat the patriarchal readings of \textit{Hamlet} and \textit{Othello} by casting Gertrude, Ophelia, and Desdemona as empowered or well-rounded characters. Moses similarly includes a “Playlet” scene that involves multiple layers of racechange and cross-dressing. These revisionist adaptations harness the performativity of racialized and gendered identities in order to de-naturalize accepted constructs of Black, Indigenous, or feminine identities.

9) Discursive Register

In addition to altering the source’s title, characters, casting, and identity politics,

\textsuperscript{22} Using Michael Warner’s theory of counterpublics, Chapter four explores the role of the real and inset audiences in Atwood’s \textit{The Penelopiad} and Shields’s \textit{If We Were Birds}. 
some revisionist adaptations change the original’s literary and linguistic register as part of the critical process and transformation. The difference in form or genre often undermines the high seriousness of the original. For instance, Atwood’s twelve Maids enter the play by singing a “Rope-Jumping Rhyme” that tells of “every goddess, queen, and bitch” that “scratched [Odysseus’s] itch” (4). Part Greek Chorus and part chorus-line, the twelve Maids perform children games, cabaret-style numbers, and salacious limericks. *The Penelopiad* distances itself from Homer’s high literary epics, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, as Atwood’s Penelope calls Helen a “septic bitch” and joins the Chorus in musical numbers. In this way, the Chorus and Penelope not only refute the dominant narrative of Odysseus’s heroic journey but also reduce the literary epic to a punch line.

By comparison, Moses’s use of vaudeville and minstrelsy in the second act of *Almighty Voice* reveals the violence involved in reducing Indigenous culture to entertaining red-faced performances, thereby critiquing the very theatrical forms he seems to uphold. Moses imbues the comedic minstrel tradition with tragic tenor, while Atwood injects high epic poetry with slapstick vignettes. Yet both playwrights adapt literary and dramatic forms only to turn them on their head.

10) Structure

With *Princess Pocahontas*, Mojica goes so far as to reject the European theatre structure of acts and scenes all together, instead opting to organize her play by the cycles of the moon. Mojica’s structure foregrounds transformation and continuity as an alternative to the more hierarchical and linear, numbered scene divisions. In refusing to use the popular European play structure, Mojica asks the question: whose theatre tradition are we partaking in? Mojica does not simply alter an original discursive form;
she presents an alternative and innovative performance structure. *Princess Pocahontas* is a good example of how a revisionist play can completely change the messages of the popular narrative (the colonial myth that John Smith saved Pocahontas by introducing her to civility) and thereby replaces the dominant version.

*Sinking Neptune*’s play structure also speaks to its political mission. OTL organizes the play by “units,” which echoes teaching units and thereby foregrounds the production’s didactic intentions. OTL even includes a final “Talk back” unit—effectively a question and answer period between the audience and actors—that emphasizes the play’s open structure by encouraging critical dialogue. These revisionist playwrights use both form and content to articulate their political messages.

11) Anti-linear Narrative

*Princess Pocahontas*’s transformative structure also exemplifies the revisionist trend of using an anti-linear narrative. Mojica presents a non-linear story with quick jumps in time, place, action, and character. A non-linear narrative is especially relevant to postcolonial works like *Princess Pocahontas* because it rejects the premise that there can be a first or a singular beginning—a common claim in colonial rhetoric that capitalizes on historical firsts. The rejection of a historical first is also quite pertinent to literary adaptations, because as Stam explains, they are commonly persecuted as belated artistic works. Sears anticipates the valorization of Shakespeare’s work as historically first by positioning *Harlem Duet* as a prequel to *Othello* set in present-day Harlem: *Harlem Duet* thus historically follows but narratively precedes *Othello*. The anti-linear narrative, then, serves as a defense for popular denunciations of adaptations as belated works.
12) Self-Declarations

In my analysis of revisionist adaptations, I have uncovered a recurring theme of self-definition that manifests itself through the self-defining utterances “I am,” “I am not,” and “We are.” The repetition of these climactic utterances across different revisionist plays creates an intertextual chorus that harmonizes the goals of self-identification. Revisionist works such as MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona* (1988), Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* (1990), Moses’s *Almighty Voice* (1991), Nolan and MacKinnon’s *Death of a Chief* (2006, 2008), and Nicole Brooks’s *Obeah Opera* (2012) hinge on “I am” statements as a loaded refrain and marker of identity construction. MacDonald, for instance, concludes her play with Constance Ledbelly’s climactic realization that “I’m the Author” (87), and Brooks’s contemporary opera features an “I AM Suite” wherein the main characters perform a series of empowering “I am” declarations. In these works, the characters’ journeys of self-discovery and the larger debates of racialized identities culminate with “I am” declarations that capture the complexities and intersections of performed, racialized, gendered, and often *othered* subject-positions. While chapter two argues that “We are” declarations offer narrative methodologies for resistant collectives, chapters three and four examine “I am” declarations as self-defining utterances that not only dramatize the process of self-formation, but also re-theorize the self as performative, multiple, and changing. Because I see these “I am” declarations as one of many possible strategies in a larger revisionist project of writing back to popular narratives that marginalize racialized and gendered characters, my study aims to stimulate further analysis of the functions of these performative utterances in revisionist theatre.
Goal

Hutcheon explains that a successful adaptation must stand on its own as an autonomous work of art that is distinct from its source(s). By contrast, the success of revisionist adaptation can be measured by the extent to which it haunts the original to the point where the two works are inseparable. The revisionist adaptor often exposes a problematic element of the original—such as the racialized Othello, the all too obliging Pocahontas, or the unrealistically faithful Penelope—thereby shedding a critical light that will forever illuminate interpretations of the narratives. Anyone who has seen Sears’s *Harlem Duet* or Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* cannot view Shakespeare’s *Othello* or Disney’s fanciful *Pocahontas* without considering the now glaring racial dynamics. In this way, revisionist drama’s goal is to transform the cultural imaginary and forever layer the original with the adaptation’s critical perspective.

Conclusion: Cultural Capital

Adaptations benefit from a form of brand or name recognition that inevitably drives up sales of the book, play, video game, or theme park ride as the case may be. Yet there are also political and personal reasons that inevitably drive the adaptor despite the critical pitfalls that so often plague any attempt to piggyback on the cultural capital of an earlier artwork. For the revisionist adaptors considered in this study, however, the motivation is much more political than financial. In fact, although the viewer’s recognition of the source text may drive up the ticket sales, it is intrinsic to the success of
a revisionist adaptation’s cultural critique, which is why so many revisionist plays include lessons on the source narrative.

I classify revisionist adaptation as a political subset of adaptations that takes into account the subversive potential, motivations, and effects of so many adaptations. This study contributes to the fields of adaptation theory and Canadian literature by defining the genre of revisionist adaptation—a genre that is dominating stages across Canada. Canadian drama has a long tradition of revisionist adaptation, a tradition that even precedes confederation and dates back to the first documented performance in North America, as I will demonstrate in the first chapter, and culminates in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. To build on Hannah Arendt’s phrase, Canadian revisionist “theatre is political art par excellence” (188).
Chapter 1

“Theatre in Our Nation”: Performing (Post)Colonial Historiography in Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France and Sinking Neptune

On November 14th, 2006—four hundred years after Marc Lescarbot’s inaugural performance of Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France (1606)—Montreal’s Optative Theatrical Laboratories (hereafter, OTL) mounted a revisionist re-enactment, Sinking Neptune, of the first documented play in what is now called Canada.23 Lescarbot’s Le Théâtre de Neptune adapted the European oceanic masque (traditionally performed at court) and French réception in order to welcome a returning French colonial leader to Port Royal, to naturalize the imperial project as a “louable entreprise,” and to instruct the Indigenous Mi’kmaq viewers on how to act like dutiful “sauvages.”24 After a cast of classical gods assure the colony’s leader of future success, four sauvages in a small canoe offer gifts and confess that “vivre toujours en ta grace / C’est tout ce que

---

23 According to Lescarbot’s documents, Le Théâtre de Neptune took place on the Annapolis Basin, which is a sheltered body of water attached to the Bay of Fundy, near Port Royal, Nova Scotia. Scholars such as Alan Filewod and Jerry Wasserman point out that Lescarbot’s script and stage directions are potentially only a rough report written by memory. All footnote references cite Eugene and Renate Benson’s 1982 translation. While there are several translations of the play, I have chosen to work with the Benson translation because, as Wasserman notes, it “is more literal . . . than the others” (Introduction 40). Other English versions include W.L. Grant’s 1911 translation, Harriette Taber Richardson’s 1926 translation, and R. Keith Hick’s 1927 version. For an in-depth comparison of the Richardson, Hick, and Benson translations, see Wasserman’s introduction to The Spectacle of Empire.

24 A “louable enterprise” translates to a “praiseworthy enterprise” (76). Although scholars have debated whether the Mi’kmaq people played the sauvages, the Mi’kmaq people’s level of participation remains unknown. Wasserman dismisses the controversy altogether and quickly states that the Indians were “surely Frenchmen in Native costume, not the Mi’kmaq themselves as has sometimes been speculated” (36). Given that the sauvages speak in French and in rhyming couplets, it is reasonable to believe that Frenchmen performed these roles. Even if the Mi’kmaq people did perform the roles of the Indians, Lescarbot’s sauvages are still reductive stereotypes that model ideal behaviour.
nous desirons” (*TN* 54). The aptly titled *Sinking Neptune*, in turn, critiques Lescarbot’s play as a colonialist “derogatory spectacle” and stages a debate on the cultural implications of considering it as a Canadian first (King “*Sinking Neptune*: Introduction” 199). OTL’s production sparked media interest in the quadricentennial anniversary of Lescarbot’s play, with journalists debating the value of such a markedly colonial piece that depicts the Mi’kmaq tribe as “sauvages.” Despite their conflicting political perspectives and historical contexts, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* are similar methodologically. Lescarbot and OTL use similar creation and performance strategies, such as collective creation, intertextuality, and audience participation, in order to contextualize the intercultural exchange between the French colonists and the Mi’kmaq tribe in 1606. *Sinking Neptune* even dramatizes *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety much like the celebratory quadricentennial re-enactments it seeks to critique.

*Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* not only demonstrate a shared methodology for performing histories but also use similar strategies to colonize and decolonize the audience’s imagination, respectively. Together, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* complicate two distinct approaches to the project of historicizing theatre in Canada—what Alan Filewod refers to as the “recuperation” and “deconstruction” of master narratives. The “first generation of self-identified Canadian theatre historians,” according to Filewod, “saw their project as recuperative,” generating “performance calendars, lists of plays and bibliographies that began to cohere into connective

---

25 “All we desire / Is to live forever in your favour” (*TN* 78)
26 All parenthetical references to *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* and *Sinking Neptune* are abbreviated as “*TN*” and “*SN*,” respectively. Although the play is constantly updated, all quotations are taken from the online 2006 version because it was repeatedly performed in protest of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s anniversary celebrations. Along with the online version, *Sinking Neptune* was also published in *Theatre Histories* (edited by Filewod), but this version of the script was never actually performed.
narratives” (Introduction viii). Despite their contribution to theatre research, these recuperative studies, as Filewod reminds us, generate a single evolutionary master-narrative of theatre history in Canada that begins with and privileges written texts or documents. *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, for instance, has garnered fame because it is the earliest documented performance and extant dramatic script in Canada. Although recuperative histories include *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as one of the first documented performances in Canada (Saddlemyer), the productions of the masque and its revisionist adaptation *Sinking Neptune* are not only events in history but histories unto themselves. *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and its celebratory re-enactments fall into the recuperative category of historiography by establishing a master narrative of French colonial discovery in the New World that posits the French colonists as benefactors of the Mi’kmaq nation who, in Lescarbot’s version, are eager to welcome the returning French leader. *Sinking Neptune*, by contrast, exemplifies a deconstructive approach to theatre history in Canada by critiquing the very notion of a cultural “beginning” that excludes the Mi’kmaq people’s pre-colonial and ceremonial performance culture. *Sinking Neptune*, however, is also arguably recuperative in its fidelity to and preservation of Lescarbot’s masque. After all, OTL’s play was the primary cause of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s recent media attention. Furthermore, in effectively updating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* for contemporary audiences, *Sinking Neptune* contributes to the survival and popularity of Lescarbot’s masque. *Sinking Neptune* disrupts Filewod’s linear trajectory of historiographical categories because it is simultaneously a recuperative project and a deconstructive performance. In complicating Filewod’s trajectory by re-enacting *Le Théâtre de Neptune* with a markedly different political perspective, *Sinking Neptune* is an
instance of what can be theorized as revisionist adaptation, that is repetition with political
difference.

Although *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* are pro-colonial and anti-
colonial, respectively, Lescarbot and OTL both include representations of the French and
Mi’kmaq perspectives. While *Le Théâtre de Neptune* presents a reductive treatment of
the Mi’kmaq people, Lescarbot’s *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* (hereafter *Histoire*) at
times celebrates Mi’kmaq culture and critiques the French colonial enterprise. Referring
to Lescarbot’s *oeuvre*, Jerry Wasserman claims that “Lescarbot rarely patronizes the
Native characters of his dramatic poetry or history, and frequently gives them substantial
dignity”” (37), and Ellen R. Welch highlights Lescarbot’s “ambivalent attitude toward
the French state and the French people, who are frequently represented as frail, decadent
shadows of their hardy, virtuous Gallic ancestors” (442). Lescarbot, however, typically
partners his praise of the “Native characters” with an argument about the French colony’s
betterment of the Aboriginal people’s lives. In the sixth book of *Histoire*, for example,
Lescarbot admires the Souriquois people’s “humanity” (215), “frankness and liberality”
(215), and “mercy” (215), and he argues that “they are wronged in being called
barbarous” (86); but prior to this praise, Lescarbot establishes the French people’s
generosities in granting Membertou “the honour” of “shooting off our cannon when we
arrived” and giving him “wine wherewith to entertain [his fellows] and to show that he
was held in reputation” (214). Here, Lescarbot’s rhetoric and arguments resemble *Le
Théâtre de Neptune* in suggesting not only that the French colony improves the lives of
the Souriquois people but that the “savages” of New France themselves recognize the
French colonists’ superiority; after all, the “savage” people see “that we are richer than
they” (214). Though Lescarbot’s *Histoire* does not warrant consideration as a progressive historical document for its time, it does demonstrate a genuine interest in the Souriquois people as he attempts to detail “the Manners and Customs of Life of the Peoples of New France” (78).

*Le Théâtre de Neptune* undeniably erects a racial hierarchy that legitimates French rule as natural but the perspectives of the two Neptune plays are not as different as one might initially expect. *Sinking Neptune*, though very laudable in its political goals, threatens to erect an inverse hierarchy by reducing the French to cultural stereotypes and antagonists. Interrupting the inset performance of Lescarbot’s play, a quotation by Plains Cree playwright Floyd Favel appears on a slide projection: “(The) unsubtle message in the European languages is human superiority over nature, man over woman, man over the birds and bees and the beast, and all brown, black, and yellow folks” (*SN* 8). In the midst of the re-enactment, the Favel quotation reads as a critical response to the masque, but in dramatizing the gap in perspectives between the French and Mi’kmaq audiences, *Sinking Neptune* also risks colonizing this gap and ventriloquizing the Mi’kmaq people.

Just as Lescarbot uses indigenous terminology—“Sagamos” (chief, *TN* 54), “adesquidês” (friend, *TN* 51), “Matachiaz” (sashes and bracelets, *TN* 79), “caraconas” (bread, *TN* 56)—to gain authenticity, OTL uses quotations by aboriginal writers to gain cultural authority. *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* demonstrate conflicting political perspectives, but Lescarbot’s and OTL’s similar rhetorical and dramatic strategies complicate the binary categories of colonial and postcolonial drama. These shared techniques indicate the significance of the playwrights’ political intentions as one of the distinguishing factors for the plays’ political effects and help to destabilize the racial
(French, Mi’kmaq) and theoretical (colonial, postcolonial) polarities entrenched in any discussion of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*. It is important to establish OTL’s simultaneous recuperation and deconstruction of Lescarbot’s play because it helps avoid a polemical treatment of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and exemplifies the nuanced process of revisionist historiography.

*Sinking Neptune* challenges what has been considered Canadian theatre history in particular and historiography in general. OTL responds to the fact that the historicization of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as the first play in Canada makes larger claims about the definition of Canada and about what it means to be Canadian. The difficulty of historicizing Canadian theatre stems from the shifting definitions of “Canadian” and “theatre.” Defining Canada as a political entity that was created with Confederation in 1867 provides a specific time frame for historical analysis, while conceiving of the nation as a geographical space potentially defines a Canada that predates confederation and colonialism. In either case, the category of “Canadian theatre history” functions as an organizational tool that involves European structures (theatre and history). The celebration of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as the starting point of “theatre in our nation” defines Canada as a successor of colonialism and as the property of a nationalist “our” that excludes First Nations people.

This paper treats *Sinking Neptune* as a model not only for revisionist dramatic methodologies but also for revisionist historiography: the play refutes anteriority, draws

---

27 In the introduction to the first volume of *Staging Coyote’s Dream*, Mojica and Knowles similarly grapple with the limiting categories of “anthology,” “First Nations,” “drama,” and “in English.” As Mojica and Knowles explain, “To divide topics up in this way is convenient, of course, but also problematic, in that it invokes categories and taxonomies rooted in Western European ways of knowing – ways of dividing, conquering, and disciplining the world that are foreign to, and have contributed to the subjection of, Native peoples throughout the Americas (the land they inhabit)” (182).
from multiple time periods, is a product of collective creation, resists stasis by being consistently updated with every performance, and avoids constructing a hierarchical dichotomy of knowing and unknowing audiences. In keeping with the genre of revisionist drama—a politicized re-dramatization of an earlier narrative—\textit{Sinking Neptune} serves as a corrective to Lescarbot’s early modern colonialism; but through the problematic double gesture of simultaneously rejecting and reinscribing \textit{Le Théâtre de Neptune}’s status as the first play in Canada, it also challenges Filewod’s linear ordering of historiography as progressing from recuperative (1950-60s) to deconstructive (1980-present) approaches.

**Critical Reception**

Montreal’s radical theatre company OTL was conceived at the turn of the millennium to promote a new form of twenty-first-century performance activism (OTL, “Mandate”). To protest the anniversary celebrations of Lescarbot’s play in November 2006, \textit{Sinking Neptune} played at \textit{Les artistes du Toc Toc} in Montreal, King’s Theatre in Annapolis Royal, and The Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax.\textsuperscript{28} In his review of Wasserman’s seminal 400\textsuperscript{th} anniversary edition of \textit{Le Théâtre de Neptune}, Filewod calls attention to \textit{Sinking Neptune} and suggests that it “would have been the ideal conclusion to this important and timely edition” (“Colonial Spectacle”).\textsuperscript{29} Answering his own call, Filewod’s edited collection on \textit{Theatre Histories} (2009) ends with the \textit{Sinking Neptune} script and an “Introduction” to the play written by OTL’s Donovan King. Aside from this

\textsuperscript{28} OTL performed \textit{Sinking Neptune} at the Anarchist Theatre Festival and the Montreal Infringement Festival before the November tour (OTL “About the project”).

\textsuperscript{29} Although Wasserman does not include a script for \textit{Sinking Neptune}, he does frame his introduction with a discussion of OTL’s play, even quoting Donovan King’s postcolonial criticisms of Lescarbot’s work.
one scholarly publication, there has yet to be any critical work on *Sinking Neptune*: this revisionist adaptation warrants further attention.

While *Sinking Neptune* lacks sufficient critical attention, the continued historical significance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, by comparison, fulfills Lescarbot’s goal of “Le renom immortel” (“immortal renown” *TN* 51). Scholarly editions, multiple translations, a historic plaque, and contemporary re-enactments of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* all contribute to the play’s renown. Lescarbot was a French historian and a theatre-practitioner, and the convergence of these roles is evident in his script for *Le Théâtre de Neptune*; he wrote the play as a historical document, intending for the production to “servent à nôtre Histoire, que pour montrer que nous vivions joyeusement” (*TN* 57).30 Contribute to the colony’s joy and historical importance it did: at the suggestion of Samuel Champlain, Poutrincourt established *L’Ordre de Bon Temps* (the Order of Good Cheer) following the performance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*. The Order of Good Cheer codified eating and entertainment, and was successful in preventing another winter of death, scurvy, and hunger. Lescarbot’s hopes for historical fame were further fulfilled in 1926 with a commemorative plaque at the site of the Port Royal *Habitation*, which acknowledges *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as the first drama written and produced in Canada. Historians have since celebrated *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a monumental event: Stratford’s centennial report describes Lescarbot’s play as “the first theatrical happening in Canada” (*100 Years* 1); Laurent Lavoie cites the play as the beginning of Acadian theatre (451); and Frederick Lewis Gay even claims it to be the “first American play” (Gay 136). In this

30 “contribute to our History in addition to showing that we lived joyously” (*TN* 81)
way, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* at once celebrates Jean Biencourt, Sieur de Poutrincourt’s return to Port Royal and transforms his reception into a historic act.

*Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s historical significance has been challenged due to the fact that it only survives as a play script in Lescarbot’s own historical writings, prompting some critics to speculate whether the masque was ever actually performed. Most recently, Welch responds to this scepticism by treating it as a historical document rather than a production. Welch offers a provocative reconsideration of the masque’s temporality as “an endlessly repeatable commemoration of the most joyous and solemn aspects of colonial life, by passing both chronological time and the reality of Port Royal’s fate” (443). Although Welch insists on the script’s a-temporality, her evidentiary support contradicts this argument as she repeatedly uses the colonial context and documents to describe the play’s contingent historical functions. Her argument that the script to *Le Théâtre de Neptune* “inscribes words and actions meant to be repeated,” and thereby “transcends its association with any particular time or place” (440-41) understates the importance of historical context and the play’s direct impact on the imperial project. It was the performance of the play and not the written text that was instrumental in the establishment of Samuel de Champlain’s *L’Ordre de Bon Temps* (the Order of Good Cheer) and of peaceful intercultural relations. I treat *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a performed event rather than an academic exercise or closet drama.

**Media Controversy**

In 2006, select theatre companies and newspapers rang in the 400th anniversary of Lescarbot’s play with commemorative reports and performances. Musique 400 and

---

31 Welch’s theorization of theatre’s timelessness would have interesting implications in relation to *Sinking Neptune* as OTL demonstrates how the original can be repeated in any time and with changing historical resonances.
Theatre 400 were created specifically for the event and planned full-scale dramatizations of Le Théâtre de Neptune.\textsuperscript{32} Toronto’s Globe and Mail exclaimed, “Four hundred years ago today, a convoy of canoes paddled into the harbour at Port Royal (now Lower Granville, N.S. near Annapolis Royal). Port Royal was the oldest French colony in North America, [and] it was also about to become the birthplace of drama and poetry in the New World” (Posner). The Chronicle Herald reminded readers that Le Théâtre de Neptune was “Canada’s first drama written and performed by European settlers” (Lightstone), and Nova Scotian journalist Carolyn Sloan similarly hailed Le Théâtre de Neptune as “Canada’s first play,” honouring the “400\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of theatre in our nation.” Although these reports gesture towards an inclusive group that unites readers in celebration of “theatre in our nation,” they ultimately define a Canada and a theatre history that begin with colonial settlement and exclude First Nations people. Together, Le Théâtre de Neptune and its subsequent historicization as “Canada’s first play” threaten to reinforce Euro-colonialist norms that obscure the First Nations pre-colonial performative rituals.

Responding to the media coverage of Le Théâtre de Neptune, King argues, “it would be more accurate to say that [Port Royal] is the birthplace of Eurocentric poetry and drama, as First Nations people have their own history of such performance that goes back thousands of years” (qtd. in Sloan 2). There were two main conflicting positions: Theatre 400 and Musique 400 planned celebratory re-enactments of the original play, 

\textsuperscript{32} Theatre 400 intended to produce a full re-enactment on the waters where the play originally took place accompanied by a theatre conference and a travelling manuscript (King, Introduction 198). These plans, however, were dependent on government funding that never materialized. Musique 400, under the direction of Phil Roberts, managed to execute a re-enactment on November 12, 2006, on the shores of the Annapolis Basin. As Michael Posner explains, “An audience of about 50 people attended. Actors mimed the various parts, including Neptune, Roman god of the sea, and six tritons, while other actors read the French-language script” (R1).
whereas OTL adapted the play in order to critique the piece as a “starting point of a cultural genocide against First Nation peoples” (King, “Sinking Neptune: Introduction” 199). Theatre 400’s Pinto and OTL’s King became the figureheads for the dispute over whether *Le Théâtre de Neptune* is “racist screed or legitimate history?” (Posner). The question quickly became one of historical context: is it fair to read Lescarbot’s play through the eyes of a twenty-first century audience member, and with the lens of contemporary postcolonial theory? Theatre 400’s Pinto argued, “it’s not right to cut a slice out of seventeenth-century life and paste it to a theatrical work four centuries later,” explaining that he “sees nothing wrong with its depiction of Natives” (Lightstone). Yet a performance of “music and dances from 400 years ago” with “period costumes and instruments” (Lightstone) cannot altogether ignore the present context and its contemporary audience. Roberts, who alongside Pinto “is leading the effort to put on the genuine article from Champlain’s day” (Lightstone), says that “to look back at dramatic effort written by French colonizers—one that uses the word ‘savages’—under the spotlight of a theatre company operating in 2006 is off the mark” (qtd. in Lightstone). Roberts’s rhetorical denouncement of *Sinking Neptune* as “off the mark” positions seventeenth-century French colonialism as the centre (or “the mark”), effectively casting King’s postcolonial approach to the sideline and fossilizing the masque as an untouched relic from the past. In reaction to this preservation of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a historical first, Filewod explains that “such genealogical attempts at fixity implode along contested boundaries of ‘theatrical,’ ‘performance,’ and ‘European’” (“Colonial Spectacle” 190). Despite Pinto’s and Roberts’s protests, Lescarbot’s play is not static, and will continue to produce meaning in relation to its viewers’ contexts.
Le Théâtre de Neptune

Performance Process and Dramatic Form

Wasserman fittingly titles his edition of Lescarbot’s play *Spectacle of Empire*, but *Le Théâtre de Neptune* not only enacts a spectacle of empire but spectacle as empire: the play does not merely represent the empire but is a constitutive extension of it. Robert Wallace, in *Theatre and Transformation in Contemporary Canada*, conceives of politics and theatre in a dialogic relationship because “art both responds to and constructs social and historical conditions” (11). *Le Théâtre de Neptune* exemplifies Wallace’s definition of theatre in its simultaneous reflection and construction of colonial conquest. Instead of a colonial flag or cross, it is Lescarbot’s theatrical performance that claims the land and establishes racial hierarchy. Accounts of cross-cultural encounters and imperial settlers are often, as Christopher Balme explains, “drawn from theatre” and are “almost invariably [described as] a ‘scene’ or ‘spectacle’” (1). Lescarbot begins the sixth book of *Histoire* by noting the pervasive theatricality of life and death that affects the French and Mi’kmaq alike:

> The author of the book of Wisdom witnesseth unto us a most true thing, that “All men have a like entrance into the world, and the like going out.” But each nation hath added some ceremonies, after these things are accomplished: for some have wept, seeing the birth of man upon the theatre of this world, there to be as it were a spectacle of miseries and calamities.

(Grant’s translation 2)
Lescarbot, like many settlers before him, here uses theatre as a metaphor for life and the essential similarities of different cultures. Life, according to Lescarbot’s *Histoire*, is a theatrical stage—one that shows itself to all nations. In *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, by contrast, theatre functions as much more than a poetic vehicle: the relationship between cross-cultural exchange and theatre is not merely one of metaphorical likeness. Lescarbot’s spectacle is the intercultural act itself. In other words, the 1606 performance does not describe the colonial project but rather constitutes the colonial project.

Even the process of creating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* contributed to the colonizing project: the play was performed in order to help boost morale and avoid mutiny in the colony. Because the French colony had been struggling during the long winters, Poutrincourt went on an expedition to Armouchiquois country in the hopes of discovering a warmer place for settlement. Lescarbot was put in charge during Poutrincourt’s absence and documented the colony’s perils and sufferings in his *Histoire*. The Frenchmen were suffering from the threat of scurvy, hunger, and fast-approaching winter. Lescarbot suggests that these discontents could have led to a mutiny, which is why he sought to distract them with a spectacle. The play at once distracted the Frenchmen from their mutinous sentiments and encouraged a peaceful relationship between the Mi’kmaq tribe and the French colony.

Despite the goal of engaging the Mi’kmaq tribe in the imperialist project, the play’s dramatic form marginalizes their viewing experience by rewarding the French audience’s knowledge of European theatre traditions. Performing allegiance to the King of France, the play pays homage to many courtly French theatre traditions, including pageants, triumphal entries, *réceptions*, and masques, thereby implicating the spectators
as participants in a show of imperial devotion. The fourth volume of Anton Wagner’s *Lost Plays*, for example, classifies *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a “nautical masque” (6) and explains that Lescarbot’s influences include the “Renaissance tradition of the European ‘entrée royale,’ the formal entry and reception” (8). In the Introduction to *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario, 1800-1914*, Ann Saddlemeyer similarly credits Lescarbot’s play as the first “marine masque” and asserts that “Masques and pageants have also been popular in Canada, ever since” (10). Hannah Fournier discusses Lescarbot’s use of the pageant traditions, while René Lelièvre and Monique Baillet describe the play as a triumphal entry. Wasserman’s introduction to creating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* contributes to these many classifications by giving a comprehensive overview of the play’s European influences: he provides a historical synopsis of pageants, triumphal entries, receptions, masques, and court festivals in French (and English) courtly life during the latter half of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century. “In France,” as Wasserman says, “Lescarbot had access to a substantial record of recent triumphal entries involving nautical motifs derived from the revival of the imperial Roman naumachia, or mock sea battles, and other water festivals employing the sea god, his nymphs, and tritons” (Introduction 25). Lescarbot borrows from the conventions of mock sea battles and court festivals (*fête*) but the painted seascapes and props of the nautical masques are replaced with the Bay of Fundy itself and with functioning canoes. Through these changes to traditional masques, the land becomes part of the spectacle. In this way, the landscape—like the spectators—becomes subsumed by the colonial project. The European theatre conventions at work in creating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* at once connect the Frenchmen to the Old World, while also politically grounding them in the New World.
Lescarbot exploits the gap between the French audience who were familiar with courtly theatre traditions and the “unknowing” Mi’kmaq audience in order to establish a hierarchy; the play, for example, abides by the conventions of a réception wherein “the more important residents” of Port Royal greet a returning ruler or royal figure (Fournier 3). It is thus significant that the Frenchmen greet Poutrincourt on the water, because it symbolizes the superiority of the colonists over the Mi’kmaq people who are believed merely to have watched from the shore. Only in their fictional, ideal French-speaking form—as scripted sauvage characters in Lescarbot’s play—do the Mi’kmaq tribe fall under the category of “important residents.” As a “visible sign of a contract between ruler and subject town” (Fournier 3), the réception not only commemorates but creates a pact of political hierarchy in the eyes of the French audience that recognizes Poutrincourt as the ruler of the French colonialists and the Mi’kmaq people. Lescarbot even scripts this compact, as the Première Sauvage expresses his immediate and future devotion:

“Sagamos, si en nos services / Tu as quelque devotion, / A toy en faisons sacrifices / Et à ta generation” (TN 54). In this way, the process of creation as well as the dramatic form reward the French and help to establish the colony.

The Poetics of Colonization

Le Théâtre de Neptune replaces the staking of the colonial flag, claiming Port Royal and its Indigenous inhabitants by performance. Filewod explains how Lescarbot “established the principle that the colonialism of spectacle is the necessary precondition of imperial invasion” (Performing xv). I argue that Lescarbot’s production is not merely

33 First Indian: “Sagamos, if you have any faith / In our services, / Then we will devote ourselves to you / And to your descendants” (TN 78).
a “precondition,” but a figurative act of invasion itself. The *Première Sauvage*, for example, speaks on behalf of all the Mi’kmaq people in homage to the *Fleur-de-lis* flag:

De la part des peuples Sauvages

Qui environnent ces pays

Nous venons rendre les homages

Deuz aux sacrées Fleur-de-lis

Es mains de toy, qui ton Prince

Represents la Majesté. (*TN* 54)

This performance of the Mi’kmaq people’s imagined devotion would likely constitute an actual alliance of the two cultures in the minds of the French audience. Filewod, for example, considers imagination as a tool of colonialism, and explains that “As an intellectual of the new humanism, [Lescarbot] could not foresee that the colonizing of the cultural imaginary is also a precondition of genocide” (Introduction xv). The *Première Sauvage*’s speech, along with the play as a whole, aims to colonize the imagination of its audience members with tropes of imperial conquest, classical allusions to Roman gods, and performative utterances that seek to naturalize the superiority of Poutrincourt.

As a performance of a successful return to Port Royal, an assurance of future prosperity, and a promise of peaceful *sauvages*, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* is a play that “makes happen what it celebrates” (Schechner 17). Further mediating French and Mi’kmaq culture, Lescarbot uses the ritual of gift exchange to portray the *sauvages* as

---

34 On behalf of the Indian peoples
Who inhabit these countries,
We come to render their homage
To the sacred *Fleur-de-lis*
In your hands, you who represent
The Majesty of your Prince. (*TN* 78)
poor hunters in need of the colonists’ generosity and grace. The first three *sauvages* offer Poutrincourt various gifts, such as a quarter of a moose, beaver skins, and bracelets; but the fourth and final *sauvage* is unable to “presentant a toy” (“bring you any gifts”) due to unsuccessful hunts (*TN 55, 79*). This failure is heightened by the *Première Sauvage’s* confession that “noz moyens sont un peu de chasse” (*54*) (“our skills . . . lie only in hunting” *78*). The absence of a gift is the best gift of all because it demonstrates the Mi’kmaq people’s lack of survival skills and their need of the French. The didactic message that the Indians have nothing to offer is skilfully veiled by a sequence of offerings. The French, however, do not need to proffer the Mi’kmaq material gifts because, as the *Troisième Sauvage* explains, being in Poutrincourt’s good favour alone will improve the Mi’kmaq’s social status. In this way, the play assures the French colonizers that they will improve the *sauvages’* lives. The Mi’kmaq viewers, by contrast, are instructed to speak in French verse and to offer specific gifts to the Europeans. The play’s didacticism divides along ethnic lines, separately targeting and dividing the French and Mi’kmaq audience.

