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# Politicizing Difference: Performing (Post)Colonial Historiography in *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle- France* and *Sinking Neptune*

KAILIN WRIGHT

ON 14 NOVEMBER 2006, four hundred years after Marc Lescarbot's inaugural performance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* (1606) — the first documented play in what is now called Canada — Montreal's Optative Theatrical Laboratories (hereafter, OTL) mounted a revisionist re-enactment, *Sinking Neptune*.<sup>1</sup> Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune* adapted the European oceanic masque (traditionally performed at court) and French *réception* in order to welcome the returning French colonial leader to Port Royal, to naturalize the imperial project as a "louable entreprise,"<sup>2</sup> and to instruct the Indigenous Mi'kmaq viewers on how to act like dutiful "sauvages" (52). The aptly titled *Sinking Neptune*, in turn, critiques Lescarbot's play as a colonialist "derogatory spectacle" and challenges the cultural implications of considering it as a Canadian first (King, "Sinking Neptune: Introduction" 199).<sup>3</sup> OTL's production sparked media interest in the quadricentennial anniversary of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as journalists debated the historical value of such a markedly colonial piece that depicts the Mi'kmaq nation as *sauvages*. Through its collective creation process, multiple sources, divergent perspectives, shifts in historical context, and interactive performance, *Sinking Neptune* frames Lescarbot's play as an imperialist fantasy of intercultural harmony between the French and Mi'kmaq, challenging what has been considered the beginning of Canadian theatre history in particular and authoritative historiography in general.

Performed on the actual waters of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Basin, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* features a series of Roman Gods (Neptune, Triton, and Diana) and four *sauvages* who each greet the colony's returning French leader, Jean Biencourt, Sieur de Poutrincourt, as well as its geographer, Samuel de Champlain, with monologues of praise.<sup>4</sup> Controversy

surrounds the material contexts of the play because *Le Théâtre de Neptune* survives only as a play script in Lescarbot's own historical writings, prompting some critics to speculate whether the masque was ever actually performed.<sup>5</sup> According to Lescarbot, however, the performance of the play was instrumental in establishing Champlain's *L'Ordre de Bon Temps* (the Order of Good Cheer), which codified eating and entertainment, in 1606.<sup>6</sup> Lescarbot's self-congratulatory report indicates that the performance and the Order of Good Cheer were successful in preventing another winter of death, scurvy, and hunger. Charles William Jefferys's twentieth-century pen-and-ink drawing of "The First Play in Canada" (see figure 1) offers an imagined reconstruction of the event with French and Mi'kmaq performers in canoes, a reconstruction which continues to shape readers' conception of the performance from the cover of Jerry Wasserman's recent edition, *The Spectacle of Empire: Marc Lescarbot's Theatre of Neptune in New France* (2006).



Fig. 1. C.W. Jefferys, drawing, *The First Play in Canada* (1942). *The Picture Gallery of Canadian History* 83. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada (C-106968).

Although some scholars contend that the Mi'kmaq people played the *sauvages*, there is no consensus as to whether this was the case or whether the play was enacted with an all-French cast, as Lescarbot's

script suggests.<sup>7</sup> Wasserman dismisses the controversy and states that the *sauvages* were “surely Frenchmen in Native costume, not the Mi’kmaq themselves as has sometimes been speculated” (36). If the *sauvages* speak in French rhyming couplets, as Lescarbot reports, it is reasonable to believe that Frenchmen performed these roles, but how does this uncertainty surrounding the casting of the masque affect its significance? On the one hand, if the Mi’kmaq people performed the lines of the *sauvage* characters verbatim, they merely contributed to the creation of these reductive stereotypes that modelled ideal behaviour. On the other hand, the Mi’kmaq people’s involvement potentially destabilized the *sauvage* stereotypes contained in the script. If the Mi’kmaq people participated, their lines may not have been delivered in the French rhyming couplets that Lescarbot documents. Their involvement, then, would undermine the veracity of Lescarbot’s script but also reinforce his assertion that the performance successfully brought together the French and Mi’kmaq in a shared event. The controversy over how *Le Théâtre de Neptune* was performed gestures toward the indeterminacy of its script and to the larger, encompassing issue of the limits of archival research.

