

Ethics in Performance of Violence: On Controversy of Collen Murphy's *Pig Girl*

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Abstract—Canadian playwright Colleen Murphy's *Pig Girl*, prize-winning works of 2016 Governor General's Award and 2014 Carol Bolt Award, is based on a real criminal case and the increasing number of murdered and missing Native Canadian women. The play not only reveals a fact that women from indigenous communities in Canada are at high risk of violence, but also exposes the indifference of police force and the whole government. Despite the sympathy toward the deadly fate of aboriginal women, especially from a white playwright, the play still arouses strong objections and boycott from the Native communities. This contrasting reaction towards the play should merit due attention. This paper, with a comparison with other artistic works dealing with similar violent theme created by First Nations artists, tends to identify the difference and take some hints for future works. Only in this way, can a piece of work dealing with violence, especially violence suffered by generations of marginalized groups, contribute to the implementation of justice without getting involved in ethical argument, and eventually become an indispensable agency of intervention of social violence and curing of the historical trauma.

Index Terms—Aboriginal women, colonial violence, ethics of representation, *Pig girl*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Canadian playwright Colleen Murphy (1954--) won Governor General Literary Award for Drama in 2016 for *Pig Girl*. The play premiered at Theatre Network in Edmonton, Alberta, in 2013 and has since been staged by the Finborough Theatre in London, England (2015), and Imago Theatre in Montreal, Quebec (2016). *Pig Girl* also won the Playwrights Guild of Canada's 2014 Carol Bolt Award for best new play and was published by Playwrights Canada Press in 2015. [1]

The play was inspired by the Pickton case in Canada. Robert William Pickton, the serial killer, was under arrest in 2002 for murdered 6 women, there are still 33 missing women's genetic and physical things found in his pig farm, and therefore was charged for 26 murders but only convicted for six women death. It is Murphy's outraged about the judge trying not to sentence the other twenty cases that pushes her to create this play. "It is often said that writers can talk to the dead but a writer can also use imagination to let the dead talk." [2] Murphy designed two time lines in the play. The first one is about Dying Girl and Killer, in which Dying Girl fights desperately with the Killer. The second one is between Sister and Police officer, in which the sister is always

persuading the cop to look for her sister, and the policeman, bound by the justice system, have become narrow-minded and refused to take any action.

The play receives positive and negative response at the same time. The Governor General award's jury states, "Colleen Murphy weaves a masterfully structured examination of humanity within our most inhumane moments. *Pig Girl* forces us to relentlessly bear witness to a single night of horror that echoes the silenced ongoing violence against women. Difficult and harrowing, it asks us to acknowledge our collective responsibility. Arresting. Undeniable. Unforgettable." [3] The play proves to be very necessary to examine the worst part of human nature, which always reminds us not of forgetting what had happened and always happens to the women in Canada. The play was not only about the things happened in the pig farm on the district of Vancouver, but also was an alert for answering the reason of why those crimes always to be against those women in the communities, and why the communities didn't do something to stop them. Paula Simmons notes the hidden power reflected in the play and she evaluate the play was a mighty and exciting story, expressed with attractiveness and absolute fearlessness. The play talks about courage, about guilty, about empathy and about what we owe to the others. [4]

At the same time, the sexual violence vividly represented on stage arouse strong criticism. Just as Colin Maclean observes that for 85 minutes we watch *The Dying Woman*, bound and suffering in the center of the stage, is violated, tortured and finally killed, and she considers that "there is not much value in repeating them here...I see little value in repeating it in such detail on a stage...There is the temptation to label the whole thing with the movie's word for it 'torture porn.'" [2] Paula Simons, although gets response from Murphy that she wanted the play to be violent and disturbing to make all audience to bear witness to the suffering and terror Pickton's victims experienced, still considers on-stage violence "morally problematic" and wonders "...is there a point when bearing witness to a staged rape and murder veers into a kind of sadistic voyeurism? When the audience is watching a sort of sexually titillating live snuff-film? At what point are we implicated in the killer's own sado-sexual pathology." [4]

Except the doubts and criticism around sexual violence on stage, the play's title arouse criticism. Tanya Kappo, a local Cree community activist, and one of the founder of the Idle No More movement, considers the title so offensive, racist and demeaning that it further victimize not just the women Pickton killed, but all Native women. She pleaded with the playwright to change the name or there might be protests in Edmonton and across Canada. Another aboriginal playwright

Manuscript received August 11, 2019; revised September 11, 2019.

