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# Beyond the Divide: The Use of Native Languages in Anglo- and Franco-Indigenous Theatre

HEATHER MACFARLANE

Language is perceived as the quintessence of a culture. It expresses a unique way of apprehending reality, capturing a world view specific to the culture to which it is linked. But language is connected to identity in another important way: its presence and use in a community are symbolic of identity, emblems of group existence. Using a language is the ultimate symbol of belonging.

**T**HIS EXCERPT IS TAKEN FROM the 1996 report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and describes a subject that is not new to Canada and Quebec, and certainly not to Indigenous peoples. The fact that language embodies identity makes it a powerful tool of resistance and a necessary element in the preservation of a culture. It stands to reason that Aboriginal authors and playwrights seeking to resist ongoing attempts at assimilation are choosing, more and more, to include elements of their original languages in their works. Indigenous literary production has, in fact, long combined English or French with Aboriginal languages. Mohawk-Canadian writer and performer Pauline Johnson, writing in the late 1800s, frequently included Native words and dialogue in her texts, while others have written exclusively in their languages of origin. Innu writer An Antane Kapeshe, for example, wrote her 1976 work *Eukuan Nin Matshimanitu Innu-Iskueu* (translated as *Je suis une maudite sauvagesse*) entirely in Innu, and Inuit writer Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk's 2002 novel *Sanaaq* is written in Inuktitut. Kiowa critic and writer N. Scott Momaday writes extensively about this power of language:

At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition is a deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language. Words are intrinsically powerful. They are magical. By means of words can one bring about physical change in the universe. . . . Indeed, there

is nothing more powerful. When one ventures to speak, when he utters a prayer or tells a story, he is dealing with forces that are supernatural and irresistible. (15-16)

This demonstrates why the insertion and handling of even a few words in another language can have great symbolic importance in a text, and why most Indigenous writers choose to include at least a few words of their own languages in their works, whether they are fluent speakers or not. Innu educator Marcelline Kanapé reinforces the significance of such an act: “Notre mode de vie, davantage urbain, fait en sorte que la spécificité de notre langue est en train de se perdre, qu’elle tombe en désuétude. D’où l’importance, pour nous, de la mettre par écrit pour en préserver la mémoire et les traces” (19). These words in Aboriginal languages have a great impact on both the Native and non-Native reader or audience, which makes them a powerful tool of resistance.

In the context of theatre, this is especially significant since the genre itself is a powerful medium for Aboriginal peoples — one that Ojibwe-Anishnaabe playwright Drew Hayden Taylor calls “the next logical progression in traditional storytelling: the ability to take the audience on a journey using your voice, your body and the spoken word” (Dawes 191).<sup>1</sup> The use of Native languages in theatre works is therefore doubly effective. The eight plays by the three playwrights examined in this paper all demonstrate the powerful impact of language in theatre. French-speaking Huron-Wyandot playwright Yves Sioui Durand, in his four plays *Atiskelandahate: Le Voyage au pays des morts* (1988), *Hamlet-le-malécite* (2004), *Le Porteur des peines du monde* (1992) and *La Conquête de Mexique* (2001), uses not only French (and some English and Spanish) but also Mohawk, Innu, Attikamek, Huron-Wendat, Ojibwe and the Nahuatl dialect of the Aztec language. The choice to use a variety of languages may reflect the fact that Huron-Wendat is not the playwright’s first language, but that he is nonetheless — and perhaps all the more so because of the loss of that language — keenly aware of the power of Indigenous language use in Native theatre production. Though it has been carefully documented, and many are relearning it, there are no remaining Native speakers of Huron-Wendat. Cree, however, remains one of the most widely spoken Indigenous languages. Playwright Tomson Highway uses Cree, his mother tongue, as well as some Ojibway-Anishnaabe in his plays *The Rez Sisters* (1988) and *Dry*

*Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), while Floyd Favel uses Cree in his plays *Governor of the Dew* (2002) and *All My Relatives* (2002).