Despite its unknown, and potentially unknowable, performance context, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* transformed Poutincourt’s return into a historic moment. In addition to a commemorative plaque at Port-Royal and the designation of the fort as a Canadian National Historic site, historians have celebrated the performance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as a monumental event in Canadian theatre: Stratford’s centennial report describes Lescarbot’s play as “the first theatrical happening in Canada” (*100 Years* 1), Laurent Lavoie cites *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as the beginning of Acadian theatre (451), Ann Saddlemyer credits Lescarbot’s spectacle as the first “marine masque” (10), and Frederick Lewis Gay even claims it to be the “first American play” (136). The continued significance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, as further demonstrated by Wasserman’s edition and *Sinking Neptune*, fulfills Lescarbot’s goal of “Le renom immortel” (“Théâtre de Neptune” 51).<sup>8</sup> His masque pays homage to many courtly French theatre traditions as well as borrowing from conventions of court festivals (*fêtes*), but Lescarbot uses a real ocean, replacing the French nautical masque’s painted seascapes and props with the Bay of Fundy itself and functioning boats.<sup>9</sup> Because the masque occurs outdoors rather than in a theatre or court, the performance subsumes the land as part of the spectacle. In this way, the

landscape — like the spectators — becomes part of the colonial project and the historic event.

In 2006, the four-hundredth anniversary of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* was rung in with commemorative newspaper reports and performances. *Musique 400* and *Theatre 400* were created specifically for the event and planned full-scale dramatizations of the play.<sup>10</sup> Nova Scotia journalist Carolyn Sloan heralded the “400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of theatre in our nation,” calling *Le Théâtre de Neptune* “Canada’s first play.” Although this and other reports gesture toward an inclusive group — uniting readers in celebration of “theatre in *our* nation” (Sloan; emphasis added) — they define a Canada and a theatre history that begins with colonial settlement. Citing *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as an example of colonial drama in Canada, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins explain that “when Europeans settled a colony, one of the earliest signs of established culture/‘civilisation’ was the presentation of European drama, which according to official records, obliterated for many years any indigenous performance forms” (7-8). The historicization of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as “Canada’s first play” ultimately threatens to reinforce Euro-colonialist theatre traditions that obscure the Mi’kmaq people’s pre-colonial performative rituals.

Countering *Le Théâtre de Neptune*’s historical significance as a Canadian “first,” OTL’s poster for *Sinking Neptune* alters Jefferys’s sketch to highlight Lescarbot’s reductive portrayal of Mi’kmaq people and the play’s participation in “cultural genocide” (see figure 2). Conceived at the turn of the millennium to promote a new form of twenty-first-century performance activism (OTL, “Mandate”), the Montreal theatre company mounted *Sinking Neptune* in November 2006 to protest the anniversary celebrations for Lescarbot’s play, performing at Les Artistes du Toc Toc in Montreal, King’s Theatre in Annapolis Royal, and The Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax.<sup>11</sup> *Sinking Neptune* is a piece of verbatim theatre, a documentary genre linked to the oral histories of “ordinary people” and whose typical features include quotations from multiple sources, such as interviews, performances, and news reports (Paget 317).<sup>12</sup> Working within this genre, *Sinking Neptune* enacts *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety (see figure 3) but interrupts the original script with quotations by scholars, such as a character based on and named after theatre scholar Alan Filewod, as well as by Aboriginal writers and artists; for example, opening slides feature quota-



tions by Daniel Paul, Lisa Mayo, and Floyd Favel.<sup>13</sup> *Sinking Neptune* also begins and ends with a press event for the quadricentennial anniversary of Lescarbot's inaugural masque, which forms a frame narrative. In addition to framing *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as an act of imperial conquest and of imagined cultural superiority over *sauvage* supplicants, *Sinking Neptune* exemplifies Gilbert and Tompkins's definition of postcolonial performance: OTL's play responds to Lescarbot's imperialism, voices Mi'kmaq people's experiences of colonization, and critiques histories of Canadian drama that begin with Lescarbot's colonial performance and the arrival of the Europeans.<sup>14</sup>