Lescarbot uses classical figures to bless New France, further adapting European tradition for the colonial project. Along with the characterization of Neptune and Triton, the play makes reference to Saturn, Jupiter, Pluto, Diana, and Cupid. Neptune, for instance, promises “Par mon sacré Trident, par mon sceptre je jure / Que de favoriser ton projet j’auray cure” (*TN 50*). The gods assure Poutrincourt of his success and vow to aid in the imperial project of conquering the *sauvages*. Cupid, for example, has colonized the hearts of the *sauvages*. According to the *Troisième Sauvage*,

---

35 “I swear by my sacred Trident, my sceptre, / That I will always support your enterprises” (*TN 74*).
Ce n’est seulement en France
Que commande Cupidon
Mais en la Nouvelle-France,
Comme entre vous, son brandon
Il allume, & de ses flames
Il rotit noz pauvres ames,
Et fait planter le bourdon. (TN 55)\(^{36}\)

The *Troisième Sauvage* configures Cupid as a ruler of New France and describes love in terms of imperial conquest. Lescarbot saves the word “flag” (“le bourdon”) for the triumphant end of the stanza, using it as an exclamatory punctuation marker for the conquest narrative. Like Poutrincourt’s piercing of the land with the *Fleur-de-lis* flag, Cupid plants his flag (“fait planter le bourdon”) in the *sauvages*’ poor souls (“noz pauvres ames,” *TN 55*). The *Troisième Sauvage* further explains that the love of his mistress depends on good favour from Poutrincourt, as he offers gifts of “*echarpes, & brasselets faits de la main de sa maitresse*” who “n’aura point de liesse / Si d’une prompte vitesse / Je ne lui di la caresse / Que m’aura fait ta hautesse” (*TN 55*).\(^{37}\)

Poutrincourt rules over their hearts as well as their souls. This scene functions as a metonymy for the play’s larger colonial project in its imagined conquest of the *sauvages*’ welcoming bodies and souls.

\(^{36}\) It is not only in France
That Cupid reigns,
But also in New France.
As with you he also lights
His firebrand here; and with his flames
He scorches our poor souls
And plants there his flag. (*TN 79*)

\(^{37}\) Translated as “*sashes and bracelets made by the hand of his mistress*” who “will not be happy / Unless I tell her promptly / Of the kindness which your Highness has done me” (*TN 79*).
Intercultural Performance

Scholarship often concentrates on the masque’s European influences, but Lescarbot’s play also borrows from the Mi’kmaq people’s customs including gift-giving and ceremonial feasting. In fact, the feast was as integral a part of marriage ceremonies, funerals, and hunting for both the French and the Mi’kmaq, making it a shared tradition that further reinforces the cross-cultural bond. Lescarbot revises the traditional masque by replacing the final dance with a celebratory feast that integrates actors and audience, French and Mi’kmaq cultures (Orgel 33). With this communal structure, the feast functions on the premise of equality, but it is still executed as a paratheatrical performance of French rule to help establish peaceful relations with the sauvages.

Working within the conventions of an oceanic masque, the concluding feast replaces the final dance, which Stephen Orgel argues is a crucial element of court masques: like the masque’s dance, the feast breaks the barrier between actor and audience, including the spectators as part of the spectacle (Orgel 33). In keeping with the function of spectacle as empire, Lescarbot uses the feast to enact the Mi’kmaq people’s willingness to accept a peace agreement by virtue of their witnessing of the masque and participation in the feast.

Le Théâtre de Neptune operates on what Richard White cites as the four elements of the “middle ground”: “a confrontation between imperial or state regimes and non-state

---

38 Lescarbot’s use of the French theatre tradition has been examined in Lelièvre and Baille’s “Une Entrée Triomphale en Acadie en 1606” (1969), Fournier’s “Lescarbot’s ‘Théâtre de Neptune’: New World Pageant, Old World Polemic” (1981), and, most recently, in Wasserman’s critical introduction to Spectacle of Empire (2006).

forms of social organization, a rough balance of power, a mutual need or a desire for what the other possesses, and an inability of one side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to do what it desired” (xii). In performing this “middle ground,” according to White, an imperial power engages in what they perceive to be Aboriginal customs as a method of negotiating a peace or trade agreement. When the Première Sauvage expresses his immediate and future devotion to Poutrincourt, calling him “Sagamos” (54), this acts as a type of naming ceremony that hails Poutrincourt as not only a French leader but also a Native chief. Finally, Lescarbot’s play narrates the idea that the French and Mi’kmaq people share a “mutual need or desire” for peaceful relations. Le Théâtre de Neptune performs the integration of European and Mi’kmaq people as well as their respective cultures, but it does so without physical force.

Although both Le Théâtre de Neptune and Sinking Neptune engage in cross-cultural performances, there is one significant difference: Lescarbot attempts to colonize Port Royal, whereas OTL aims to decolonize this so-called “birthplace of drama and poetry in the New World” (Posner).

According to Lescarbot, Le Théâtre de Neptune succeeded in its goal of reinforcing peaceful relations between the Mi’kmaq and French peoples, and perhaps more importantly to Lescarbot, of avoiding mutiny among the Frenchmen. Immediately after his account of the performance, Lescarbot explains that the spectacle established the Order of Good Cheer, which included food, fellowship, and entertainment, thereby helping the colony avoid scurvy in the coming winter. The performance and its following feast started a series of weekly feasts that continued until the end of March when the weather improved. “Food preparation and dining,” as Wasserman explains, “became
ritual performances that winter, no less efficacious than the nautical réception that celebrated the successful transition of the colony from leaderless, near mutinous contingency to god-blessed safety and stability” (36). More than mere entertainment, Le Théâtre de Neptune suppressed the Frenchmen’s mutinous desires and enacted a contract between the Mi’kmaq tribe and the French colony. The performance was not simply a reflection of peaceful cross-cultural relations but an embodied act that made these relations a reality in the eyes of the French. OTL, however, is much more interested in the masque’s significance in the eyes of the Mi’kmaq people.

**Sinking Neptune: Revisionist Theatre Historiography**

**Performance Process and Dramatic Form**

*Sinking Neptune*’s non-hierarchical creation process and dramatic form challenge Lescarbot’s performed fantasy of diplomatic intercultural relations, offering a methodology for revisionist history. As a piece of “verbatim theatre,” a documentary genre linked to oral histories of “ordinary people,” *Sinking Neptune* is composed of quotations from multiple sources, such as interviews, performances, and news reports (Paget 317). In “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques,” Derek Paget explains that words from “‘ordinary’ people” are collected and performed “in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event or combination of these things” (317). Paget’s emphasis on the use of “ordinary people” as sources gestures towards the political resonances of OTL’s theatrical process. OTL aims at inclusivity and rejects artistic or political hierarchies, as demonstrated by the theatre’s mandate:
Optative Theatrical Laboratories is a non-hierarchical dramatic collective whose mandate is to ‘theatrically challenge hegemonic thinking and oppressive systems.’ Its community-based project is both activist and theatrical, occupying the unique transformative space between the two fields [. . .] The word *optative*, defined as ‘the dramatic expression of a wish, desire or choice,’ drives the collective in its theatrical explorations, experiments, and cultural interventions.

These goals are especially evident in *Sinking Neptune*; speaking on behalf of OTL, King explains that *Sinking Neptune* “was created as an anti-racist project to deconstruct the play *[Le Théâtre de Neptune]*, critically engage the Eurocentric process of re-enactment and commemoration, and expose it all with a twenty-first century spotlight to stimulate critical reflection” (Introduction 199). OTL’s methodology and *Sinking Neptune*’s script work together to destabilize *Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s narrative of French omnipotence.

In using postcolonialism as a basis for the process and the product, *Sinking Neptune* answers Denis Salter’s call for a “dialectic of both theory and practice” in postcolonial histories (“On Native Ground” 121).

*Sinking Neptune* draws attention to the very dramatic and theoretical structures—of revisionism, verbatim theatre, and postcolonialism—that inform its creation. After four slide projections of “Native Quotations,” the play begins with a self-reflexive emphasis on the pervasiveness of its own theatricality with the “spectacular” news conference (4). The opening scene presents the 2006 news reports and plans for a commemorative “musical on the Order of Good Cheer” as spectacles of a nationalist empire (5). An actor portraying Ken Pinto (director of Theatre 400) greets the news
reporters just as Lescarbot greeted Poutrincourt, updating the colonial réception to a contemporary setting. *Sinking Neptune* immediately establishes the continuity of time through this updating. By layering Lescarbot’s play with Pinto’s re-enactment, *Sinking Neptune* suggests that past and present always inform each other, thereby refuting Pinto’s argument that we must approach *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its pure historical context and refrain from applying a postcolonial lens. The two parallel narratives—of the early modern masque and its present day responses—are braided together in a way that dramatizes their inseparability.

The play’s use of time and its sequencing of events exemplify a key revisionist strategy: in order to challenge the significance of a national “first,” *Sinking Neptune* disrupts the chronological order of history and the three unities of time, place, and action. The quick shifts in time (from the seventeenth century to the present) and in perspective (from Lescarbot to Indigenous artists) undercut sequential history, and, as a result, lessen the importance of a “beginning.” OTL also critiques the recent re-enactments and anticipates the excuse that Lescarbot’s work was merely a product of the seventeenth century by merging Poutrincourt with Pinto. The same actor performs the role of both Poutrincourt and Pinto, suggesting that the 2006 Director engages in the same colonial project as the 1606 leader.

**Dramatic Methodology as Rhetoric**

*Sinking Neptune* avoids propagating a single source or dominating voice. Although *Sinking Neptune* reproduces *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety, it refuses to privilege Lescarbot’s source text by foregrounding responses from Aboriginal artists, quoting directly from the press releases about the quadricentennial celebrations, and
including theatre critic Filewod as a character. As a verbatim piece, *Sinking Neptune* does not change the words in Lescarbot’s script but instead alters the original’s political significance and reception. In deconstructing *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as merely one of many intertexts, OTL pointedly recuperates Aboriginal artists (including Daniel Paul, Lisa Mayo, Floyd Favel, and Hanay Geiogomah), scholarship on Lescarbot’s work (namely by Filewod), and recent oral commentary (by CBC and Halifax Herald reporters). Speaking to this recuperative element, Paget defines verbatim theatre as a genre that “involves nothing less than the continued reclaiming and celebrating of that history which is perennially at ‘the margins of the news’” (336). The form of *Sinking Neptune*, then, at once deconstructs the hegemonic *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and reclaims narratives of “the margins.”

Further interconnecting theory and practice, King’s dramaturgical note about *Sinking Neptune* emphasizes the “flexibility” of collective creation as a counter-measure to the stagnancy of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and as a means of fostering change: “There is no playwright, but rather a flexible team of researchers and editors,” because “a deconstruction is always a work-in-progress, the text is flexible and can be altered with new or other pieces of source text” (202). As a work-in-progress that welcomes future revisions, *Sinking Neptune* demonstrates one of Salter’s strategies for postcolonialist theatre historiography by “destabilizing structures” and resisting “the temptation to closure” (“On Native Ground” 120). The constant updating and collective creation process together with the verbatim theatre genre avoid erecting a singular authorial voice. “Generally speaking,” as King explains, “the entire cast is involved in the creation of the script, based on the source materials that are found” (Message). Furthermore, OTL
makes these source materials available to the public online. Underscoring the dangerous relationship between authorship and authority, an opening projection warns: “If you don’t do it, then the white people will do it for you . . . They’ll tell your story for you. They’ll tell you who you are. They’ll tell you what you are if you let them” (Geiogomah qtd. in SN 4). This projection targets Lescarbot’s scripting of the Mi’kmaq people and argues for the importance of self-narration and historical versioning. The process of collective creation wherein there is no singular authorial voice contrasts with Lescarbot’s creation process, which was all about authority—the authority of Lescarbot as interim leader and playwright as well as Poutrincourt’s supremacy as the returning leader.

*Sinking Neptune* demonstrates a methodology that not only adapts the source’s narrative but also actively changes its political significance. By casting the actors in multiple roles, for example, *Sinking Neptune* reinforces the artificiality of the *sauvages* in *Le Théâtre de Neptune*. One of the journalists—Van Gorder—transforms into a “savage” during the *Première Sauvage*’s speech as a visual commentary on the effect of Lescarbot’s script: Van Gorder “assumes a ‘savage’ posture. Over the course of four ‘Savage’ monologues, he becomes more and more scantly [sic] clad, ‘redfaced’ and stereotypical of Natives” (10). Gorder’s transformation points out the potential of performance to turn anyone into a “savage”; but together the *Première Sauvage*’s speech and Gorder’s parodic transformation undermine the credibility and plausibility of Lescarbot’s renderings of the *sauvages*.

As an alternative to a traditional play structure that organizes the dramatic action with a series of acts and scenes, *Sinking Neptune* uses “units,” including a final unscripted unit that engages the audience in a question and answer period. Like
Lescarbot’s feast, OTL’s Talkback session breaks the fourth wall and integrates actor
with audience. King describes the Talkback sessions as “fruitful discussions,” and he
invites the viewer to “decide for yourself about what approach [to Lescarbot’s play], if
any, you feel is best” (199-200). While Lescarbot’s feast aims to recruit the Indigenous
people as participants in the French colonial project, OTL’s Talkback gathers the viewers
in an open discussion of a postcolonial project.

In one of its many performances, for instance, *Sinking Neptune* was presented in
2005 at the OneLight Theatre conference for a forum on “Canadian Theatre Identity
Crisis: Challenging Eurocentricity through Aboriginal Myth and Ritual” in Halifax, Nova
Scotia. The conference topic, like OTL’s play, was selected in response to Theatre 400’s
plan to re-stage *Le Théâtre de Neptune* (Campbell 225). King explains that the
conference attendees, “including Mi’kmaq and other First Nations present,” were
“invited to participate in the ‘meta-performance’” (Message). OTL, in turn, incorporated
the conference attendees’ involvement in future productions. *Sinking Neptune*’s project
of speaking back to an “original” is not only reinforced but also literalized by the
Talkback unit and the ever-changing script.

**Intercultural Performance**

Slide projections frame and punctuate *Sinking Neptune*, providing another
platform for responses from twentieth-century writers and artists. In *Sinking Neptune*,
after the six Tritons deliver their speeches verbatim from Lescarbot’s play, a quotation
from Daniel Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian* appears on the screen. Francis’s quotation
describes *sauvages* as merely an “invention of the European [colonizers]” viewed
“through the prism of White hopes, fears, and prejudices” (qtd. in *SN* 9). OTL here
applies Francis’s theory of the imaginary Indian to suggest that Lescarbot supports French sovereignty with racial fictions. The use of projections not only functions as commentary on Lescarbot’s masque but also disrupts the audience’s viewing experience by calling attention to the script’s mechanics.

In emphasizing the fictionality of Lescarbot’s play, *Sinking Neptune* also reminds the audience that we can never know what the Mi’kmaq tribe thought or felt about the oceanic masque. After the first *sauvage* declares devotion to the French King, the Filewod character concedes that “We don’t know [what the Mi’kmaq thought of the masque] because of course, nobody asked them” (10), which establishes a level of uncertainty and introduces the slide-projected quotations as only hypothetical responses. A quotation by Daniel Paul convincingly suggests that the Mi’kmaq audience “thought the white man and his customs strange, but, being such gracious hosts, they would not contradict them, even though they thought them loco” (10). With these interjections, *Sinking Neptune* dramatizes the process of witnessing and responding to *Le Théâtre de Neptune*. The slide projections represent possible viewpoints of the Mi’kmaq people and the French colonists with a twenty-first-century lens. *Sinking Neptune* actively changes audiences’ attitudes towards *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, but what is equally important is the performance of how much has changed in cultural attitudes towards Indigenous people, imperialism, and racial minstrelsy since 1606.

**Narrowing the Gap?: *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune***
In dramatizing postcolonial responses to *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, *Sinking Neptune* speaks from the gap in understanding that occurred during the 1606 performance. Yet what does it mean to speak from and for this gap? Despite their contradictory political aims, the dramatic techniques of OTL’s *Sinking Neptune* and Lescarbot’s *Le Théâtre de Neptune* have some commonalities: they both erect a racial hierarchy, script Native figures, and present historiographical approaches. Outlining these various dramatic techniques not only helps to define the genre of revisionist plays but also reveals three similar methodologies involved in colonizing and de-colonizing the audience’s imagination. Firstly, though OTL challenges Lescarbot’s claims of French absolute sovereignty, it does so by simply reversing *Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s racial hierarchy instead of eradicating the hierarchy altogether. Secondly, in dramatizing the gap in understanding between the French and Mi’kmaq audiences, *Sinking Neptune* threatens to colonize the original gap and speak for the Mi’kmaq people. Finally, OTL arguably uses quotations by Aboriginal writers to gain cultural authority just as Lescarbot uses Indigenous language to gain authenticity. These similarities do not suggest OTL’s failure to challenge the original—no one could argue that *Sinking Neptune* celebrates *Le Théâtre de Neptune*—but rather underline how revisionist adaptations can effectively critique their sources with a re-enactment and with shared techniques.

*Sinking Neptune* recuperates the original while deconstructing it. Revisionist adaptations reaffirm the canonical status of the source by updating it for contemporary audiences. After all, *Sinking Neptune* retells and performs *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety and was a primary reason for the media attention on the anniversary. Yet *Sinking Neptune* also critiques the popular historicization of “Canada’s first play” by repeatedly
interrupting a performance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* with critical responses from academics and Indigenous artists. I see *Sinking Neptune*’s doubleness not as a liability but as a postcolonial feature. In simultaneously reproducing and deconstructing Lescarbot’s play, *Sinking Neptune* complicates Filewod’s sequential ordering of approaches to historiography (from “recuperative” to “deconstructive”). *Sinking Neptune* serves as a model for revisionist strategies that bring attention to a source while changing its cultural significance, and thus problematizes definitions of postcolonial historiography as being purely deconstructive.

*Sinking Neptune*’s ever-changing script also illustrates the impossibility of excavating a stable historical account of a performative event. Ultimately, we can never know what the audiences thought on November 14th 1606, or the extent of the Mi’kmaq involvement in the dramatization of the *sauvages*. *Sinking Neptune*’s diverse inset responses to Lescarbot’s masque avoid colonizing the audience’s imagination with a single conception of the Mi’kmaq people’s experience, and speak to the relative unknowability of the nation’s participation. What is certain, however, is that *Sinking Neptune* uses performance as a tool for reclaiming the cultural imaginary, that is, the shared historical narratives of a culture. Postcolonial revisionist historiography—as modeled by *Sinking Neptune*—necessarily involves both a representation and a deconstruction of imperial values, rhetoric, and strategies in order to alter the cultural imaginary. *Sinking Neptune* exemplifies revisionist drama as repetition with political difference.
Chapter 2

“We are”: Performing Choric Counterpublics and Dispublics in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and Erin Shields’s *If We Were Birds*

Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2007) and Erin Shields’s *If We Were Birds* (2008) do much more than retell Greek myths from the female characters’ points of view.\(^{40}\) Premiering within one year of each other, *The Penelopiad* adapts Homer’s *The Odyssey* and *If We Were Birds* dramatizes Ovid’s “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” myth; both plays focus on a chorus of disenfranchised women, which, in turn, theorizes a political audience.\(^{41}\) In line with the traditional Greek chorus who functioned as commentators, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* conceive the chorus as a defiant united audience that instructs the real audience on how to resist dominant myths. Atwood’s twelve handmaidens demand justice for their undeserved hangings and model the potential for resistance possessed by a collaborative heterogeneous group.\(^{42}\)

---

\(^{40}\) Atwood wrote two versions of *The Penelopiad*—a novella (2005) as part of Canongate’s myth series and a play (2007)—but all discussions of *The Penelopiad* refer to the play version unless otherwise stated.

\(^{41}\) *The Penelopiad* was first performed at England’s Swan Theatre, in Stratford-upon-Avon, on July 27\(^{th}\) 2007 by the Royal Shakespeare Company in association with Canada’s National Arts Centre. Since then, Nightwood Theatre produced a director’s showcase of *The Penelopiad* in 2009 that featured ten different directors who were each responsible for a specific section of the play. Most recently, Nightwood mounted a production at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre directed by Kelly Thornton (Nightwood’s Artistic Director) and starring Megan Follows as Penelope. The Summerworks Festival staged a workshop of *If We Were Birds* in 2008, and Shields’s play premiered at The Tarragon Theatre in 2010. The two plays are not only connected by their adaptation of Greek myths and concentration on the Greek chorus but also through their performance history. Philippa Domville acted in The Royal Shakespeare Company and NAC’s productions of *The Penelopiad* before playing the role of Procne in Tarragon’s production of *If We Were Birds*. Similarly, Tara Rosling played Philomela in Tarragon’s production of *If We Were Birds* and a Maid/Naid in Nightwood’s 2012 production of *The Penelopiad*.

\(^{42}\) As Atwood explains, “the chorus of Maids is in part a tribute to the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, in which lowly characters comment on the main action, and also to the satyr plays that accompanied tragedies, in which comic actors made fun of them” (*Penelopiad* vi).
Similarly, Shields fuses an ancient Greek tragedy with contemporary war reports in order to call to arms a chorus of multi-generational and cross-cultural women who challenge the pervasive use of rape as a tool of military conquest. Through these choruses, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* ultimately instruct the real audiences on how to gather as a resistant, political public.

Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner define the characteristics and social formations of literary publics throughout history. While Habermas concentrates on dominant literary societies or publics, Warner takes interest in subaltern, counter-cultural groups and their role as reactionary counterpublics. My chapter applies theories of publics to theatre audiences—who are dominant publics unto themselves—and has two main sections. The first part discusses how, although the Greek chorus usually voiced common sense or dominant views, Atwood’s and Shields’s choruses can be viewed as counterpublics that are formed by a shared victimization and that collectively resist the dominant versions of the Greek myths. Counterpublics, as Warner explains, are marginalized groups that form in radical opposition to the dominant cultural collective, that is, what Habermas calls the public. While Habermas provides a comprehensive socio-historical study of the literary public, this chapter concentrates on the contemporary theatre audience as a public gathered in a set time and space and as a “carrier of public opinion” (Habermas 2).  

The public is a propagating agent of the cultural imaginary because the public is a carrier of society’s popular narratives and shared beliefs. Frye describes the phenomena of the public’s cultural imaginary as the

---

43 Habermas gives a historical overview of the changing definitions of the public from ancient Greece to present day society, concentrating on the formation of a bourgeois reading public in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This chapter focuses on the contemporary audiences who attend productions of *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds*. 
“social imagination” (217) and explains that “literature is conscious mythology: as a society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought” (234). For Frye, writers at once contribute to the “social imagination” and participate in “an imaginative continuum [. . .] conditioned in their attitudes by their predecessors, or by the cultural climate of their predecessors” (252). Atwood and Shields call attention to their participation in an imaginative continuum and a conscious mythology through their revisionist adaptation of popular Greek myths. The choruses, however, actively resist the domineering versions of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Ovid’s “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.” As counterpublics, the choruses challenge the public’s mythologies and aim to transform the dominant public imaginary. *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* gather theatre audiences in order to alter Homer and Ovid’s role in the cultural imaginary.

The second part of my study explores the larger implications of performing counterpublics before real theatre audiences or dominant publics.44 Building on Habermas’s and Warner’s concepts of publics, I argue that *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* gather and construct an alternative public—what I term a dispublic—that participates in mainstream culture with intentions of transforming it from within. Habermas’s public and Warner’s counterpublic are too stratified for and, as a result, do not readily apply to many of Atwood’s and Shields’s audience members who are at once politically radical and yet part of popular middle-class culture. My concept of the

44 Recently, studies of Early Modern drama have explored the public-making element of theatrical events. McGill University’s *Making Publics: 1500-1700* (or “MaPs” project) has institutionalized the study of art as a public-making form. Paul Yachnin, the originator of MaPs, argues for the significance of theatres as a social engine for the formation of publics, and suggests, “Shakespeare’s theatre was the leading arena of public-making […] and political change in early modern England” (201).
dispublic defines this specific type of audience and accounts for revisionist adaptation’s potential mobilizing effects on these contemporary viewers.

Critical Contexts

This chapter presents the first extended analysis of Atwood and Shields’s uses of the Greek chorus. Despite the international popularity of Atwood studies and the critical acclaim of Shields’s play, the novella version of The Penelopiad has garnered much more attention than the play script and If We Were Birds has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves.\(^45\) Sarah Appleton and Sudha Shastri focus on the novella version of Atwood’s The Penelopiad and its feminist revisions to The Odyssey, but both critics overlook the chorus. Similarly, Mihoko Suzuki, Hilde Staels, and Earl G. Ingersoll approach Atwood’s prose-fiction version as literary satire, parody, and as a “novella,” respectively, glossing the role of the chorus. These articles provide valuable insights into the novella’s literary form, but they have little application to Atwood’s dramatic adaptation.

The dramatic version is especially important to consider because it changes the literary significance of Atwood’s chorus. The audience’s relationship to the chorus is different when we are together in a theatre house rather than isolated as individual readers. While Penelope, with her first-person narrative perspective, offers a more identifiable figure for the solitary reader, the chorus as both a group and an inset

\(^{45}\) If We Were Birds won the 2011 Governor General’s Award for drama in English. The Tarragon’s production was also nominated for several Dora awards, winning for Outstanding Performance by a Female in a Principal Role (Tara Rosling) and for Outstanding Original Sound Design/Composition (Thomas Ryder Payne).
audience better mirrors the collective theatre audience. With the stage version, both chorus and audience are joined in a shared space and time as “we” all watch the main action of the play. The performance medium, the audience’s role as a collective group, and the choruses’ blocking (on centre stage), encourage the audience’s identification with the chorus and their collective narrative. *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* shift the focus from individual mythic figures to communities of servants and thereby privilege collective narration as a survival strategy and narrative method.

While the plays may seem to pit a female counterpublic (choruses, Penelope, Philomela) against a male-dominated public (Odysseus, Tereus), Atwood and Shields are careful to complicate this gender division. Penelope and Philomela are sometimes joined with the choruses, but this relationship is overtly troubled due to class issues. Atwood casts Penelope as a betrayer of the Maids, and Shields presents Philomela as an upper-class woman who is at first unsympathetic to the sufferings of her female servants. The lead female characters, Penelope and Philomela, are in some ways no better than the male counterparts. The public and counterpublic, as a result, are not gendered as masculine and feminine, respectively.

**Collective Narration**

*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* use distinct narrative methods and poetics to model a counter-discourse that privileges the disenfranchised choric collective over the affluent central protagonists. *If We Were Birds*, for instance, begins not with an invocation of the muses but with an invocation of female collectivity and the shared
narrative of a “we”: in the opening scene, Philomela’s mouth spurts blood as she attempts to tell her story, and it is not until she switches from the singular “I” to the collective “we” that she is able effectively to narrate her tale. *The Penelopiad* similarly begins with the lone Penelope struggling to tell her story, but when she tries, words escape her and she sounds like an owl. The twelve Maids, by contrast, storm the stage and defiantly declare that their deaths were “not fair” (4). While the male characters approach the Maids as merely a homogenous and passive group of women—Atwood’s Penelope is aware of the men’s pejorative use of “women” as a descriptor and complains when her son categorizes her as part of “the women” (61)—*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* reveal the powerful potential of a group of women by mobilizing them as an active “we.” Along with the collective narration, the repeated metaphors and acts of weaving throughout both plays poeticize collectivity as a braiding of individuals. Through the choruses, these two plays propose a narratology for collective storytelling, poeticize the choric “we,” and harness the political potential of groups of women.

Atwood and Shields complicate the second-wave feminist approach to women as a united collective by highlighting the class rift between the royalty (Penelope, Philomela) and their slaves (choruses). Because radical or second-wave feminism focused on one axis of oppression—patriarchal violence—as a commonality among all women, it marginalized issues of class, ethnicity, geo-political positionality, imperialism, and ableism to name a few.46 Atwood’s and Shield’s cross-cultural and multi-generational choruses complicate second-wave feminism by demonstrating the power of a united collective while emphasizing socio-political and class differences among its

46 Warner describes second-wave feminism in terms of the public and private: “Male was to public as female was to private” (32); see *Publics and Counterpublics* for a discussion of second-wave feminism in relationship to the dichotomy of the public and private.
members. While critics such as Appleton and Shastri tend to focus on how Atwood changed Homer’s *The Odyssey*, I argue that it is the playwrights’ concentration on the choruses that most impacts the audience’s relationship to the original Greek myths and, more importantly, that transforms our conceptions of what it means to be part of a collective or audience.

Atwood’s opening two scenes contrast the inarticulateness of the lone “I” with the powerful narrations of the choric “we.” The ghost of Penelope sits alone on stage in a state of “bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness” (3)—a self-reflexive description that establishes the theatre’s power to embody even the disembodied. She is unable to “scream” or correct her own myth: “Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours! But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl” (4). The Maids, by contrast, “interrupt Penelope” (4) with a narrative empowered by the “we.” While “jumping ropes, or doing other rope tricks,” the Maids proclaim:

> We are the maids
> The ones you killed
> The ones you failed
> We danced in air
> Our bare feet twitched
> It was not fair
> With every goddess, queen and bitch
> From there to here
> You scratched your itch (4)

Shields is especially effective in emphasizing cultural differences among her chorus members: the intercultural women tell stories of wars from around the world.
The Maids’ song immediately and effectively resists the same legend that Penelope longs to correct (4). As “the ones you killed” and “failed,” the chorus of women at once addresses Odysseus, who “scratched [his] itch” with “every goddess, queen and bitch,” and Penelope, who failed to stop the murder of her favourite Maids. The Maids, unlike Penelope, do not dance around the issues, but instead directly accuse Odysseus of murder and infidelity as they declare “you judged us bad” (4). In jumping rope, the women appropriate the device that hung them to death for their own pleasure or fun. They also use colloquial phrasing when they refer to Odysseus’s marital infidelity—“with every goddess, queen and bitch . . . you scratched your itch”—to debunk his epic-hero status. The Maids, therefore, symbolically interrupt Penelope’s faltering narrative of forced female silence to powerfully define themselves (“we are”), accuse the epic hero of murder, transform instruments of punishment into vehicles of pleasure (the rope), and undermine the high poeticism of The Odyssey with profanity (“bitch”). In short, the choric “we” harness their actions, words, and discursive form to redefine Odysseus as a callous philandering murderer.

Shields’s play similarly begins with Philomela fighting to complete “I am” declarations and longing to narrate her own version of Ovid’s myth. Philomela must narrate her story with a newly attached tongue and bird songs: “I think they’ve sewn it back so I can sing through the night, so I can mourn my fate with a sweet song” (3). Philomela, however, finds her own voice with the help of the chorus. In the following lines, there is a marked transition from Philomela’s fear-ridden “I” to an empowered “we” after the chorus directs her to “speak”:

---

48 The line “you judged us bad” (4) has two meanings: Odysseus not only judged them as “bad” women, but also wrongly accused them of betraying his honour and thereby made a “bad” judgment.
PHILOMELA: Not much has changed, now that I’m a bird.

Especially the size of my fear:

Large enough to get caught in the throat but not enough to die.

CHORUS: Speak it, speak it, / speak it, speak it—

PHILOMELA: We were born for fear because the gods made us weak,

but when we were girls we could run as fast,

jump as high, yell as loud as the boys,

so you can see why we forgot to shake. (4)

Encouraged by the chorus of women, Philomela gains confidence. The command “speak it” (emphasis added) functions as a refrain throughout this scene, which at once encourages Philomela to narrate her own version of the Ovidian myth and to say “we,” or what I read as the true “it” or goal of the scene, because it is the coming together of all the women—the chorus, Procne, and Philomela—that transforms Philomela from a cowering bird to a commanding woman.

In If We Were Birds, the narrativizing “we” empowers Philomela, draws Procne onto the stage, and brings together all of the play’s female characters. Neither Philomela’s bloodied tongue nor Procne’s entrance comprise the main action of the first scene; rather, the crux of the action is the women’s coming together as a fearless “we”:

CHORUS: Speak it, speak it, speak it / speak it—

PHILOMELA: Before the fear.

CHORUS: Yes?

PHILOMELA: Oh, before the fear we …

CHORUS: Yes?
PHILOMELA: We moved in such different ways.

When we were children, Procne and I,

[ . . . PROCNE enters . . . ]

BOTH [PROCNE and PHILOMELA]: We were not frightened of darkness then;

PROCNE: We were not nervous with lightening bugs or spiders.

[ . . . ]

CHORUS, PHILOMELA, PROCNE: We were not frightened of darkness then. (4-5)

Further demonstrating the power of the “we,” the line “We were children, Procne and I” (emphasis added) functions as a type of incantation that brings Procne onto the stage. Procne and Philomela are the first to harmonize with their shared line: “We were not frightened of darkness then” (5). The chorus then joins the two women as they all triumphantly repeat “We were not frightened of darkness then” (5). Philomela’s story, then, picks up more and more voices as the women gradually coalesce in an audible way. It is not an immediate unity, but a coming together that is expressed through the joining of voices. As with The Penelopiad, the opening scene of If We Were Birds builds up to the empowering force of a choric “we.” The following section, however, will demonstrate how these choruses do much more than establish the power of collective narration as the plays progress.
Performing Choric Counterpublics

The two choruses function as what Warner would call “counterpublics,” that is, groups of people (often strangers) that not only oppose but also transform a dominant ideology and discursive form. Warner sees the dominant public’s discursive form as primarily text and reading-based; counterpublics, by comparison, are often performance-based and “the discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (119).49 Atwood’s and Shields’s plays concretize the role of the chorus as a counterpublic that directly affects the audience’s relationship to the original myths and their surrounding scholarship. The choruses are “‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining” the dominant Greek myths as well as the relationship between the disenfranchised slaves and their female masters (Warner 121).