It is virtually impossible to separate language and identity, and this is why French-speaking Canadians and Québécois go to such great lengths to preserve their language. Jean Lesage and the Liberal party, in power from 1960 to 1966, declared that “bien parler c’est se respecter,” and set up the Office de la langue française in 1961.<sup>2</sup> Between 1966 and 1968, French labels on food products became mandatory, and immigrants to Quebec were required to have a working knowledge of French in order to be admitted to the province. In 1969, Bill 63, designed to promote the use of French in Quebec, became law, and, in 1974, The French Languages Act ruled that all of the province’s government business be conducted solely in French. This ruling proved to be extremely controversial, especially with regard to education, since only those who could prove that their mother tongue was English were allowed to educate their children in English schools; it ultimately led to Bill 101, the *Chartre de la langue française* brought in by the Parti Québécois in 1977. The most famous and contentious of the laws imposed by Bill 101 was that which stated that signs could be printed only in French. Bourassa’s Liberals modified this law in 1985 with Bill 178, which allowed bilingual signs in certain circumstances, providing that French dominated. Since then, tensions between English- and French-speaking populations have continued to take centre stage in both provincial and national politics, consistently pushing the fight for the preservation of Indigenous languages to the side. However, language is no less inseparable from identity for these groups. This explains why the banning of Aboriginal languages by church and state, which became public policy, proved to be such a devastating tool of assimilation. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the use of Native languages was forbidden in residential schools, and those who violated the rule were severely punished. Since the advent of European colonization, the number of aboriginal-language speakers has been decreasing steadily. Unless drastic changes are made, it is estimated that of the original languages spoken, numbering between fifty-two and seventy, as few as three will survive: Inuktitut, Cree, and Ojibwe-Anishnaabe (Draaisma).

Because debates between English-and French-speaking populations, both inside and outside Quebec, have dominated Canadian politics for so long, the language rights of Aboriginal peoples inside and outside

the province are consistently pushed to the side. Comparing Franco-Indigenous texts using Native languages with their Anglo-Indigenous counterparts, however, alters the usual dynamic of the debate between English- and French-speaking populations in Canada. The texts reposition this debate between the two so-called official languages, putting Aboriginal languages at the fore, which, in turn, highlights the colonial role of both the English and French populations. Aligning these two colonial powers is controversial since French speakers have long had to struggle for their own rights in an English-language dominated society. It is also important to acknowledge the significant element of “double marginalization” experienced by Franco-Indigenous peoples — as French speakers within an English majority and as Aboriginal peoples within Quebec. It is very difficult, for example, for Franco-Indigenous writers to access programs designed almost entirely for English speakers. The fact that English or French is now the mother tongue of many Aboriginal peoples also has an impact on language and a sense of cultural belonging, since many have a loyalty to both English or French *and* their Native language. But as far as Native peoples are concerned, both English and French presences are colonial. Kanapé speaks of Quebec’s reluctance to foreground the survival of Indigenous languages:

Il est légitime que toute nation lutte pour sa langue et sa culture si celles-ci se voient menacées.

Cependant, le combat des uns ne devrait pas empêcher le combat des autres. Ce n’est pas toujours le cas au Québec: la quête de reconnaissance et d’égalité de la nation québécoise ne s’accompagne pas encore pleinement du droit des Premières Nations à poursuivre ces mêmes objectifs. (19)

Federal policy on Aboriginal languages is also seriously lacking, as is the political will of Canada outside Quebec to implement programs protecting these languages. In 2007, for example, the federal Conservatives, under Stephen Harper, drastically cut the budget the Liberals had promised to programs promoting Aboriginal language preservation, from \$172 million to approximately \$5 million (Draaisma).

The reason behind including Indigenous languages in these eight plays is twofold: on the one hand language is political and a tool of resistance, and, on the other hand, it allows for greater ease and power of expression. Politically, the use of Aboriginal languages upsets the

position of the dominant language *as* dominant (Byczynski 33). Critic Julie Byczynski states that dialogue in a different language

has the potential to call into question the seeming authority that the English [or in this case French as well] language has in that theatre. In the grander scheme of things, it might also subvert the authority of English [or French] in the spectators' everyday lives . . . by denaturalizing it — undercutting its 'taken-for-grantedness'. (33)