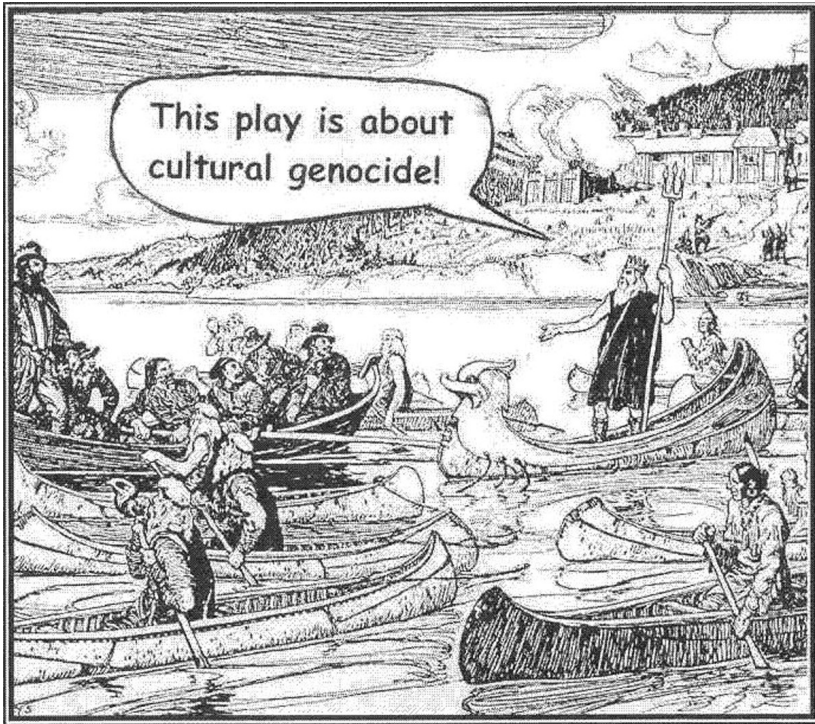


Fig. 2. OTL, poster, *Sinking Neptune* (2006). Image courtesy of Donovan King.

While OTL contributes to an ever-growing field of scholarship on Lescarbot's play, there has yet to be substantial critical work on *Sinking Neptune*. Filewod laments that Wasserman's seminal four-hundredth-anniversary edition of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* ignored OTL's response to the play.<sup>15</sup> Filewod's edited collection *Theatre Histories* (2009) presents the only print edition of *Sinking Neptune* as well as an introduction to

the play written by OTL's Donovan King. This essay is the first scholarly article to consider OTL's important Canadian play and its contribution to Canadian theatre histories.



Fig. 3. Photograph from *Sinking Neptune's* inset performance of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* with George Mougias as Neptune and actress Natalie Gural as the Tritons (14 November 2006). Courtesy of Donovan King.

The productions of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and its revisionist adaptation, *Sinking Neptune*, are not only events in history but histories unto themselves.<sup>16</sup> *Le Théâtre de Neptune* establishes a 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, critiques the very notion of a cultural "beginning" that excludes the Mi'kmaq people's pre-colonial culture. OTL offers a different historical narrative that challenges Lescarbot's appropriation of Aboriginal words and feast rituals in order to establish a French rule. *Sinking Neptune*, however, ironically, was also the primary cause of *Le Théâtre de Neptune's* recent media attention. Furthermore, in effectively updating the 1606 play for contemporary audiences, *Sinking Neptune* contributes to the survival and historical relevance of Lescarbot's masque.

The revisionist form — which involves a paradoxical embrace (retelling) and distance (reframing) of the original — structures *Sinking*

*Neptune's* postcolonial historiography and political protest. In offering an extended and foregrounded retelling of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* with a markedly different political perspective, *Sinking Neptune* is an instance of revisionist adaptation; whereas Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as repetition with difference (*A Theory of Adaption* 142), I define revisionist adaptation as repetition with political difference. OTL's play effectively models revisionist historiography: the play refutes anteriority, draws from multiple time periods, is a product of collective creation, resists stasis by being constantly updated with every performance, and avoids constructing a hierarchical dichotomy of knowing and unknowing audiences. In challenging *Le Théâtre de Neptune's* historical significance and reductive portrayal of subservient Mi'kmaq people, *Sinking Neptune* serves as a corrective to Lescarbot's early modern colonialism but through the problematic double gesture of simultaneously rejecting and re-inscribing *Le Théâtre de Neptune's* status as the first play in Canada.

### *Le Théâtre de Neptune*

Wasserman fittingly titles his edition of Lescarbot's play *Spectacle of Empire*, yet *Le Théâtre de Neptune* enacts not only a spectacle of empire but also spectacle as empire: the play represents the empire and is also a constitutive extension of it. Lescarbot's historical account suggests that, instead of a colonial flag or cross, the theatrical performance 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 de la Nouvelle-France* (hereafter, *Histoire*) by noting the pervasive theatricality of life and death that affects the French and Mi'kmaq alike:

L'Auther du livre de la Sapience dite de Salomon nous témoigne une chose trei-veritable, qu'une pareille entrée est à tous à la vie, & une pareille issuë. Mais chacun peuple a apporté quelque ceremonie apres ces choses accomplies. Car les uns ont pleuré, de voir que l'homme vinst naitre sur le theatre de ce monde, pour y estre comme un spectacle de miseres & calamitez.<sup>17</sup> (651)

Lescarbot, like many settlers before him, uses theatre as a metaphor for life and the essential similarities of different cultures. In *Le Théâtre de*



*Neptune*, by contrast, theatre functions as more than a poetic vehicle: the relationship between cross-cultural exchange and theatre is not merely one of likeness; Lescarbot's spectacle is the intercultural act itself. In other words, the play does not perform a narrative of the colonial project but rather is the colonial project.