The public is the “dominant” group who “take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy” (Warner 122). Counterpublics, in contrast, “are, by

---

49 In comparing the discursive forms of publics and counterpublics, Warner repeatedly uses the nineteenth-century British magazine *The Spectator* to demonstrate the making of reading publics. Warner highlights a “hysterical moment in *Spectator* no. 217” where we can see a response from a markedly subaltern group of readers. A letter from “Kitty Termagant” describes a club of “She-Romps” that seems to be the inverse of Mr. Spectator’s own club of Mankind and propriety as formed and defined by his magazine. Kitty explains that “we throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in Publick Places. I am not able to express the Pleasure we enjoy from ten at Night till four in the Morning, in being as rude as you Men can be, for your Lives. As our Play runs high the Room is immediately filled with broken Fans, torn Petticoats, lappets of Head-dresses, Flounces, Furbelows, Garters, and Working-Aprons” (qtd. in Warner 109). With this letter, Kitty not only describes “an inverted image of the Spectator’s own club” (109)—“his is all male, theirs female;” “His is regulated by an ethic of bourgeois moral urbanity” and “theirs throws off the restraints of decorum” (109)—but also “anticipate[s] counterpublicness” (119) by rejecting gender-specific obligations.
definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (Warner 63), and they aim at transforming these norms through an alternative discourse that is received by the dominant public with hostility. Warner’s theory of counterpublics is especially applicable to revisionist drama, which speaks from and for the margins—Warner himself classifies “performance” as the preferred mode for expressing the politics of counterpublics or minority cultures. In short, counterpublics are groups that 1) form in opposition to a dominant public or discourse, 2) aim to transform and not merely replicate the dominant group or discourse, 3) use alternative idioms or forms, such as performance, to effect change, and 4) are looked upon with hostility or distrust by the dominant public.

These four elements not only correspond with but further reveal Atwood’s and Shields’s strategies of resistance: *The Penelopiad*’s and *If We Were Birds*’ choruses oppose patriarchal powers through their actions as well as their discursive modes. Firstly, the choruses are formed in opposition to the myths’ male war heroes and the patriarchal scholarship that celebrates them. Atwood’s and Shields’s choruses unite against Homer’s and Ovid’s narratives of Odysseus and Tereus, respectively. Exemplifying the second and third characteristics of a counterpublic, the choruses’ modes of expression further conflict with these dominant powers. In both plays, the choruses engage in cacophonous, multivocal narrations to subvert Homer’s and Ovid’s seemingly objective, univocal narratives. The choruses also overtly reject epic poetry with their profanity and mock-epic laments. Finally, fulfilling the last element of counterpublics, the choruses and their discursive forms are dismissed with conventional patriarchal animosity as the

---

50 Atwood and Shields are reacting against an image of the Academe as “the procession of the sons of educated men” (Woolf 828) or as “a congeries of old-boys’ networks, academicians rehearsing their numb canons in sessions dedicated to the literature of white males” (Rich 33).
dominant male characters label them “whores” (*Penelopiad* 77) and “the spoils of war” (*If We Were Birds* 17).

**Opposition to Dominant Mythologies**

Atwood and Shields question the patriarchal values that are responsible for the dissemination of their respective myths: the plays challenge the popular views of Penelope as a symbol of female fidelity and of Philomela as a rape victim. Writers have long celebrated Penelope as a “chaste woman” (Aristophanes) or the “ideal of Roman chastity” (Latin elegiac poets of the first century B.C.) (Katz 4). Following in this tradition, Marilyn A. Katz provides a comprehensive overview of the critical reception of Penelope and explains that “critics, too, are inclined to underplay the complexity of Penelope’s *kleos* in the Odyssey,” either “restricting it to her constancy,” or “assimilat[ing] her craftiness to it” (5): Beye portrays Penelope as “the all encompassing stability at the end of man’s adventures;” A.T. Edwards attributes her importance to the fact “that she remained faithful to her husband in the face of suitors;” and Russo similarly describes Penelope as “renowned throughout Greece for her loyalty and cleverness” (qtd. in Katz 6). As Katz says, “Penelope’s *kleos* [renown] in this system of meaning, then, is identical with her constancy,” and she merely “functions as a stable and unchanging reference point for the adventures of Odysseus” (6). In her Introduction to the play, Atwood is careful to remind us of this long tradition of scholarship: “the play you hold in your hands is an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo” (v). With this opening line, Atwood underlines the sheer abundance of different
versions of the myth from Oral Trojan War material to Homer’s *The Odyssey* to “post-
Homerian retellings, stretching from Ovid through Dante and Chaucer and Shakespeare
and Tennyson to James Joyce and Derek Walcott and Barry Unsworth and Lewis Hyde”
to Atwood’s own novella and play (v). *The Penelopiad* and its many literary echoes
remind us that Penelope has been created and recreated by male authors in order to serve
patriarchal ideals of female silence, patience, and fidelity.\(^{51}\)

*The Penelopiad*’s dramatization of Penelope as a ghost—she alerts the audience,
“I’m dead” (3)—literalizes her role as an abstracted symbol of the ideal wife. In her
opening monologue, Penelope speaks to her own textual significance and contests the
many literary interpretations of her role as faithful wife. “After I was dead,” Penelope
explains, “they turned me into a story,” but it was “not the kind of story I would have
preferred to hear” (5). She does not sanction the popular myth, and mourns, “what have I
amounted to, now the official version has gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick
used to beat other women with” (4). In an effort to refute Homer’s dominant version,
Penelope pits herself against “public opinion” (5), proclaiming, “Now that all the others
have run out of air, it’s my turn” (5).\(^{52}\) With this first monologue, Penelope reveals her
conflicted relationship to the literary canon and *The Odyssey*’s popular, edifying
mythologies.

Penelope’s emblematic role of wifely duty connects her to the collective Maids
whose deaths have similarly been interpreted on a purely symbolic level as a
representation of Odysseus’s authority. Atwood herself explains that the play “was

\(^{51}\) Although Penelope tells her own story in this play, Atwood is careful to remind us that her legend has
been appropriated by a myriad of writers and Penelope’s opening monologue presents Odysseus as a
trickster who spins “plausible” tales (3).

\(^{52}\) *If We Were Birds* begins with a similar act: Philomela asserts that there will be “no more silence” (3) as
she coaxing her newly attached tongue “forward to speak” (3).
conceived as a composition for two voices—the voice of Penelope herself, and the collective voice of the twelve maids—or slaves—who are hanged at the end of *The Odyssey*” (vi). In Atwood’s novella version of *The Penelopiad*, the Maids, like Penelope, even refer to their own literary role as symbolic figures: “You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us pure symbol” (168). In this way, Atwood’s Penelope and Maids address their scholarly treatment as objects of a decidedly masculine gaze. The Maids’ self-reflexive acknowledgement of their role as “pure symbol,” according to Staels, attacks “traditional allegorical interpretations imposed on ancient myths” and targets James “Frazer’s influential myth-ritualist theory [in *The Golden Bough*] among mythopoeic critics such as Jessie Weston and Northrop Frye” (104). Frye, for instance, casts Odysseus as the centre of a mythic “romance”—“a hero escaping safely from incredible perils and arriving in the nick of time to claim his bride and baffle the villains” (*Anatomy* 319); but Penelope is merely an unmoving “ambivalent female archetype . . . who is the fixed point on which the [male-driven] action ends” (*Anatomy* 322). While I agree with Staels that Atwood resists mythopoeic readings of Penelope and the Maids as referents for male power, *The Penelopiad* further provides an alternative approach to narratives and myths alike. Instead of interpreting individual characters and actions—an approach that often celebrates acts of war and male heroism—Atwood concentrates on the significance of a group of women and their collective narrative.

In *If We Were Birds*, Shields exposes the cultural interest in rape narratives and the use of sexual violence as a prevalent weapon in war. Upon Tereus’s return from the Theban war, Pandion relishes the second-hand tales of beheading and rape. Pandion
instructs Tereus to “gives us a story” (13) and “don’t spare any details” (15) as Tereus explains that “we bashed ribs and skulls and hips and faces / spraying the walls of Thebes with rebel innards” (15). Shields intimately links war and sex as the male warriors celebrate the sword as phallus:

PANDION: Would you mind if I held your soldier’s bride?

TEREUS: My soldier’s bride?

PANDION: You know, your blade. Your dagger, your dragonforce.

TEREUS: Sir?

PANDION: Your Peter the Great, your pork, your ninja, your purple-headed yogourt slinger.

TEREUS: My sword?

PANDION: Any hero would be honoured for the King of Athens to grip onto his legend.

TEREUS: Of course.

PANDION: If only for a moment.

TEREUS reluctantly hands over his sword. PANDION has trouble lifting it, but then starts waving it about in mock battle. (16-17)

As Tereus struggles to keep Pandion’s sword erect, Shields presents war, legend, and phallus as mutually constitutive. In an interview with Richard Ouzounian—a theatre critic for the Toronto Star—Shields describes many “disturbing” discoveries while researching for her play: “A good 50 to 60 percent of Ovid’s Metamorphoses involve a rape of some kind. There’s almost a normalcy to it. I mean, the Rape of the Sabine Women is the foundation of Ancient Rome. Think of it. Rome was founded on the backs
of raped women.” Shields, then, is quite conscious of Philomela’s role as a popular literary subject that enacts fantasies of rape.

In presenting the problematic female icons (Penelope and Philomela) in relation to a larger collective (the chorus), The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds expose the effects of these societal ideals and fantasies on a group of women. Atwood and Shields do not simply give a voice to the previously silenced figures Penelope and Philomela, but rather expose this silencing as systemic exploitation and use the choruses to speak out against it. Each play explicitly marks itself off from a dominant cultural narrative, namely the scholarly focus on male-driven violence as demonstrated by Odysseus’s heroic battles and Tereus’s aggressions. As theatre pieces that refute the “official version” of Greek mythologies, The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds are poised to dramatize a counterpublic.

**Resisting the Dominant Form: Text versus Performance**

*The Penelopiad’s* and *If We Were Birds’ choruses perform the second characteristic of counterpublics by pitting themselves against a text-based diegetic mode and relishing the performance-based mimetic mode of theatre. Warner directly associates textuality, reading, and rational-critical discourse with dominant publics, and the more embodied medium of performance with counterpublics: the verbs for public agency “are verbs for private readings,” such as “scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on,” whereas counterpublics do not privilege “rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity” and instead “depend more heavily on performance spaces than on
While I see Warner’s parallel binaries of text/performance and publics/counterpublics as fairly reductive—after all performance, just like texts, can be used to reaffirm the dominant public—his definition of performance as a bodily medium that can be interpreted as a subaltern discourse is constructive: it helps to explain theatre’s potential for forming counterpublics. But, if the “verbs for public agency are verbs for private readings,” then what are the verbs for counterpublic agency? These verbs, if we are to extend Warner’s theories, are performance-based ones, such as “to show,” “to do,” and “to embody.” Unlike print-based rational-critical verbs, such as “scrutinize, ask, reject, opine,” Atwood and Shields’s plays align their inset viewers (chorus members) with verbs connected to the body and performance like “show,” “do,” “act.” It is with these markedly “counterpublic” and performance-based verbs that both plays begin.

The Penelopiad’s and If We Were Birds’ opening scenes dramatize the loss of the rational-critical “telling” mode of linear narration: Penelope is an inarticulate ghost trapped in Hades, while Philomela first appears as a fowl with a bloodied tongue. Atwood and Shields immediately threaten the narrative method—“to tell”—that distinguishes print-based novels or narrative fiction as a genre. Atwood’s first scene establishes the failure of the telling mode: the voiceless Penelope is trapped in the underworld and when she tries to “scream” or narrate her own “legend,” she “sound[s] like an owl” (4). Similarly, the 2010 Tarragon production of Shields’s play begins with Philomela spitting out blood as her tongue “cowers in the depths of my throat, / curled

Critics like Hutcheon for example, often contrast print as a “telling” mode with performance as a “showing mode” (Theory 38). Richard Schechner similarly defines theatre performances in relation to “explaining, showing, doing” (Performance Studies 22). Warner suggests that reading is the mode by which publics form and establish dominion: “the attribution of agency to publics works in most cases because of the direct transposition from private reading acts to the sovereignty of opinion” (123).
and trembling” (3). While Penelope has figuratively lost the ability to speak, Philomela has literally lost her tongue, and, as a result, must struggle to at once “show” and “tell” her story through bird-like actions and sounds. The opening scenes to Atwood’s and Shields’s plays, with their references to absented stories and lost words, bring attention to the past failures of “telling” modes; but, as Penelope’s and Philomela’s physical bodies communicate from beyond, these initial scenes also demonstrate the restorative potential of theatre as a “showing” medium and the importance of sharing their stories. In this way, the plays privilege the markedly “counterpublic” medium of theatre or performativity as an alternative literary mode that has the ability to at once “show” and “tell” with bodies on the stage.

Atwood’s and Shields’s plays present Penelope and Philomela as women who have been denied the right to tell their own story or to participate in the rational-critical medium of written narratives. While both women inevitably tell their tales through monologues, the plays enable Penelope and Philomela to not only “speak” (*If We Were Birds* 4) their stories from beyond the grave but to appear before us as embodied figures despite their state of “liplessness” (*Penelopiad* 3).

**Alternative Discursive Methods: Bird Sounds and Parody**

*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* not only resist the dominant form (text) and discursive style (epic) of their source texts, they present an alternative narrative methodology: collective narration, bird sounds, and low literary or parodic forms (mock-lament, rope-jumping rhymes). Exemplifying what Warner would call an “alternative
idiom," Atwood’s twelve Maids and Shields’s disenfranchised chorus speak as cacophonous collectives and, ultimately, with non-human voices and bird sounds. In both plays, the choruses of servant women appear before the audience as the embodiment of female collectivity and their narrative forms reinforce this collaboration.

In If We Were Birds, for example, the chorus members’ lines alternate, overlap, and occasionally interrupt one another, creating a brocade of narratives. When narrating Procne’s wedding, Shields’s chorus members take turns describing the events as if collectively weaving the narrative for the audience:

YOUNG: The furies made the bed and on the post perched an owl, a dangerous sign of foreboding.

PIOUS: He kissed the tips of her fingers and the bottoms of her feet.

PREGNANT: He leaned back to look in the mirror.

PIOUS: Again.

BLEEDING: Finally he unwrapped her like the gift she had been, and when he finally touched her breast the owl cried out.

PIOUS: It continued to shriek through the night disrupting the pleasure of the newly weds, interrupting Tereus’ concentration so he couldn’t fully enjoy his greatest reward for a battle well-waged and won.

YOUNG: “Whoo whoo! Twit twoo!”

PIOUS: And curious Philomela standing at the door
thought she heard the cries of her sister in ecstasy:

*Lights up on PHILOMELA*

PHILOMELA: Whoo whoo! Twit two! (33)

Here, the individual members of the chorus take turns speaking, thereby demonstrating a heterogeneous yet collective narration method. Their emphasis on the foreboding owl and its shrieks foreshadows the play’s end and signals an alternative to rational-critical discourse: to cry out against their individual fates, the chorus members and Philomela eventually use non-human bird sounds to communicate.

Bird symbolism, imagery, and sounds permeate *If We Were Birds*. As Philomela’s opening “blanket of feathers” (3) costume reminds us, she must narrate her version of the myth as a bird. Along with the title itself, throughout the play there are numerous references to birds, the backdrop of the stage at times looks like a feathered nest (Tarragon production, 2010), the Chorus is “wrapped in blankets of feathers” (3), and the women’s transformation into birds frames the play. Tereus’s final lines—You you you you / YOU YOU YOU YOU (76)—echo the ominous owl’s “Whoo whoo! Twit two” (33) as he, Philomela, Procne, and the chorus members all metamorphose into birds.

*The Penelopiad* also features bird sounds as a way of calling out against the official version through a markedly non-rational (and non-human) discourse. Homer includes only a few lines to mark the death of the handmaids, describing them as doves with impure souls:

Thus speaking, on the circling wall [the Prince] strung

A ship's tough cable, from a column hung;
Near the high top he strain’d it strongly round,
Whence no contending foot could reach the ground.
Their heads above, connected in a row,
They beat the air with quiv’ring feet below:
Thus on some tree hung struggling in the snare,
The doves or thrushes flap their wings in air.
Soon fled the soul impure, and left behind
The empty corse to waver with the wind. (499-508)

Homer uses bird imagery to capture the deaths of the Maids as they “flap their wings” in futility and their “empty corse” is left to merely “waver with the wind.” Atwood uses this imagery as an overarching topos for Penelope (Duckie, owl) and the Maids (doves, geese). Atwood harnesses Homer’s de-humanization of the Maids by dramatizing their transformation into birds as a site from which to call for an uprising and to curse Odysseus and Penelope. After Penelope explains, “I sound like an owl,” the play ends with the Maids, their “we” narrative, and the dissolution of language:

and now we follow
you, we find you
now, we call
to you to you
too wit too woo
too wit too woo
too woo (emphasis added, 82)
The Maids’ words transform into bird sounds: “to you” and “too woo” audibly mix as the similarities of their sounds makes them almost interchangeable. In this way, one of the overarching narratives in both plays is the transformation from a word-based and logical discursive mode into a non-human discursive form. In short, the choruses in both plays employ the counterpublic’s strategy of subverting not only a dominant ideology but also its linguistic and rational discursive form.

In addition to pluralizing the narrating “I” and transforming rational-critical discourse into bird sounds, Atwood’s Maids resist the epic genre of The Odyssey myth by communicating through low literary forms that subvert the traditional poetic forms of lamentations and ballads. Atwood playfully destabilizes literary genres with indecorous subtitles like “Chorus: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament” (9) and “Chorus: Dreamboats, a Ballad” (57). The scene title “Kiddie Mourn, A Lament” is at once sexually suggestive with the pun on “kiddie porn,” and grounded in the poetic genre of lamentations.

“Dreamboats, A Ballad” also announces its use of a classic literary form, the ballad; the title simultaneously uses “Dreamboats” as a playful reference to a dream ballad—one that presents dream as a vehicle, or “boat,” for the imagination—and as a colloquial, even sarcastic, description for handsome men. While Atwood’s Penelope communicates through traditional soliloquies, the chorus actively parodies traditional literary forms of lamentations and ballads.
We(aving): The Poetics of the Choral “We”

*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* develop a poetics of the choral “we.” Both plays promote group collaboration and the social formation of a “we” through the dominant weaving metaphors, which signify the strength of a collective as a braid of individual strands. Penelope weaves and then un-weaves a shroud to keep her aggressive suitors at bay, while Philomela weaves the story of her rape into a cloth. This weaving functions as another action-based supplement for the more traditional diegetic mode.

In *The Penelopiad*, the weaving and unweaving of the shroud helps delay Penelope’s decision (she must choose one of the suitors to marry when the shroud is complete), uniting Penelope and her Maids in a shared strategy of resistance. Classics scholars, however, typically interpret the weaving trick as a symbol of storytelling (Clayton) and of Penelope’s “constancy and cleverness” (Katz 5).54 *The Penelopiad* participates in these common interpretations by using weaving as a metaphor for storytelling and Penelope’s agency: as Atwood’s Penelope puns, “I’ll spin a thread of my own” (*Penelopiad* 5). Although weaving still functions as a sign of storytelling and of Penelope’s cleverness in *The Penelopiad*, it accrues another significance in Atwood’s version—that of female interconnectedness.

---

54 See Barbara Clayton’s *A Penelopean Poetics* for an analysis of the weaving imagery in *The Odyssey*. Clayton convincingly argues that “Penelope’s web text is an intricate self-reflexive gesture in which we can read both narrative reversal (stories that ‘undo’ one another) and narrative return (to a retelling of the *Odyssey*), in what amounts to a final poetic mimesis of Penelope’s unweaving” (52). Clayton’s examination of the emphasis on self-reflexive storytelling in *The Odyssey* reveals the many inset reinterpretations of the Odysseus’s myth, which Atwood adds to. The story of Penelope’s web trick, Clayton points out, is repeated by three different narrators: Antinous, Penelope, and the shade of Amphimedon (23). Atwood’s Penelope, then, not only resists the many different scholarly interpretations of her character, but also the many different narrations of her own actions within the *Odyssey* itself.
The one moment where Penelope’s “I” merges with the Maids’ collective “we” occurs when they (un)weave the shroud together. Instead of dramatizing Penelope as a heroic “exception among womankind” (Katz 5), Atwood presents her as someone who has betrayed a female collective. While the chorus members repeatedly refer to themselves as a “we”—their lines “we are the maids / the ones you killed / the ones you failed” (4) act as a refrain throughout the play—Penelope is a solitary “I” and longs for their attention. In fact, the first time that Penelope refers to herself and participates as a member of a “we” is in the “Unweaving by Moonlight” scene from act two:

For more than three years we picked away at my weaving at the dead of night. And though we were permanently exhausted, these nights had a touch of festivity amongst them. They were such pleasant girls, full of energy; a little loud and giggly sometimes, as all maids are in youth, but it cheered me up to hear them chattering away, and to listen to their singing. They had such lovely voices, all of them. We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. We became like sisters.

(emphasis added, 54)

The repetition of “we” accompanied by the descriptions of “weaving” phonetically merge so that we-aving also becomes an index of the “we.” In forming a sisterhood through this weaving, Penelope is actually happy—an anomaly in the context of the rest of the play—and she finds a way to postpone the suitors’ marriage proposals. The accompanying weaving actions and group choreography reinforce the “interwinding” (51) of the Maids and Penelope: the Maids themselves form the loom by holding a rope and performing a “twining dance, as Penelope weaves” before her audience of suitors.
(50). Then, when they are alone at night, “The fabric of ropes comes apart as they sing and move out and in” (53). Through the unweaving of the shroud, Penelope and the Maids “form a [social] fabric” (51)—a secret group. Penelope survives and maintains her household by forming this powerful “we,” which is both created through and represented by the act of weaving.

The braiding of ropes, however, also foretells the eventual hanging of the twelve Maids and the subsequent fraying of the collective. In the Nightwood productions (2009 and 2012), the directors used the same ropes for the unweaving and the Maids’ hanging. In the 2009 production, the Maids are hanged on individual strands, symbolizing the unraveling of their past secret bonds. In the 2012 production, Tereus uses a single rope to successively hang each Maid, which emphasizes the unifying act of their collective death. Penelope’s breaking apart from the group and dissolution of the collective “we” becomes the central tragedy in the play.

Atwood even alters the significance of Penelope’s dream in Book 19 of The Odyssey to suggest not the impending death of the suitors but that of the Maids. In The Odyssey, Penelope dreams that “The bird of Jove” (630) kills “A team of twenty geese” (628) but, as she mourns “Each fav’rite fowl” (632), the eagle returns and explains:

I come, prophetic of approaching joy:

View in this plumy form thy victor Lord;

The geese (a glutton race) by thee deplor'd,

---

55 The play’s repeated use and referral to ropes not only symbolizes the thread of life, as spun by the fates in Greek mythology, but also reminds the audience of the Maids’ eventual hanging at the hands of Odysseus and his son.
56 While every production need not use the same ropes for the weaving and hanging scenes, Atwood’s call for “ropes” in both instances invites directors to reuse the same prop. In the 2009 and 2012 Nightwood productions of The Penelopiad, the directors did just that.
Portend the Suitors fated to my sword. (643-46)

Penelope’s dream in *The Odyssey* foretells the victorious return of Odysseus and the death of the suitors. Atwood, however, emphasizes the Queen’s love of her “fav’rite” geese:

PENELOPE: I dream I have a flock of beautiful, lovely white geese, geese of which I am very, very fond. I dream that they are happily pecking around the yard when a huge eagle with a crooked beak swoops down and kills them all. And then I wake up in tears.

ODYSSEUS: The eagle is your husband, Odysseus, who will soon return to slay the suitors.

PENELOPE: But if the geese are the suitors, why do their deaths make me sad? (71)

In this scene, Penelope challenges the traditional interpretation of the geese as representations of the suitors, explaining that the suitors’ deaths would not “make me sad” (71). Atwood’s version of the dream shifts the attention from the male characters (Odysseus, suitors) to the female Maids.

The Maids themselves resist the traditional literary focus on Odysseus’s alleged heroics and the marginalization of their deaths: “we had no voice / we had no name / we had no choice / we had one face / one face the same” (82). Atwood adapts the Maids’ role as a faceless “we” into a position from which to resist their murderers. Whereas Homer and scholars have lumped the Maids together as “one face” with no individuality or character depth, Atwood’s Maids find strength in their collectivity and transform their oneness into a sign of unity. Atwood also reinterprets the Maids’ original role as
emblems of retribution in *The Odyssey* by giving them individual names and emphasizing their distinctiveness as “the youngest” and “the most beautiful” (77). Atwood’s Maids—Melantho, Tanis, Kerthia, Iole, Celandine, Klytie, Selene, Zoe, Alecto, Chloris, Phasiana, and Narcissa—are named after Greek Gods. Shields also gives her Chorus members distinct roles—The Young One, The Pregnant One, The Bleeding One, The Pious One, The One with Dwindling Dignity—that are suggestive of their particular past sufferings. In this way, Atwood and Shields identify the choruses of women without effacing individual differences by highlighting the distinct personal narratives and names of each Chorus member. *The Penelopiad* not only foregrounds the story of the twelve Maids, which is created by multiple narrative strands, but also promotes the intertwining of these individuals who collectively fight against the dominant characters and “demand justice!” as well as their own “retribution!” (78).

Just as the chorus and staging establish a poetics of collaboration, the rehearsal and production process of *The Penelopiad* also tends to enforce the collaborative potential of a “we.” Shannon Hengen highlights *The Penelopiad*’s lessons on female collectivity both in its production process, which involved collaborative networks of women, and in the play script itself: Atwood “is beckoning us to relive experientially and individually Penelope’s neglect of her disadvantaged Maids and then as an audience to discern the instances and effects of similar neglect in our time” (49). The productions of *The Penelopiad* involved artistic collaboration among Canadian and British actors, and between England’s Royal Shakespeare Company and Canada’s National Arts Centre. These productions also led to an “unusual” collective of “nine wealthy and influential Canadian women and the play’s creative team” (Hengen 52). The Canadian playbill
explains that each of the nine donors, now known as the Penelope Circle, not only helped to fund the National Arts Centre’s production, but also mentored “a young woman who she believes will have a profound impact on our society” (n.p.). Even the play’s production and funding process emphasize the empowerment of female collectivity.

In If We Were Birds, as in The Penelopiad, weaving functions as a controlling metaphor that signals the importance of the female characters’ interconnection. Philomela weaves her tale into a tapestry, but must rely on a servant woman to help deliver the story to Procne. As “Procne and the servant stretch out the tapestry,” it retells the gory violence of Philomela’s rape and mutilation through movement: “Lighting shift: the sheet is lit from behind. Movement Piece: Silhouetted tableaux of the rape and dismemberment are projected onto the tapestry. PROCNE understands every image” (65). Philomela narrates her traumatic rape through a group act that involves chorus members (servants) and Procne. In this instance, the discursive mode of the female collective is again action-based and performative, instead of reading-based and literary, in its use of movement.

If We Were Birds’ set design further reinforces the significance of the tapestry as an overarching metaphor. At the Tarragon production, red strips of fabric were interlaced to form the backdrop, which recalled the image of a woven tapestry and, as lights moved over the stage, of weaving. With the backdrop and the re-enactment of rape behind the fabric, the tapestry becomes a narrating device itself, but one that involves multiple authors (servant, Philomela, the chorus) and actions instead of words. With the addition of feathers, the play’s woven backdrop transforms into a nest that signals the characters’ shared fate—Philomela, Procne, Tereus, and the chorus are all birds by the play’s end.
Shields poeticizes birds and weaving as symbols of an alternative discursive mode, one that is collective, non-lingual, and counter-hegemonic.

In addition to their focus on choric groups, both plays use metaphors, set, and props to further underscore the interweaving of individuals into a collective. Atwood and Shields develop a poetics of the choral “we;” this “we” is heterogeneous yet united, non-lingual, and performance-based. The choruses are, in short, counterpublics who enact counter-discursive strategies.

**Hostility and Indecorousness**

In both plays, the choruses, as well as their alternative discursive forms, are met with hostility, fulfilling Warner’s definitions of counterpublics. “The discourse that constitutes [a counterpublic],” as Warner explains, “is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (191). Atwood’s Maids, for instance, are brutally punished for their “impertinent” behaviour and flirtations with the soldiers (75). Telemachus “eyes the Maids and the suitors with disgust,” calling them “Sluts and bloodsuckers” (55). Later in the play, Odysseus orders his son to hang the Maids for their indiscretions and Eurycleia explains that they were “rude” and “notorious whores” (77). Shields’s chorus also receives notable enmity. In *If We Were Birds*, Tereus is the first to introduce the chorus of slaves, describing them as “the spoils of war” and as the “displaced women” that his soldiers “satisfied themselves with” (17). As neither subjects nor objects of value, Pandion complains that the women “look a bit, well, used” (19). The dispassion
does not stop there. In Philomela’s first encounter with the chorus, she snaps, “what are you looking at” (21) and orders, “What I do or don’t do is none of your business” (22). When the slaves explain how they have been beaten and raped by Tereus and his men, the wealthy Philomela cannot relate from her position of privilege and reacts with disgust, asserting that “Everyone he attacks deserves what he gets [...] If you hadn’t done anything wrong, you wouldn’t be here” (23). Both Atwood’s and Shields’s choruses, like the counterpublics they are, receive aggression, disgust, and revulsion.

In *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds*, the choruses exemplify potential discursive forms of counterpublics, which not only function as vehicles for self-expression, but also unite them as marginalized narrators. Their narrative strategies include heterogeneous narration with multiple voices, low-literary forms, the non-human language of bird songs, and acts of weaving. Through these modes, the choruses are able to survive and share their traumatic experiences, while also resisting the oppressive families that own them. The plays, as a result, present a choric resistive “we” as a “counterpublic” that transforms normative interpretations of Greek mythologies and the rational-critical form of scholarly discourse. After all, it is with performed bodies and bird sounds that these plays metamorphose their originals.

**The Theatre Audience as Dispublic**

Though useful when considering the choruses of *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds*, the theoretical model of publics and counterpublics has its limitations when applied to Atwood’s and Shields’s real audiences. The two plays change the way the
audience conceives itself as a group because the chorus transforms what it means to be part of a public. As model counterpublics, the choruses voice an opposition to hegemonic myths, to the use of rape as a weapon of war, and to forced marriage, among many other issues. The chorus, in turn, functions as a mirror for the audience and thereby invites the viewers to share this oppositional position. In fact, many audience members may already share these accepted political leanings and sympathies. A public, as Warner explains, “appears to be open to indefinite strangers but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres)” (106). To put this in relation to theatre, the dramatic performances of Atwood’s and Shields’s plays gather a group of strangers, but at the same time, these strangers share the same set of criteria as dictated by the event: they are participating in the circulation of feminist politics, they share the same language (English), they are willing and able to pay to attend the theatre, and they are all gathered, however momentarily, in the same geographical location particular to the theatre house. This is to say that theatres are ideologically informed institutions with a set of politics and values that frame the act of witnessing, but these values are not necessarily progressive. The political mandates of theatres imbue the playhouse itself with a political resonance so that the audience members are gathered with the presupposition, however nominal, of attending a production influenced by particular issues. On the one hand, Nightwood theatre produced a 2012 production of *The Penelopiad* and has a markedly feminist theatre mandate that aims to foster plays by and about women; adding to the political resonance, this 2012 production was held at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, which is committed to queer
theatre. On the other hand, Tarragon Theatre, where Shields’s play premiered, does not have an overly political mandate and draws a determinedly middle class and middle-aged audience. These theatres gather and foster audiences with interests in political drama either prior to the theatrical event or as a result of it. In other words, The Penelopiad’s and If We Were Birds’ theatre performances seem to address strangers but actually define a public with shared criteria.

Atwood’s and Shields’s audiences are gathered as dominant publics, while the plays work to unite them in opposition to the popular dissemination of myths that celebrate masculine violence, wifely duty, and rape. The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds were overtly advertised as feminist adaptations of Greek myths. Highlighting The Penelopiad’s markedly female-focus, public transit billboards advertised the play as “half-Dorothy Parker, half-Desperate Housewives.” Kelly Thornton’s director’s message in the 2012 playbill of The Penelopiad exclaims that “Atwood steps out from behind the tall shadow of patriarchal myth-making to ‘spin a thread of her own’” because “in history, in myth, in culture, the truth of women’s lives was at best reduced to two-dimensional portraits of trustworthy wives and at worst ignored altogether” (emphasis added, 3). Reports on If We Were Birds similarly introduced Shields’s play as a “feminist” (Citron) work that “centres around female issues” (Ouzounian). The plays’ advertisements and reviews invited an audience to witness an overtly feminist writing back to dominant myths and histories. The Nightwood and Tarragon audiences, however, do not meet the requirements of a counterpublic because they do not face hostility from

57 Tarragon’s 2009-10 season featured plays by political Canadian playwrights such as Daniel MacIvor and Michael Healey.
the general or dominant public; in many senses, these theatre audiences are themselves the dominant public.