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feels moved by the play after watching it, but also found the title deeply inappropriate, arguing that the play was exploiting the suffering of Pickton's victims as theatre entertainment. He insists that the pain was too raw and too fresh and still need time to mourn and no time to create art. And if art was to be created, he suggested, it should be by aboriginal actors and writers. The Metis actor, playwright, and former theater officer with the Canadian Council, Bruce Sinclair holds that he would never to write a play about the Holocaust or about slavery and therefore interrogate why we are making entertainment out of suffering of aboriginal woman. Besides, he is confident that Canada is full of talented and accomplished aboriginal actors, directors, and playwrights, who should have the right and opportunity to tell their own stories, without paternalism of having their stories told by white writers and actors. [4] Actually such play as *Pig Girl* allows the narration of our social realities without any cultural context, thus continuing to legitimize the dominant colonial discourse and colonial violence against women, particularly indigenous women.

The controversy aroused by Murphy's play reveals a critical issue of whether a dominant white playwright has the privilege to tell a native story or not. Does she, as a white playwright, have the moral authority to write this play? What or how do Native playwright or artists express the same issue?

II. VIOLATION ON ABORIGINAL WOMEN: THE ONGOING COLONIALISM IN CANADA

Around the world, women from indigenous communities are often most at risk of being displaced, attacked, harmed, and killed. In North America today, this pattern is no different. Data compiled by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada) and published in Amnesty International Canada's report *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada* shows that Aboriginal women in Canada between the ages of 25 and 44 are five times more likely to die as a result of violence than non-Aboriginal women of the same age. Compounding this disproportionately high level of violent homicides is the disproportionately low rate of success in solving those cases: according to the NWAC only 53% of the over 500 murders documented in the *Sisters In Spirit* database were solved, compared with a national homicide clearance rate of 84%. [5] Meghan Rhoad, a researcher at Human Rights Watch expressed that "There is a feeling among many that if women of other background were being murdered and going missing at the same rate, it would be treated as a national crisis." [6] Just like the Sister in *Pig Girl* accuses, "If men went missing or rich white women started disappearing you guys would be banging down doors—all points alert or whatever the hell you call that emergency stuff..." [7]

The precarious reality of Native Canadian women is the legacy of centuries of colonial conquer of North America. For this statement, the residential schools are usually chosen as a proof. Just as Palmater points that "the abuse, neglect, torture, medical experimentation, rapes, beatings and murders in residential schools speak something far more

sinister than an education system designed to assimilate Indians..." The policy of residential schools taken by the Canadian government is, according to The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "cultural, physical and biological genocide against Indigenous peoples". Even former Prime Minister Paul Martin calls it "a form of cultural genocide". [8] Prior to colonization women usually held important status in society, while the colonization totally changed the traditional gender relations in Aboriginal society. In his October 2011 submission on behalf of the First Nations Summit to the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, Grand Chief Edward John states that women were "specifically targeted" in federal policies of forced removal and assimilation designed to undermine the political and familial structures of Indigenous communities. Beverly Jacobs and Andrea Williams similarly comment on the deliberate dispossession of Indigenous women to weaken Indigenous nations, and finally have a "direct link to the disappearance and murder of hundreds of Aboriginal women in Canada" [3].

Sarah Deer once made a thorough analysis about the rape of Native Americans, arguing "rape is fundamental element of colonization, and an ongoing historical reality of the treatment of Native women that has been embedded in federal policy and legitimized in federal and Supreme Court decisions." She insists that "rape is a metaphor for colonialism, drawing an analogy between indigenous people historical experience with settlers as exploitative and riddled with colonial intrusions of their lands and resources, and Native women's experiences of colonialism over time as invasion of their bodies." [9] From the very beginning of Columbus's 1493 expedition, the explorer will presented Native women to his subordinates as "rewards and incentive". And one of the colonialist Michele de Cuneo wrote to his friend the process of his raping a Native woman, "Having taken her into my cabin, her being naked according to their custom. I developed a desire to take pleasure. I tried to put my desire into execution but she didn't want it and treated me with her fingernail...I took a rope and trashed her well, for which she raised such unheard of screams..." [10]

The violation of Indigenous women seems to be tolerated by federal law and Native women seem to be viewed as "immoral and less worthy of protection". The abuse of their bodies even marketed by private company in the form of video game called "Custer's Revenge" in 1989, the objective of the game player is to manipulate the character of General Custer to have a sex with a Native American woman who was bound to a post. [11] The history of discrimination against indigenous peoples forms a vicious circle of violence and exploitation against them. When a society prey on indigenous women, it is really difficult to change stereotypes about them.