Speaking in an endangered language is not only an attempt to preserve it and the world view that goes with it, but also a profound act of resistance, given that Aboriginal voices, in any language, have been silenced for generations. As critic Maurizio Gatti explains, “*écrire dans sa langue d’origine, surtout quand on connaît le français, constitue une affirmation d’identité distincte et d’originalité adressée aux Blancs, mais surtout un geste politique dans un contexte historique où tout a été tenté pour prohiber et éliminer les langues amérindiennes*” (112). The work Sioui Durand undertakes with his theatre company Ondinnok reinforces a collective reclaiming of language and tradition, with a focus on solidarity and the promotion of Indigenous culture worldwide, in order to create an artistic work that, as he puts it, “incarnates all the voices of the world” (*Le Porteur* 16). Many of his plays, in fact, have been conceived for and performed on international stages, and their collective nature is reflected, interestingly, in words in Native languages spoken collectively. Words like *hyo*, *gwah* and, in the Aztec dialect, *ahuiya*, act as collective amens and demonstrate the strength of the community depicted on stage. Sioui Durand calls his play *Le Porteur des peines du monde* a “drame-rituel puissant qui réunit, au delà de la mémoire enfouie sous le joug des abaissements, des Amérindiens de l’Amérique du Nord et du Sud pour la ré-appropriation de la spiritualité comme territoire imaginaire intact”(16). Although Durand’s approach is pan-Native, encompassing many different Indigenous languages and cultures, while Favel and Highway deal specifically with the Cree language, all three playwrights succeed in decentering the power of the dominant languages. Highway, in particular, naturalizes the everyday use of original languages in *Dry Lips* when he devotes several pages to a sports commentator on the reserve delivering his play-by-play of the Wasy Wailerettes’ hockey game entirely in Cree. Equally effective is his placing of a Cree word next to the English “fax machine,” saying

“Eegeewetamagoot fax machine,” or “Fax machine told her”(108), and demonstrating through this juxtaposition the everyday use of Cree in a contemporary context. Similarly, in Sioui Durand’s *Hamlet-le-malécite*, the protagonist, Dave, records the Innu “hello,” *kwé kwé!* on his answering machine, challenging the notion that Native languages are static and disappearing (2). Equally destabilizing is the playwright’s inclusion of passages of Shakespeare spoken in Attikamek by two medieval rats acting as stagehands in *Hamlet le malécite*. The decision to include an Aboriginal language here is interesting, since the stagehand generally represents an intrusion of reality onto the world of the stage. In this case, the stagehand speaks Attikamek, decentering French as the language of reality and relegating it to the world of fiction.

These three Indigenous playwrights also share the goal of artistic and cultural expression, and each of them describes the necessity of using Aboriginal languages in order to express their beliefs and culture. Floyd Favel explains the limitations of English for an Aboriginal playwright in this way: “To hear English on stage in the mouths of Native people, the voice is higher, less in the body, and resonates less with the total life of the performer. A whole spiritual dimension is lost. We have faint traces of the mystery and magic, but mostly the soul is burdened by the mechanicity of a foreign language which has colonized the soul’s expression”(“Theatre of Orphans” 10). He suggests instead the use of a language that “touches more truly the feelings trapped in blood, muscle and genes” (“Theatre of Orphans” 10). Favel’s description of language as “in the blood” echoes N. Scott Momaday’s controversial belief that memory is, in fact, genetic and exists in the blood.<sup>3</sup> I read this figuratively, rather than literally — as an expression of just how powerful language can be.

The inefficacy of English and French to express the spiritual and mythological in Aboriginal cultures is perhaps the greatest motivation for these playwrights to use Native languages, and all three consistently use words and passages in original languages in order to express the sacred. Ojibwe-Anishnaabe writer Basil Johnston speaks of words that possess “an element of the Manitou that enable[s] them to conjure images and ideas out of nothing” (101). Similarly, poet Marie Annharte Baker, also Anishnaabe, comments on the spiritual power of Aboriginal languages: “The Ojibway language has now an achieved status of being a ‘sacred’ language. It is a preferred spoken language at cer-

emonies. Speaking an Indigenous language is a better way of honouring the earth and one's relatives" (62). In both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, Nanabush, or Wesaygachuk, speaks in Cree or Ojibwe-Anishnaabe, as do those who speak to him (or her). In *Dry Lips*, the character of Simon Starblanket, constantly seeking the spiritual and a return to tradition, often expresses himself in Cree. In Sioui Durand's *Le Porteur des peines du monde*, the "Porteur," half man and half bird, speaks in Innu, as does the caribou Papakuasik'w, who performs a healing ceremony in the language; songs and ceremonies in all of the plays are performed in Native languages. Further, Sioui Durand's play *Atiskenandahate* is truly pan-Native: based on an Inuit myth, Innu characters take part in a Thanksgiving ceremony delivered in Mohawk as well as a *makushan*, and *kushapasigan* (or shaking tent ceremony). Though such a creative approach might seem piecemeal, it reflects the fracturing of language and community caused by colonization while at the same time celebrating the use of these languages. The use of original languages in the ceremonies preserves the sanctity of each event, taking away any gratuitous use of cultural practices while at the same time giving a sense of scripture-like permanence and authority to tradition.