A counterpublic, by contrast, often gathers in protest under the threats of imprisonment, violence, and police intervention. In 2011, for example, the Prime Minister warned audiences against seeing a play with controversial political content. The play under attack was Catherine Frid’s *Homegrown*—to be mounted at the Summerworks theatre and music festival that year—which explores a lawyer’s work with an imprisoned member of the Toronto 18 terrorist group (Shareef Abdelhaleem) who plotted attacks on Toronto. The play, its audience, and the Summerworks festival were all seen to oppose the dominant social order and were met with severe hostility from the government. As a result of *Homegrown*, the Stephen Harper government did more than caution the audience, it pulled the annual grant of approximately $47000 further demonstrating the potential consequences of political theatre. Agitprop theatre (*Eight Men Speak*) and political street performances (Occupy Toronto) also constitute counterpublics in gathering audiences who come together in opposition to the dominant public and who face hostility from both bystanders and government officials. Unlike these counterpublic audiences, *The Penelopiad*’s and *If We Were Bird*’s audiences are usually middle to upper-class individuals attending a production at a mainstream venue, such as Ottawa’s National Arts Centre (*The Penelopiad*), Stratford-upon-Avon’s Swan Theatre (*The Penelopiad*), and Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre (*If We Were Birds*). These

---

58 For further discussion on the history of political theatre in Canada, including street protests, war re-enactments, and state produced agitprop at the G20, see Alan Filewod’s *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (2011). On December 4th, 1933, for instance, the viewers of the collectively written agitprop play *Eight Men Speak* gathered at Toronto’s Standard Theatre in protest against the arrest and assassination attempt of the Communist Party of Canada’s leader, Tim Buck. Local police monitored the audience members and performers, and, after only one performance, they stopped the production run. The play was met with so much resistance that the police threatened to revoke the theatre’s license if it continued to show *Eight Men Speak*. 
types of audiences cannot be classified wholly as a radical “counterpublic;” and yet the
category of dominant “public” does not account for the political activism that the plays
can potentially incite: they call for a classification that acknowledges their political
agenda as well as their participation in mainstream theatre.

Ultimately Atwood’s and Shields’s plays transform the audience into what I term
a dispublic, which functions within the discourse of the dominant public while also
resisting its normative ideologies. In short, a dispublic works with and against the
dominant public. Although Atwood’s and Shields’s audiences may have a previous
knowledge of Homer’s and Ovid’s Greek myths (even if it is just from other
contemporary adaptations or the play bills themselves), the plays demand a
reconsideration of these myths as we know them. It is the plays’ doubled message—as
works that resist the popularity of the very Greek myths they are dramatizing—that
defines the audience and transforms them into a dispublic. I borrow the prefix “dis-”
from Pêcheux’s and Muñoz’s theories of disidentification wherein a subject at once
identifies with and against a dominant ideology; a dispublic performs disidentification by
simultaneously participating in and transforming the popular cultural imaginary. As
outlined in my introduction, Pêcheux and Munoz theorize three identificatory positions:
identification (participating within the dominant culture), counteridentification
(functioning outside and against dominant culture), and disidentification (working with,
on, and against dominant culture). I see Pêcheux’s terminology of identification,

59 The NAC Theatre Company’s playbill for The Penelopiad describes it as “a refreshingly modern
perspective on Homer’s enduring epic The Odyssey” (9). Tarragon Theatre similarly establishes Shields’s
play as an adaptation by introducing If We Were Birds as “A vivid re-imaging of Ovid’s myth” (Tarragon
Theatre website). Both playbills go on to relate the adaptations’ plots to the original narratives.
counteridentification, and disidentification as the identificatory positions of a public, counterpublic, and dispublic, respectively.

Atwood and Shields at once identify with and against dominant narratives. While chapter three will argue that revisionist plays promote disidentification and have a disidentificatory relationship to their sources, this chapter contends that revisionist plays’ audiences share the plays’ disidentificatory relationship to the original. As plays that not only retell, but also arguably capitalize on the Greek myths and the canonicity of these sources, The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds function within the sphere of the dominant public imaginary. These revisionist plays may dramatize inset counterpublics, but the plays as a whole will never form a real counterpublic. Instead, they occupy the sphere of the dispublic, forming audiences that participate in dominant society while working on and against its ideologies or popular mythologies. In this way, The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds transform their audiences into dispublics. The two plays demonstrate theatre’s potential to form a resistive audience both on stage and off.

Making Publics in the Theatre

The Penelopiad and If We Were Birds are not only performed in the public venue of a playhouse and before a public, but are also set in a time period that privileged the public sphere. In ancient Greece, the public sphere ruled.\(^\text{60}\) It is no wonder, then, that the

\(^{60}\) “The private (from privatus, deprived),” as Warner explains, “was originally conceived as the negation or privation of public value. It had no value in its own right” (28). While Hannah Arendt would dispute this claim—The Human Condition (1958) examines both the public and private sphere in ancient Greece—she similarly stresses the dominance of the public realm as the only place where glory could be achieved. Set in ancient Greece, the plays stay true to the pervasiveness of the public sphere in the lives of the ruling class: soldiers, servants, and citizens continually watch the elite female characters.
plays advocate the political potential of forming publics. Today, as in ancient Greece, a theatre production incorporates the spatial and social definitions of “public”: it participates in the public sphere and it forms a public group. The playhouse is a public space in that it is open to the public or general populace, and the audience forms a public (a specific group bounded by a singular event). By bringing a group of people together with a shared interest (play), space (theatre house), and temporal context (duration and date of performance), theatre productions transform the audience into a public with specific spatial and temporal parameters. The theatre is a public space invested in the act of making publics.

A theatre production creates a specific type of viewing public that is heterogeneous yet unified. A participant in a reading public is at once a personal “me” and an impersonal part of a collective “we”: “‘the text addresses me’ and ‘It addresses no one in particular,’ is a ground condition of intelligibility for public language” (Warner 161). Comparatively, the theatre audience experiences this same paradox: the play addresses its audience members simultaneously as a “me” and a “no one,” and, as a result, participates as an “I” and a “we.” Although the actors can physically see their viewing public, the actors, directors, and theatre designers still conceive of the audience as an unknown collective group that constantly changes; the theatre performance addresses the theatre public as a “no one” much like a text’s author who cannot foresee the reader. The theatre audience emulates the reading public’s experience, as theorized by Warner, because “we know that it [the public speech or performance] was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it” (76). In this paradox of audience reception—where the theatre
production, like a text, addresses a “me” and a “no one”—each theatre member interacts with the performance as both a personal individual and an impersonal collective. The experience is *personal*, given his/her unique point of view in the theatre space and private emotive or thinking perspective, and *impersonal* because the singular audience member also partakes in the collective by clapping with the crowd and reacting with the rest of the group. The playgoer therefore has a double experience: responding both as a private “me” and as a public “we.”

This two-fold experience is important because there is lived dissention or difference among the “we.” The personal experience of each “me” prevents or at least complicates and qualifies a homogenous group experience. The individual members not only have different relations and responses to the public discourse, but also recognize their own difference or “me-ness.” In participating in a public as a “me” and a “we,” the individual members become conscious of the parameters that define their public: “as participants in the mass subject, we are the ‘we’ that can describe our particular affiliations of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, or subculture” (171). The theatre audiences’ paradoxical experience as a “me” and “we” creates a self-reflexive and heterogeneous audience that is aware of their participation in a politicized “we.”

Intensifying the audiences’ paradoxical viewing experience as a “we” and “me,” *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* break the fourth wall by addressing their audiences as a collective, or “you,” with shared values, which has the added value of inviting reflexivity on the artifices of theatre. In her opening monologue, Atwood’s Penelope addresses the audience, piercing the fourth wall: “*Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!*” (4). The second-person pronoun “you” is at once
singular and plural, calling up both the individual “me-ness” of the audience and the collective “we.” In the 2012 Nightwood production, Penelope (played by Megan Follows) gestured towards a particular audience member when delivering this line, emphasizing her metatheatrical awareness of the audience as a group of individuals. Similarly, Shields’s Philomela directly speaks out to the real audience in *If We Were Birds*’ opening scene. Explaining that she was born to fear men, Philomela says, “when we were girls we could run as fast, / jump as high, yell as loud as the boys, / so you can see why we forgot to shake” (emphasis added 4). In temporally bridging the fourth wall, Atwood and Shields implicate the audience as addressees of urgent messages about female expectations and mutilations. The action on the stage is not a contained narrative, but instead reaches outwards and invites a self-reflexive consideration of this “you.” Both plays also position the chorus on the centre of the stage, thereby making the inset viewers the focus of the audience’s now self-reflexive gaze. Using these methods, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* implicate the audience as participants in the play rather than distanced observers. This critical stance and reflexivity help make the audience a dispublic.

**Chorus as Didactic Agent: Uniting the Inset and Real Audiences**

Atwood’s and Shields’s choruses instruct potentially unknowing audiences as a way of competing with previous interpretations of the Greek myths. *The Penelopiad* not only provides a model of a critically active audience (chorus), but also reveals the dangers of an unknowing audience (Telemachus). Atwood’s Maids are at once voices of
dissention—they punctuate the dramatic action of *The Penelopiad* with their demands for justice—and devices for Penelope’s survival. In Atwood’s version of the Greek myth, the Maids purposefully insult Penelope and Odysseus as a way to gain the suitors’ confidence. The Maids then relate information back to Penelope as they unravel her shroud by moonlight. Penelope instructs them:

> Stick close to the suitors – that way we’ll always know their plans. You can even say rude and disrespectful things about me, or Telemachus, or even Odysseus himself – that will make the illusion more convincing.

**MELANTHO (practicing):** Queen Penelope is a very clumsy weaver!

*Penelope smiles.* (53)

The Maids’ gossip and insults, then, are a form of permitted transgression. Atwood’s changes to the original myth cast the Maids not as “nightly prostitutes” (Homer 497) but as loyal servants, depict gossip as a survival strategy, and present the men as bad audience members. Telemachus and Odysseus misunderstand the intentions and effects of the Maids’ “transgressions.” Melantho, one of the Maids, innocently performs prescribed disobedience that was approved by Penelope the night before:

**MELANTHO:** Queen Penelope is a very clumsy weaver!

**ANTINOUS:** What’s she really up to?

**MELANTHO:** Nothing!

**ANTINOUS:** I’m going to follow her.

**MELANTHO:** No! *(Flirting.)* I mean—don’t leave me all by myself. I’ll get lonely!
Telemachus as inset viewer wrongly interprets the Maids as insubordinate when in actuality they are trying to protect Penelope through gossip and flirtation. He functions as a negative model of a punishing and ignorant audience.

The Penelopiad corrects these misinformed responses to the Maids by eliciting an empathetic audience. The Maids, as we see in Atwood’s version, are doubly punished for assisting Penelope—first by the suitors and then by Telemachus and Odysseus. After realizing that Melantho is trying to help Penelope, “Antinous grabs Melantho roughly” and “pushes her down” as “several more Suitors pile onto Melantho. They rape her. Other suitors grab other Maids” (56). Although the Maids repeatedly endure this horror in an effort to help Penelope, Odysseus orders his son to “Kill them” upon his return (75). The Penelopiad, then, revises popular interpretations of the Maids as traitors and of Penelope as innocent heroine. In a cry for justice, the Maids

invoke the law of blood guilt!

We call upon the Angry Ones!

O Angry Ones, O Furies, you are our last hope!

We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf!

Be our defenders, we who had none in life! (78)

The Maids deliver this invocation out to the audience, momentarily casting the real spectators as Furies who must enact revenge on behalf of the Maids. By invoking the audience’s help in this way, the Maids garner support and align themselves with the viewers. Atwood thus invites the audience to act on the part of the choric “we” and thereby unites the viewers as a subaltern collective that refutes existing notions of Odysseus’s heroism. Unlike the chorus, however, the audience does not partake in
alternative discourse nor does it receive hostility from a dominant public; it is not, as a result, a counterpublic. In short, Atwood transforms the audience into a united and politically reactionary dispublic: we share the chorus’ viewpoint and assessment of their callous slaughter, but we do not receive the same social ostracism.

As with Atwood’s twelve Maids, Shields’s chorus voices the play’s political messages and informs the audience’s reaction to the other characters. The collective chorus—as opposed to individual members of the chorus, at least one of whom appear in almost every scene—deliver critical commentary in ten of the nineteen scenes. After “A Celebrated Battle” scene where King Pandion and King Tereus tell stories of their battles and play with swords, the chorus responds to the male showmanship by sharing their own experiences of war: the “Pregnant One” was raped by men as her husband was forced to watch, the “Dwindling One” concealed her “sons and grandsons until soldiers dragged them into the streets” (25), and “The Young One” was raped and separated from her sisters. The chorus members are also the only characters who critique the “overly hasty engagement” of Procne to Tereus (22). They see Tereus as he really is: a “mercenary” who “can chop heads and hands from the enemy / without hesitation or remorse” (23). The general structure of the play consists of a scene with the main characters followed by a choral scene with analytical commentary. The chorus’ disruptive omniscient narration provides them with a poetic justice. In this way, Shields, like Atwood, privileges the collective “we” as an agent of political intervention and narration.

*If We Were Birds* introduces the chorus as the play’s didactic agents. The play opens with two mirror scenes that contrast the ideologies of King Pandion’s wealthy
daughters who relish the mysteries of marital consummation with the chorus of servants who critique the societal fetishization of a woman’s virginity. After the two sisters bathe together, discuss the “fleshy utensils” between their thighs, and wonder about their marriage nights, the Chorus enters in the next scene to “clean up the mess from the bathtub” (11). The sisters’ comic innocence contrasts with the chorus’ more tragic experience. Philomela naïvely asks “what bulges under the soldiers’ tunic” (6), whereas the Chorus knows all too well the vigour of male sexuality, the importance of female virginity, and the burden of protecting it:

BLEEDING: Thank you, dear Hymen,

For placing my hymen in a place to be ripped

by the first man to enter me fully.

PIOUS: My blood is a gift I can give to my husband

on our first night alone:

evidence of my purity, my innocence, my love.

YOUNG: Thank you oh Hymen for bestowing upon me this valued charm

so when it’s stolen from me everyone will know. (12)

The chorus not only shares experiences of sexual violence with each other, Philomela, and the audience, but also critiques the cultural value of the hymen as a marker of female “purity” that diminishes in value as it is taken or given away, causes pain as it is “ripped by the first man to enter,” and publicizes the loss of virginity because “when it’s stolen from me everyone will know.” The first two scenes, therefore, demonstrate the chorus’ critical remove from the main action of the play, as performed by the title characters Procne and Philomela, as well as their political views of gender relations and female
virginity. The chorus’ ironic tone and delivery—“Thank you Hymen”—forces the real audience to discern the underlying political messages for themselves. In *If We Were Birds*, therefore, the chorus and audience proper function as critical spectators who resist the implied values of the play’s main action and title characters.

Because the choral “we” and theatre audience are intertwined as political agents in both plays, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* demonstrate theatre’s potential to form an on-stage counterpublic and an off-stage dispublic. The plays posit the audience members in relation to the chorus, prompting reflection on the ideologies (feminist), values (virginity, fidelity), and discursive modes (parody, adaptation, mock-epic) that have brought them together. Theatre’s ability to gather and create a public in one space makes it an effective tool for mobilizing social change.

**Conclusion**

*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* advocate participation in a social collective; more specifically, they model a united, feminist group of women. The choric “we,” not the “I,” effects change in these two plays. “We” as the audience are not only resistive of the patriarchal military figures within the plays, but also of the scholarly treatment of the female characters as mere symbols, wives, or victims. Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* forms a palimpsest with Homer’s *The Odyssey* and the many other versions of the Greek myth. Shields’s play, in turn, layers itself with Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, altering the audience’s earlier imaginings of the myth. If the early canonical versions of *The Odyssey* and *Metamorphosis* are part of the collective conscious of Western society,
then Atwood and Shields’s plays change the dominant imaginary. *The Penelopiad*’s audience, for instance, forms a counter-imaginary (or counter-discourse) that sees the Maids as pivotal characters and interprets Penelope as a flawed figure who is partially responsible for the handmaidens’ death. *If We Were Birds*, by comparison, reframes Ovid’s myth as a fetishisation of female virginity and rape. By offering revisionist versions, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* debunk the “originals” as the sole authoritative sources of the canonical myths and transform the myths’ role in the public imaginary. This transformation of the public imaginary is executed via the audience who reimagine the two myths from Atwood’s and Shields’s perspectives.

*The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* not only call attention to the constitutive relationship between literary mythologies and societal gender expectations: the plays reveal how the public narratives of *The Odyssey* and “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” have been used to enforce gender expectations. Atwood’s and Shields’s revisionist plays respond to these pervading myths by dismantling their representations of gender roles. The choruses, for instance, use their position as faceless and nameless collectives to their own advantage and as a site from which to challenge their oppressors. While the choruses parody, critique, and subvert the arguments and discursive forms of the original myths, their role as a “we” and their collective narration are their most powerful strategies for effecting change.

The real audiences, in turn, enact this change by collectively imagining a revised version of the Greek myths. In gathering the audience as a group with shared cultural values, the revisionist plays argue against dominant narratives of Greek mythologies and work to activate a dispublic. The audience’s participation in the dominant public is key to
the plays’ transformation of the cultural imaginary because it enables them to change it from within. The plays change the cultural significance of the myths—the ultimate goal of revisionist drama—by transforming the audience into a dispublic with a shared reimagining of the two myths. In gathering the audience as a dispublic, *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds* alter two Greek myths on a local level and the cultural imaginary on a larger level. The plays, then, are not only altering the public, but also the public imagination. In this way, Atwood and Shields harness the power of collectivity in order to revise popular conceptions of dominant mythologies. With *The Penelopiad* and *If We Were Birds*, the play’s social activism occurs when we look away from the play and collectively step outside the theatre as a newly constructed “we” with a revised collective imaginary of Greek mythologies.
Chapter 3

“*I am not what I am*”: Failed Performances of Identification

in Margaret Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia*

and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*

Historical portraits of theatre in Canada have often been Janus-faced, with mainstage theatres like those of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival on one side and smaller alternative theatres on the other.\(^{61}\) Although Canadian theatre is no longer as stratified, this double-sided image reflects two main definitions of Canadian theatre as either theatre in Canada or theatre by Canadians, respectively. Though critics have celebrated the Stratford Shakespeare Festival as Canada’s most internationally renowned theatre, the company concentrates on Shakespearean works and has a history of employing artists from abroad. Most of the alternative theatres, by contrast, are dedicated to plays written by Canadians and have political mandates, such as Nightwood Theatre (Toronto’s oldest professional feminist theatre company); Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (invested in Queer theatre); and Native Earth Performing Arts (devoted to Indigenous works). Yet when playwrights adapt Shakespeare for a politicized purpose, the two profiles meet.

---

\(^{61}\)The Stratford Shakespeare Festival is the largest classical repertory theatre in North America. Canada’s alternative theatre movement of the 1970s rejected such mainstream conceptions of theatre and dedicated themselves to using Canadian playwrights, actors, and directors. For a historical overview of the alternative theatre movement, see Renate Usmiani’s *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada* (1983) and Denis Johnston’s *Up the Mainstream: The Rise of Toronto’s Alternative Theatres* (1991). The phenomenon of Canadian revisionist adaptations can be seen as an extension of the alternative theatre movement because these adaptations often challenge European canonical works for a political purpose and in a Canadian context.
Margaret Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia* (1992) and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997) simultaneously capitalize on and disavow their Shakespearean sources as well as their Canadian mainstage theatres. Clarke’s revisionist adaptation dramatizes the making of an all-female production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. While the inset play focuses on the European female characters from *Hamlet*, the metatheatrical frame consists mostly of heated exchanges between the inset White, female Playwright and White, male Actor as they debate the ramifications of an all-female cast. *Harlem Duet*, by comparison, is a “rhapsodic blues-tragedy” that features an all-Black cast and tells the story of Othello’s relationship with his first, Black wife Billie whom he leaves for the White Mona or Shakespeare’s Desdemona (Sears, “nOTES” 14). As counterpoints to the present-day main narrative, the two subplots concern the characters HIM and HER in 1860 as well as HE and SHE in 1928 wherein HER/SHE seeks murderous revenge on HIM/HE when he announces that he is in love with a White woman. In all three of *Harlem Duet*’s narratives, a Black man leaves his Black lover for a White woman, thereby dramatizing issues of racial hierarchy and miscegenation in different time periods.

---

62 Both plays premiered at smaller alternative theatres. Since its conception as a student performance at Winnipeg’s Black Hole Theatre Company in 1987, *Gertrude and Ophelia* has been performed at Calgary’s Pumphouse Theatre (1992) and at Victoria’s City Theatre (1993). Sears’s *Harlem Duet* premiered at an alternative theatre—opening at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre in 1997 and produced by Nightwood Theatre—but was later performed at Stratford. While *Gertrude and Ophelia* has been credited as the first Canadian adaptation of *Hamlet* by a female playwright (Knowles, *Shakespeare*), the 2006 production of *Harlem Duet* was Stratford’s first show with an all-Black cast. Margaret Jane Kidnie, in her book *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, observes that “For the audiences watching the history-making Stratford production in 2006, the challenges of sight, race, and the continuing production of Othello within the Canadian theatrical establishment were perhaps not resolved, so much as further deepened” (87).

63 The two counterplots feature the same actors that play Billie and Othello. From the earliest narrative thread (1860) to the present-day plot-line, the figures progress from grammatical objects of speech (HIM/HER), to subjects (HE/SHE), and finally, to proper names (Othello/Billie). Although Othello and Billie have arrived at proper names, they still grapple with the self-identification of the personal pronoun “I.”
Both Clarke and Sears stay relatively faithful to the original plots of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Othello*, respectively, by nuancing our interpretations of actions and characters rather than changing the narrative events themselves. *Gertrude and Ophelia*, for instance, quickly establishes that the inset Playwright is taking a markedly “feminist” (2) approach to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* where Gertrude is no longer the implied co-conspirator of King Hamlet’s death. In fact, Clarke’s Gertrude marries Claudius in order to ensure Hamlet’s claim to the throne, and she is the one that is taken aback from the Mousetrap when she realizes that Claudius “reigns with my husband’s blood on his hands” (23).  

From the opening scene of *Gertrude and Ophelia*, Clarke’s Playwright makes it quite clear that she aims to change the way we think about Shakespeare’s mother figure. Fittingly, Clarke also alters our conceptions of Shakespeare’s fatherly King Hamlet by casting doubt on the paternity of the Prince and by suggesting that Gertrude had relations with Yoric. When Ophelia longs to “build a shelter in the woods and live there together” with Gertrude, the Queen hints at her intimate past with the Fool and recounts that “Yoric used to talk such foolishness to me” (15). The Queen later concedes, “the jester was more father to [the Prince] than [King Hamlet]” (20), which is why the Fool was sentenced to death; as Gertrude laments, “We cried together my son and I for the loss of our . . . fool. It was the only time that I defied my husband” (20). Clarke’s reimagining of Gertrude and Yoric’s affair alters Shakespeare’s graveyard scene in *Hamlet* from a pinnacle moment of Hamlet’s philosophical self-reflection to one of a son mourning the undeserved death of his true

---

64 In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Prince Hamlet orchestrates a performance of *The Murder of Gonzalo* and plans to “have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle” (2.595-7) in an effort to arouse Claudius’s guilt. In short, for Hamlet, “the play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.605-6).
father, Yoric. But, as Playwright reminds us, the identity of Hamlet’s true father “doesn’t matter, not in terms of the mess these women are in” (22). It is Gertrude’s maternal relationship with Ophelia that steals the play’s focus; Ophelia’s madness is as much a result of Gertrude’s betrayal in Clarke’s play as it is of Hamlet’s “get thee to a nunnery” dismissal in Shakespeare’s version (3.1.122).

Whereas Clarke retells Hamlet with a renewed focus on the female characters, Sears offers an addendum that paradoxically comes before the narrative actions in Othello with her prequel. In Harlem Duet, Sears presents Shakespeare’s Othello as a miscegenation narrative that exemplifies a history of racism and anachronistically recasts Othello’s marriage to Desdemona as his intentional embrace of a dominant White American culture. Like Clarke, Sears alters the characters’ roles and motivations in Shakespeare’s original play. Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is now tainted with the destruction of Billie and the rejection of Black Harlem culture. As a shrill faculty wife, Desdemona is undone as the heroine and the strawberry-spotted handkerchief is now Billie’s wedding-day gift that Othello merely re-gifts to Desdemona. Billie, in fact, is now responsible for putting a spell on the handkerchief and thereby prompting Desdemona’s ultimate death in Shakespeare’s Othello. Finally, Sears dethrones Iago as the vice figure because Harlem Duet presents racism and Billie’s spell as the catalysts of Othello’s enraged downfall. While Clarke’s Gertrude and Ophelia takes a feminist approach to Hamlet, Sears’s Harlem Duet encourages an anti-racist interpretation of Othello.

In addition to re-identifying previously marginalized characters, both plays banish central canonical figures to the physical margins of the stage: Clarke’s Playwright
character refuses to allow Hamlet into her play and rejects the patriarchal demands of mainstage theatres, just as Sears denies Desdemona access to the stage and critiques productions of *Othello* that fail to change the original. Yet neither *Gertrude and Ophelia* nor *Harlem Duet* escape the force of the sources they seek to revise, as both Hamlet and Desdemona haunt the plays. No matter how hard they try to challenge the Bard’s canonical renown and the popular representations of Gertrude as a hyper-sexualized succubus or of Othello in blackface, Clarke’s and Sears’s plays cannot efface their Shakespearean counterparts.

Due to their unavoidable dependence on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Othello*, *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* simultaneously identify with and against the canonical source texts. In particular, Clarke’s and Sears’s revisionist plays disidentify with Shakespeare’s representations of the virgin-whore duo (Ophelia and Gertrude, respectively) and famous Moor (Othello). Clarke and Sears call attention to this disidentificatory strategy by using the main characters to enact either identification or counteridentification with gender and racial expectations. While Gertrude and Othello preach identificatory strategies, Playwright and Billie attempt to counteridentify with dominant White patriarchal ideologies. Neither of these two strategies, however, is successful within the contexts of the plays: Ophelia goes mad in the absence of Hamlet and her father, Gertrude comically debases the very patriarchy that she so desperately tries to support, Playwright eventually gives into the demands of the male director, Othello fails to completely align with White American culture, and Billie reinforces the racial dichotomy that haunts her. In dramatizing the failures of identification and counteridentification as too extreme in their stratified relationships to dominant
ideologies, *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* ultimately propose and present disidentification as a method of cultural negotiation. Though I examine the individual characters’ self-naming and identificatory strategies, it is the plays themselves that radically challenge identificatory practices. The plays’ proliferating failed identificatory performances gesture towards the fallibility of the normative gender and racial identities.

Gertrude, Playwright, Billie, and Othello perform a series of self-identificatory statements that fail to convince their inset and real audiences. After briefly contextualizing the popularity of Shakespeare productions in Canada, I will then examine the failed performances of identification and counteridentification in Clarke’s and Sears’s plays. I conclude the chapter by arguing that these failed acts of identification and counteridentification draw attention to the flimsiness of self-identificatory acts. In critiquing strategies of identification and counteridentification, these revisionist plays promote disidentification. The strategy of disidentification, in turn, captures the revisionist plays’ fraught relationship with their source texts because Clarke and Sears at once work with and against the Shakespearean sources.

**Contexts: Shakespeare and Canada**

On a global scale, Shakespeare’s plays are extremely popular sources for adaptations and revisionist works that take a postcolonial or feminist perspective. As is the case for many theatres worldwide, a persistent belonging and unbelonging govern Shakespeare’s role in Canadian theatres despite dramatists’ best efforts to appropriate the Bard as Canadian. The *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*’s entry on Shakespeare, for
instance, heralds him as the “most produced non-Canadian playwright” in Canada.

Makaryk’s celebration of Shakespeare comes with a provision when she explains that “the phrase ‘a world elsewhere’ is an apt metaphor for the position of Shakespeare in Canada” because it alludes “to difference and sameness” (3). Shakespeare is put under the sign of “Canada,” but fulfilling Butler’s definition of disidentification, it is a sign to which he does and does not belong. Shakespeare’s role as a “Canadian playwright,” then, seems to be characterized by a simultaneous appropriation and disassociation. As Sears’s Billie pointedly says, “the Shakespeare’s mine, but you can have it” (52).

Although there is no doubt about Shakespeare’s prominence in Canada, the relevance of Shakespeare productions to a nationalist Canadian theatre culture has been especially controversial since the inception of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Beginning as a national theatre in 1957, Ontario’s Stratford Shakespeare Festival was not only founded by a British director (Tyrone Guthrie) but has been aptly criticized for relying on American and British artists (actors, directors, Shakespeare himself). In historicizing the problematic relationship between Shakespeare and national theatre in Canada, Margaret Groome explains that “this tension was manifested in theatrical discussions that stressed the importance of developing a national dramatic canon while simultaneously favouring the English model of theatre and making a decided turn to Shakespeare” (109). Ontario’s Stratford Shakespeare Festival has received critical backlash for its homage to Shakespeare and its efforts to replicate England. “With the growth of Canadian nationalism during the 1970s,” Makaryk explains, “Shakespeare and Stratford came increasingly under attack from some quarters, since both were perceived as enshrining Canada’s colonial dependence” (25). These attacks on the Stratford
Shakespeare Festival consider Canadian productions of Shakespeare to be anti-nationalistic and derivative of colonial mentality. Clarke and Sears’s adaptations, therefore, speak to a national, and even transnational, controversy over Shakespeare’s cultural importance.

Though the popularity of Shakespeare in Canada has garnered mixed responses, many dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare play to both sides of the debate by working with and against the Bard’s canonical renown. These adaptations often target Shakespeare from a specific political perspective in order to transform canonical representations of marginalized identities. For instance, Ken Mitchell and Humphrey and the Dumptrucks’ *Cruel Tears* (1975) addresses class issues in a populist version of *Othello;* Tibor Egervari’s “*Le Marchand de Venise*” *de Shakespeare à Auschwitz* (1977) sets *The Merchant of Venice* in Nazi Germany and highlights the original’s anti-Semitism; MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Mornin* g Juliet*) (1988) engages in feminist-queer issues while adapting *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet;* and Timothy Findley’s *Elizabeth Rex* (2000) uses the cross-dressing in *Much Ado About Nothing* as a catalyst for considering the performativity of gender and queer sexuality. Knowles compares *Othello* adaptations—*Cruel Tears, Goodnight Desdemona,* and *Harlem*

---

65 *Cruel Tears,* what Mitchell refers to as a country opera, premiered in 1975 at Saskatoon’s Persephone Theatre, written by Mitchell and with music by Humphrey and the Dumptrucks. Having toured nationally, it was published in 1977 and was nominated for a Chalmers award for outstanding Canadian play in 1978. Egervari’s adaptation has been performed in both French and English, and was first produced in 1977 by La Comédie des Deux Rive in affiliation with the University of Ottawa’s Department of Theatre.  
66 Goodnight and Desdemona’s “began with a joke” in 1985 during a touring performance of *This is For You, Anna.* As Banuta Rubess (the play’s first director and dramaturge) explains, “Ann-Marie MacDonald crammed a pillow on my face and with great hilarity pronounced: ‘Goodnight, Desdemona!’” (Introduction xi). Commissioned by Nightwood Theatre, the play premiered there in 1988 and a revised version of the play toured nationally with the Nightwood Theatre Company in 1990; it was also in 1990 that *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* won a Governor General’s Award for English language Drama.  
67 Premiering at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 2000, *Elizabeth Rex* won the Governor General’s Award for English language Drama that same year.
Duet—from three consecutive decades (the seventies, eighties, and nineties) as representative of the shifting political concerns from class, to feminism, and finally, to a combination of class, feminism, and race. Each adaptation, as Knowles says, “is very much a product of its place and moment and, at the same time, productive of its own and subsequent moments as a marker of, and site for, the negotiation of social change around specific issues” (“Othello” 39). There is a standing tradition of Canadian Shakespeare adaptations that reflect their political environment while voicing the need for certain changes.

Gertrude and Ophelia comments on the industry of Shakespeare in Canada, and more specifically, on Canadian mainstage theatres. Clarke uses gender politics to frame her critique of mainstream theatres, satirizing the popularity of Shakespeare and Stoppard as the current arbiters of a gender hierarchy that marginalizes female figures and writers in the theatre. Gertrude and Ophelia features a female playwright who warns, “it’s a world with many seductions, including the mainstage” (48). Because the “eternal male script” and mainstage theatres are mutually constitutive, Playwright must reject both. In a metatheatrical moment, Actor warns:

ACTOR: Your play will wear itself out on little stages like this . . . what is this place . . . a gas station, a fire hall?

PLAYWRIGHT: A pumphouse.

ACTOR: Whatever. This play is never getting onto a mainstage without a Prince Hamlet. (48)
Clarke acknowledges the small Pumphouse Theatre venue as a symbolic consequence of her concentration on only female characters and her refusal to engage in Bardolatry. Here, Gertrude and Ophelia suggests that the small Pumphouse Theatre venue inevitably goes hand in hand with the play’s political rejection of a phallocentric canon because mainstage theatres, such as Stratford Festival Theatre, privilege the male characters and would not be interested in a feminist staging of Hamlet. In fact, the metatheatrical moment challenges other theatre venues to dare to produce a version of Hamlet “without Prince Hamlet” himself. The theatre venues themselves, as Gertrude and Ophelia reminds us, are institutions with ideological connotations.