Through analyzing 128 articles about the missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside from the Vancouver Sun published between 2001 and 2006, Jiwani finds that the current mainstream media are trapped in "prevailing and historically entrenched stereotypes about women, Aboriginality, and sex-work". [12] In her influential paper on the murder of Pamela George, a Salteaux woman in Regina, Sherene Razack makes the argument that sexualized violence against racialized others and, more particularly

Aboriginal women is a hallmark of White settler societies such as Canada. Citing historical accounts, Razack notes, "Newspaper records of the nineteenth century indicate that there was a conflation of Aboriginal woman and prostitute and an accompanying belief that when they encountered violence, Aboriginal women simply got what they deserved. Police seldom intervened, even when the victims' cries could be clearly heard." [12] For those missing and murdered women, the mass media take a victim-blaming perspective, for example, the Vancouver Police Department Missing Women Investigation Review stated that "Downtown Eastside sex trade workers were willingly visiting the Pickton property in Coquitlam and some were being murdered there." [8] Murphy's play, to a great extent, exposes the indifference of the police. This can be vividly found in the impatience of the police officer when the sister pleads him to take some action:

I got over thirty families yelling at me about missing sisters, daughters, mothers—just like you, "Oh, they didn't phone," "Oh, their friends haven't seen her in a while"—you think I don't care what happened to women like your sister? I care lots but I got my own theory says that most of those gals didn't care much about themselves—didn't care whether they lived or died and that's damn terrible and damn sad but it's likely true. [6]

Police reaction and response to the investigation is based on the prevailing stereotypical view of these women as itinerant workers—always on the move and hence culpable in their murders or disappearances. And this is one important point that Murphy holds when defending herself while being criticized:

It's that she refuses to be a victim. She refuses to be the victim that we see in the general wash—not the women who actually died, but the wash of how the general population or the general media treats the women as just a big, faceless group of victims. It's that she fought—and fights to the last minute—for her life...And the fact that nobody came to rescue her—nobody...But she never stop fighting... [1]

Even though Murphy can find ample reason to depend herself, yet the staging sexual violence against an Aboriginal woman makes the play no different from "the news article...as particularly demonstrative of violence against women that includes clear elements of torture and actual victim terrorization prior to carrying out a premeditated murder." [13] Besides, the disrespectful title and the vivid presentation of sexual violence on stage is of course can be dealt through other options, therefore, it is quite necessary to have a general glimpse of how Aboriginal artists will do when facing such issue.

III. RITUALIZED EMPHASIS ON SURVIVANCE INSTEAD OF VICTIMIZATION

When being criticized whether the theme or her method is appropriate, Murphy declined to engage in any discussion and asserts her fundamental right as a creative artist to tell the stories she wanted to tell. With regard to this "fact-inspired" play, Murphy ironically mentioned that she only read Stevie Cameron's *On the Farm* and a little news stories, and she tries to express the story as "subjectively" as

possible, not caring about what or how the audience will feel about the play at all. And most importantly, her play doesn't serve as a kind of intervention. [1] It is obvious that Murphy didn't have a thorough research or contact with people from Aboriginal communities. Besides, even the cast contains no Aboriginal people. During the interview by Farfan, Murphy also pointed out an important detail that she once read Keith Barker's play *The Hours that Remain about the Highway of Tears*, which offers "the possibility of going beyond the death and into a kind of spiritual life". [1] While the playwright paid little attention to this kind of approach even though she was moved by the whole play. She, to some extent, stubbornly expressed:

Every writer, every person who creates something that's inspired by or based on what happened must create it. There's no comparing and saying, "Oh, this is better, this is better." No. The more stories, the more ways, the more compositions, the more perspectives, the more visualizations, the more experiences—there can never be too many and there must be as many as possible. [1]