Kinship, too, is expressed through language. Eli Taylor, an elder from the Sioux Nation, explains this relationship: "Our Native language embodies a value system about how we ought to live and relate to each other. It gives a name to relations among kin, to roles and responsibilities among family members, to ties with the broader clan group" (Spielmann 50). Favel echoes this same idea, adding that the voices of his ancestors live through those words he speaks:

My mother taught me her language. Therefore when I speak to people it is not only me who speaks, my mother lives in my words, as it was she who gave me my speech. My mother lives in me, my mother lives in my words. . . . Present in the immediate words are the ancestors, which go back generation by generation, right back to the day our language bubbled up from the springs. ("Theatre of Orphans" 9)

In Favel's works, and in Sioui Durand's as well, family relationships are always expressed in Native languages. Words like "grandmother," "grandfather," "grandchild," and "wife" become the Cree words *noh-kom*, *mosom*, *nosisim*, and *wikimikan* in Favel's plays, demonstrating the importance of community as well as kinship ties. Significantly, each of



the plays in question also names its characters in ways that reflect their language of origin, either drawing attention to their family position or using names in original languages, such as Sioui Durand's Kwedit, Mocom, Meshekusk, and Pukutauk, and Highway's Zhaboonighan, Pegahmagahbow, and Keechigeesik. Naming in Indigenous languages is made especially significant by the fact that so many Native peoples were renamed, and given English or French names by record keepers for the church and state.<sup>4</sup>

Place is also indelibly inscribed in language, or perhaps more accurately, language is born in place — “bubbling up from the springs,” as Favel suggests (9). He goes on to explain, “Language is related to place; it is our umbilical cord to our place of origin, literally and symbolically” (9). In this way, language also constitutes a claiming of territory as well as a claiming of identity. Think, for example, of the often cited example of the number of words in Inuktitut used to describe snow, or the names of plants and animals found only in a specific region. These examples demonstrate the extent to which language is connected to land, and to which the people speaking that language belong to the land they inhabit. Language, therefore, has the ability to connect the speakers to their territory, and in this way is a claiming of that land, or of the right to inhabit it. In the context of Aboriginal theatre, this is obviously significant, and reflects the importance of using Native languages to describe place names and elements of the environment. **The act of naming places for these three playwrights is profoundly political.** As Sioui Durand states, “Le fondement des droits territoriaux trouve sa substance dans notre culture et nos pratiques millénaires. Nos droits sont notre mémoire et notre mémoire est notre territoire” (*Porteur* 14). In Favel's *Governor of the Dew*, a beaver revisiting his youth and the breakdown of his community uses the Cree *nitaskiy oma!* to say “this is my land” (6), and then *ote oma ka-wikiyan ota oma kakipeohpikiyan* to say “this is where I live, this is where I grew up” (10). The territorial claiming that accompanies naming also explains the importance of renaming in Aboriginal languages sacred and significant places carrying English or French names. Sioui Durand writes, “Le territoire nous révèle notre culture et la manière de vivre de nos ancêtres; il vivifie notre langue, il garantit notre liberté et notre avenir” (*Porteur* 14). Accordingly, each of the playwrights in question uses Aboriginal languages not only when naming places such as *Wasaychigan*, meaning “window” in Ojibwe-

Anishnaabe, and *Kapuskasing*, meaning “bend in the river” in Cree, but also when naming plants, animals, and elements of nature. Sioui Durand, for example, speaks of *Mistapeu* (caribou), *e-de-ka gak-wa* (sun), and *oki'so-tso-he-ka* (moon) in Mohawk, and Favel writes of *ministik* (island) and *pi-ha-yoo* (prairie chicken) in Cree. Each of these elements is inextricably linked to language and place. Sioui Durand's *Porteur* speaks in Innu, and the translations read “Je porte les blessures de cette Terre, J'entends crier le ventre de la Terre” (27), which demonstrates the link between language and place, and particular language and nature.