Even the process of creating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* contributed to the colonial project. 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 in *Histoire*. *Sinking Neptune's* Filewod character explains that Lescarbot decided that "his men needed . . . bread and circuses, so he collected the first for a feast and wrote the second himself, a 'masque,' or symbolic pageant, to welcome back the governor with song, dance, and declaimed verses. He called it 'The Theatre of Neptune,' and set the little colony rehearsing to occupy its time and raise morale" (6).<sup>18</sup> The play succeeded in distracting the Frenchmen from their privations as winter approached and from their mutinous sentiments, while also encouraging a peaceful relationship between the Mi'kmaq nation and the French colony.

Despite the goal of engaging the Mi'kmaq nation in the imperialist project, the play's dramatic conventions threaten to marginalize the viewing experience of the Mi'kmaq by rewarding the French audience's knowledge of European courtly theatre traditions. The play, for example, abides by the conventions of a *réception*, or triumphal entry, wherein "the more important residents" greet a returning ruler or royal figure (Fournier 3). As Wasserman explains, 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" (25).<sup>19</sup> Working within the conventions of *réceptions*, it is significant that the Frenchmen greet Poutrincourt on the water because this symbolizes the superiority of the colonists over the Mi'kmaq people, who are believed merely to have watched from the shore. Only in their fictionalized, 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 also creates a pact of political hierarchy in the eyes of the French audience. The very act of witnessing the performance implicates the Mi'kmaq people in a contract with the returning leader. Lescarbot's "nautical *réception*," Wasserman asserts, "celebrated the successful transition of the colony from leaderless, near mutinous contingency to god-blessed safety and stability" (36). In this way, the dramatic form of *réception* rewards the French participants and helps to establish the colony.

For its French viewers, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* replaces the symbolic staking of the colonial flag, claiming Port Royal and its Mi'kmaq 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 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 païs  
 Nous venons rendre les hommages  
 Deuz aux sacrées Fleur-de-lis  
 Es mains de toy, qui ton Prince  
 Representes la Majesté. (Lescarbot, "Théâtre de Neptune" 54)<sup>20</sup>

The French audience could have interpreted this performance of the Mi'kmaq people's imagined devotion as an actual alliance of the two cultures. Filewod, for example, considers imagination a tool of colonialism, explaining, "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 naturalize Poutrincourt's superiority.

Further adapting European tradition for the colonial project, Lescarbot uses classical figures to bless New France. Along with the figures of Neptune and Triton, the play makes reference to Saturn, Jupiter, Pluto, Diana, and Cupid. Neptune promises, "Par mon sacré Trident, par mon sceptre je jure / Que de favoriser ton projet j'auray

cure” (“Théâtre de Neptune” 50).<sup>21</sup> The gods assure Poutrincourt of his success and vow to aid in the imperial project of conquering the *sauvages*. Cupid, for example, colonizes their hearts. According to the Troisième Sauvage,

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. (“Théâtre de Neptune” 55)<sup>22</sup>

The Troisième Sauvage configures Cupid as a ruler of New France and describes love in terms of imperial conquest. Lescarbot saves the word *bourdon* (flag) for the triumphant end of the stanza, treating it as an exclamatory punctuation mark for the conquest narrative. Like Poutrincourt’s piercing of the land with the *Fleur-de-lis* flag, Cupid “fait planter le bourdon” in the *sauvages*’ “pauvres ames.”<sup>23</sup> The Troisième Sauvage offers gifts of sashes and bracelets, explaining that the love of his mistress depends on good favour from Poutrincourt because “ma maitresse . . . n’aura point de liesse / Si d’une prompte vitesse / Je ne lui di la caresse / Que m’aura fait ta hauteesse” (“Théâtre de Neptune” 55).<sup>24</sup> As a respected and honoured leader, Poutrincourt rules over their hearts as well as their souls. This scene embodies Lescarbot’s larger colonial project in its imagined conquest of the *sauvages*’ welcoming bodies, hearts, and souls.