It can never ignore Murphy's endeavor to expose the ugly side of current society and to a large degree subvert the general media's approach to treat Aboriginal victims as faceless and only figures. Just as Paula Simons analyzes that white artists hold a "victim narrative" perspective in which Aboriginal women are over-represented as prostitutes, drug addict, raped and murdered, at most those works are designed to inspire collective guilt, but this process will again privilege the white as benevolent heroes who are going to "rescue" First Nations and Metis people from their troubles. [3] However, Murphy ignores wholly other possibilities, thus it is quite necessary to make a comparison with works created by Aboriginal artists when deal with similar disasters. The reason lies in the fact that Aboriginal artists are intended to focus on the survivance, memorization and community spirit while artists from the dominant society only expose the violence.

Métis filmmaker Christine Welsh's *Finding Dawn*, a documentary about the missing women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, constitutes "an intervention into both the social issue of violence itself and the representational politics that contour its expression in dominant public discourse." [8] Colonialism has attempted the "obliteration of memory" through land theft, by way of legislated dispossession through the Indian Act, and in policies of child removal such as residential schools and contemporary child welfare policies. *Finding Dawn* affirms critical Indigenous practices of remembrance that resist the calculated obliteration of memory these policies were designed to produce. The film takes those women murdered or lost not as isolated or victimized figures but as each belonging to a broader network of community relations whose present work is to memorize them. Welsh concludes that "We may never know what happened to Dawn or to so many other women we've lost. But I do know that right across this country there are people who will not give up hope. We will continue to honor the dead and learn to take better care of the living. We will search for the missing and call them home. [8]

George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), being claimed as foundational to modern English-Canadian drama,

tells the life and tragic death of its title character. Throughout the play, Rita is called upon to defend herself on successive charges of vagrancy, theft, and prostitution until she reached her destination of being raped and murdered. Since it was created in 1967, the play has been performed several times. Algonquin and Irish Canadian theatre artist Yvette Nolan directed it in 2009, successfully wresting the play from the representational archive to which it had been consigned, in which Rita (first played by a white actress) was a mute anthropological artifact of historical racism. Instead, Nolan found strategies by which these women's lives are remembered. [14] Nolan skillfully makes use of music (drum song) and dancing (powwows and other social gatherings) to cultivate a feelings of community and kinship, compassion and obligation, responsibility and indebtedness, vulnerability and loss. The violence scene of being raped has been abstract through dance instead of an Aboriginal woman's body being violated. Besides, Nolan is not interested in having the body of an Aboriginal woman "play dead" onstage, but makes following her brutal murder, Rita's spirit "wakes in the place between" following her brutal murder, When the entire company joins once again in song, Rita, in the ritual space of performance, returns to the community and will not be forgotten forever. [14] Similarly, Halton Women's Place and Thinkspot Burlington held "Sisters in the Spirit Vigil" to encourage gathering of citizens and Aboriginal community members to honor the missing and murdered Aboriginal females. The participant expressed that "We stand in solidarity with them as they continue to seek justice." And a Round Dance Ceremony will be performed during the ceremony. [15]

Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* follows a similar method by making the ghosts and the memory of the victims of the barber killer materialized onstage and communicate with Rebecca when she is searching for her missing mother. In the 2004 production of *Unnatural and Accidental* that Nolan directed for Native Earth Performing Arts Theatre in Toronto, the death scene was abstracted through choreographed movement, focusing on the women who move in unison with ritual purpose but not merely as victims. Especially when the knife blade collectively in hand, the women reverse the familiar scenario of helplessness we see repeated throughout the play, this time it is the Barber's turn to squirm. [14] If Murphy realize this approach taken by Aboriginal directors and playwrights, she at least can change a little in the stage performance when the police officer mumbles:

I can't talk about this to my colleagues or my girlfriend—they'll think I'm...every night I dream I hear someone knocking on my door. I get up and go downstairs—four in the morning every morning I open the door and there's women standing all over in my front yard, so many women they're trampling the flower beds and whispering to me, "Come on, copper, c'mere, c'mon," and they're beautiful, they're all so beautiful, but I'm afraid they'll bite me and I'll become one of them so I slam the door shut and lock it and run back upstairs but the knocking doesn't stop... [6]

Definitely Murphy intends to show the conscious torture of the police officer for his hesitance to take action, yet if the

playwright takes a similar way to make these women's ghost materialized on stage, the criticism from Aboriginal audience would have been less.