While Gertrude and Ophelia attacks commercial and patriarchal demands on the theatre, Harlem Duet critiques racial inequality in universities, theatres, and other institutions. In the main plot-line, Sears’s Othello works as a professor at Columbia University, or “Harlumbia” as his landlord calls it, where he encounters racism and must “White wash” his life by mimicking the behaviour and attitude of his White colleagues in order to advance (353). Harlem Duet engages in a political reframing of Othello in terms of miscegenation, and targets theatres as propagators of racial stereotypes. In the 1928 narrative thread, HE is an actor who struggles with the minstrel tradition as he longs to be “of Ira Aldridge stock” and perform Shakespearean roles without blackface (363). In her Foreword to the play, Sears explains how “Shakespeare’s Othello had haunted me

---

69 Located in Calgary, the Pumphouse Theatre’s mandate “is committed not only to providing a high-quality venue for the arts but also to keeping that venue affordable for Calgary’s arts community.”

70 Just as Gertrude and Ophelia calls attention to its small theatre venue, the hyper-theatricality of Findley’s Elizabeth Rex (2000) leads to a hyper-awareness of the theatre setting in general and Stratford in particular. First produced at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival’s Tom Patterson Theatre in 2000, the play’s setting is a “barn in Stratford-upon-Avon” in 1616 (xiv), which merges the contemporary Canadian replication of England’s Stratford with the play’s imagined England of the seventeenth century. The theatre structure itself, therefore, contributes to and aids the audience’s suspension of disbelief while watching the play. Elizabeth Rex also helps to reinforce the legitimacy of Stratford Ontario’s Tom Patterson building as a theatre from Elizabethan England.
since I first was introduced to him. Sir Laurence Olivier in black-face” (14). *Harlem Duet* actively inverts the popular portrayal of Othello as a blackface Moor among a cast of white actors by featuring an all-Black cast with Mona as the lone White character. In fact, all we see of Sears’s Mona is a ghost-like wave of the hand, which was performed by a Black actress wearing a white glove in the premiere production. Clarke and Sears use their adaptations to not only revise the original plays but to challenge some of the very industries—academia and theatre—that house them.

**Ghosts of Main Characters Past: Failing to Exorcize Hamlet and Desdemona**

*Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* make interesting companion plays because Clarke keeps Hamlet and the male director off-stage in order to foreground the female characters Gertrude and Ophelia, while Sears keeps the White Mona offstage in order to concentrate on Othello and Billie. Yet there is an inset criticism of this counteridentificatory reversal in both plays. The plays counteract the absence of Hamlet and Mona with many discussions of the two absentees. Although Clarke and Sears relegate Hamlet and Mona to the margins of the stage, the canonical figures haunt both plays. Hamlet and Mona’s ghost-like presence personifies what Muñoz describes as the “phantasm of normative [identity]” or the illusive promise of accepted normalcy (4).

In *Gertrude and Ophelia* the male director is never seen but his “male directorial voice” (27) can be heard from off-stage and the male Actor relays the director’s desire for “something to represent the men who are missing from the action” (3) of the inset play. In this way, the director and Actor defend and thereby give a presence to Hamlet.
The Playwright and Actor’s overarching debate over whether to include the tragic Prince parodies Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” dilemma in Shakespeare’s version. At the end of Gertrude and Ophelia, Hamlet makes an appearance when the Actor finally gets to perform the role of the Prince of Denmark. The play is structured by the male Actor’s constant interruptions and by the Playwright’s repeated directives to “Get out of my play” (6, 16) and “get out of here” (11), which playfully appropriate Hamlet’s “get thee to a nunnery” in Shakespeare’s version (3.1.122). These disruptive episodes mark scene breaks for the inset play, and also function as a type of dumb show about the Playwright’s and Clarke’s political struggle with the “eternal male script” (28). The attempt to remove Hamlet from the inset play structures the play proper.

Many critics focus on Sears’s all-Black cast and marginalization of Mona as a radical response to Shakespeare’s original staging of Othello (Kidnie, Taylor), but they do not consider the embedded critique of this counteridentificatory reversal of racial dynamics. Sears’s Mona, like Clarke’s Hamlet, has only a brief, albeit comic, appearance. Sears makes explicit references to the minstrel tradition in her Foreword to the play and with the 1928 narrative thread that presents Othello in blackface. Arising in nineteenth-century America, minstrel shows featured white actors in blackface who would comically enact Black stereotypes on stage, thereby reducing African-American culture to a comic target and to Black skin. Eric Gardner describes the popular Jim Crow character from minstrel performances as a “rural, enslaved, but happy African American who sings, dances, spews malapropisms, and cracks jokes” (136). Harlem Duet reverses the minstrel tradition by featuring an all-Black cast, using a Black actress to play Mona, and poking fun at a Black actor’s performance of Whiteness. In the premier production
of *Harlem Duet*, the same actress—Dawn Roach—performed the role of both Amah (Billie’s sister-in-law) and Mona. While Sears’s Mona does not engage in song and dance, the audience laughs at the comically brief glimpse of Mona’s arm and her shrill off-stage voice.\(^1\) In a review of Stratford Shakespeare Festival’s 2006 production, Taylor notes that the “joke” appearance of Mona’s “very, very pale white arm framed in a doorway . . . greatly amused [the] audience.” The Black actress’ racechange and performance of Mona does not convince the audience that she is a real “white woman” nor is it intended to.\(^2\) In this way, the performance fails to enact convincingly a White body but it is this failure to embody a White woman that is most subversive and disidentificatory because it calls attention to the inauthenticity of minstrelsy.

The White ideal that Mona represents is illusive, unattainable, and phantom. Like Clarke’s Hamlet and male director, Sears’s Mona haunts the stage and “we see nothing of her but brief glimpses of a bare arm and a waft of light brown hair” (47). In all three timelines, Othello idealizes Mona, and as Billie tells him, “White people are always the line for you, aren’t they? The rule” (55). Despite Mona’s physical absence, we hear her disembodied “shrill voice” and she acts as the catalyst for the main action of the play—Othello’s desertion of Billie. The audience, for example, hears Othello’s side of a conversation with Mona: “Hey Mone . . . Mone, I’m not done yet. . . Mone? Mona? I’m coming, OK? I’ll be right . . . Just wait there one second, OK? OK?” (61). Although we cannot see Mona or even hear her voice during this conversation, her impact is visible

\(^1\) Sears adapts the strategy of anatomization by reducing Mona to a White hand. Shakespeare’s play, by contrast, isolates body parts to signal Othello’s Blackness: characters derogate Othello for having “thick-lips” (1.1.66) and a “sooty bosom” (1.2.70).

\(^2\) Susan Gubar’s *RaceChanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (1997) defines racechange as “the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability” (5). See also Dorinne Kondo’s “(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre” (2000).
and her elliptical ("... ") presence is felt. As signalled by his stuttered delivery, Othello’s attitude shifts immediately from light-hearted confidence to a more serious and apprehensive tone as he begins to apologize to the off-stage Mona. As the stage directions note, Othello’s “demeanour changes” much to Billie’s “astonishment” (61). His strength and dynamism with Billie fade during this conversation with Mona, and Billie herself explains that Othello is “oh so happy to oblige” the “White woman” (67). Mona is talked to, described at length, and the cause of visible “changes” (61). Mona is an absent presence.

As a preface to Harlem Duet, Sears gives “32 sHORT rEASONS wHY I wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE” where she explains that “Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written Harlem Duet” (“nOTES” 14). Yet the dramatization of Harlem Duet has produced a new ghost: Mona. In her review of Harlem Duet at Stratford, Kate Taylor mourns Mona’s failure to appear onstage. According to Taylor, Othello is “an implausible figure who is supposed to be full of racial conscience and educated intelligence yet is leaving a woman he is clearly still in love with for a phantom” (emphasis added). For Taylor, Mona’s absence inhibits Othello’s character development and relatability. While Taylor interprets Mona’s absence as destructive to Othello, I suggest that it is constructive to the play because it dramatizes the illusiveness of normative Whiteness and reduces the power of a White ideal. Although the non-dramatization of Mona transforms her into a ghost, her non-existence presents Whiteness as an unarticulated entity, an ellipsis. Mona symbolizes the impossibility of embodying the phantasm of normative culture. Harlem Duet, therefore, does much more than reverse the racial dynamics of Othello as it was
performed in Shakespeare’s time: the structure and casting of Sears’s play disidentifies with the original production’s marginalization of the Moor.

Disidentification and failed performance are intimately linked in both *Gertrude* and *Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet*. Muñoz’s close examination of drag—which he refers to as a type of “passing”—informs my interpretation of racechange in the productions of *Harlem Duet*. In describing the cultural work of drag performance, Muñoz explains:

> the passing entailed in traditional drag implicates elements of the disidentificatory process . . . . The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form. In traditional male-to-female drag, ‘woman’ is performed, but one would be naïve and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how ‘real,’ as an actual performance of ‘woman.’ Drag performance strives to perform femininity and femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women. Furthermore, the drag queen is disidentifying, sometimes critically and sometimes not, with not only the ideal of woman but the a priori relationship of woman and femininity that is a tenet of gender-normative thinking. (108)

The cross-racial performance of Mona and Othello’s identification with White culture engages in a similar negotiation with essentialist conceptions of race by revealing the constructedness of Whiteness and Blackness. As with the audiences of cross-dressing, *Harlem Duet’s* audience, no matter how real the cross-racing, does not consider Mona an

---

73 While Sears’s casting notes merely describe Mona as “White, 30s (an off-stage voice)” (337), all productions to date have featured an all-black cast and have used a Black actor to play Mona’s minor role; it is unlikely that a theatre would cast a White actor to play a minor off-stage voice and merely wave his or her hand in one scene.
actual White woman. Drag and racechange counter essentialist notions of gender and race. In this way, the seemingly counteridentificatory reversal of previous all-White casts has disidentificatory effects. The failure to easily transgress racial boundaries and fully enact racechange is a necessary part of the disidentificatory act because a successful performance would merely reinforce gender or racial ideals: through this failure, the subject simultaneously works with and rejects the accepted form, thereby enacting disidentification.

**Theorizing Performative Utterances**

In disidentifying with Shakespeare’s canonical plays, Clarke’s and Sears’s revisionist adaptations simultaneously work with and against notions of a hegemonic “original.” Building on the structural doubleness—working with and against—that characterizes revisionist adaptations and disidentificatory performances, I hope to complicate bifurcated notions of “failed” or “successful” speech acts by demonstrating the potential for simultaneous failure and success. J.L. Austin works from the premise that performative utterances succeed in creating a bond between the speaker and listener, and chooses to ignore “non-serious” or dramatic utterances, whereas Butler works from almost the reverse premise that all speech acts fail and that all utterances, and by extension identities, are performative or “non-serious.” *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* contribute to this theoretical debate by exemplifying the potential interplay of success and failure in a single speech act. Butler gestures towards the mix of success and failure in performances of identity when she describes disidentification as
“misrecognition” and as an “uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong” (*Bodies* 219). Despite Butler’s insistence on the failure of all performances, this doubleness (“one does and does not belong”) signals the implicit success in “misrecognition” that includes a belonging even if it is only a counterpart to an un-belonging. In *Harlem Duet*, for instance, Othello’s argumentative “I am not my skin. My skin is not me” speech succeeds in his mind but fails in the minds of Billie and the audience. Butler concedes to another element of success when she explains that “The authors of gender [or race as the case may be] become entranced by their own fictions” (“Performative Acts” 3), which helps to explain the success of Othello’s counteridentification in his own mind. In *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet*, it is neither the success nor the failure of identificatory performances but instead the simultaneity of these effects that destabilizes accepted performances of gender and race, thereby revealing the provisionality of these identificatory performances.

Butler emphasizes the precarious state of identities based on performance and visible cues by pointing to the provisionality of identity as merely a “stylized repetition of acts through time” (“Performative Acts” 2). Similarly, Clarke’s and Sears’s plays demonstrate how prescribed performances of gender and race, whether through self-naming, actions, or appearance, rely on culturally accepted identificatory labels and codes of behaviour that have been repeated through time. Although these labels and codes can be used as empowering identificatory tools for self-naming, they can also carry a citational history that precedes the speaker and the speaker’s identity. In this way, identificatory statements at once announce and denounce the speaker’s autonomy. The historicity of Othello’s “I am not my skin” statement (*Harlem Duet* 355)—in particular,
the echo of Iago’s “I am not what I am” (*Othello* 1.1.69)—provides a model for the paradox of self-defining utterances because the declaration simultaneously demonstrates Othello’s agency and relies on Iago’s earlier usage. This paradox—of a citational history that frames and constrains sites of self-naming and protests—defines Clarke’s and Sears’s revisionist adaptations.

*Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* perform what Austin calls failed or infelicitous speech acts, and these failures demonstrate the precariousness of self-declarative utterances in both plays. Austin explores the “infelicities” of performative utterances and classifies types of cases in which something goes wrong and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: [. . .] And for this reason we call the doctrine of the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the Infelicities. (14)

Among these infelicities, Austin categorizes “Abuses” wherein the act is carried out but void. These abuses suggest an internal problem, wherein, for example, the speaker is “misleading” and “probably deceitful” (11). The second main category of infelicities is “Misfires,” which denotes an external problem with the act itself. Austin explains that “when the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched: and our act . . . is void” (16). Austin, however, dismisses theatrical performances as unserious utterances. Austin claims that all ritualistic speech acts on stage, such as a nuptial scene, are by extension misfires because the invoked procedure is “disallowed.” To follow Austin’s logic, then, all the words spoken on stage would be
failed speech acts because the audience knows that they are merely fictional and because the related governing agencies do not recognize them as official acts.

Before examining the infelicities of Iago’s and Othello’s “I am not” statements, I want to add a qualification to my integration of theatre and speech act theory in relation to *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet*: speech acts can succeed within the diegetic world that the two plays so realistically represent. The audience’s suspension of disbelief complicates the structural premise that all theatrical utterances are misfires—the audience believes the performed speech acts within the context of these plays. When watching a realistic representation on stage, an audience collectively accepts the performative utterances and actions as real. Furthermore, the characters intend their speech acts to succeed within the play’s diegetic realm so they do not deliberately perform abuses. Speech acts and performed rituals can be successful within the diegetic world of the play—Othello’s separation from Billie, for instance, is successful within the context of *Harlem Duet*—which further nuances Austin’s contention that all theatrical speech acts fail.74 Theatre’s performative utterances can succeed within the diegetic world of the play and within the minds of the real audience.

**The “I” that I am is nothing without this you**

Applying Austin’s nuanced categories of infelicities to Othello and Iago’s “I am not” utterances reveals a significant difference between the two speech acts: while Iago’s “I am not what I am” signals an intentional abuse, Othello’s “I am not my skin. My skin

---

74 Billie, for instance, accepts Othello’s pronouncement of their marriage as null and void.
is not me” misfires because there are problems with the structure of the utterance itself. This difference is key to Sears’s political commentary on Othello’s performance of race and self-identification as American. Iago characterizes his past and future performances of a trustworthy counsellor as infelicitous, but in doing so, he exerts agency over the intentional infelicity of his speech acts. Othello’s infelicitous speech act, by contrast, is unintentional. The context of his performative utterance and the presence of his Black body undermine his attempt to identify with White culture. Othello’s dismissal of the history of racism and his racialized skin also misfires because there is no accepted linguistic speech act by which he can successfully re-identify his race. Unlike Iago’s conscious infelicities, Othello has little control over the failure of his speech act.

Othello’s speech act arguably succeeds as an ideological argument (that skin should not function as a racialized marker for identity) and as an expression of self-conception (he does not connect with Africa or his Black ancestry). But the context and structure of the speech act—Othello’s Black body and Billie as the inset audience—undermine the legitimacy and success of his “I am” declarations. While Othello’s self-defining speech act may succeed to his own mind and on a conceptual level, the context of the speech renders it a failure to both the inset audience and audience proper.

Billie, the scene’s inset audience, contributes to the failure of Othello’s self-identificatory speech acts. She functions as a model audience but, as the play has established by this point, she does not believe Othello’s self-identifications as “American.” For Billie, America is not, as Othello says, “beyond this race shit bullshit now” (73). As the addressee of his monologue, her belief in the prevalence of race as a cue to one’s identity structures his self-defining utterances. In *Giving an Account of*
Oneself, Butler explores the structuring role of the addressee in a self-narrative: “I am my relation to you” (81). In short, the addressee and the social context constitute the self. As Butler says, “the ‘I’ that I am is nothing without this ‘you,’ and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other by which its capacity for self-reference emerges” (82). In Harlem Duet, Othello’s self-reference, for instance, emerges as a response to Billie’s indictments of his racism. Her political beliefs thus instigate his speech, and her role as the “addressee” helps to constitute the content of his monologue. Billie’s role as the “you” to Othello’s “I” binds the two figures in a mutually constitutive relationship. While Butler describes the invisible structure of a self-narration, Billie manifests this structure with her physical presence onstage. She gives an embodied presence to the interlocutor that Butler theorizes as the constitutor of all self-narrations.

Austin’s categories of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts help to further distinguish Iago’s and Othello’s “I am not” declarations: a locutionary act is the actual utterance and its ostensible, linguistic, or semantic meanings; an illocutionary act is the intended meaning or the force of the utterance; and a perlocutionary act is the psychological or social effect of the utterance (Austin 102). The illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of Iago’s “I am not what I am” support one another: Iago confesses his mischievous posturing as trustworthy confidante, which supports the audience’s perception of Iago as a villain. The perlocutionary effect of Othello’s “I am not my skin,” however, contradicts the illocutionary intention. Billie “sits on the floor by the bed watching him from the bedroom” (355) and remains unconvinced by Othello’s argument that America has moved beyond “this race shit bullshit now” (356). For Billie, Othello’s
“I am not my skin” statement and preference of White women only reaffirm the significance of skin colour as a repeated cultural marker of race and identity.

In fact, Othello’s rejection of his racialized skin aligns him with the canonical Moor of Shakespeare’s play—who is celebrated as “far more fair [or White] than black” in both *Harlem Duet* (99) and *Othello* (1.3.315)—and with what Billie describes as the “coitus Denegrification” (55) of popular figures such as Michael Jackson. *Harlem Duet*’s act 2 scene 1, for example, begins with audio clips from “Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley’s interview on ABC’s ‘Dateline’” (79), which remind the audience of Jackson’s contentious inter-racial marriage and physical self-modifications. Michael Jackson not only sought to “White wash” (55) his life by marrying the White Lisa Marie Presley, he also underwent drastic reconstructive surgery to alter his face and adopt White features, such as a pinched nose, a small cleft chin, and high cheekbones. The interview is doubly applicable to *Harlem Duet*’s racial issues because Lisa Marie Presley is the daughter of Elvis, who appropriated Black music for the White rock scene. As a couple, Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley represent a Black man’s voluntary self-whitening as well as the dominant culture’s appropriation of Black culture. The allusions to Michael Jackson present Othello’s “I am not my skin” declaration as merely another failed rejection of racialized Black skin.

As Emmanuel Levinas says, “The corporeality of one’s own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or denouement of being . . . a knot that cannot be undone” (77).

---

75 *Harlem Duet* contextualizes the controversy of inter-racial marriages and the suppression of Black culture in contemporary society. With Michael Jackson’s unfortunate death in 2009 the sound clips about his marriage and surgeries take on a new meaning. Jackson and HIM/HE are now even more similar as all three die despite their best attempts at “coitus denegrification” (66). In addition to the reference to Michael Jackson, the play features sound clips from the OJ Simpson trial, which further emphasizes the contemporary relevance of Billie and Othello’s relationship: Simpson, a Black man, was accused of murdering his White wife and “Othello was often invoked” (Knowles “Othello” 385).
Despite his attempts to replace skin with literature and television as new markers of a cultural identity, Othello cannot undo the racial significance of his own skin. His body is an identificatory “knot” that cannot be undone with “I am not.” In this way, Othello has no control over the perlocutionary consequences of his soliloquy. Instead, the scene’s location, his Black body, the citational history of this declaration (in the two subplots and in Shakespeare’s *Othello*), Billie’s role as addressee, and his logical fallacies all render his statement “void.” Othello fails to convince his inset audience and audience proper that “My skin is not me.” As Billie says, Othello suffers from “Corporeal malediction” and “A crumbled racial epidermal schema” (66). Othello’s failed speech act raises the question whether a Black speaker can ever successfully disassociate from racialized skin colour.

As with *Harlem Duet*, instances of self-identification fail in *Gertrude and Ophelia* as a result of narrative structures and infelicitous speech acts. The mutually constitutive relationship of addresser and addressee is even more pronounced in *Gertrude and Ophelia* than in *Harlem Duet*. Ophelia loses her sense of an “I” because of her inability to define herself as a “you” after Hamlet has unintentionally killed her father and she has lost her parents, brother, and the Prince. In Clarke’s “Ophelia’s Bower” scene (32), the loss of Ophelia’s relational identity leads to her madness. As neither daughter, sister, nor lover, Ophelia quickly shifts from a playful game to a serious question of self:

He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me . . . me . . . me . . . who is this ‘me.’ I know her not. Her father is dead. Her mother is dead! Her brother is far away. Her lover . . . My love is gone gone . . . gone sailing [ . . . ] I will
make words, like you, and be the victor . . . over (she mouths words which have no sound. Finally giving into the pain, sound does come from her in the form of a long howl and then as the spasm subsides, she pants). She had a love once. But he is gone. She had a brother once. But he is gone. She had a father once. But he is gone. Such wise heads! All, all, gone . . . There was a lady once, who loved me. (Sings) “. . . your child . . . a feather . . . roof and robe and safety.” Gone. Gone. But I shall make words. Words. Words. And be the winner over pain. (33)

This soliloquy begins with Ophelia plucking petals from a daisy to determine whether Hamlet loves her. Yet the juvenile “He loves me. He loves me not” game speaks to Hamlet’s hurtful ambivalence towards Ophelia in both the source play and the adaptation. Ophelia’s contemplation of “this me” in relation to Hamlet’s affection gestures towards the gendering of the addresser and addressee in their wooing scenes, wherein the male pursuer and female object of desire perform masculine and feminine identities. Ophelia, in her conversations with Gertrude, makes it quite clear that she does or says very little in her interactions with Hamlet: when Hamlet “put his hands under [Ophelia’s] skirt” she “did nothing” and “spoke no words” (5); and when he forces her to have sex with him she is similarly “quiet” (14) and succumbs to his violent actions. Ophelia is merely the object on which Hamlet acts—she is a grammatical object (me) to his grammatical subject (he). Clarke’s Ophelia suffers from a loss of self-knowledge when she does not know what Hamlet expects from her because Ophelia’s identity is in large part predicated on their relationship. Without Hamlet, Ophelia does not know how

---

76 Both Gertrude and Ophelia define themselves according to their relations with male characters. For instance, Gertrude’s “I” is merely the possessive object of the King as she asks, “whose Queen am I?” (23).
to be a “me.” In thinking of herself in the third-person as a “she,” Ophelia aligns with others’ perspectives of her as a “she” and further distances herself from the first-person pronoun “I.”

Ophelia, in addition to losing her Father and lover, also feels betrayed by Gertrude who had been Ophelia’s mother figure and sole solace throughout Gertrude and Ophelia. Ophelia is most emphatic when mourning the loss of the maternal Gertrude, or “a lady” (33): Clarke uses an exclamation mark after “Her mother is dead!” (whereas her father, brother, and lover get no such emphasis) and Ophelia performs the hyperbolic “All, all, gone” after her description of Gertrude’s abandonment (33). “Ophelia’s Bower” scene, however, performs the double loss of Gertrude as Ophelia’s maternal figure and of Ophelia as a mother herself with the lost pregnancy; throughout the scene, Ophelia has “very painful uterine contractions” and, while it is unclear if it is a miscarriage or abortion, she loses her unborn baby (32). “Ophelia’s Bower” scene is a reaction to and enactment of the loss of the maternal.

Both Gertrude and Ophelia and Harlem Duet dramatize the failure of female roles and the female characters’ self-loss with failed pregnancies. With her howl and “words without sounds” (33), Ophelia’s abortion is marked with inarticulateness and an absence of a subject. While psychologists report that abortion can cause feelings of self-loss, abortion is not merely a catalyst but a representation of self-loss in these plays.77

---

77 The use of abortion and miscarriage as literary tropes for a crisis of self-identity can be seen in many Canadian works; some plays include, Merrill Denison’s Marsh Hay (written in 1923 and first produced in 1974), Michel Tremblay’s Les Belle Soeurs (1972), Clarke’s Gertrude and Ophelia (1987), M. NourbeSe Philip’s Coups and Calypsos (2001), Sears’s Harlem Duet, and Jane Cawthorne’s Abortion Monologues (2009). There are also an abundance of novels that feature miscarriage or abortion as a catalyst or trope for self-knowledge, such as Atwood’s novels The Edible Woman (1969) and Surfacing (1972), Graeme Gibson’s Five Legs (1969), Alice Munro’s Lives of Girls and Women (1971), Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners (1974), Audrey Thomas’s Mrs. Blood (1970) and Blown Figures (1974), David Helwig’s The
Mary Frost and John T. Condon explain that lost pregnancies are often experienced as a crisis of self-identity: “the baby is experienced as part of the mother. Thus, the loss of part of the self in miscarriage results in an abundance of confused feelings” (56). This causal relationship between lost pregnancy and self-loss is reversed in *Gertrude and Ophelia* when Ophelia’s mental breakdown precedes her self-induced abortion. Ophelia sings of daisies and rosemary at the end of act 1 and her mental breakdown culminates in the second act with the abortion: as the stage directions note, “Ophelia’s Bower” scene takes place with “Ophelia on her knees, legs apart, her body slightly rocking. The basket is directly in front of her. The front and back of the skirt is visibly stained with her blood as are her hands. She is having very painful uterine contractions intermittently throughout this scene” (32). These painful contractions punctuate her soliloquy on the loss of her mother figure, father, brother, Hamlet, and most importantly, of Ophelia’s “me” (33). Her loss of self is at once dramatized as and heightened by the abortion.

Ophelia’s rape and pregnancy are a symbolically fitting undoing of her selfhood because they effectively invalidate her literary archetypal role as “virgin.” While Shakespeare’s Hamlet merely directs sexual innuendos at Ophelia, Clarke’s Hamlet violently rapes her. In *Gertrude and Ophelia*, Ophelia’s pregnancy is a physical sign of her loss of virginity and a bodily reminder of Hamlet’s rape. Although the exact cause of the lost pregnancy remains ambiguous, Gertrude suggests that Ophelia tried to “abort” the baby by using “plants” and “potions” (33). She was not in control of her


*Gertrude and Ophelia*, for instance, disidentifies with Freudian notions of the “mother” in particular.

Lucile F. Newman’s “Ophelia Herbal” (1979) and Maurice Hunt’s “Impregnating Ophelia” (2005) both explain that Ophelia’s flowers, listed in her madness scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, could have acted as abortifacients in the period.
impregnation, but with the abortion, Ophelia seems to enact some agency. The failed pregnancy completes Ophelia’s descent into madness, but because the abortion is self-induced, she arguably chooses this self-disassociation as she extricates herself from the patriarchal web that Gertrude more successfully navigates. Ophelia’s lost pregnancy does not merely resemble or occur in tandem with her inner breakdown, it is her breakdown. The abortion is not a simile but a catachresis: the plays conflate the literal abortion (of part of the mother) with the figurative loss of the self. As Gertrude says: “She has tried to abort herself” (33). In aborting her selfhood, therefore, Ophelia performs the ultimate “I am not” speech act.80

In *Gertrude and Ophelia*, Ophelia’s signs of madness—speaking to herself, referring to herself in the third-person, releasing soundless words—are all instances of the breakdown of language. Ophelia’s “howl” (33) in Clarke’s play is the antithesis to Hamlet’s philosophical reasoning and logic in Shakespeare’s version as Ophelia’s soundless words and spasms manifest her inability to express herself through accepted linguistic codes.81 Betrayed by language, Ophelia regresses to a pre-linguistic stage or what Julia Kristeva defines as the “semiotic” domain, which, for Kristeva, involves the maternal body and connotes female madness (*Desire*).82 The linguistic breakdown of the symbolic (associated with grammar and structure) externalizes Ophelia’s inner breakdown. In this void of self-narration or “I am” utterances, Ophelia is a formless

---

80 The death of an unborn child involves the death of a non-subject and emphasizes Ophelia’s lack of own subjecthood (“who is this ‘me’”). A large part of the grief over a child comes from the inability to conceive of the child as a separate subject. Frost and Candon explain, “in early pregnancy, the baby is still experienced as part of the self. If the pregnancy is lost, the resulting narcissistic injury can be very powerful. Feelings of emptiness, shame, helplessness and low self-esteem are commonly expressed [22,35,36]” (55). Abortion is thus a complex trope that captures and speaks to female-specific self-abnegation, and the effects of the absence of an identity, name, or defined subjectivity.

81 See Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* for a theorization of the significance of the “howl.”

82 Ophelia’s howl also connects her with dramatizations of male madness, such as Lear who also voices a “Howl, howl, howl, howl!” (5.3.255).
howl, an “O,” a zero, on which “the patriarchy” (2) has scripted Freudian interpretations of the virgin-whore dyad in *Hamlet*. However, as with Othello’s failed “I am not my skin” utterance, the linguistic structure’s failure to express Ophelia’s interiority points to the problematic non-existence of a linguistic structure that can express self-loss or female madness. Although she works within prescribed codes of self-identifications (“who is this me”) and of female madness (spasms, howl), the scene challenges the codes themselves.

In *Gertrude and Ophelia*, however, it is not only Ophelia who suffers from a failed pregnancy but also Gertrude, who endures many. In act 1 scene 3, the Queen tells Ophelia that “they all died. The last one was a little girl. So perfectly shaped she was. But dead at birth with the cord around her neck. And that was ten years ago and since then, I cannot conceive” (10). Gertrude, we learn from this exchange, is now infertile, so Ophelia acts as her surrogate daughter, repeatedly calling her “Mother” throughout the play. Gertrude laments that she cannot have a “legitimate heir” with Claudius, obsesses over Hamlet’s succession to the throne, and projects her maternal longings onto Ophelia whom she grooms to be the future Queen. They act like mother and child as Ophelia “throws herself into Gertrude’s bed, burying her body, fetus like, in the older women’s body” (12). Ophelia, then, is a corrective stand-in for a miscarried baby girl. The third-person pronouns available to miscarried children—“she,” “her”—are what Ophelia uses to describe herself in her breakdown scenes. Similarly, in the scene that reports Ophelia’s death, Gertrude does not name Ophelia and instead only refers to her as “She,” “her,” and “girl” (43).
Just before her death, Ophelia confronts her subsidiary role, realizing that “Everybody saw little Ophelia, the mouse, because the Prince saw her” (41) and that even Gertrude prefers Hamlet because he is her legitimate son. Ophelia’s hatred for Gertrude and her incestuous sheets replaces Shakespeare’s confrontation scenes between Hamlet and Gertrude. Although Clarke’s Ophelia complains that she fails to measure up to Hamlet in Gertrude’s heart, Ophelia succeeds in acting as a replacement for Shakespeare’s Hamlet in this scene: just as Shakespeare’s Hamlet accuses Gertrude of lying “In the rank sweat of an enseaméd bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love” (3.4.94-5), Clarke’s Ophelia labels Gertrude a “scheming, pimping mother,” and more pointedly, “Gertrude the whore” (41). In this way, the structure of Gertrude and Ophelia—which concentrates on developing the two female characters—responds to Ophelia’s complaint that everyone is too focused on Hamlet: “With you I hear nothing but the Prince” (41). But ultimately, Ophelia fulfills the fate of her double—the “little girl” who died “perfectly shaped” (10)—in adopting a child-like manner, acting as a stand-in heir, and having an aestheticized death. It is only after Ophelia’s death that Gertrude realizes that she failed as a mother to the young Ophelia. Clarke thus complicates the overly simplistic characterization of Ophelia as archetypal virgin and Gertrude as archetypal mother because both characters fail in these respects: Ophelia is undone as the virgin, and Gertrude is plagued by her infertility and inability to mother any more children. In Gertrude and Ophelia, Ophelia dies because she cannot conscientiously fulfill patriarchal demands and stand by as Prince Hamlet rapes her and kills Polonius. Ophelia’s madness and failed identification with patriarchal demands
function as subversive acts that caricaturize literary interpretations of *Hamlet* that reduce
Gertrude to a corrupt mother and Ophelia to a virginal madwoman.

Much like Sears’s inversion of the racial dynamics in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,
Clarke’s choice to dramatize Ophelia’s madness and death on the center stage reverses
the original performance dynamics in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by enacting what was
merely glossed over and reported in the original. Clarke fights against the silencing of
female madness, grief, and death through the inset Playwright who refuses to reduce
Ophelia’s death as an aside or a “bracketed phrase” (43): “Ophelia may be dead, she may
even have to die offstage, but I will not have it passed over with some bracketed phrase –
‘She should have died hereafter; there would have been time for such a word’ [. . .] 
Macbeth, act five, scene five” (43). In dramatizing both Ophelia’s death and an abortion
on the stage, *Gertrude and Ophelia* exposes the tragedy of the un-narratable. 83

Similarly, in *Harlem Duet*, images of miscarriage and abortion mark the final
stages of Billie’s otherwise inexpressible mental breakdown when she describes the
effects of Othello’s identification with White people in terms of miscarriage. After Magi
lectures Billie on her “Racism” (364), Billie explains:

No, no, no . . . It’s about Black. I love Black. I really do. And it’s
revolutionary . . . Black is beautiful . . . So beautiful. This Harlem sanctuary .