Despite the use of courtly theatre traditions (such as the masque and *réception*), Lescarbot was invested in representing Mi’kmaq people and their rituals. He evokes the ritual of gift exchange to portray the *sauvages* as 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 à toy” due to unsuccessful hunts (“Théâtre de Neptune” 55).<sup>25</sup> The Première Sauvage heightens this sense of failure through his confession that “noz moyens sont un peu de chasse” (54).<sup>26</sup> 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 French, however, do not 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 better 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 works along ethnic lines, separately targeting and dividing the French and Mi'kmaq audiences.

Scholarship often concentrates on the masque's European influences, but Lescarbot borrows not only from the Mi'kmaq custom of gift giving but also from that of ceremonial feasts.<sup>27</sup> He revises the traditional European masque, for example, by replacing the final dance with a celebratory feast that integrates actors and audience (Orgel 33). In fact, the feast was an integral 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.<sup>28</sup> With this communal structure, the feast functions on the premise of equality, but it is still executed in the play as an instrument of French rule, meant to help establish peaceful relations with the *sauvages*. Lescarbot uses entertainment, namely the Mi'kmaq people's participation in the masque and subsequent feast, to cajole as well as enact their willingness to accept a peace agreement.

While *Le Théâtre de Neptune* presents a generally reductive treatment of the Mi'kmaq people, Lescarbot's *Histoire* at times celebrates Mi'kmaq culture and critiques the French colonial enterprise. Referring to Lescarbot's oeuvre, Wasserman suggests that "Lescarbot rarely patronizes the Native characters of his dramatic poetry or history, and frequently gives them substantial dignity" (37). 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 lives of Aborigines. In the sixth book of *Histoire*, for example, Lescarbot admires the Mi'kmaq people's "charité" and "hospitalité," arguing that they are not barbarous and can see that the French are more prosperous (727). Though Lescarbot's *Histoire* may not warrant consideration as a progressive historical document for its time, it does demonstrate his genuine, albeit paternalistic, fascination with the Mi'kmaq people and, as the sub-

title to book six suggests, “les mœurs, coutumes, & façons de vivre des Indiens Occidentaux de la Nouvelle-France” (651).<sup>29</sup>

With Lescarbot’s marked investment in the Mi’kmaq people’s manners and customs, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* operates on what Richard White cites as the four elements of the “middle ground” of intercultural encounters: “a confrontation between imperial or state regimes and non-state 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). *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, in short, performs the integration of the European and Mi’kmaq people as well as their respective cultures, but it does so without physical force. In performing the “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. Although both *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* engage in cross-cultural performances, there is one significant difference: Lescarbot attempts to establish French rule at Port Royal, whereas OTL aims to decolonize the so-called “birthplace of drama and poetry in the New World” (Posner).

As a performance of a successful return, 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). Not simply an idealized reflection of peaceful cross-cultural relations, this performance was an embodied contract that ensured “god-blessed safety and stability” in the eyes of the French (Wasserman 36). OTL, however, is much more interested in the masque’s meaning in the eyes of the Mi’kmaq people.

### *Sinking Neptune*

*Sinking Neptune*’s non-hierarchical creation process and non-hierarchical dramatic form challenge Lescarbot’s performed fantasy of diplomatic intercultural relations, offering a methodology for revisionist history. As its mandate demonstrates, OTL aims at inclusivity and rejects artistic or political hierarchies:



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. (OTL, “Mandate”)

These goals are especially evident in *Sinking Neptune*. Speaking on behalf of OTL, King explains that it “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 21<sup>st</sup> century spotlight to stimulate critical reflection” (“Sinking Neptune: 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 postcolonial theory 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 post-colonial histories (121).

*Sinking Neptune* draws attention to the very theatrical and theoretical structures — of revisionism, verbatim theatre, and postcolonialism — that inform its creation. After the four slide projections of “Native Quotations,” the play begins with a self-reflexive emphasis on the pervasiveness of theatricality through 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. By layering Lescarbot’s play with Pinto’s re-enactment, *Sinking Neptune* illustrates that past and present inform each other, thereby refuting Pinto’s argument that we must approach *Le Théâtre de Neptune* purely in its historical context and refrain from applying a critical, postcolonial lens. *Sinking Neptune* braids together the two parallel narratives — of the early modern masque and its present-day responses — 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 Aboriginal 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 roles of both Poutrincourt and Pinto, suggesting that the 2006 director engages in the same colonial project as the 1606 leader.