Except these on-stage presentation, memorization of First Nation women takes the form of long marching. The Women's Memorial March is held every Valentine's Day since 1991 to honor the lives lost in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, during which period the relatives hold the photos of lost beloved ones to "work to reappear those who have been erased from history itself". [14] In March 2006, a nonprofit organization "Walk4Justive" was created to call for attention about the astonishing number of Aboriginal women lost along British Columbia's Highway 16 since 1969 which eventually earns a more famous name "Highway of Tears". M'áís playwright Keith Barker's *The Hours That Remain* was also written in response to Highway of Tears, Barker's script received several staged readings across Canada to form a kind of performative memorization for all missing Aboriginal women in Canada through its ritual repetition to new audiences across the country. [14]

Teresa Margolles, Mestiza Mexican artist, in her *PM2010*, a work created for the Seventh Berlin Biennale in 2012, displays all 313 covers published by Juárez's main daily newspaper in 2010 in sequential order to reveal the endless repetition of victim of drug and sexual violence in a routine and normalized form. Margolles even displayed a series of handmade adobe bricks she had produced from sand collected from places in and around Juárez where the corpses of sexually abused women had been found on the floor of the gallery. [14] Just like those artists memorize through creating works, even ordinary high school students make faceless dolls to honor those murdered and missing, considering those dolls as missing people who have stories to tell. [16]

From the artistic works, no matter in the form of stage performance or materialized display of certain objects, all reflects the Aboriginal people's intention to call for attention to the disaster and memorization of those loved and lost. However we have to notice that those artistic efforts are not meant to merely memorize, but also aim to transform the reality. As times goes by, we can find the situation improves. Canada's new Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has made the national inquiry a "priority", stating that in addition to the need for justice and answers for the victims and their families, ending violence against women and repairing the relationship with the indigenous population is crucial to the future of the country because more than 25 percent of Canadian youth are indigenous, and he believes that "renewing our relationship [with the indigenous community] is an ambitious goal, but I am equally certain it is one that we can—and will—achieve if we work together." [5] Even Stephen Harper denied the calling for a national inquiry about the missing and murdered First Nations women, he made a public apology in 2008 for the abuse in historical boarding schools. From the level of concrete actions, we find that the federal government awarded the NWAC a five-year, \$5-million grant to be used to assemble a crime database for aboriginal women only. Municipal police forces and the RCMP in the West are dispatching task forces and special units to re-investigate unsolved murders and disappearances. Besides, Edmonton's Project KARE, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have launched

extensive cold-case reviews involving additional financial and police resources.

IV. CONCLUSION

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's attitude is very practical in solving dispute, not only for renewing the relations between native communities and the white society, but also in solving the conflicts in Murphy's play. Just like Murphy takes Tomson Highway as an example to defend her choice of casting. For Tomson Highway, it is not necessary for an Aboriginal actor to play an Aboriginal, for in that way, it will form a barrier to further development of Aboriginal drama. The painful historical trauma is not a taboo for a white artist, but the point is that those who are willing to touch it should be aimed to enhance understanding between different peoples and finally contribute to a community with a shared future for mankind, instead of trapped in racial discrimination, personal reputation or financial profit. They have to ask the questions what Laura Moss asks when she considered the question "is Canada postcolonial?" Those questions are as follows, (1) What is the triangulated relationship between art, politics and place?; (2) What responsibility does an artist have to her subject matter?; (3) What are the ethics of representation?; (4) Who speaks for whom?; (5) Who profits?; and (6) How then to remember? [17]The white artists, as well as the whole dominant society should abandon its persistent ideas and learn to listen carefully the thought of First Nations people. Murphy's work can avoid criticism if she becomes alert and willing to accept the suggestions from Aboriginal audience. Besides, her work can take a big stride if she proposes some solution but not confined in exposure. As for the crime of violence against women itself, the government and the white society should pay due attention to the "restorative justice" and a "tribal-centric system" demanded by First Nations people.

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