. . . . . here. This respite . . . like an ocean in the middle of a desert. And in

---

83 The themes of self-loss and prescribed silence in *Gertrude and Ophelia* expose the psychology of
abortion and miscarriage, and the lack of dialogue surrounding failed pregnancies. Norman Brier’s *Grief
Following Miscarriage* attributes much of the grief following a lost pregnancy to the absence of social
recognition for this loss: “There is no publicly acknowledged person to bury or established rituals to
structure mourning and gain support, and, often, relatively few opportunities are present to express
thoughts and feelings about the loss due to the secrecy that often accompanies the early stages of
pregnancy” (451). While Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* argues for the inadequate discourse on maternity,
a focus on failed maternity is especially warranted because there is currently no accepted public discourse
for abortion, miscarriage, and still-birth. The mother’s grief has no socially sanctioned outlet or public
platform for acknowledgment, just as Ophelia’s inner turmoil has no socially prescribed linguistic code.
my mirror, my womb, he has a fast growing infestation of roaches. White roaches. (365)

Her womb acts as a “mirror” for her inner fears of a White “infestation.” It is at this point when the audience and Magi fully realize that Billie has a mental “disease,” and that this disease is “racism” (365). The miscarriage, then, marks the dissolution of her marriage, acts as a metaphor for her loss of self, and also functions as a psychological projection of her fears. If a baby “becomes a screen onto which the mother projects her wishes and fantasies” (Frost and Condon 55), then the lost babies in the two plays become screens onto which the mothers project the failures of their unfulfilled hopes and desires. Frost and Condon, for example, explain that “the foetal-maternal relationship has been thought of as transference-like” (55). In the climactic scene of Billie’s madness, she uses what Magi suggests is a miscarried foetus for a potion that will poison Othello and Mona, thereby transferring her hopes for revenge onto the foetus and using it as an instrument in her revenge plot. Billie’s use of magic not only connects her to Ophelia who uses abortive “potions” (33) but also signals another symptom of post-miscarriage grief: “Cognitive modifications often accompany the emotional changes” of a failed pregnancy and are “characterized by impairment of reality testing, altered awareness of internal stimuli, changes in dreaming, and emergence of magical thinking” (Frost and Condon 55). These documented effects of abortion and miscarriage help to psychologize Ophelia and Billie’s self-loss.

In *Harlem Duet*, as with *Gertrude and Ophelia*, abortion functions as a trope for the loss of self that involves issues of linguistic codes, the absence of the maternal, and the failure of the future tense. *Harlem Duet* tells us that Billie had both an abortion and a
miscarriage during her relationship with Othello. The play’s first scene establishes the haunting presence of Billie’s miscarried child in the freezer on stage:

AMAH: Yeh, thank god [Billie and Othello] didn’t have any babies.

MAGI: No, no . . . Twice . . .

AMAH: No!

MAGI: First time, he told her he believed in a woman’s right to choose, but he didn’t think that the relationship was ready for—

AMAH: We didn’t—

MAGI: Nobody did. Second time she miscarried.

AMAH: When? I don’t—

MAGI: ‘Bout the same time he left—no, it was before that. She was by herself . . . Set down in a pool of blood. She put it in a ziplock bag . . . in the freezer . . . all purple and blue . . . (32)

Clarke and Sears do not bracket the abortions but instead put them centre stage: much like Ophelia’s bloodstained skirt and painful contractions that are performed for the audience, Billie’s miscarriage takes place in “a pool of blood” and we are immediately told that the “purple and blue” foetus is stored onstage. Instead of narrating failed relationships in the genre of romance, the failed pregnancies express the women’s psychological fragmentation and romantic break-ups as violent acts more suited to tragedy. The absence of progeny literalizes the absence of a romantic future between the two sets of lovers (Ophelia and Hamlet, Billie and Othello). In this way, the abortions and miscarriages represent the crisis of the future. Othello “didn’t think that the relationship was ready” (32) for a child, suggesting their instability as a couple, and the
miscarriage marks the end of their relationship as an unfortunate metaphor for the death of their partnership. Miscarriage and abortion establish a failed lineage, a loss of identity, and a failed maternal, thereby ghosting any hopes for a future. In both plays, the loss of the unborn child as a non-subject at once constitutes and symbolizes the mother’s already precarious subjectivity as a lover to a disappointing male partner.

Neither Billie nor Ophelia can rely on their respective lover to be a constituting “you” to their self-identifications. In this way, Gertrude and Ophelia challenges the codes of femininity as being all too reliant on masculinity. While the “you” (Billie) to Othello’s soliloquy undermines his self-identification and denial of racialized skin, the absence of a “you” or listener to Ophelia’s soliloquy unravels her sense of self and leads to her madness. Though Gertrude acts as Ophelia’s confidante and mentor throughout most of the play, Ophelia is alone when she loses her child and quite literally has no “you” or on-stage addressee. Sears dramatizes the failure of Othello’s identification with White culture just as Clarke foregrounds the failure of Ophelia’s identification with patriarchal powers. In dramatizing Ophelia’s, Othello’s, and Billie’s failed self-identifications, Gertrude and Ophelia and Harlem Duet place the spotlight on the audience as an implied and constitutive “you” who must take a key role in the characters’ identificatory processes.

The Political Potential of Failed Speech Acts

Gertrude and Ophelia and Harlem Duet ultimately gesture towards the radical potential of infelicitous utterances by emphasizing the hollowness of socially prescribed
and sanctioned speech acts, such as wedding vows and performances of gender or race. Jacques Derrida critiques Austin’s opposition of “success/failure” as “insufficient and extremely secondary,” explaining “it presupposes a general and systematic elaboration of the structure of locution that would avoid an endless alternation of essence and accident [or essential and accidental]” (15-16). According to Derrida, Austin focuses on the infelicity of the speech act’s context and fails to examine the conventionality of the locutionary structure itself, namely its iterability or the inherent repeatability of the performative utterance. In reaction to Austin’s dismissal of theatrical performances as “hollow,” “void,” and “parasitic” (22), Derrida suggests:

what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, “non-serious,” citation (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a “successful” performative? So that—a paradoxical but unavoidable conclusion—a successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative” (17).

While Butler argues that all performances fail, Derrida similarly asserts that an implicit citationality renders all speech acts “impure,” thereby destabilizing Austin’s binaries of pure/impure, serious/non-serious, or successful/unsuccesful speech acts. Derrida objects to Austin’s categorizations of successful and failed performative utterances because all speech acts are inevitably citations of an earlier act, but I contend that this does not necessarily render Austin’s categories of infelicity meaningless.

Intersecting speech act theory with disidentification theory recuperates failed performance as a potential strategy of resistance and revision. Derrida convincing
renders the locutionary structure “impure” and innately derivative of pre-existing linguistic codes, but this does not undermine the relevance of a speech act’s success or failure in relation to its context or audience. For instance, Iago’s “I am not what I am” utterance successfully colours all his past and future declarations as intentional lies, or in Austin’s terms, as abuses: it is a perlocutionary success. Furthermore, in Clarke’s and Sears’s plays, failed performances are not “void” but instead enact disidentification and transform the sources by productively calling attention to the limits of the locutionary structures and codes for self-identification. In *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet*, the failure of the speech acts and identity performance reveals the code of normative citizenship to be quite precarious indeed. While Derrida emphasizes the citationality and iterability of all linguistic acts, I suggest that the failed performances in these two plays expose this citationality with overbearing Shakespearean intertexts and thereby de-naturalize the performer’s identity constructions.

Adaptations of canonical works announce their citational relationship to a mainstream narrative but revisionist adaptation points to this relationship only to try to renounce it. Revisionist adaptation, therefore, is the generic equivalent of the characters’ overtly iterable performative utterances: Clarke’s and Sears’s revisionist plays unavoidably cite a canonical narrative despite their best efforts to destabilize the original; but, in turn, *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* could not destabilize the source without citation, and the endless cycle of iterability brings this circularity out to light.
Failed Performances of Identification and Counteridentification

*Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* both stage philosophical debates about strategies for negotiating gender and racial demands. *Gertrude and Ophelia*’s frame narrative places Playwright’s counteridentification and Actor’s identification with patriarchal theatre traditions in dialogue with each other as they fight about the importance of Hamlet and the other male characters. Similarly, in *Harlem Duet*, Billie and Othello’s arguments can be pared down to a debate over whether to counteridentify or identify with White culture. Both plays contain archetypal figures of identification and counteridentification.

Clarke’s Playwright refuses to appease the male director and overtly counteridentifies with Shakespeare, Stoppard, and the “eternal male script” (28). In rejecting Hamlet and the mainstage, Playwright explains that she wants Gertrude and Ophelia’s obsessions “on the stage, not his, not his body on the stage, his flesh invading my play” (48). Playwright even performs the role of Gertrude in the play-within-the-play, and when Playwright breaks character she refuses to comply with popular representations of Gertrude as an emblem of female subordination. In a scene following Ophelia’s death, Playwright performs the role of Gertrude but refuses to wear a veil because it emblematizes female silence and passivity: “If you expect me to play this melodrama at least let me play it with out [sic] having my mouth stuffed with lace. Talk about silencing the female voice!” (46). Playwright, however, eventually acquiesces to the male director’s requests and rehearses a scene with Hamlet that adds a “male presence” and “a
little relief from all that female realism” (29). Doomed from the start, Playwright’s feminist production of *Hamlet* fails to fully counteridentify with Shakespeare’s original work.

Clarke’s Gertrude, by contrast, chooses to work within the patriarchal codes of female duties and marriage in order to protect Hamlet’s right to the crown. In her marrying Hamlet’s uncle, Gertrude ensures that “there can be only one heir—my only son” because she “cannot conceive [ . . . ] a legitimate heir” for Claudius (10). The Queen further explains that her “marriage [to Claudius] is the best thing for everyone” (11) and that women must always make sure that their husbands “succeed” (13). Gertrude advises Ophelia that “Men are not the hot goats they all pretend to be and if they fail at love . . . they always find a way to blame that failure on the woman [ . . . ] So it is important, when you come to wed, no matter what it means for you, he must succeed” (13). Highlighting the sheer performativity of sexualized gender roles, Gertrude’s instructions to Ophelia advocate strategies that identify with and support stereotypes of the virile man and submissive woman. Gertrude pointedly explains to Ophelia, “You did right to obey your father and your King” (17). Even after Hamlet rapes Ophelia, Gertrude instructs her to “act as if nothing happened” and to “be your usual gentle self” in order to lure Hamlet into marriage (emphasis added, 15). For Gertrude, Hamlet and Ophelia have simply consecrated their marriage without “the words of the church” because “the same blood, would come to you on your wedding night” (15). In this scene, Gertrude frames femininity in terms of a performance of submissiveness for male onlookers, and she preaches identification with gender stereotypes and patriarchal notions of wifely duties as a survival strategy.
Ultimately, it is in playing Gertrude that Playwright most successfully undermines Prince Hamlet’s role as protagonist. Despite the Playwright’s efforts to focus exclusively on the female characters, she eventually gives in to the male director and rehearses a scene between Hamlet and his mother. As Gertrude, however, she destabilizes the Prince’s tragic role through comedy. While the inexperienced male Actor plays the role of Hamlet, Playwright performs the role of Gertrude and effectively “upstages him for comic effect in all the subversive ways that an experienced actor can” (46). Gertrude quite literally takes over for Hamlet as she recites his lines:

ACTOR: “Shall I lift this veil . . .” *(realizes there is no veil on the now sweetly smiling face of “Play” and throws up his hands).* Damn!

PLAYWRIGHT: *(prompting)* and show the world’s corruption in the face of a woman? Gosh, I know your scene better than you do. (47)

With this interruption, Playwright not only upstages but also replaces Hamlet. Clarke’s Gertrude is the “better” Hamlet (47). The Actor’s performance of Hamlet fails and the frame instructs the audience of this failure: as Actor complains to Playwright, “You are ruining my scene. You are doing it deliberately” (48). Playwright then asserts, “We cannot have your scene, because your scene is Prince Hamlet’s scene and I will not have him in my play” (48).

In addition to Gertrude’s superior acting abilities and the Playwright’s refusal to accept the Hamlet scene in her play, sexual innuendos further render Hamlet’s originally serious speech comedic. Following Gertrude’s story about Claudius’s shortcomings in the bedroom, the Actor, as Hamlet, recites the following monologue:
I do not hate you mother. I love you. And hate myself bitterly that I can not stop loving such a woman. To be such a man! To love such a woman as you! I thought I had hardened my heart against you, but while I was away I softened and felt once again as I did when I was a child. Then you were my angel-mother. I forgot your recent sins. Forgive your frailty. Then my first sight when I return is you like some black spider, crouched over her grave, strewing flowers like poison venom on her sweet body. (47)

With a “hardened” and “softened” heart, the sexual symbolism is overt in this scene: Hamlet is emotionally and phallically “soft” in the absence of his mother but longs for her as he did as a child, which as Freud suggests, is a very sexual longing. Throughout the scene, as the stage directions explain, “Playwright overplays the lines, presenting the most ‘Freudian’ of Gertrudes” (46). This comic performance of the Freudian mother usurps Hamlet’s tragic speech, transforming it into a parody of psychoanalytic treatments of Hamlet. According to Freud, Oedipus and Hamlet share the same “basic wish-phantasy of the child” (257): “the death of the father” and, as a “complement” to this wish, the desire to have “sexual intercourse with one’s mother” (257). Clarke’s sexual innuendos purposefully echo Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of Shakespeare’s original play. Yet the performance of this speech renders masculinity, not femininity, as “frailty.” The earlier “not-so-wedding night” scene about Claudius’s failed sexual performance with Gertrude places the “softened” Hamlet among a cast of men who fail to perform in both the sexual and the dramatic sense.

Gertrude gains the audience’s sympathy over Hamlet because she is not the virago that we expect. Whereas Shakespeare pins our empathy to Prince Hamlet and
suggests that Gertrude helped orchestrate the death of King Hamlet, Clarke pointedly rejects “Shakespeare’s Gertrude” and defends the Queen:

PLAYWRIGHT: as “The Mother,” Gertrude is like an ideological sponge. The crap and piss left over from shaping the play, is sucked up into the Gertrude character, where we can safely feel all the disgust and contempt we want. Then we’re supposed to identify like crazy with Hamlet and his pals, feeling our ever-so-neat fear and pity, because all the nasty bits have been displaced into her. Well, I’m here to tell you it’s a crock. I identify with Gertrude and I don’t like the bad press she’s been getting. (2)

From this opening scene, Playwright clearly informs the audience, and the male Actor, of her “feminist” (2) reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet and desire to flesh out the character of Gertrude as a more sympathetic character. Further aligning the audience with the female characters, Hamlet’s Freudian speech and the women’s songs point to his harmful duplicity towards Ophelia. Hamlet is not only both “hardened” and “softened” (7) but also, as Gertrude’s songs warn, “frost and fire” (16). As well as recriminating Hamlet, Clarke thematizes the Prince’s ambiguity and indecision (hot/cold, fire/frost), which parodies the trope of women as virgin and whore. This reductive binary of female roles has been popularly applied to Shakespeare’s Ophelia and Gertrude in literary scholarship. Clarke, however, adapts the binary of virgin-whore and applies it to the male characters, who are cast as either “soft” or “hard,” “frost” or “fire.” Hamlet’s failed sexual performance in the inset play as a “softened” man and as Ophelia’s romantic

---

84 Just as “to die” signaled both death and a sexual climax in Shakespeare’s time—the Oxford English Dictionary explains that “die” was “used as a poetical metaphor in the late 16th and 17th cent.” for a “sexual orgasm”—Clarke’s play aligns death with sex: Hamlet’s “hardened” and “softened” heart, together with Gertrude’s “prick” of her pin, contribute to Ophelia’s death.
companion, together with the Actor’s inability adequately to perform the role of Hamlet in the play proper, are central to Clarke’s critique of Shakespeare and to the distancing of her play from the source.

In *Gertrude and Ophelia’s* only scene with Hamlet, Gertrude undermines Hamlet’s tragic role through her ironic performance, parodies Freudian interpretations, reduces him to a binary, and after all tragic tenor has been robbed from his role, she pillages his speech by performing his lines. Instead of ending with bloodshed, Playwright (Gertrude) and Actress (Ophelia) conclude the play proper. Ophelia is not revived but the actress who plays her is, when Playwright and Actress cordially leave the stage together and the Actress promises that “Everything will be fine” (52). While the inset Playwright aims to restore Shakespeare’s female characters by completely excluding the tragic Prince, Clarke, in turn, completes this restorative goal by simultaneously including and excluding Hamlet. Clarke’s play as a whole disidentifies with the androcentrism that Gertrude submits to and Playwright tries to eradicate. As Mark Fortier says, “Clarke’s play, after all, unlike the Playwright’s, includes a scene from *Hamlet*, even if it is to be played suspiciously or ironically” (351). Clarke takes a disidentificatory position with the play proper because she calls attention to the struggles of at once heeding and countering the canonical source and its scholarly significance.

As with Playwright’s unsuccessful attempt to counteridentify with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Billie’s counteridentification with the White world outside Harlem also fails. As the figure of counteridentification, Billie does not want to participate in the majoritarian society and instead retreats to Harlem with the hope that someday Harlem will serve as an all-Black refuge. Billie admits that she “love[s] seeing all these brown faces” (350).
and that Harlem is a “respite [from Whiteness] like an ocean in the middle of a desert” (365): she imagines a future Harlem “teeming with loud Black people listening to Jazz and reggae and Aretha” (366). Yet Sears problematizes Billie’s separatist sanctuary because Billie’s opposition to the dominant culture fills her with rage: “I hate. I know I hate” (369). In obsessing over race and in hating White culture, Billie reinforces racist rhetoric. In one of her lectures to Billie, Magi reveals the debilitating effects of counteridentification:

Is everything about White people with you? Is every living moment of your life eaten up with thinking about them. Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are anymore? What about right and wrong. Racism is a disease my friend, and your test just came back positive. You’re so busy reacting, you don’t even know yourself. (364-5)

The counteridentification with “White people” and the reductive racial opposition of Black versus White cause Billie to lose her own identity. By contrasting Othello and Billie’s identificatory practices, Sears dramatizes not only the danger of Othello’s identification but also the harmful effect of Billie’s counteridentification because both characters lose hold of their self-identities. The equally harmful effects of identification and counteridentification illustrate Pêcheux’s and Muñoz’s warnings about the two positions’ symmetrical structures. As Muñoz says, “the danger” of counteridentification is “the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of ‘counterdetermination’” (11). In its inversion of identification, counteridentification
merely duplicates the same ideological problems and racial hierarchies as exemplified by Othello’s rejection of his Black ancestry and Billie’s rejection of White culture.

If Othello is obsessed with “White-washing” his life, Billie seems only to want Black. Her “I am” statements often define her in terms of Black culture—“We are Black. Whatever we do is Black” (55)—but even Billie is at times suspicious of this word and of her racialized skin as an identifying agent. Billie seems to have little control over the identificatory category of Black: “When someone doesn’t serve me, I think it’s because I’m Black. When a clerk won’t put the change into my held-out hand, I think it’s because I’m Black . . . I’m even suspicious of the word Black. Who called us Black anyway? It’s not a country, it’s not a racial category, its [sic] not even the colour of my skin” (349). In this speech, Billie’s self-assertive statements imagine that others (such as the server and clerk) identify her first and foremost as Black. With these “I am” statements Billie’s “I” becomes the object of external identification, prompting her to assume a selfhood outside of society. Billie cannot escape the racialized binary of White versus Black, and her counteridentification with White culture merely reaffirms this racial polarity. Gertrude and Ophelia and Harlem Duet feature acts of counteridentification, but this strategy fails because it merely reinforces dominant binaries.

Othello is the inverse of Billie.85 He identifies with English and American culture, and, as Leslie Sanders says, he is “a member of the black community who is dazzled by

---

85 Dickinson contrasts Othello’s and Billie’s positions, describing Billie in terms that echo definitions of counteridentification. “Where Othello,” Dickinson argues, “like Cesaire’s Ariel, chooses to work within the system, the more revolutionary Billie, like Caliban, chooses to challenge it from without” (10). But Billie is not as revolutionary as Caliban. While Caliban embraces his status as monster “as a site from which to curse Prospero” (Muñoz 185), Billie is, at least in part, paralyzed by perceived derogations of Blackness.
whiteness” (558). After fighting with Billie about the difference between White and Black feminists, Othello defines himself in a climactic soliloquy:

I am not minor. I am not a minority. I used to be a minority when I was a kid. I mean my culture is not my mother’s culture—the culture of my ancestors. My culture is Wordsworth, Shaw, Leave It to Beaver, Dirty Harry. I drink the same water, read the same books. You’re the problem if you don’t see beyond my skin. If you don’t understand that I am a middle class educated man. I mean, what does Africa have to do with me. [. . . .] Some of us are beyond that now. Spiritually beyond this race shit bullshit now. I am an American. The slaves were freed over 130 years ago. In 1967 it was illegal for a Black man to marry a White in sixteen states. That was less than thirty years ago . . . in my lifetime. Things change, Billie. I am not my skin. My skin is not me. (355)

In this scene, Othello tries to negate the significance of his skin but the negation of Blackness merely enables him to align with a culture that he defines as “White” and “American.” In assuming a liberal fallacy that “race” does not matter and is irrelevant, Othello refuses to acknowledge the power of racism or racialized history. Yet there is a logical fallacy to his denial of racism and his self-identification with mainstream White American culture because the premise that skin colour does not define identity contradicts Othello’s preference for White women and Mona’s alabaster skin. Despite Othello’s repeated insistence that “we’re all equal in the eyes of God” (355), he explains that White women are “different” (354). With “a Black woman,” Othello feels that he “represent[s] every Black man she has ever been with and with whom there was still so
much to work out” (355). Othello’s generalizations about Black women undermine his rejection of Black male stereotypes. In her parable to HIM, HER suggests that Othello tries to become White through his relationship with Mona:

Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to find a magic spell in order to become White. After much research and investigation, he came across an ancient ritual from the caverns of knowledge of a psychic. “The only way to become White,” the psychic said, “was to enter the White.” And when he found his ice queen, his alabaster goddess, he fucked her. Her on his dick. He one with her, for a single shivering moment became . . . her. Her and her Whiteness. (361)

White women, then, are not only “easier—before and after sex” (355), they enable Othello to “become White” and thereby fully self-identify as a White American.

Othello’s self-defining utterances assert his individuality and masculinity: “I am a very single, very intelligent, very employed Black man” (355). In declaring his single status and separation from Billie, Othello renders their marriage void. Harlem Duet explains that when slaves did not have access to recognized wedding ceremonies they would jump over a broom as an act of marriage. In homage to this tradition, Billie and Othello jumped over a broom in their earlier days in Harlem. With Othello’s annulment of their marriage, Othello not only leaves Billie but also refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the subversive marital tradition. Othello’s assertion of individuality thus relies on an identification with a White collective and tradition. But the ease with which Othello negates his past speech acts and ancestral traditions gestures towards the flimsiness of self-identifications as retractable or negatable: with a single speech act, for
instance, Othello proclaims, almost effortlessly, that he is “officially” engaged to Mona and separated from Billie (354). Othello punctuates his defiant monologue with the self-assertive statements, “I am not minor,” “I am not a minority,” and most poignantly, “I am not my skin” (355). These self-defining statements, however, are grounded in negation, ranging from his refusal to be considered a minority to his disassociation from Africa when he says, “What does Africa have to do with me” (356). Othello pairs these negations with affirmations, proclaiming, “I am a middle class educated man” and “I am an American.” These affirmative “I am” declarations, however, paradoxically destabilize what they seek to confirm—Othello’s “I”—because the accompanying “I am not” negations demonstrate the instability of the very signifiers—“Black,” “American,” and “man”—that form his identity.

Othello and Billie personify strategies of identification and counteridentification, respectively. In _Harlem Duet_, these two strategies parallel assimilationist and separatist perspectives as suggested by the location of Billie and Othello’s apartment “at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards” (17). Margaret Jane Kidnie suggests that the “highly charged stand-off between Billie and Othello, turning on the question of whether to live according to a separatist or integrationist racial politics, is never conclusively resolved in favour of either side” (31). But this absence of a conclusive winner can be read as a type of resolution because it refuses to uphold a hierarchic binary that privileges separatism or assimilation. _Harlem Duet_, I argue, critiques both perspectives, purposefully favouring neither assimilationism/identification nor separatism/counteridentification.
*Harlem Duet* steps outside “either/or” constructions of race and ideology by questioning the boundaries of Blackness and Whiteness. It is the intersection of these racial identities and racial ideologies that is key: the intersection offers the option of an “and,” as opposed to a binary “either/or” structure. The setting of the play—at the junction of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards—not only gestures towards the fallibility of either separatist or assimilationist politics but also towards their similarity as ideological positions preoccupied with prescribed racial codes. *Harlem Duet* emphasizes the potential of disidentificatory subject positions as a bringing together of positions.

*Gertrude and Ophelia* similarly challenges the all-too-simple dichotomy of separatist and assimilationist strategies in relation to feminist politics. The Playwright, on the one hand, voices a separatist response to patriarchal literary traditions in her efforts to focus exclusively on women and separate the genders. Gertrude, on the other hand, exemplifies an assimilationist approach to the patriarchal demands made upon her as Queen to the nation’s powerful King. Ophelia straddles these oppositional positions benefitting neither from her assimilationist attempts to obey Hamlet and her father nor from her separatist isolation as a lone “me.” Ophelia’s resulting madness and death suggest the destructive void of a third alternative that is needed to triangulate the separatist and assimilationist strategies. Caught in this binary, Ophelia is collateral damage. In challenging dichotomous political responses to patriarchal and racial norms, *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* gesture toward the potential of the third position—that of disidentification, or the strategy of simultaneously identifying with and against a dominant ideology.
Revisionist Drama and/as Disidentification

Iago’s famous performative utterance “I am not what I am” best encapsulates revisionist plays’ disidentificatory relationship to their source (Othello 1.1.69). Iago’s confessional aside sets up a binary of identificatory categories, “I am” and “I am not,” only to merge the two. With “I am not what I am,” the second “I am” carries with it a now tacit “not.” Iago recasts his performances of honesty as acts of mischief, providing a new code of behaviour that layers truths with fictions and creates a palimpsestic experience for the audience: at this point in the play, the other characters (mainly Othello) perceive Iago’s performances as truthful, whereas the extra-diegetic audience understands them to be dishonest. In other words, Iago’s speech acts succeed according to the play’s inset audience and fail according to its real audience. After “I am not what I am,” Iago’s subsequent speech acts perform a transformative doubleness: an “am” and “am not.”

Adaptation, as defined by Hutcheon, involves “repetition with variation” (Theory 8). To describe the adapted work’s relationship to the sources, then, is to describe it in terms of “am” (repetition) and “am not” (difference), and it is this convergence and divergence that creates meaning. Like revisionist adaptation that transforms the source by working with and against it, disidentification “is a strategy that tries to transform a

---

86 Iago’s mischievous statement—“I am not what I am” (Othello 1.1.69)—establishes the Christian Bible as a widely recognized intertext and illuminates the complexities of the biblical “I am who I am” statement (Exodus 3:14). Michael Neill describes Iago’s performative utterance as “a blasphemous unspeaking of the biblical name of God” (“Postcolonial Shakespeare?” 165). Although I agree that Iago is a blasphemous figure, I contend that Iago’s declaration shares rhetorical nuances with the biblical “I am who I am” because both statements simultaneously reveal and negate the speaker’s identity.
cultural logic from within, always labouring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance’’ (Muñoz 12). Clarke’s and Sears’s revisionist adaptations of Shakespeare realize the political potential of disidentification by working with and against the Bard to re-signify the identities of his marginalized characters. *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* effectively transform the canonical characters from within.\(^8^7\) Disidentification, therefore, is not similar to but ideologically synonymous with revisionist adaptation.

While Clarke’s Playwright and Sears’s Billie seek to invert the dominant structures, the plays themselves engage in a more nuanced negotiation with Shakespeare’s work. As a survival strategy as well as a theoretical approach, Muñoz fittingly explains that disidentification “resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate” (9). Clarke and Sears resist their protagonists’ “good dog/bad dog criticism” in order to disidentify with their overbearing canonical forbearers. After all, Clarke includes Hamlet in the play proper and introduces *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as an intertext by mentioning Stoppard and his play. In dramatizing Playwright’s failed counteridentification with Shakespeare’s original *Hamlet* and Gertrude’s failed identification with patriarchal expectations, Clarke simultaneously rejects and embraces

\(^{87}\) Linda Burnett’s “‘Redescribing a World:’ Towards a Theory of Shakespearean Adaptation in Canada” provides a helpful overview of the racial and feminist transformations in four plays (MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona*, Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia*, Gass’s *Claudius*, and Sears’s *Harlem Duet*). Burnett argues that “what is really significant about these playwrights’ endeavour is their refusal to start a new picture from scratch. Instead of painting over Shakespeare’s work, they touch it up some places and in others add their own representations to stand beside his. In so doing, they are engaged in the constructive postcolonial project that Rushdie calls ‘redescribing a world.’ And by adding to the cultural canvas those perspectives previously left out of the picture, they are, again in Rushdie’s words, taking the ‘necessary first step toward changing’ a world” (9). While Burnett provides an examination of parody and the doubleness of these works—“both to pay tribute to and to sabotage” the Bard (5)—this chapter seeks to further complicate this doubleness and theorize Canadian revisionist plays by integrating disidentification theory, adaptation theory, and speech act theory.
Shakespeare’s play, thereby disidentifying with the source. Although it is set in present day Harlem, the narrative actions of *Harlem Duet* precede the action of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. *Harlem Duet* is thus simultaneously descendant from and antecedent to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, which effectively displaces the criticisms of parasitism that plague adaptations. *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* can be read as theorizations of the disidentificatory potential of adaptation.

*Harlem Duet* warns against identification with the Bard and faithful retellings of *Othello*. Sears explained that “using three time periods was very important”: “It gave the depth that I wanted. It supported many layers of the play, of the language, and of the contradictions around race” (Sears and Sealy-Smith “Nike” 25). In each time period, Othello leaves Billie for a White woman because of prescribed codes of White superiority, and this trans-historical repetition heightens the tragedy of Othello’s abandonment of Billie. Kidnie expresses the audience’s reaction: the “instant recognition of the actors’ bodies in performance—the realization that the same two actors portray Billie and Othello in all three settings—creates the sense that we are witnessing a single story, stretched across time” (“There’s Magic” 33). Yet it is not merely a single story “stretched,” but a single narrative pluralized; and the tragedy does not just come from the murder of Othello in the subplots or from Billie’s breakdown but from the repetition of the same story over and over again. The sound clips that open each scene reinforce the overarching narrative of repetition: the same “cacophony of strings” plays over and over again in act 2 scenes 4, 5, 6, and 7, which quickly “becomes a grating repetition” (361). As well as adding dramatic tension, the three parallel storylines and sound clips enact the tragedy of stasis.
By charting the same racial conflicts from the Elizabethan era to the present, *Harlem Duet* dramatizes the tragedy of repetition. As Fischlin says, the “three similar storylines from different historical periods emphasize the traps of historical amnesia and repetition, all repeating the basic motif of a Black man leaving a Black woman for a white woman” (“Nation and/as Adaptation” 318). Nuancing Fischlin’s interpretation, I argue that the play does not critique repetition but repetition without difference. It is repetition with politicized variation, after all, that enables Sears to work simultaneously with and against the dominant narratives of racial marginalization. Repetition with political difference, then, acts as a corrective to the tragedy of stasis. In using adaptation as a vehicle for change and in dramatizing the damaging potential of mere repetition or reversal, Clarke and Sears demonstrate the counter-discursive power of revisionist adaptation as disidentification.

“I am” declarations and dramatic adaptations have an implicit citationality because they garner meaning from earlier performances, but it is on the basis of this citationality that the political work takes place. The failure of Othello’s “I am not my skin” suggests the precariousness of normative identities, and the inability of Gertrude and Ophelia to fully conform to female stereotypes highlights the performativity of gender roles. Iterations of self-identification are either undermined by their narrative context (as is the case with Othello’s self-defining soliloquy) or fail to be completed (as is the case with Ophelia who cannot define a “me”). The characters’ failure to successfully identify or counteridentify with normative structures of gender or racial identities performs disidentification, just as the playwrights’ failure to fully identify with or against their source texts enacts revisionist adaptation. Approaching failed
performances of normative identity and literary fidelity as disidentification not only challenges popular denouncements of adaptations as derivative but also foregrounds the precariousness of the dominant identificatory structures that the plays fail to uphold.

Both *Gertrude and Ophelia* and *Harlem Duet* emphasize the performativity of identity, while emphasizing the flimsiness of these very performances in the plays. The self-negation “I am not what I am” applies to the main characters’ identities because they are dependent on performances of gender and race. It is this paradoxical doubleness—the “am” and “am not”—that defines the central characters in these two plays and the two adaptations’ relationship to their sources.
Chapter 4

“I am” Declarations and the Adaptive Self in

Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*

and Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife*

Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1990) and Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (1991) grapple with questions of Aboriginal identity by dramatizing confrontational “I am” statements. “Indians,” Paula Gunn Allen explains, have been told that they “have to assimilate or perish” (*Sacred 5*). In Mojica’s and Moses’s plays, as a result, individual perseverance and cultural survival are intrinsically linked. After all, as Allen suggests, the isolated individual is “foreign to American Indian thought” because “at base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being” (*Sacred 60*). If, however, American Indian stories conceive of a collective “we” rather than an isolated “I,” then what is the significance of the repeated “I am” declarations in these two plays? Allen’s discussion of repetition provides some insight into the function of the “I am” refrain because “Repetition [in Aboriginal stories] operates like a chorus in Western drama” that serves to “reinforce the theme” while it “integrates and fuses” (*Sacred 63*). In this way, the repeated “I am” declarations both announce the theme of individual identity and integrate the speaker within a larger whole.