In keeping with its multiple historical contexts and perspectives, *Sinking Neptune* avoids propagating a single source or dominating voice. Although *Sinking Neptune* reproduces *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety, OTL’s adaptation foregrounds responses from Aboriginal artists, quotes directly from the press releases about the quadricentennial celebrations, and includes Filewod as a character, thereby refusing to privilege Lescarbot’s script as the primary source of national history. As a verbatim piece, *Sinking Neptune* does not change the words in Lescarbot’s text but instead alters the original’s political significance and reception. In deconstructing *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as merely one of many intertexts, OTL pointedly foregrounds Aboriginal artists (Paul, Mayo, Favel), scholarship on Lescarbot’s work (namely by Filewod), and recent oral commentary (by CBC and *Halifax Herald* reporters). Speaking to this recuperative element, Derek 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” that seek to displace Lescarbot’s historical status.

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” (120). The con-

stant 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” (Donovan, “Sinking Neptune”). Moreover, OTL makes these source materials available to the public online. Underscoring the dangerous relationship between authorship and authority, an opening projection quoting Hanay Geiogomah<sup>30</sup> 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” (SN 4). This projection targets Lescarbot’s scripting of the Mi’kmaq people and argues for the importance of self-narration and historical revision. 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 retells the source’s narrative but also alters 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: Gorder “*assumes a ‘savage’ posture. Over the course of four ‘Savage’ monologues, he becomes more and more scantily [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” unit breaks the fourth wall and integrates actor with audience. King describes the “Talkback” units 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” (“Sinking Neptune: Introduction” 199–200). While Lescarbot’s feast aims to recruit the Aboriginal people as

participants in the French colonial project, OTL's "Talkback" gathers the viewers in an open and unscripted discussion of a postcolonial project.

In one of its many performances, for instance, *Sinking Neptune* was staged in 2005 at the OneLight Theatre forum, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, entitled "Canadian Theatre Identity Crisis: Challenging Eurocentricity through Aboriginal Myth and Ritual." The forum 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'" (King, "Sinking Neptune"). OTL then incorporated the attendees' involvement in future productions. The unpredictable "Talkback" unit and ever-changing script literally reinforce *Sinking Neptune's* project of speaking back to an original.

Providing another platform for responses from politicians, writers, and artists, the slide projections frame and punctuate *Sinking Neptune*. After the six Tritons deliver their speeches from Lescarbot's play, a quotation from Daniel Francis's *The Imaginary Indian* appears on the screen; Francis 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's racial fictions support French sovereignty. The projections comment on Lescarbot's masque and disrupt the audience's viewing experience by calling attention to the script's racial rhetoric and dramatization of the imaginary Indian.

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] because of course, nobody asked them" (10), which establishes a level of uncertainty about the historical event and introduces the slide-projected quotations as only hypothetical responses. A quotation by Paul 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 as well as modernizes 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* critiques *Le Théâtre de Neptune*'s historical significance and offers a more pluralistic view of the historical event, but what is equally important is its performance of how cultural attitudes toward Indigenous people, imperialism, and racial minstrelsy have changed 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 between the French and Mi'kmaq audiences' perspectives that occurred during the 1606 performance, but what does it mean to speak from the Mi'kmaq people's imagined perspective and for their untold experience? Despite the contradictory political aims of the two plays, the dramatic techniques of OTL's *Sinking Neptune* and Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune* have some commonalities. Though the goal of exposing *Le Théâtre de Neptune* as an agent of the French colonists' "cultural genocide" of the Mi'kmaq people is laudable, *Sinking Neptune* also tackles the difficult task of dramatizing the seventeenth-century Mi'kmaq audience's unknowable perspective, much as Lescarbot did four hundred years earlier. Interrupting the inset performance of Lescarbot's play, a quotation by 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, Favel's words read as a critical response to the masque; however, 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. Whereas Lescarbot uses Aboriginal terminology — *Sagamos* (chief, 54), *adesquidés* (friend, 51), *Matachiaz* (sashes and bracelets, 79), *caraconas* (bread, 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 dramatic strategies and shared script complicate the binary categories of colonial and postcolonial drama. The mutually used techniques and scripts help to destabilize the racial (French/Mi'kmaq)



and theoretical (colonial/postcolonial) polarities entrenched in any discussion of *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune*.

Comparing Lescarbot and OTL's dramatic techniques reveals the methodologies involved in colonizing and decolonizing the audience's imagination. Firstly, OTL challenges Lescarbot's claims of French absolute sovereignty by reversing *Le Théâtre de Neptune*'s racial hierarchy (the French colonists are exposed as racist perpetrators of cultural genocide) and by eradicating authorial hierarchy (through the collective creation process and flexible team of creators). Secondly, OTL uses quotations by Aboriginal writers and artists to gain cultural authority, just as Lescarbot uses Aboriginal language to gain authenticity. Finally, OTL and Lescarbot conclude their plays, respectively, with an interactive feast and "Talkback" unit. These similarities do not suggest OTL's failure to challenge the original — no one could argue that *Sinking Neptune* reifies *Le Théâtre de Neptune* — but rather underline how revisionist adaptations and historiographies can effectively critique their sources through re-enactment and using shared techniques. In highlighting the French and Mi'kmaq audiences' different viewing experiences of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, *Sinking Neptune* exposes the limitations of colonial historical records that all but eradicate the Mi'kmaq people's perspectives.