Sadly, as the words of the *Porteur* demonstrate, Native languages are also the languages of suffering in the plays, and describe dispossession, loneliness, illness, death, alcoholism, and abuse. The decision to use original languages here is interesting, since many of these words have their roots in colonization and would not necessarily be found in original lexicons. These words, however, spoken in Native languages, take on the gravity of the emotions they express. They demonstrate the deep and enduring legacy of colonization, engendering respect for a deeply painful communal suffering. Lamenting the loss of the buffalo, the Grandmother in Favel's *All My Relatives* speaks in Cree, saying, “we are pitiful” (29). Sioui Durand's *Porteur* explains that he drinks, and why, using the Innu language, and Marie-Adele, on her deathbed in *Rez Sisters*, tells Pelagia in Cree, “I'm scared to death” (96). Dickie Bird Halked, in *Dry Lips*, speaks in Cree after being rejected by his mother, and just before he commits rape. Expressing these emotions in Native languages keeps the sentiments within the community where they are understood, shared, and protected, and where their expression might also lead to healing. The quote from Lyle Longclaws that opens Highway's *Dry Lips* suggests that “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed” (6). A woman's voice in Sioui Durand's *Porteur* says to the *Porteur*, “uapatani nenu eshishan tshikassinita munnu tshetshi nistutakau (Montre-leur ta lourde blessure HURLANTE afin qu'ils puissent voir. . . .)” (45), and *Porteur*, in the next scene, uses Innu to ask for help, “J'ai besoin de votre force donnez-moi votre force pour que je puisse finir mon voyage” (56). Similarly, in *Dry Lips*, Nanabush tells Dickie Bird Hawked to speak to him “in Indian” in order to explain his trauma and ask for help (98), and Dickie Bird's father, Big Joey, speaks to his son in Cree in an effort to comfort

and soothe him (101). Native languages express suffering, but they are also used to heal.

Cree actor Billy Merasty explains the desire in these situations to use original languages: “It makes greater sense for me to delve into the language than into English because I find the English language very inadequate. But with the Cree, you have greater access to emotions — profound emotions, like pain, sorrow, to the other extreme of happiness, laughter” (Mojica 40). The use of original languages to express emotion is, therefore, more honest in the sense that it is spontaneous and not mediated by intellect. Merasty goes on to say, “The way I look at the language, with Cree, it’s more organic, it’s more instinctual and real for me, whereas English is more cerebral; it tends to come more from the mind than from the organic side” (Mojica 39). Feeling can get lost in English (or French), and this is why expressions of love and happiness also tend to be made in original languages. Favel’s George, in *All My Relatives*, sings love poems to his lover in Cree (52), just as Highway’s Marie-Adele, in *Rez Sisters*, remembers the Cree words of her husband, “Adele, ki-sa-gee-ee-tin oo-ma, (Adele, I love you)” (96).

Interestingly, both of these manifestations of love in Cree are memories, showing just to what extent language is connected to continuity — past, present, and future. Language transcends time in that it reflects the past, present, and future of a culture, and this, again, serves to demonstrate the importance of Native language in theatre. Sioui Durand explains the process involved in developing a theatre production and the significance of that process: “La dramaturgie amérindienne plonge ses racines au Coeur de l’histoire et de la tradition la plus authentique et condense ainsi tout l’espace culturel de notre passé, de notre present et de notre avenir” (*Porteur* 15). Favel’s *All My Relatives* tells the story of a family trying to hold onto tradition, one that is often preserved in memory. The grandmother speaks Cree as she looks at photographs with her family (38), but memory, like tradition, is not always easy to access, and the grandmother expresses this when she uses Cree to say, “here, from time to time, now, I forget” (25). Favel reminds us, however, that language carries memory and culture with it: “The use of words is dangerous, risky, the language evokes all manner of entities and memories and spirits. The word conjures” (*Relatives* 9). Favel fears that without language, however, there is no memory, and without memory, the culture dies. “When the time comes that Indians don’t

speak their languages anymore,” the grandmother says, “that’s one sign of the end” (59). Highway, on the other hand, expresses his faith in continuity when, in *Dry Lips*, the character Zachary speaks to a newborn in Ojibwe-Anishnaabe (129).