As Allen reminds us, the differences between the Aboriginal “I,” or, more accurately, the holistic “we,” and the European concept of an individual autonomous “I”
not only has been responsible for the colonial focus on conquest and ownership but also has fuelled stereotypes of the primitive Indian. What is perhaps most threatening about the Native participation in a “whole being” is that the so-called “primitive Indian” does not share an industrial society’s values of capital growth and individual property (Sacred 5). The American dream of wealth and progress, as Allen describes it, casts the Aboriginal people as savage, and, by extension, as a threat to a post-industrial society (Sacred 5); the characterization of the Aboriginal people as primitive, and thereby non-capitalistic, has been “a root cause of the genocide practiced against American Indians since the colonial period” (Sacred 5). Because differing cultural conceptions of “I” have been used as one of the excuses for the colonizer’s investment in the attainment of private property, *Princess Pocahontas’s* and *Almighty Voice’s* “I am” statements accrue weighty cultural significance as they respond to the civilizing claims of colonial conquests. Whereas chapters one and two investigated collectivities (“our” and “we”), this chapter analyzes constructions of the individual “I” in relationship to the First Nations’ shared, collective experience of Euro-colonialism.

Building on chapter three’s argument that declarative “I am” statements announce a citational history of previous usages, I argue that *Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* emphasize this citationality in order to present the self as transformative, layered, and integrated within a larger collective. Both plays feature crises of identity that culminate in self-assertive statements, such as “I am Princess Pocahontas” (Mojica 30), “I am one” (Mojica 59), and “I am the wife of Almighty Voice” (Moses 20). In a final attempt at self-assertion, for example, Moses’s Almighty Voice recognizes his wife by her “eyes”—a pun on eye/I—and emphasizes the self-defining importance of “I”
statements. Similarly, Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* ends with Contemporary Woman #1’s proclamation “I am one” (59). In works that seek to reshape earlier versions of the Pocahontas and Almighty Voice myths, these performative utterances resonate with the biblical “I am” and are a key strategy for speaking back to colonial legends and a history of enforced Christianity in Canada. By re-appropriating religious rhetoric, Mojica and Moses at once repeat and undermine the antecedent narratives of colonial settlement. This palimpsestic experience governs Mojica’s and Moses’s re-conceptualization of the “I” as layered and performative. I argue that these revisionist plays are not only palimpsests themselves but are also constructing a palimpsestic “I.” In short, the “I am” proclamations in *Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* conceive of the self as layered and multiple much like the form of adaptation itself.

The Palimpsestic “I”: Integrating Speech Act Theory with Adaptation Theory

In addition to presenting a layered “I,” *Princess Pocahontas*’s and *Almighty Voice*’s self-assertions re-identify the speaker. As Butler contends, performative acts can have a subject-making function. Responding to Austin’s citation of the marriage ceremony—“I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)” (Austin 12)—as a

---

For further discussion of literature and palimpsests, see Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Genette argues that “the duplicity of the object, in the sphere of textual relations, can be presented by the odd analogy of the palimpsest: on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through” (398-99).

The audience likewise experiences adaptations as palimpsests: the audience members that have a previous knowledge of the source text(s) benefit from the memory of the earlier works in addition to the adaptation itself, which results in what Hutcheon refers to as “the double pleasure of the palimpsest” (116). In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon conceives of both adaptations and the experience of adaptations as “palimpsestous,” asserting that “we experience adaptations . . . as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (8). With dramatic adaptations, the narrative and the audience’s experience are both layered.
speech act, Butler interrogates the power that authorizes this pronouncement and interprets the marriage ceremony as a reinforcement of heteronormativity. Butler argues that “it is through the invocation of convention” and not through the speaking subject that the speech act “derives its binding power” (*Bodies that Matter* 225). Whereas Austin imbues the speaking subject with the power to act through language, Butler emphasizes the authority of the performed convention itself. My analysis combines both approaches by investigating the subject-making and empowering capabilities of performed language: I chart a symbiotic connection between the authority of the language itself and the authority of the speaker. To apply Austin’s speech act theory, the “I am” declaration performs an action and gains its authority from both the speaker and the speaker’s delivery. Yet as Butler’s theories of performative identity would suggest, the history of the “I am” statement resounds with each delivery and, as a result, the declaration invokes authority through citation.

Conceiving of “I am” statements as palimpsestic speech acts provides a theoretical framework—that of speech act theory and adaptation theory—for understanding the relationship between individual “I am” declarations and their many echoes. Butler’s emphasis on the citationality of performative utterances does not valorize earlier utterances as “original” or as “source” but rather democratizes every performative utterance as one of many.\(^90\) The relationship between a performative utterance and its antecedent, however, is a contentious issue when considered in the context of adaptation studies. Literary adaptations, like speech acts, call attention to their

---

\(^90\) As Stam, Hutcheon, and Julie Sanders have pointed out, adaptations are often discredited as parasitical or subordinate to their “source.” Adaptations, Hutcheon explains, are “haunted at all times by their adapted [source] texts” (6). Sanders, in particular, argues for the value of contemporary revisions, asserting that adaptations “make texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the process of proximation and updating” (19).
predecessors, but unlike speech acts, they are sometimes denounced for this citationality. Stam, Hutcheon, and Julie Sanders argue for an egalitarian approach to literary adaptation that takes the earlier works into account without blindly valorizing them. Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* and Moses’s *Almighty Voice* use self-defining “I am” declarations to call up a citational history of culturally loaded “I am” statements from announced intertexts that range from the Bible to colonial history to contemporary literatures. In their particular use of intertextuality, the two plays avoid the subservient worship of older works by performing a critique of them. Using adaptation studies as a way of complicating “I am” statements not only suggests the highly adaptive nature of the self, but the intersections of adaptation theory and speech act theory. According to Butler’s conception of speech acts, all language, whether it references the dominant or the marginal, cites earlier instances of naming and the “historically revisable possibility of a name” or of an “I” precedes, exceeds, and creates the speaker (*Bodies* 226). Butler suggests that “the ‘I’ only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated . . . and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the ‘I’” (*Bodies that Matter* 225). This emphasis on the definitive power of citation and historicity should not be confused with a celebration of fidelity or a valorization of the source since Butler herself seems to take it for granted that “reiterations are never simply replicas of the same” (*Bodies* 226). The inherent variation within repetitions is actually the premise of Butler’s theories of linguistic performance and citationality. For Butler, as with recent adaptation theorists, the history of a performative utterance further “decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said” (*Bodies* 227). In this way, the multiple echoes of “I am” statements destabilize the notion that an identity or self can be
traced back to a single originating source. Allen similarly points to an overarching assumption of intertextuality in Aboriginal literature, explaining that “It is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of the unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life” (*The Sacred Hoop* 62). This citational history of the plays and of “I am” statements reinforces the performance of the “I” as layered and multiple.

Allen’s conception of the self begins where Butler’s ends: with the theory that the self is transformative and connected to earlier performances. While Austin and Butler outline the constitutive powers of speech, Allen describes the constitutive force of Aboriginal peoples’ ceremonies. Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* contributes to a theorization of performative identity by conceiving of life in terms of a transformative ritual: “the ritual cycle of dying, birth, growth, ripening, dying, and rebirth” is a “transformative process” (80). Unlike Butler’s sequential ordering of language as a predecessor of the self, Allen does not assume that ritual ceremonies precede the self. For Allen, ritual “means transforming something from one state or condition to another” because performative ceremonies involve “the power to make, to create, to transform” (*Sacred Hoop* 29). In *Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice*, by extension, the “I am” statements and performative acts manifest what they state or perform. Allen’s discussion of ceremonies contributes an emphasis on change: the performative utterances not only constitute but also transform the self.

The revisionist genre of Mojica’s and Moses’s plays informs the adaptive “I” in these works. *Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* use “I am” utterances as a central
strategy in re-writing “Indianness” and colonial histories. Although Mojica and Moses make allusions to a variety of narratives, I approach Princess Pocahontas as a revisionist adaptation of the Pocahontas myth and Almighty Voice as a revisionist adaptation of the legend of Kisse-Manitou-Wayou (Almighty Voice). At the beginning of the published edition of Princess Pocahontas, Mojica herself lists some of the play’s many intertexts, including Chrystos’s Not Vanishing, Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, and Allen’s The Sacred Hoop. In the first volume of Staging Coyote’s Dream, Mojica and Knowles describe Princess Pocahontas not only as a critique of the colonial “Captain Whiteman,” but also as a “rousing intertextual call for solidarity” (136).

Much like Mojica’s play, Moses’s Almighty Voice also features stirring intertextuality. With Almighty Voice, Moses dramatizes the late nineteenth-century tale of Kisse-Manitou-Wayou, who was hunted by Mounties for killing a cow. This myth has been the subject of many retellings, such as Pauline Johnson’s poem “The Cattle Thief,” Rudy Wiebe’s short story “Where is the Voice Coming From?,” Peterson’s play Almighty Voice, and Pierre Berton’s The Wild Frontier: More Tales from the Remarkable Past among others. Directly responding to these many versions, Moses’s first act rewrites the myth, while act two parodies a wide range of popular “Indian” stereotypes. Princess Pocahontas and Almighty Voice challenge identity constructions of the Indian princess (Pocahontas) and the noble savage (Almighty Voice) through the use of multiple...
“I am” statements. These two plays are not only revisionist adaptations—they dramatize the “I” as revisable and adaptive.

**Four Functions of “I am” Statements**

*Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* dramatize four main functions of “I am” statements: 1) to describe and thereby constitute the self; 2) to forge belongingness to a community; 3) to assert ownership over identificatory categories; 4) and to emphasize individuality as distinct from yet simultaneously identified with a group. While the first function describes the “I am” statement’s effect on the speaker’s identity, and the second and third functions describe the speaker’s relation to the identificatory category, the fourth function speaks to the individual’s participation in communal identity. Despite the subject-making capacity and prevalence of “I am” statements in Canadian revisionist plays, there has yet to be any scholarship on the plays’ usage of performative declarations as a strategy for writing back to reductive representations.  

First, self-defining utterances describe and create the speaker’s identity as we saw with the “I am Canadian” speech and Austin’s speech act theory.  

The biblical “I am that I am” also exemplifies the self-constituting, and occasionally tautological, potential of speech acts. Mojica and Moses engage with the issue of the Christian conversion of

---

93 See my Introduction for further examples of “I am” utterances in Canadian literature.  
94 According to Austin, performative utterances satisfy the following conditions: “they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’” and “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as ‘just,’ saying something” (5). Some examples of performative utterances include “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*”—as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern” or “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow” (Austin 5).  
95 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* explains that “‘I AM WHO I AM’ is an etymology of the Israelite name for God, YHWH [. . .]. YHWH is treated as a verbal form derived from ‘to be’ and formulated in the first person because God is the speaker” (p.70 n.14). Many scholars agree on the
Aboriginal peoples across North America in part by echoing and challenging the authoritative power of biblical “I am” statements. Mojica and Moses appropriate the “I am” rhetoric of the Christian Bible in order to construct alternative versions of Aboriginal identities. While still an emblem of the forced Christian conversion of Native peoples, the Biblical “I am” also exemplifies the constitutive functions of speech acts. William Franke, for instance, emphasizes the self-constituting powers of language in the Bible, asserting, “language becomes the medium of a disclosure of human life” (156).

“I am” statements, however, do not always achieve self-constitution. I would like to complicate the first function of self-assertions by accounting for speech acts that demonstrate an inner confusion and self-loss. Almighty Voice, for example, reaches a self-reflexive climax when the title character’s wife, ironically named White Girl, repeatedly asks, “Who Am I?” in the final scene of the play as she struggles to remember her true identity (60, 61). This inquisitive “I am” suggests a will to construct selfhood while at the same time exposing the speaker’s instabilities. In Nolan and MacKinnon’s Death of a Chief, by comparison, Brutus struggles to complete his “I am” statement when he pauses after the performative utterance—“I am . . . Indian”—and then undermines his Native identity by explaining, “Well mostly, partly anyway. Métis?” Brutus’s self-identification shifts from “Indian,” to “mostly” Indian, to “partly,” and finally, he expresses his identity in the form of a question as he asks, “Métis?” Brutus cannot fulfill a singular identificatory category, and instead opens his “Indian” identity mysteriousness and tautology of the self-defining utterances “I AM” and “I am who I am” (from the Old Testament): William R. Arnold notes that the naming “I AM WHO I AM” is “opaque” and “unintelligible” (108), Ee Kon Kim suggests that “Yahweh is the very God who conceals himself” (108), and Jeffrey J. Niehaus explains that “In the very act of revealing himself, God conceals himself” (179). The biblical “I am” demonstrates the inscrutable enigma of God in that the tautology simultaneously “reveals” and “conceals.”
up to inquiry, much like Moses, who ends *Almighty Voice* with the inquisitive “Who am I?” (60). Brutus’s “I am” statement, with its shifts and instability, in part reflects the trickster tradition by resisting reductive and unitary identity labels. The ellipsis after the “I am” enables audiences to complete the identification; but it also gestures toward the transformative nature of identity and the difficulty of arriving at a singular self-identification. The failure to perform or complete “I am” statements often reveals the speaker’s lack of subject-making ability and individuality. Austin, as I outlined in chapter three, explores the causes of failed speech acts with his categories of “infelicities,” accounting for problems with the speaker’s inner intentions and with the performative procedure. Butler challenges the success of every speech act and warns that “success’ is always and only provisional” because “as much as it is necessary to . . . lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse” (*Bodies* 228, 227). Self-naming, then, constitutes the self, but the history of the identificatory category also signals the previous usages of the identificatory label that the speaker did not control. With “I am” statements, therefore, the speaker lays claim to the identificatory label, yet paradoxically, this very label may also constrain the speaker’s autonomy. In particular, the biblical genealogy of “I am” reminds audience members of past usages of self-assertions that pre-date Mojica’s and Moses’s characters.

---

Marking the second and third functions, self-defining utterances assert a sense of belonging to and ownership of identificatory categories and of the self. Miri Albahari argues that thoughts of “‘me,’ ‘mine,’ or ‘I am’” express “a sense of belongingness” and “possessive ownership” (53). As speech acts that assert belongingness, “I am” statements directly contribute to Mojica’s and Moses’s project of reviving Native cultural communities. “I am” declarations, however, can fail to assert the speaker’s ownership or belonging to a group, and, as a result, can denigrate the speaker into the property of an identificatory category. In *Princess Pocahontas*, Pocahontas says, “I am Lady Rebecca,” and “I am a Christian Englishwoman” (30-31). The speaker’s earlier identificatory labels, “Matoaka” and “Pocahontas,” conflict with the categories of “Christian” and “Englishwoman.” In the context of the play and the history of colonial rule in North America, the labels “Christian” and “Englishwoman” signify the historical erasure of her Native (Matoaka) identity and her perceived status as the property of John Rolfe and Christian England. The same holds true for *Almighty Voice*’s White Girl when she refers to herself as “Marrie”: the name Marrie—Moses’s intentional mispronunciation of Mary, the “name of their God’s mother” (10)—becomes an index of the Christian school’s attempt to convert White Girl. Butler explains that “the expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses” is undercut “by the historicity of the name itself” and “by the history of the usages that one never controlled” (*Bodies* 228). Pocahontas’s and White Girl’s “I am” statements, then, simultaneously emblematize and hinder the very autonomy they seek to proclaim due to the colonial historicity of the appellations themselves (*Bodies* 228). The history of the identificatory categories “Christian” and “Englishwoman” as well as the history of Native people’s forced religious conversion
undermine her autonomy. The declaration “I am a Christian Englishwoman” does not simply perform Pocahontas’s power, belongingness, or authority; rather, the declaration also suggests the constraining power of the identificatory labels “Christian” and “Englishwoman” as Pocahontas performs the role of “Lady Rebecca” on behalf of her people.

Finally, the fourth function of self-assertive statements occurs due to repetition. I argue that it is not merely the identificatory category or descriptor, but the first person singular pronoun “I” that has self-defining properties. In repeating “I am” declarations in succession, the individual speaker reinforces the existence of the “I.” Princess Pocahontas’s third Transformation uses repetition to assert Malinche’s presence and agency:

I am the only one can speak to the Maya, to the Mexica. It is my words that are of value. (moves downstage right, crosses herself, kneeling with head bowed) I am christened Doña Maria. They call me “Princess.” I am a gift claimed as value by this man in metal. I can change the words. I have power. Now I ride at the side of Cortez, the lady of the conquistador. Smart woman.

I am a strategist. (23)

Malinche’s “I am” statements reinforce her individuality, while simultaneously conveying her plurality. She corrects what “they call me,” and complicates the colonial identificatory label “Princess” by adding multiple identificatory categories, such as “Doña Maria,” “gift,” and “strategist.” For Malinche, the “I” is adaptable; and it is this adaptability that is the source of her power. Likewise, in Sears’s revisionist adaptation Harlem Duet, Othello’s series of statements—“I am not minor,” “I am a middle class
educated man,” “I am an American,” and “I am not my skin” (355-56)—spread his claim over multiple identificatory categories, while also employing repetition to affirm the existence of an “I.” In repeating, “I am,” Malinche and Othello erect an oral tower of “I”s that also expands horizontally along different categorical lines of nationality, class, and race. With these statements, Malinche and Othello display ownership over multiple categories of identification, and more importantly, over their “I.” The repetition of “I am” statements not only asserts belongingness to and ownership of an identificatory category but also reinforces the existence of an individual self. In Malinche’s speech, the four functions coalesce, signalling the racial complexity of intersections between community and individuality during the subject-making process.

The Bible further demonstrates how successive “I am” declarations can give authority to the message while also validating the speaker as truth-teller. Biblical scholars explore the interrelated significance of the narrating “I” and repetition in the Christian epic tradition and the Old Testament. By analyzing the subject-making powers of language in the Bible and literature, Franke notes that “only in being repeated can revelation be realized and validated” (157). Richard S. Briggs similarly argues that repetition validates the Ten Commandments and explains that we “hear this testimony to the word of God twice, because it is to be taken as reliable” (110). Applying these theological examples to the contemporary usage of “I am” declarations, therefore confirms that it is not only the “I am” statement but also the emphatic repetition of the performative utterance that can authorize the speaker’s selfhood.97

97 A speech act does not always succeed in establishing the authority of the speaker. Later in the chapter, I examine repeated self-assertions in Princess Pocahontas that communicate the stagnancy of the speaker’s identity as wife.
Whether empowering or disempowering, “I am” statements place the declaration and the speaker in relation to the citational history of the utterance—a history that includes previous “I am” assertions in the play itself as well as in its multiple intertexts. In this way, the “I” extends horizontally by reaching out to other works and subjectivities. The performative “I am” statements, then, are intrinsically layered: they signify the speaker’s identity while also gesturing towards the history of “I am” declarations and identificatory labels. In short, “I am” simultaneously asserts the speaker’s individuality (singular subject) and multiplicity (history of this linguistic “I”).

In keeping with their dramatization of a layered selfhood, Mojica and Moses use multi-generational intertexts (early modern to contemporary), multiple languages (English, French, Spanish, Cree), and cross-cultural allusions (American, Latin, Cree, colonial European) in order to expose the dramatic text as a heteroglossic and formally diverse medium. I see these self-assertive speech acts as a microcosm for the revisionist plays as a whole. Both the individual “I am” statements and the play as a whole are connected to these intertexts laterally—as opposed to vertically—because they reject literary hierarchies that privilege the older arts. The revisionist genre of the plays thus informs the non-hierarchical identity politics and reinforces the “I” as a layered “—” that connects to other characters and narratives. Mojica and Moses ultimately work against identity hierarchies, as if rotating the unitary hierarchical “I” to a plural egalitarian “—.”
Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots

Exemplifying an ideological shift in Canada from a focus on place to race, *Princess Pocahontas* counters popular historicizations of Aboriginal culture and colonial discovery. Mojica, as Knowles explains, thinks of the figures in her play “less as ‘actual’ figures in history than as subjects of Western colonialist representation” (“Translators” 257, original emphasis). The play weaves together different narrative strands about the performativity of female Aboriginal identity, most notably the Pocahontas myth, and was first performed in 1990 at Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace with Mojica and Alejandra Nuñez as the two actors. The play re-identifies the female Native characters as powerful individuals, while simultaneously connecting them to a larger community of Indigenous women, as the successive “I am” statements reveal a development from performances of simulated stereotypes to self-defining proclamations.

Most critics have, quite rightly, analyzed *Princess Pocahontas* as an attack on popular conceptions of “Indianness.” Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian* (1978) and Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian* (1993) contextualize stereotypes of the noble savage as the product of European prejudices in popular literature and culture. “Indianness,” Mark Shackleton writes, is merely “the image of Native people held by non-Natives” (257-8). Applying Gerald Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners: Post-Indian Warriors of Survivance* to Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas*, Shackleton conceives of Indianness as “a simulation” (Shackleton 258). Participating in what Knowles has called the “ongoing reinvention” of Native subjects, *Princess Pocahontas* parodies simplistic stereotypes of
the “real Indian Princess” in order to replace this misconception with a representation of the multiplicity of Native female figures (21). Critics, however, have yet to analyze the usage of “I am” declarations as a method of challenging these very constructions of “Indianness” in *Princess Pocahontas*. The “I am” statements perform resistance, successful derision of stereotypes, and self-assertion.

*Princess Pocahontas*’s non-linear structure and organizing Transformations (instead of acts and scenes) are integral to the play’s resistance of the colonial Pocahontas myth. Distinct from a traditional European dramatic structure with its act and scene divisions, Mojica organizes her play as a series of thirteen transformations “for each moon in the lunar year,” which also include four transfigurations (*Princess Pocahontas* 16). In the introductory notes to the play, Mojica explains that she refused to impose a structure on her story and that “I didn’t realize that I had a ‘structure’ until I went through the process of preparing the manuscript for publication” (16). *Princess Pocahontas* has “13 moons, 4 directions; it is not a linear structure but it is the form and the basis from which these stories must be told” (*Princess Pocahontas* 16). Mojica’s transformative structure offers an alternative model to linear North American and European narratives. Transformation, Allen explains, is “common in American Indian lore” (19) and is “the oldest tribal ceremonial theme” (162). The play’s embodiments of the stereotypical “Indian” and the transformative structure go hand-in-hand as strategies for resisting European form and historical narratives.

Parodic embodiments of Indian stereotypes are plentiful. *Princess Pocahontas* features the “Storybook Pocahontas,” the historical “Pocahontas/Lady Rebecca/Matoaka”

---

98 See Knowles’s “Translators, Traitors, Mistresses” for a treatment of Métis and Mestizo nations in relation to *Princess Pocahontas*. 
who undergoes symbolic name changes, and the “Cigar Store Squaw.”

The play opens with the Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant where Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides performs the “Dance of the Sacrificial Corn Maiden” in the style of a “Hollywood ‘Injun dance’” for the talent segment of the competition (19). While Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides strives to measure up to North American beauty standards, the stage directions and props for the Beauty Pageant comically undercut the credibility of the popular “Miss America” contests. When Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides is named Miss Congeniality—figuring her as merely another re-articulation of the Pocahontas myth—the Host crowns her with a headdress covered with small ears of corn in mockery of a conventional crown. The headdress lights up after the Host plugs it into an electric outlet, comically performing the modern technological corruption of natural products. Adding another layer to the simulation, the fake crown is made of artificial corn. What we are left with is a proliferation of simulation. The “crowning” moment exaggerates the failure of the colonial quest to capture the authentic or real Indian princess. This scene dramatizes the simulation and assimilation of Indianness in popular culture as interrelated strategies of cultural appropriation, demonstrating Shackleton’s punning maxim that “it takes a simulation to fight a simulation” (259).

At first, the “I am” declarations in Princess Pocahontas convey the simulation of Indian identity and the struggle to reclaim a Native “I.” Following the Miss North

---

99 For further discussion of Pocahontas’s name change, see Jill Carter’s “Blind Faith Remembers.” Carter explains that “A naming ceremony announces the child to the community, but as the child grows, his/her works announce themselves and new names are bestowed” (14). See also, Allen’s Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat and Beth Brant’s “Grandmothers of a New World.”

100 Much like Princess Buttered on Both Sides, Mojica’s Cigar Store Squaw also dramatizes problematic efforts to conform to North American beauty standards. In transformation 10, the Cigar Store Squaw fantasizes about being “Doris Day, Farrah Fawcett, Daryl Hannah . . . Christie Brinkley” and “hums ‘Uptown Girl’ while putting on white buckskin mini-dress” (49). The “white buckskin mini-dress” (49) emphasizes the North American sexualization involved in the popular images of the Indian woman that combines the Indian “buckskin” with popular culture’s “mini-dress.”
American Indian Beauty Pageant in the first Transformation, Transformation 2 rejects the North American pageant crown and the colonial claim to Pocahontas as an Indian princess. Quoting Chrystos’s *Not Vanishing*, Contemporary Woman #1 asserts, “I am not your Princess” (21), but her refusal of colonial ownership overlaps with Contemporary Woman #2’s reminder, “She’s a savage now remember” (21). The two lines are delivered simultaneously and compete for the audience’s attention, dramatizing the battle between the colonial “savage” identity and the rejection of these stereotypes. Despite Contemporary Woman #1’s protestations, Lady Rebecca/Pocahontas/Matoaka embraces the colonial image of herself as the Indian Princess. Mojica, however, disrupts the logical sequence of Pocahontas’s re-namings. In chronological order, Pocahontas’s four names were Pocahontas (a childhood name that refers to her mischievous character and trickster qualities), Matoaka (named after the white feathers, or Matoaks, in her hair), Amonute (“beloved woman”), and finally, Rebecca Rolfe (wife of the English settler John Rolfe) (Allen, *Pocahontas* 17-18). Yet, Mojica’s play shifts from Pocahontas to Rebecca and ends with the Matoaka naming ceremony. In Transformation 6, the Troubadour sings of Pocahontas and how she saved John Smith from imminent death. Pocahontas then transforms into a dutiful wife and colonial product, announcing, “I am Lady Rebecca” (30), and, finally, at the end of Transformation 6, we see Matoaka’s face-painting ceremony, which marks her self-identification: “I have to find my own colours and mix my own paint” (32). In concluding Transformation 6 with the young Matoaka’s agency,

---

101 In “Grandmothers of a New World,” Brant investigates the motivations for Pocahontas’s historical name change to Lady Rebecca, and argues that “Pocahontas had her own destiny to fulfill – that of keeping her people alive” (166). According to Brant, Pocahontas learned the English language from a missionary, and “her conversion to Christianity was only half-hearted, but her conversion to literacy was carried out with powerful zeal” (165). In *Princess Pocahontas*, Pocahontas’s Christian conversion also seems half-hearted, or at very least numbing, as she describes herself as Lady Rebecca in a trance-like state.
the play reverses the loss of her Native name by restoring her ability to “paint” her own identity. This reverse-chronology transforms Lady Rebecca back into Matoaka. In this way, Mojica rewrites the European ending of the Pocahontas story with Transformation 6, and on a larger scale, with the play as a whole.

Although “I am” statements typically assert a sense of belonging to or ownership of a specific identificatory category, the declarations “I am Princess and Non Pareil of Virginia” (30) and “I am Lady Rebecca forever and always” (30) ironically signal Pocahontas’s status as colonial property and highlight her distance from New World categories. Albahari explains that “whenever a subject has feelings of personal ‘my-ness’ towards any object, bodily or mental, then the subject implicitly identifies with [a] group” and stands in a relation of “ownership towards the object in question” (59). When “I am” statements announce a speaker’s connection to and ownership of an identificatory category, the declarations in turn suggest a sense of belonging; but it is the identificatory groups “English” and “Christian” that claim Pocahontas in Transformation 6. The Transformation, after all, dramatizes her marriage to John Rolfe who “claimed her for his bride-y-O” (emphasis added, 30). Marking her English conversion, the stage directions describe Pocahontas “fitting neck and wrists into collar and cuffs with much resistance” (30) as the Englishwoman garb imprisons her:

LADY REBECCA: Now you see here, I wear the clothes of an Englishwoman and will disturb you less when I walk. Here, I am Princess and Non Pareil of Virginia. I am Lady Rebecca. For me the Queen holds audience. [. . . .] Can I still remember how to plant corn? I’ll stay. Never,
never go back where anyone might know Matoaka. My name is Lady Rebecca forever and always. I am a Christian Englishwoman!

TROUBADOUR: (singing) Alas for our dear lady,

English climate did not suit her-

She never saw Virginia again,

She met her end at Gravesend. (30-31)

Despite her “resistance” to the English uniform, Pocahontas sacrifices her “Matoaka” identity and vows to “Never, never go back where anyone might know Matoaka” (31). The transformative “I am” declarations and names have very real consequences in this play: the relinquishing of her Native identity marks, as the Troubadour narrates, her death or “end” (31). In this way, Pocahontas is cuffed by her English identity much to her detriment. Her attempts to self-identify as “Lady Rebecca forever and always” (31) also resonate with popular historical accounts of Pocahontas as a romantic heroine who sacrificed her “savage” culture to save John Smith and wed John Rolfe. As Jill Carter says, “the popular legend of Pocahontas around which Mojica has constructed her project chronicles the story of a ‘savage’ but ‘noble Indian Princess’ who [. . . was] paraded in England as an object of conquest and a symbol of the ‘civilizing’ and ‘transformative’ power of colonization” (8-9). The audience, therefore, would likely recognize these self-identifying speech acts—“I am Princess and Non Pareil of Virginia” (30), “My name is Lady Rebecca forever and always” (31), and “I am Christian Englishwoman!” (31)—from mainstream histories about the civilizing power of colonization. Pocahontas’s “I am” statements paradoxically announce her identity as both the famous “savage” and the civilized “Christian English woman,” but this contradictory doubleness results in
Pocahontas/Lady Rebecca/Matoaka’s failure to belong to either category of “Indian” or “Englishwoman” fully. The popular legends of Pocahontas render her an outcast, and, as Carter describes, “a besotted nubile who betrayed her people” (9). Just as Pocahontas does not successfully inhabit the identificatory labels of “Englishwoman” or “Christian,” so too does she fail to inhabit the label “Indian” because of her perceived betrayal and duplicity. The colonial myth of Pocahontas renders her hybridity a betrayal. Pocahontas paradoxically brims with names although they are emptied of identity.

Whereas Pocahontas’s “I am a Christian Englishwoman” signals Rolfe’s and England’s civilization of the Indian princess, the play’s next “I am” statement realigns Native women with Native men when Contemporary Woman #1 helps a buckling Aboriginal man to “Stand up” (39). Transformation 8, in particular, shows the potential for a reciprocal relationship among Native men and women: Contemporary Woman #1 tells the weak Native Man, “you are my man, I am your woman” (39). This moment replaces a hierarchical relationship that posits European men above Native women with a symbiotic one. Unlike Lady Rebecca’s asymmetrical relationship to colonial Europe, wherein she is an unrequited giver as suggested by the repetition “I provided” (31), the “you are my man, I am your woman” statement signals a proprietary symbiosis. She seems to foster a bond when he slowly rises in response to her directive: “stand up” (39). Yet this effort to script Contemporary Woman #1 in a symbiotic relationship with a Native man fails to be realized and instead parallels the colonial narrative. Just as the white colonizers discard the helpful Native women, the Native man “exits” as soon as he

102 In describing her unilateral relationship with John Rolfe, Mojica’s Lady Rebecca explains that “I provided John Rolfe with the seeds to create his hybrid tobacco plants and I provided him with a son, and created a hybrid people” (31). In *Princess Pocahontas*, John Rolfe seems to give very little in return with the exception of “a nice fan to hide my face and fan myself in these hot, heavy clothes” (31).
“is standing tall” (40). This scene enacts a gender division in Native culture after colonialism and responds to the popular depictions of Native women, like Pocahontas, as helpful agents of colonialism.103

Just as Transformation 8 dramatizes Contemporary Woman #1’s double abandonment, Transformation 9 similarly uses repetition to expose Native women’s static role as subordinated other. While repetition with variation can be used as a political tool for change—as demonstrated by Sears’s *Harlem Duet* and Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia* in chapter three—repetition without variation can suggest the difficulty of moving beyond past oppressions. Transformation 9 shifts to Margaret’s perspective and highlights a crisis of repetition with the refrain, “I am the third and youngest wife of a captain of the home guard” (44, 45):

MARGARET: *Putting on a calico apron dress, she is stunned, numb, rum-dumb.*

My husband didn’t have a good hunt this season.

*Putting on kerchief, ratchet sounds.*

I am the third and youngest wife of a captain of the home guard. My husband didn’t have a good hunt this season. [ . . . . ]

I am the third and youngest wife of a captain of the home guard. I have no children of my own. I help care for the children of the other wives. My husband didn’t have a good hunt this season, so he brought me into the fort; and he left with flour, sugar and brandy. (44-45)

---

103 There are many in-depth studies on the gender division in the Native community. In order to theorize the history of gender division in the Native community, Sylvia Van Kirk’s “‘Many Tender Ties’: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada” explores the potential allure of the colonialists’ domestic offerings to Native women.
Aligning repetition with stasis, the repeated “I am” statement dramatizes Margaret’s stagnancy and confines her to the role of “third wife” (44). In this scene, repetition is not merely emphatic—it perpetuates the absence of change. When Margaret is “stunned” (44) by her own refrain, “I am the third and youngest wife of a captain” (44, 45), this restricting effect of repetition contrasts with the liberating potential of transformation. In short, Princess Pocahontas privileges transformation over repetition without difference. Even the form of the play itself—a revisionist reclaiming of the Pocahontas myth organized by transformation—uses repetition with variation as a strategy of resistance.

Princess Pocahontas abounds with transformation and repetition with variation. In addition to the series of Transformations, the play’s physical properties and performance elements highlight the possibility for change. Mojica notes that the “theme of the set, costumes and props is also transformation; objects and set pieces appear to be one thing but become something else; they can be turned inside-out to reveal another reality” (17). Princess Pocahontas breaks free from the confines of a pre-scripted linear narrative of colonial history by telling the myth of Pocahontas through a non-linear multi-vocal performance. The play harnesses revisionist adaptation (repetition with political difference) as a form of critique and as a liberating mode that enables the possibility of transformation. Princess Pocahontas, for instance, concludes with a climactic “I am” statement that at once reflects and realizes Contemporary Woman #1’s agency. Contemporary Woman #1 explains that it is “International Women’s Day,” but she resists a feminist sisterhood based on similarities and instead asserts her difference. After “so many years of trying to fit into feminist shoes,” she demands custom-made ones that are “crafted to fit these wide, square, brown feet” (58). This moment aspires
toward a feminism that recognizes differences among women. Positing herself as an individual within a community of feminists and Native women, she proclaims:

So, it’s International Women’s Day, and here I am. Now, I’d like you to take a good look – (turns slowly, all the way around) I don’t want to be mistaken for a crowd of Native women. I am one. And I do not represent all Native women. I am one.