*Sinking Neptune* simultaneously recuperates and deconstructs Lescarbot's play. On the one hand, revisionist adaptations reaffirm the canonical status of the source by updating it for contemporary audiences. After all, *Sinking Neptune* performs *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in its entirety and was a primary reason for the media attention surrounding the anniversary. On the other hand, *Sinking Neptune* 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 Aboriginal artists. *Sinking Neptune* serves as a model for revisionist strategies that bring attention to a source while changing its cultural significance; as this analysis has shown, OTL's play problematizes definitions of postcolonial historiography as purely deconstructive.

OTL's ever-changing script fittingly illustrates the impossibility of excavating a stable historical account of a performative event. Ultimately, we can never know what the audiences thought on 14 November 1606 or the extent of the Mi'kmaq people's involvement in the dramatization of the *sauvages*. *Sinking Neptune*'s diverse responses

to Lescarbot's masque avoid colonizing the audience's imagination with a single conception of the Mi'kmaq people's experiences 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 and reframing the cultural imaginary, that is, the shared historical narratives of a culture. Postcolonial revisionist historiography — as modelled by *Sinking Neptune* — necessarily involves both a representation and a deconstruction of imperial values, rhetoric, and strategies. As *Sinking Neptune* shows us, revisionist drama enacts repetition with political difference.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 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. All footnote references to *Le Théâtre de Neptune* cite Eugene and Renate Benson's 1982 translation.

<sup>2</sup> "Praiseworthy enterprise" (76).

<sup>3</sup> Although there are many different versions of *Sinking Neptune* — OTL consistently updates their script with new information — 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.

<sup>4</sup> See Wasserman's substantial introduction to *Spectacle of Empire* for an in-depth analysis of the historical contexts and performance conventions of *Le Théâtre de Neptune's* original performance in 1606.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Filewod and Wasserman point out that Lescarbot's script and stage directions are potentially only a rough report from memory. Welch responds to this skepticism by treating *Le Théâtre de Neptune* 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, bypassing both chronological time and the reality of Port Royal's fate" (443). Unfortunately, however, Welch does not consider *Sinking Neptune* in her analysis of *Le Théâtre de Neptune's* continued historical significance and cultural influence; Welch's theorization of theatre's

timelessness would have interesting implications in relation to *Sinking Neptune* because OTL demonstrates how the original can be repeated at any time and with changing historical resonances.

<sup>6</sup> As part of the Order of Good Cheer, French colonists appointed each day a chief steward who was responsible for ensuring that the colony's meals included meat as well as some form of entertainment (Wasserman 23). For further information on Champlain and the Order of Good Cheer, see Raymonde Litalien and Denis Vaugeois's *Champlain: The Birth of French America* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jefferys's drawing, Filewod explains, is the only evidence to support the claim that the Mi'kmaq people portrayed the *sauvages*; however, some historians, such as Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly, accept the sketch as historical fact, suggesting that both the Frenchmen and Mi'kmaq people participated in the performance (Filewod, *Performing* xiv). Filewod, however, asserts "it is probable that the 'Savages' were performed by Frenchmen because the assumption that the colony's aboriginal neighbours took part in the masque leaves unanswered the question of why they would have" (*Performing* xiv).

<sup>8</sup> "Immortal renown" (75).

<sup>9</sup> The type of boats used in the masque are also a subject of debate. Wasserman suggests that the six Tritons' boats were "probably canoes" (36); Filewod asserts that Lescarbot "does tell us that the four 'Savages' spoke from a canoe" but "does not identify the watercraft used in the performance," concluding that "it was more likely a longboat with the Tritons at the oars" (xvii).

<sup>10</sup> Theatre 400 intended to produce a full re-enactment on the waters where the play originally took place as well as a theatre conference (King, "Sinking Neptune: 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 12 November 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).

<sup>11</sup> OTL performed *Sinking Neptune* at the Anarchist Theatre Festival and the Montreal Infringement Festival before the November tour (OTL, "About the project").