For many Aboriginal peoples, language is a political declaration of nationhood, just as it is for a considerable percentage of French speakers in Quebec. Marcelline Kanapé writes, “Chez nous, on dit: ‘Si tu ne parles pas ta langue, c’est que tu n’as plus de lien avec la nation’” (18); this, however, seems extreme, since there are other ways of celebrating culture that, though they may not be as powerful as speaking the language, certainly keep it alive. Momaday underlines the importance of simply continuing to speak — in any language — explaining that expressing oneself is the first step in keeping a culture strong: “But one does not necessarily speak in order to be heard. It is sometimes enough that one places one’s voice on the silence, for that in itself is a whole and appropriate expression of the spirit” (16). Expression is the key for Momaday, and this may take many forms. English and French, however, are often perceived as the only options available in Canada, either because these are the only languages one knows or because to write or express oneself in an Aboriginal language limits one’s audience. As we have seen, Aboriginal peoples often find themselves on one side of the Anglo/Franco divide, where the focus is no longer on Aboriginal self-expression, but rather on one linguistic category or the other. This only serves to separate Aboriginal peoples along the same colonial divide, instead of uniting them as original peoples. Thus, the value of using even just a few words from original languages, is, as Gatti reminds us, a profoundly political act: “Un Amérindien qui prononce une conférence au Québec ou en Europe commencera souvent dans sa langue maternelle afin d’affirmer la légitimité de celle-ci, de rappeler non seulement son existence, mais son droit à un statut officiel” (113).

There is, of course, the concern about how the use of Native languages in theatre will impact an audience that does not speak, or has no connection to, these languages. Obviously, this has a certain amount to do with how much of the play actually takes place in the given language, but in the case of the plays in question, which are written predominantly in English or French, the outcomes may vary. Some audience members may be frustrated that they cannot understand exactly what is being said, though often the meaning can be inferred by the context, physical

actions, and visuals. Those who need to understand every utterance, and are not engaged by the sense of mystery a foreign language engenders, may feel alienated not only by the action and actors but also by those around them who do understand the words being spoken (Byczynski 33). This alienation is not always a dead end, however, since it may result in the awareness on the part of the audience that the power dynamic has been modified, and that those who are accustomed to being in control are startlingly, but perhaps refreshingly, on the outside. In this way, alienation can result in a kind of inclusion, since the non-Native speakers are forced to consider their role as outsiders, thus actively playing a part in the political dimension of the play. Distance can, in this way, enhance their experience of the theatre. Inability to understand precisely what the words spoken mean may also add to the mystery and difference highlighted through the use of language, since the difference here forces the audience to suspend reality and accept the mystery of what is occurring on stage. J. Edward Chamberlin discusses the listener's response to foreign languages in detail in his book *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories: Finding Common Ground*: "Language is the stuff of stories and songs, and we want them to be different. Strangeness and surprise are important to stories, and what could be stranger or more surprising than another language? (15)."

Critic Renate Eigenbrod also argues that the use of Native languages in a text can serve to draw in non-Native-language speakers in that it offers an intimate window into the culture. She writes, "I would argue that the inserted words situate the readers: for some they carry more than a metonymic meaning by creating a close, personal link with the text (even if not all the words are understood) and granting a certain ownership of the literature, an insider perspective denied to them if the text were written only in English [or French]" (145). Eigenbrod's use of the word "ownership" is interesting here, since non-Native ownership of the story would go against the political aim of the playwrights working in Aboriginal languages. While the use of the word is most certainly figurative, I would argue that many playwrights do, on some level, seek to exclude the audience in order to reverse the power dynamic completely. Sioui Durand, meanwhile, suggests that the use of Native languages in theatre is an attempt to include audience members unfamiliar with the language in order to bring them closer to the experience of suffering and colonization. Speaking about his choice

to use Mohawk to relay a Thanksgiving ceremony in his play *Atiskenandahate*, he writes, “ces discours émotifs servent ici à créer une pression sur l’auditoire . . . ils servent à créer un état d’esprit qui permettrait à l’auditeur d’accéder à un niveau de tension qui lui donnerait accès au sentiment qu’est pour nous cette déchirure dans la chair de notre peuple et ainsi de faire partager l’enjeu de notre destinée dans le maintenant” (13). Like Merasty, Sioui Durand argues that dialogue in a Native language expresses a deeper, more sincere emotion that ultimately elicits a greater empathy and involvement from the audience.