Crosses to tree upstage right; brings empty basin and pitcher of water centre stage.

And since it can get kind of lonely here, I’ve brought some friends, sisters, guerrilleras—the women—“Word Warriors,” to help. (59)

The “here I am” and “I am one” utterances emphasize the singularity of the “I” as she reminds the audience that she is not plural or “a crowd.” Whereas the earlier “I am” statements linked the characters to stereotypes of Indianness, this final declaration posits the speaker as an individual and refutes assimilationist generalizations. Although Shackleton argues that Mojica fights simulation with simulation, the play’s final transformation moves beyond this strategy by asserting Contemporary Woman #1’s self-construction. As Contemporary Woman #1 explains, “What I want is the freedom to carve and chisel my own face” (59). In contrast with the play’s initial, contested negation—when Contemporary Woman #1’s defiant “I am not your princess” overlapped with Contemporary Woman #2’s reminder, “She’s a savage now remember” (21)—the concluding “I am one” statement goes unchallenged and functions as a positive self-assertion.
With “I am one,” Mojica does not theorize the “I” as unitary but instead refuses generalizations about the Aboriginal peoples. “I am one” works outside of racial categories (Indian, Native, squaw) and effectively avoids reducing a Native female “I” to a homogenous collective “we.” Instead, Contemporary Woman #1, with her “I am one” statement, simultaneously connects herself to a larger group of “Word Warriors” and asserts her singularity. In working outside of prescribed racial categories, Contemporary Woman #1 offers the alternative label “Word Warriors” to describe her “friends, sisters, guerrilleras – the women” (59). While Contemporary Woman #1 imagines herself as a singular individual or “one,” she also connects herself to collective groups, including both the “Word Warriors” or “the women” and the historical figures that make “I am” declarations throughout the play. The play’s final Transformation interconnects “one” woman with the nation as both Contemporary #1 and #2 repeat: “Una nación no sera conquistada hasta que los corazones de sus mujeres caigan a la tierra [. . .] A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground” (60). While Contemporary Woman #1 may have struggled to forge a symbiotic relationship with a Native man, here she reminds the audience that this very subjugation of the hearts of women is an essential component to the conquest of a nation.

Because Mojica presents the self as multiple and transformative, difference is no longer antithetical to the “I” and the other is no longer the threat. Princess Pocahontas’s casting reinforces the ever-changing state of the self: two actors perform the entire play. In the only production to date, Mojica played the roles of Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides, Contemporary Woman #1, Malinche, Storybook Pocahontas, Pocahontas/Lady Rebecca/Matoaka, Deity/Woman of the Puna/Virgin, Marie/Margaret/Madelaine, Cigar
Store Squaw, and Spirit Animal; Nuñez acted as Host, the Blue Spots, Contemporary Woman #2, Troubadour, Ceremony, the Man, Spirit-Sister, and Musician. By using two actors to play multiple roles, Mojica’s casting strategy further layers the “I” and complements the play’s political message by embodying the connectedness of the “one” to the “many.” Just as an adaptation functions as an independent yet palimpsestic work of art, Mojica integrates all four functions of the self-assertions by constructing the “I” as simultaneously individual and part of a collective.

Almighty Voice and His Wife

Princess Pocahontas and Almighty Voice share many revisionist and self-defining strategies. Almighty Voice’s “I am” declarations not only give him the agency to define himself but also signal the performativity of race and Indianness. Almighty Voice, as Rob Appleford suggests, exposes the mainstream desire to possess the Aboriginal peoples through representation of the “real” Native, which further aligns with Princess Pocahontas’s political project, making them rich companion plays. Moses, in turn, reclaims the myth of Almighty Voice, who defended himself in a standoff with one hundred Mounties. Inverting the stereotypical representations of Indians as redfaced savages, Moses uses whiteface together with an abundance of “I am” statements in order to highlight the precariousness of racial identity. The whiteface—an obvious stage trick that calls attention to the artificiality and transparency of racechange—reduces whiteness and “Indianness” to flimsy performances that merely involve stage makeup.
Almighty Voice reduces Almighty Voice the man, as seen in act 1, to an entertaining redfaced Indian, as exemplified by act two. Whereas Princess Pocahontas moves from stereotypical conceptions of Native identity to self-identification, Almighty Voice and His Wife begins with the playful courtship of Almighty Voice and White Girl only to revert to a minstrel performance of Indian stereotypes. The action of act one “incorporates historic events and happens between the end of October 1895 and May of 1897” in Saskatchewan, while the second act “occurs on the auditorium stage of the abandoned industrial school at Duck Lake” (2). Act one: “Running With the Moon,” charts Almighty Voice and White Girl’s courtship, marriage, and attempts at pregnancy; after their marriage, Almighty Voice becomes an outlaw for poaching a settler’s cow and breaking out of jail. The first act ends with Almighty Voice’s ethereal vision of his wife and child as he dies:

ALMIGHTY VOICE lies by the dead fire, his leg badly wounded. The spectral tipi appears and the drum goes silent. Inside the tipi are WHITE GIRL and her baby, mother and child, a destination. ALMIGHTY VOICE rises and uses his Winchester as a crutch to come to the tipi. WHITE GIRL comes out and shows him the baby and the baby cries. The moon turns white.

ALMIGHTY VOICE dies. (29)

This scene, entitled “His Vision,” invokes a “spectral” mood, as the moon turns white. In Almighty Voice, the only image more ominous than the blood-red moon is the white moon because it corresponds with the whitewashing of the characters’ identities. Act two begins with a white moon that fades to “reveal the white face that masks WHITE GIRL into the role of the INTERLOCUTOR, a Mountie and the Master of Ceremonies” (3). At
the end of the first act, however, the baby’s cry acts as a counterpoint to the white moon and Almighty Voice’s death by gesturing towards future generations and the continuation of life. The play’s final moments recall this “spectral” (29, 60) tableau when Almighty Voice and White Girl shed their vaudevillian characters and “WHITE GIRL lifts a baby-sized bundle to the audience” (61).

The second act directly corrupts Almighty Voice’s and White Girl’s authoritative “I am” statements from the first act. Even act one’s concluding sombre death scene quickly transforms into a joke with the Interlocutor’s antics of the second act. Act two refers to many mainstream portrayals and commodifications of Indian identity, such as a “cigar store” (30), “red man” (31), “Geronimo” (31), “Tonto” (31), the “Pontiac” car (32), and “the Vanishing Indian” (33). The characters undergo a dramatic transformation in act two—entitled “Ghost Dance”—wherein Almighty Voice is a “Ghost” and White Girl (as “Interlocutor”) is the Master of Ceremonies at the “Red and White Victoria Regina Spirit Revival Show” in the present day. The Spirit Revival Show is an instructional production of “Indian” culture and the “discovery” of what is now Canada. The sombre ending of the first act sharply contrasts with the vaudevillian hypertheatricality of the second act. A reviewer from The Globe and Mail emphasizes the surprising shift in style, explaining that the second act “leaves you grabbing the door handle to hold on” (qtd. in Appleford 3). This stylistic shift, I contend, brings attention to the artificiality of the second act’s historical re-creations of Almighty Voice and of Indian culture in Canada. The vaudevillian excess ultimately undercuts the credibility of Indian stereotypes as we witness the tragic disconnect between the character’s self-
identificatory “I am” statements in the first act and the imposed Indian stereotypes in the second act.

The ordering of the play, which moves from Almighty Voice and White Girl to a white Interlocutor’s second-hand version of their tale, enacts a larger narrative of historical revision. In particular, Moses’s second act parodies Peterson’s historical play *Almighty Voice*, which casts children as wild “chanting and dancing” Indians (12) and was originally performed by Young People’s Theatre of Toronto in August of 1970. The actors in Peterson’s *Almighty Voice*, as with Moses’s version, play multiple roles and often directly address the audience. While Peterson produced his play in a school’s auditorium and directed the audience of children to act as “volunteers for our outposts at Duck Lake” (15), Moses sets his second act in a school’s auditorium at Duck Lake. The Interlocutor even asks for a performance of Indianness that echoes Peterson’s “dancing” Indians: “Would you now consider performing, Mister Ghost, for our attentive friends that charming curiosity you called a dance” (41). With this parody and the stylistic shifts between acts, Moses distances the second act’s hypertheatrical enactments of Native stereotypes from the first act’s more spectral portrayal of Almighty Voice and White Girl’s loving relationship.

The beginning of Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife* offers a set of self-defining strategies as White Girl and Almighty Voice establish ownership over their own identities. Almighty Voice, for instance, adamantly rejects the new biblical names prescribed by the treaty agent:

GIRL: They called me Marrie. It’s the name of their god’s mother.
VOICE: What’s wrong with White Girl? White Girl’s a good name. They’re so stupid. That agent has to call me John Baptist so I can get my treaty money.

GIRL: John Baptist. That’s the name of one of their ghosts.

VOICE: I’m no ghost. I’m Almighty Voice. Why can’t they say Almighty Voice?

GIRL: I’ll call you John Baptist too.

VOICE: You’re not the agent! You’re my wife.

GIRL: It’s so he’ll kill the ghost instead of you, husband. That god won’t know it’s us if we use their names.

VOICE: So I have to call my wife Marrie?

GIRL: Yes. Their god won’t be able to touch us. Just call me Marrie.

VOICE: My crazy White Girl.

[ . . . ]

VOICE: Crazy Marrie. (10)

In her first “I am” statement of the play, White Girl teases, “I am a crazy one” (5), which here inspires Almighty Voice’s playful appellations: “crazy White Girl” and “Crazy Marrie.” Although Almighty Voice rejects the biblical pseudonyms, White Girl here interprets her new name as a potential disguise and tool for survival: “Their god won’t be able to touch us. Just call me Marrie.” The play, however, warns against this acceptance of socially prescribed White identities when White Girl later confronts the “White God” and her forced Christian name. The problematic strategy of donning a colonizer’s mask is
also carried out with disturbing results in the second act when Almighty Voice and White Girl both wear whiteface.

White Girl uses the tools of Christianity—a prayer and the Eucharist—to defy its own “White God of the ghost men” (20). As her hybrid name “Crazy Marrie” suggests, White Girl struggles to harmonize her two identities as the White God’s Mary and as Almighty Voice’s wife. In a prayer, she further confuses her Native and Biblical names, asking her “husband god” to “see what a little girl I am” (20). This panicked prayer blends Almighty Voice’s appellation “little girl” with the Biblical “I am,” revealing the tension between her Cree and Christian selves. As with Margaret in *Princess Pocahontas*, repetition signals internal conflict as White Girl repeats, “what a little girl I am” (19, 20). In her prayer, however, White Girl not only signals her conflicted identities, but also challenges God, shouting “stupid god, this is what you want!” (20). Her prayer employs epizeuxis, accelerating the rhythm and emphasizing the violence of her speech:104

Great husband god, see what a little girl I am. Great White God of the ghost men, mother is here. Blood blood blood between my thighs. Yes, gimme, gimme, gimme something sweet. Oh yes, yes, you’re rotten, rotten meat, but wifey wife will eat you up. Mister God, stupid god, this is what you want! Come on! Come on, don’t leave! I’m your little squaw. Eye-eye! See! Eye-eye, Mister God. Eye-eye! (20)

As “the bloody moon rises” in the backdrop (19), her repetition of “Blood blood blood” encourages the audience to imagine the blood spreading between her thighs as an

---

104 Epizeuxis is a literary device that uses repetition for emphasis and with no words intervening, such as “Blood blood blood” and “gimme, gimme, gimme” (Moses, *Almighty Voice* 20).
emblem of a sexual becoming—as a sign of menstruation and the loss of virginity, the “blood between my thighs” at once marks female maturation and violence. The heated repetition of “yes,” “Come on,” and “Eye-eye,” rhetorically climaxes while she orgasms on stage. This sexual monologue imbues White Girl with power. By appropriating the language of the Eucharist, for instance, she “will eat” the White God and reclaim authority. After this speech, she announces that “I am the wife of Almighty Voice” and, further separating herself from the Christian God, says, “You don’t know my name” (20). Her “I am” declarations effectively rename and re-identify her as White Girl. At the end of this scene, White Girl rejects the paternal White God and turns towards the maternal moon: “I turn here in the wind toward the river and the moon is there, a woman with better things to do” (2). With White Girl’s speech acts, Moses exposes the power of performative “I am” utterances to constitute rather than merely describe an identity. White Girl is able to realize her own identity, while rendering the White God powerless.

In the second act, by contrast, White Girl as the Interlocutor unintentionally exposes colonial history’s artificial claims to truth. By presenting the Indian as hyperperformative and man-made, Almighty Voice further undermines the veracity of colonial history. The Interlocutor presents the colonial “facts” as intentional “lies”: “these fine, kind folks want to know the truth, the amazing details and circumstance behind your savagely beautiful appearance . . . They want to know the facts. And it’s up to you and me to try and lie that convincingly” (32). Here, the Interlocutor suggests that theatrical representations of Aboriginal peoples do not capture the “real true Indian” but instead create convincing lies. The second act overtly historicizes the first act, but it also
includes whiteface, dance, song, and jokes. This generic blend of history and vaudeville forcefully undermines the believability of colonial history and of Indian stereotypes.

Moses uses metatheatricality as yet another method by which to undercut popular representations of the “real” Indian. In act two, the vaudevillian performance and breaking of the fourth wall remind the audience that they are watching a play and highlight the artificiality of institutionalized educational productions of Aboriginal culture in schools across Canada. For example, the Interlocutor’s characterization of the audience prompts the audience to create their own “I am” statements and self-identify. One of the direct addresses to the audience assumes a communal hatred of the Indian: the play characterizes the audience as a group of un-thinking people who merely want to be “entertained” by the spectacle of the “Indian” (32). Moses provocatively aligns the audience with the racist Interlocutor who addresses the viewers as “dear friends” and expects them to share his concern over the “indigent Indian problem” because all Indians are “bad ones” (40). Enacting the imagined audience’s reaction, Ghost responds “Bravo! Bravo, Mister Interlocutor” (40). In this instance, misrepresentations of Indians extend to an uncomfortable misrepresentation of the audience proper. Helen Gilbert’s article on whiteface in Almighty Voice notes that some of the play’s “speeches are addressed directly to the spectators, who thus become no longer anonymous consumers, but objects against which the play is enacted” (692). In his review of a 2012 production of Almighty Voice, Dickinson describes the audience’s reactions to Moses’s second act:

in Act 2 Moses doesn’t just break the fourth wall, he explodes it, with both Mr. Interlocutor and Almighty Ghost coming out into the audience at various points, and each strategically playing to and upon our ideological sympathies
in order to gain the upper hand. And it is this last point that makes Moses’ play at once so groundbreaking and compellingly contemporary, for it accomplishes via its canny structure the double task of exposing both real and representational violence to us, theatricalizing Aboriginal stereotypes and then catching us in the act of succumbing to them. (“Push”)

Moses, as Dickinson explains, forces the audience to separate themselves actively from the play’s imagined racist audience. The play thus incites the audience to counteridentify with the Interlocutor through their own rebellious “I am” declarations. In this moment, the audience joins Almighty Voice and White Girl as subjects of misrepresentation. As a result, the play invokes an uncomfortable audience and leads the viewers to be sceptical of identity constructions. Moses avoids a simple bifurcated relationship between a politically correct, morally upstanding audience and the Interlocutor’s detestable performance of political incorrectness by demonstrating the entertaining allure of the very stereotypes he seeks to challenge. In short, Almighty Voice’s audiences do not get to celebrate their political superiority and are instead reminded of the slippery slope of Aboriginal stereotypes.

Despite Almighty Voice’s and White Girl’s defiant “I am” utterances in the first act—such as, “I’m no ghost. I’m Almighty Voice” (10), “I am the wife of Almighty Voice. You don’t know my name” (20)—the second act centers on the whitewashing of the characters. Almighty Voice pairs racial mimicry with colonial history as two primary strategies for subordinating Aboriginal culture. Representing the violent erasure of Native culture in Western colonial history, the Interlocutor and Ghost both wear whiteface. The initial threats to Almighty Voice’s and White Girl’s identities are realized
in act two. First of all, the re-writing of White Girl as “Marrie” seems to be complete when she appears in act two as the non-Native Interlocutor in a Mountie costume who entertains the audience with stereotypes of Aboriginal culture. Secondly, the appearance of Almighty Voice as “Ghost” in the second act rearticulates his earlier death and demonstrates the ultimate failure of his denial, “I’m no ghost” (10). Ghost’s white make-up signals a double erasure: the death of Almighty Voice as well as the death of his Cree self. In figuring Almighty Voice as a ghost, the play satisfies and exposes the fantasy of the vanishing, or ghosted, Indian and the Interlocutor jokes that “the only good Indians are the dead ones” (40). In her definition of two categories of the stereotypical American Indian—noble savage and howling savage—Allen exposes the overarching colonial fetishization of the vanishing Indian, explaining that these stereotypes of the primitive and dangerous Indian are not only the cause but also the “compelling rationale for genocide” (5). In the second act of Almighty Voice, the Interlocutor’s historicization of Aboriginal culture as an ancient relic of an uncivil past is a central strategy for reinforcing the deserved elimination, or whiting-out, of the First Nations peoples in Canada. As Allen observes, the “savage” Indians are seen to “deserve extermination” (The Sacred Hoop 5). In the second act, the whiteface fulfills the colonial demand for cultural extermination and the renaming of Almighty Voice as a ghost.

The overt parodies of Indian stereotypes effectively distance the comic theatricality of Indianness from the Aboriginal characters we saw in the first act. The whiteface, mock-ceremonial dances, and songs dramatize what Almighty Voice and White Girl are not. While some critics, such as Dorinne Kondo and Gilbert, argue that whiteface references the minstrel tradition and the white oppression of minority groups, I
contend that Moses’s use of whiteface demonstrates the performativity of racial identities, including whiteness and Indianness, and thereby destabilizes minstrelsy as an artificial performance. In “How My Ghosts Got Pale Faces,” Moses himself explains the subversive potential of whiteface:

White as a colour only exists because some of us get told we’re black or yellow or Indians. I think my ghosts exist to probe this white problem, this tonal confusion, to spook its metaphors. Maybe my ghosts are like mirrors, but from a funhouse.

I want to spin new meanings out [of] the stereotypes or turn it into a cliché trying. Once white itself is a ghost, colour will be just a too-simple beginning of rich and strange complexities. (81)

_Almighty Voice_ is ground breaking in its implementation of whiteface as a parody of the minstrel tradition that, in Moses’s words, turns Indian stereotypes into a “cliché trying.” In _Almighty Voice_, whiteface exposes the fallibility of assimilation—as prescribed by the treaty agent in the first act—and only results in the removal of the face paint in the play’s final scene: the identity of “white” is “just a too-simple” performance of racial identity.

Moses’s use of whiteface takes part in a revived interest in minstrelsy and has garnered critical attention in its reversal of the minstrel tradition. Susan Gubar’s _RaceChanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture_ (1997) defines racechange as

---

105 Gilbert’s “Black and White and Re(a)d All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Theatre” gives an overview of whiteface in contemporary drama. Gilbert compares _Almighty Voice_ with the 2000 production of _Fountains Beyond_ that was directed and updated by Wesley Enoch—as an adaptation of Landen Dann’s 1942 script—at QUT Gardens Theatre in Brisbane, Australia. _Almighty Voice_ and Enoch’s production of _Fountains Beyond_ offer the unique use of whiteface as a strategy for combating Native othering.
“the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability” (5). For Gubar, racechange can involve either “white passing as black or black passing as white” (5), which in Moses’s case extends to red passing as white. Responding to Gubar, Kondo and Gilbert each warn against Gubar’s over-idealization of whiteface, because it works within a history of racial stratification. Kondo argues that racechange is “systematically encoded and maintained in structures of white privilege that persist despite individual intentionality” (100). Gilbert similarly interjects that “racial impersonation often indexes white power” (681). Although the historical use of minstrelsy as a strategy for reinforcing racist codes does inform the reception of whiteface, Gilbert concedes that whiteface “can also set up opportunities to de-essentialize race” (681). In addition to mimicking racist discriminations against Aboriginal culture, Moses’s use of whiteface exposes minstrelsy and redface as strategic exaggerations of race that not only index white power but also racial prejudice.

White Girl as the Interlocutor at once enacts cross-racing and cross-dressing when she pretends to be a White male Mountie disguised as a female Sweet Sioux. Exemplifying the play’s metatheatrical complexity as well as the layered nature of the self, Interlocutor and Ghost act out an inset mock-revelation sketch in scene six of act two, entitled “The Playlet.” Just as the Chief Magistrate (Ghost) is about to rape the “Sweet Sioux” woman (Interlocutor), the “squaw” explains that she is really the “Corporal Red Coat of the Mounted Police . . . cleverly disguised as Sweet Sioux in order to tempt the evil Magistrate to show his true colours” (55). In this moment of racechange, the audience sees a female Aboriginal actor as White Girl/Interlocutor/Corporal Red Coat/Sweet Sioux. The scene blurs the division of
“white” and “red” through performance. The pun on “show his true colours” (55) comically foreshadows the play’s final revelation of “red” skin when Ghost and White Girl remove their white masks. Further anticipating the Interlocutor’s rediscovery of her Cree self, the Corporal Red Coat (Interlocutor) directs the dying Chief Magistrate (Ghost) to “Call me Red” (55). In the second act, White Girl’s insistence that “I’m the Interlocutor” identifies her as the Master of Ceremonies, but the audience’s memory of her role as White Girl troubles this self-identification. In act two, the layering of racial performance (Native/White/Native) suggests the impossibility of locating “true colours” in one body.

In Almighty Voice, whiteface offers the cathartic opportunity to remove a white mask and remember Native appellations. The play ends with Ghost and Interlocutor’s racial striptease as they wipe away the white layers from their body and face. This final scene dramatizes the Interlocutor and Ghost’s highly anticipated return to their initial Native identities. Reacting to her White Girl identity, for instance, the Interlocutor asks, “Who am I?” (61). Ghost offers her the many different conceptions of her Native self from act one and re-names her “White Girl,” “crazy little girl,” “my wife,” and finally “Ni-wikimakan [My wife]” (61). But it is in articulating White Girl’s identity that Ghost can simultaneously redefine himself as her husband, Almighty Voice. The stage directions note that White Girl’s “gloved hands begin to wipe the white face off, unmasking the woman inside” (61). With Almighty Voice’s help, she removes her white gloves and throws them in the fire. The play ends with Almighty Voice dancing “in celebration” as White Girl “removes the rest of the white face and costume, becoming White Girl again” (61).
Reciting the final lines in Cree, Ghost and Interlocutor respond to non-Natives’ stories of Almighty Voice and call attention to Moses’s own use of the English language:

GHOST: Piko ta-ta-wi kisisomoyan ekwo. [I have to go finish dancing now.]

INTERLOCUTOR: Patima, Kisse- Manitou-Wayou. [Goodbye, Almighty Voice.] (61)

Here, White Girl calls Almighty Voice by his Cree name for the first time, at once drawing attention to the Cree language and to Moses’s use of the English Language throughout most of the play. Reflecting on his first encounter with the Almighty Voice myth in school, Moses says that he “hadn’t realized how much space there might be between the lines of such [historical] documents, hadn’t seen the difficulties in translation between the language of English and for instance Cree, between the respective cultures and sets of values, between for instance what each community thought was the definition of human” (“How My Ghosts” 70). The ending of Almighty Voice responds to this space between the languages of English and Cree. With the last line of Moses’s play, White Girl re-identifies Almighty Voice as Kisse- Manitou-Wayou, which, in turn, helps complete their symbolic transformation back to their Cree identities.

Ultimately, Almighty Voice and White Girl can only respond to the question “Who am I?” in the Cree language. Moses’s final scene and use of Cree also offers a response to Wiebe’s short story “Where is the Voice Coming From?” As the title of the short story suggests, Wiebe questions the narrativization of Native myth and history. Beginning with an announced awareness of the history-making process of narration and identification, Wiebe declares that “The problem is to make the story” (78). While the

106 For further discussion of translation between cultures and translation in the theatre, see Barbara Godard’s “Writing Between Cultures” and “Between Performativ e and Performance: Translation and Theatre in the Canadian,” respectively.
short story poeticizes Almighty Voice as “an incredible voice that rises from among the young poplars ripped of their spring bark, from among the dead somewhere lying there” (86), it ends with a pronounced and regretted distance between the narrator and subject. The narrator can only describe Almighty Voice’s poetic cry as “wordless” because, unfortunately, “that is the way it sounds to me . . . . For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself” (12). As a response to this difficult untranslatability, the final lines of Almighty Voice call attention to this difference in language while still retaining Cree as a rich signifier of cultural identity.

Together, the removal of the whiteface, the self-defining declarations, and the Cree language enable White Girl and Almighty Voice to rediscover their identities from the first act. Throughout the play, the “I am” statements contribute to many revisionist moves, they give Almighty Voice and White Girl authority over their own identities, reappropriate biblical rhetoric, challenge the truth-claims of colonial history, and expose the performativity of racialized identities. Yet the final pursuit of identification—“Who am I?”—leaves the audience with questions rather than answers.

Understanding the Self as Adaptation

Princess Pocahontas and Almighty Voice respond to stereotypes of the “real Indian” by presenting the “real” self as illusive and transformative. Trinh T. Minh-ha explains that dominant ideologies conceive of the “genuine, original, authentic self” as un-changing or homogenous, which renders difference oppositional to the “real” core self (415). As Trinh says,
Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I . . . between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal identity. The further one moves from the core the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one’s role as the real self, the real black, Indian, or Asian, the real woman. (415)

I see Mojica and Moses as working alongside Trinh to re-define difference not as antithetical to but as an intrinsic part of the self. Trinh re-theorizes the self in order to re-conceive of difference as constructive and constitutive. Comparatively, *Princess Pocahontas* re-theorizes the “I” as multiple and layered, while *Almighty Voice* destabilizes racial boundaries by demonstrating the performativity of race and the relative ease with which one can enact racechange. Both plays present the self as multiple, performative, and changing because, after all, the “I is not unitary.”

The plays’ adaptive form, intertextuality, and interperformativity reinforce the plurality of the “I.” Though there is a structured form to the plays, this form is not singular and immutable but multiple and permeable. Carter approaches the many layers of Mojica’s play as a *mola*, that is, a hand-woven cloth used to dress Kuna woman of Panama: “each story – each fragment of female experience—selected for inclusion in Mojica’s play becomes a layer in the performative *mola*” (12). Similarly, Moses’s use of whiteface literally layers the characters’ bodies with white paint, which symbolically places white on top of red skin, but also exposes the red skin beneath the surface. This racial layering is one of the play’s methods for interconnecting what Trinh calls the “I and not-I,” thereby challenging the bifurcations of “red” and “white” as hierarchal racial categories. Adaptations, therefore, are akin to the re-theorized self—layered, multiple,
and varied—because palimpsests have no authoritative, real, or core text. In this way, Mojica and Moses at once challenge traditional notions of an original text and an unambiguously unified self.

*Princess Pocahontas* and *Almighty Voice* redefine the self through a progression of “I am” statements as the main characters battle with their status as *other* in relation to a domineering colonial culture. The two plays ultimately pluralize the “I” as a method of reconfiguring cultural difference as no longer antithetical to the real self. With these plays, the “I” is stretched out horizontally through hyphenated identities that extend and deepen the self. In rotating the “I” from a vertical position (“I”) to a horizontal position (“—”), the two plays challenge cultural hierarchies by layering racial identities on a horizontal plane and by undermining notions of the “real Indian.” Trinh calls for a “practice of subjectivity” that is aware of “its own constituted nature” (419), and understanding “I am” declarations as self-defining utterances responds to this call.
Conclusion: Afterthoughts

“In the workings of the human imagination,
adaptation is the norm, not the exception”

–Linda Hutcheon

The epigraph, taken from Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, speaks to both the allure and impact of adaptation as a mode that seems to be everywhere. Many of my project’s source texts—Shakespeare, Homer, Ovid, colonial legends—are themselves retellings or adaptations of earlier works, thereby demonstrating a continuing cycle of literary adaptation. Despite the popular celebrations of literary and historical “firsts,” revisionist adaptations like Moses’s *Almighty Voice* and Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* call attention to the pervasiveness of their adaptive mode and encourage the understanding that adaptation “is the norm, not the exception” when it comes to “the human imagination” (*Theory* 177).

Due to its pervasiveness, the mode of adaptation and the category of revisionist drama warrant further distinctions and research. I want to add nuance to my definition of revisionist adaptation as repetition with political variation by emphasizing the various forms this political transformation can take. There is, for example, a key difference between exposing a political issue already dormant in the original—like race in *Othello* or feminine ideals in *The Odyssey*—and adding a new political lens as is the case with Native Earth’s all-Aboriginal casting of *Julius Caesar* wherein Brutus questions his Indian identity. Does the latter form warrant a separate category altogether? What about
plays like Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* and Moses’s *Almighty Voice* that re-politicize colonial legends as stories not simply about colonialism but also about contemporary Aboriginal women or Almighty Voice’s son and marriage, respectively? Mojica and Moses’s plays expose pre-existing political issues in the colonial legends (colonialism, religious conversions, racism) while also adding their own cultural framework and narrative plot lines (naming ceremonies, blue spots, marriage, family). Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams take account of this literary “move beyond adaptation” when works “transform the source text into something new that works independently of its source” (3). Revisionist adaptors, in their frequent efforts to displace the source, often work in a mode of transformation that is more akin to a process of metamorphosis than adaptation when they succeed in changing the original beyond recognition (Frus and Williams 3).

At what point, then, do highly intertextual works stop being adaptations and start being what would more aptly be called transformations? My adaptation grid, with its narrative fidelity and political fidelity axis, helps to account for these varying political approaches and exposes the inherent complexities in graphing a revisionist work.

My study defines the mode of revisionist drama and examines the literary strategies of the eight playwrights in detail, but it also demonstrates the need for increased attention to revisionist and non-Shakespearean adaptations. In doing so, my project expands the field of adaptation studies and lays the foundation for future research in terms of Francophone drama, other sources, revisionist poetry or fiction, and a wider historical scope. My first chapter’s consideration of two Francophone works opens up the prospect of a more extended analysis of Canada as a bilingual nation through companion chapters on French-Canadian revisionist plays that adapt Greek mythology, Shakespeare,
and colonial legend. How, for instance, are the Francophone adaptations different in political concern or dramatic style from their Anglophone counterparts? Knowles and Lieblein’s respective anthologies of Anglophone and Francophone Canadian Shakespeare adaptations gesture towards the need for a side-by-side study of English-Canadian and French-Canadian revisionist plays.

My project opens up the scope of Canadian literary adaptation by analyzing retellings of Greek mythology, national history, and colonial legend, but there is exciting opportunity to explore other rich sources of adaptation like the Judeo-Christian Bible, Medieval literature, Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Victorian literature, and Canadian literature itself, to name a few possibilities. I am particularly interested in further examining Canadian adaptations of the Judeo-Christian Bible and Greek mythology because these sources, along with Shakespeare, were quite popular in early Canadian theatre during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More research in the field of Canadian literary adaptation is needed to account for the diverse political motivations, national bilingualism, range of source narratives, and long-standing tradition.

There is still much work to be done in adaptation studies in order to establish critical methodologies that do not privilege the source’s capacity to illuminate the adaptation’s meaning. This is especially pertinent to revisionist adaptations that critique the cultural prevalence of the original, which is why I have kept my examination of source texts and authors to a minimum. Intensive analysis of a source may ultimately be counter to a revisionist project that seeks to discredit the original text. As adaptation continues to be a predominant mode of the cultural imaginary in an age of transnational literatures, I cannot help but wonder if my own scholarly category of Canadian
Revisionist Drama unnecessarily limits this examination by confining it to a nation. My hope is that this study of adaptation complicates the title’s national scope by involving other national literatures. My project, in this way, gestures towards a literary genealogy that follows the cultural lineage of a story rather than a nation state. “Stories,” as Bissoondath says, “compete to shape the world — to impose narrative order on disparate or uncertain events — all the while prompting fresh narrative possibilities in the imagination” (Age 15). One thing is certain: literary adaptations dramatize the possibilities of the imagination.
Works Consulted


Campbell, Sue. “Inside the Frame of the Past: Memory, Diversity, and Solidarity.”

_Embodiment and Agency_. Ed. Sue Campbell, Letitia Meynell, Susan Sherwin.


Print.


Carter, Jill. “Blind Faith Remembers . . . This Ain’t No Love Story, This Ain’t No Masque: Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots as Transformative Ritual for the Grandmothers, the Ones Who Remain, and for the Ones Who Are Yet to Come.”


http://www.abortionmonologues.com/about_play.html


http://www.optative.net/neptune/media.htm


Citron, Paula. “Tarragon Theatre—Erin Shields’s If We Were Birds.” Rev. of If We Were Birds, by Erin Shields. The Classical 96.3 fm. N.d. Web. 6 June 2011. http://www.classical963fm.com/arts/reviews/item/if-we-were-birds


Hengen, Shannon. “Staging Penelope: Margaret Atwood’s Changing Audience.” *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings.* Ed.


http://www.pumphousetheatre.ca/mainstructure/homepage.htm


---. “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL: 32 sHORT rEASONS wHY i wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE.” *Harlem Duet*. Winnipeg: Scirocco Drama, 1997. 11-15. Print.