<sup>12</sup> In "Verbatim Theatre," 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 toward the democratizing elements of OTL's theatrical process.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Paul is a Mi'kmaq elder and columnist; Lisa Mayo co-founded Spiderwoman Theatre (based out of New York) in 1976 and is of Kuna and Rappahannock ancestry; Cree theatre director, playwright, and writer Floyd Favel is a member of the Poundmaker First Nation.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert and Tompkins's introduction to *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* lists four essential features of postcolonial drama that apply to and define *Sinking Neptune*'s response to *Le Théâtre de Neptune*: 1) "acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly"; 2) "acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonized (and sometimes pre-contact communities)"; 3) "acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms"; and, finally, 4) "acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation" (11).

<sup>15</sup> Although Wasserman does not include a script for *Sinking Neptune*, he does frame his introduction with a discussion of OTL's play, even quoting King's postcolonial criticisms of Lescarbot's work.

<sup>16</sup> Together, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* and *Sinking Neptune* complicate two distinct approaches to the project of historicizing theatre in Canada — what 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 narratives” (Introduction viii). *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, for instance, offers a recuperative history of Canadian “origins” and has garnered fame because it is the earliest documented performance and extant dramatic script in Canada. To add to Filewod’s examples, *Sinking Neptune* demonstrates a deconstructive approach to theatre history in Canada by avoiding a linear narrative (through shifts in time) and foregrounding multiple versions (through shifts in perspectives). *Sinking Neptune*, however, is also recuperative in its fidelity to, and preservation of, Lescarbot’s masque. *Sinking Neptune*, I argue, reveals that postcolonial historiography can be at once recuperative and deconstructive.

<sup>17</sup> “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” (Lescarbot, *Histoire* 2). (All English translations of *Histoire* cite Grant’s English edition.) For original French quotations, u/v and long s have been normalized. Italics and punctuation are retained from the original.

<sup>18</sup> In *Performing Canada: The Nation Enacted in the Imagined Theatre*, Filewod offers one of the first extended analyses of *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, arguing that the play is an “enactment of nation” that exemplifies “the historical and reciprocal relationship of theatre and nation in Canada” (xvii). Voicing quotations from the real scholar’s work, the Filewod character similarly offers provocative explanations of the masque’s “fantasy of interculturalism” (*Performing* xvi).

<sup>19</sup> Music, nautical fare, and allegorical figures such as Neptune are typical elements of *réceptions*. In *Spectacle of Empire*, Wasserman compares *Le Théâtre de Neptune* with other early modern masques, offering an extended consideration of, and full script for, Ben Jonson’s nautical masque, *The Masque of Blackness* (1605). *Le Théâtre de Neptune* also finds similarities with the 1550 entry welcoming Henri II into Rouen, which involved dolphins, triton-musicians, a sea chariot, and the figure of Neptune, who promises the king “favourable winds, calm seas, and the support of the gods” in future battles to conquer England (Wasserman 25).

<sup>20</sup> 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. (“Théâtre de Neptune” 78)

<sup>21</sup> “I swear by my sacred Trident, my sceptre, / That I will always support your enterprises” (TN 74).

<sup>22</sup> 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. (“Théâtre de Neptune” 79)

<sup>23</sup> “Plants there his flag” and “poor souls” (79).

<sup>24</sup> “My mistress . . . will not be happy / Unless I tell her promptly / Of the kindness which your Highness has done me” (79).

<sup>25</sup> “Bring you any gifts” (79).

<sup>26</sup> “Our skills . . . lie only in hunting” (78).

<sup>27</sup> Lescarbot’s use of the French theatre tradition has been examined in Renée Lelièvre and Monique Baillet’s “Une Entrée Triomphale en Acadie en 1606” (1969), Hannah 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).

<sup>28</sup> For further information on Mi’kmaq culture, see both volumes of *The Mi’kmaq Anthology* (edited by Lesley Choyce et al., 1997, 2011) as well as Stephen A. Davis’s *Micmac* (1991). For the impact of colonial settlement on the Mi’kmaq people and their customs, see John G. Reid and Emerson W. Baker’s *Essays on Northeastern North America, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2008), Anne-Christine Hornborg’s *Mi’kmaq Landscapes: From Animism to Sacred Ecology* (2008), and Lawrence E. Sullivan’s *Native Religions and Cultures of North America: An Anthropology of the Sacred* (2002).

<sup>29</sup> “The Manners and Customs of Life of the Peoples of New France” (*Histoire* 78).

<sup>30</sup> Geiogamah, a Kiowa Tribe member, is a playwright, director, and historian.

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