Translation obviously plays a part in audience response, and this is where reading a play and seeing it performed are clearly two very different experiences. Almost all of the plays discussed include translations of words in Aboriginal languages either in brackets directly after the word used, at the bottom of the page, or in a lexicon at the end of the play. The exception to this is some of the ceremonies appearing in Sioui Durand’s works. Lexicons are clearly not an option in live performance, though Surtitles are sometimes used, which act as a kind of mediating technique to highlight the Indigenous language while still making it accessible to the entire audience. This ensures that the audience shares in the experience of watching the play, and reduces the risk of exclusion. Is this, however, the desired result? Chamberlin describes the problem: “Untranslatability is an ancient value. . . . The Greek philosopher Plato once said that if we change the forms of story and song . . . we change something fundamental in the moral and political constitution of a society. That’s why he didn’t want to change or translate them; and that’s why others do” (14). This last sentence is important, and expresses the risk involved in translation. In doing so, there is the tendency to favour the use of the colonizer’s language over the original language, which arguably does little to reverse the established power dynamic, and re-instates the use of English or French as the dominant language.

Ultimately, however, the most important impact is that on the Aboriginal audience members — whether or not they speak their Native language. Words and passages in an Aboriginal language create community and a sense of belonging for those who speak or recognize it as their own — and it is not always crucial to speak the language in order to feel a connection to it. Momaday expresses this idea: “Now when I hear Kiowa spoken . . . it is to me very good. The meaning most often escapes me, but the sound is like a warm wind that arises from my

childhood. It is the music of memory. I have come to know that much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning but in sound. (7) The feeling is bittersweet, however, for, according to Ojibwe-Anishnaabe writer Armand Garnet Ruffo, there is a certain sadness or melancholy that comes with hearing a language one no longer speaks — a yearning for a connection that, while not lost, is continually threatened. Either way, it is clear that using original languages in theatre develops community, uniting Native peoples from both the same culture and different cultures and contributing to a strong sense of belonging. It is significant that the number of Aboriginal peoples seeking to learn their languages is increasing steadily. This is a direct result of the concerted efforts of many in Native communities — such as those made by the playwrights in question — to keep their identities and languages alive. Examining these works in the context of Aboriginal theatre or literature highlights the shared cultural elements of the works rather than isolating them along Anglo and Franco linguistic divides, and the exchanges that occur are immensely valuable in terms of both culture and politics. Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, it moves the debate away from the divisive linguistic concerns of the English and French populations in order to foreground Aboriginal experience. Native languages, here, take Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike beyond the divide, opening up, ideally, a new dialogue between cultures that favours Indigenous interests over the more divisive aspects of the debate between Canada's English- and French-speaking populations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Consider the success, for example, of Ontario's Anishnaabe De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company, which began in 1981, is based on Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island, and is still going strong. Quebec's Ondinnok Theatre, begun in Montreal by Huron-Wendat writer and director Yves Sioui Durand and Catherine Joncas in 1985, has also been hugely successful.

<sup>2</sup> Dates and general information concerning Quebec's language policy are taken from *The Canadian Encyclopedia* entry "Quebec Language Policy."

<sup>3</sup> Momaday discusses the concept of "memory in the blood" or "racial memory" further in *The Man Made of Words*. The idea that memory is somehow genetic is highly contentious, and has been taken up by numerous Native American writers, in particular, including Leslie Marmon Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, James Welch, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and Gerald Vizenor. It has become a point of discussion in debates over "blood quantum," taking place largely in the United States, but increasingly in Canada as well. Arnold Krupat in *The Voice*

in *the Margins* describes the notion of blood memory as profoundly racist. Chadwick Allen summarizes the debates in his book *Blood Narrative*.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1940s, the Government of Canada assigned numbers as surnames to Inuit peoples. Each of the numbers was preceded by a letter, which indicated region and community, and people were made to wear these numbers around their necks. It wasn't until 1969 that the government agreed to do away with the numbering system, replacing numbers with family surnames.

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