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“YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND ME”: HYBRIDITY AND THIRD SPACE IN *AGE OF IRON*¹

This paper discusses the 1993 play *Age of Iron* in relation to Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity and Third Space. It also examines the play through responses to Bhabha's theories (including those by Britta Kalscheur, Smadar Lavie, and Ted Swedenburg), that argue that hybrid forms cannot necessarily subvert the cultural power structure of White and Other. *Age of Iron* acknowledges that hybridity alone is not enough to create a Third Space. This is evident in Clements's Cassandra, a hybrid character who represents First Nations women abused at the hands of both white men and men of their own communities, and also fills the role of the Greek mythological prophet. This paper examines Cassandra's journey as she seeks to have her experiences of abuse acknowledged and ultimately understands that she will not receive validation from her white oppressors.

Cet article examine la pièce Age of Iron (1993) à la lumière des théories de l'hybridité et du tiers espace mises au point par Homi K. Bhabha. Il fait également appel à diverses réactions aux théories de Bhabha (dont celles de Britta Kalscheur, Smadar Lavie et Ted Swedenburg), qui font valoir que les formes hybrides ne réussissent pas nécessairement à renverser les structures culturelles de pouvoir du Blanc et de l'Autre. La pièce Age of Iron reconnaît que l'hybridité à elle seule ne suffit pas à créer un tiers espace. C'est ce que nous voyons chez la Cassandra de Clements, un personnage hybride qui représente les femmes des Premières nations victimes de mauvais traitements aux mains d'hommes blancs et d'hommes de la communauté à laquelle elles appartiennent, tout en jouant le rôle de prophète mythologique grec. L'article examine le parcours de Cassandra alors qu'elle cherche à faire reconnaître les mauvais traitements qu'elle a subis et qu'elle comprend par la suite que ses oppresseurs blancs ne lui accorderont jamais la validation qu'elle demande.



Marie Clements's 1993 play *Age of Iron* features a hybridized Maesthetic in which Euripides's *The Trojan Women* is overhauled, combining mythology and performance conventions

from various cultures, to address the state of oppressed people in modern-day Canada. The hybrid form of the play has some characteristics of Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space, in which cultures may freely interact and allow for a renegotiation of culture for the present. Yet the play also appears to show the limitations of this theory, since it shows the cultures of the white colonizers and the non-white marginals as hybrid, but this hybridity does not stop whiteness acting with the power to Other. Ultimately, *Age of Iron* calls for renegotiation of the post-colonial culture of marginalized groups to occur within the marginal communities themselves.

The four central characters of *Age of Iron*, dubbed the Trojan Street Warriors, are street people of downtown Vancouver, or "Urban Troy," who are depicted as imprisoned by their colonizers as Euripides's Trojan women were imprisoned by the victorious Greeks after the Trojan War. The priestess Cassandra is cast as a First Nations prostitute who has been sexually abused at a residential school at the hands of a priest, who is dubbed Apollo to parallel the mythological god who cursed Cassandra. The queen of Troy, Hecuba, is a black bag lady who mourns the daughter that had been taken from her. The other two original Trojan women, Andromache and the Spartan Helen, are not used. In their place Clements places two First Nations men—Wiseguy, an older alcoholic man who functions as a First Nations Elder, and Raven, a younger man in the role of the Trickster. Raven also represents First Nations children who grew up in foster homes, detached from their culture and family heritage.²

The play is composed in a non-linear, often disjointed style in which the past and present fade in and out of each other. In Act 1, Wiseguy, Hecuba, and Cassandra spend much of the action dealing with their individual and collective pasts. Wiseguy uncovers the First Nations Earth Woman from underneath the concrete streets, and Cassandra is joined by a chorus of murdered First Nations women called the Sister Chorus. Raven, by contrast, refuses to acknowledge the past, instead mocking Wiseguy and Hecuba and being violent towards Cassandra, eventually raping her. The rape is followed by the arrival of the System Chorus, who represent the oppressive white-dominated systems such as law enforcement and social work, and capture the Warriors. Raven is taken to jail, where he finally begins to speak of his past. Hecuba has the chance to confront the System Chorus about the seizing of her child and eventually scares the chorus off with the help of Wiseman. Cassandra becomes doubly imprisoned when the Sister Chorus transform into the Muse Chorus, who serve

Cassandra's abuser Apollo, and join forces with the System Chorus. Act 2 belongs almost entirely to Cassandra, as she relives her past with her family before she was sent to the residential school, only to find herself back in the present and still trapped by the System Chorus. She attempts to appeal to Apollo for justice, but Apollo himself never appears onstage, and Cassandra realizes she will not receive validation from white culture. After this realization, the Sister Chorus returns to Cassandra, and she returns to Raven, Hecuba, and Wiseguy. Raven is now less resistant to Cassandra, and she appeals to him to create a new song for the future.

Age of Iron appears to work within Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the Third Space, in which culture is recognized as continuously interacting and hybridizing:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. ("Commitment" 37)

Thus when the restrictive notion of fixed origin for cultural identity and history is challenged, an ambivalent and unrestricted process allows for the emergence of new meanings and discourses.³ The play itself certainly demonstrates a state of hybridity, since its aesthetic and characters are hybrids of past and present, of various ancient mythologies, and of individual and collective narratives of oppression. Within this hybrid aesthetic, even whiteness itself is exposed as hybrid. Yet, in the end, whiteness still appears to be dominant and still resistant to the creation of a Third Space in which cultures are permitted to freely flow, intersect, and influence one another.

Thus, it appears that *Age of Iron* also takes into account that the power imbalance between the colonizer and the colonized still exists within a hybrid space. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg point out in their 1996 article "Between and Among the Boundaries of Culture: Bridging Text and Lived Experience in the Third Timespace" that hybrid forms are not necessarily able to transcend colonial hierarchy:

A new hierarchy of cultural practices has emerged, and the old category of the exotic is now occupied by the hybrid. Once again, the Other, now hybrid, is reinscribed by the Eurocenter. The hybrid appears outlandish and weirdly funny to the White Western audiences that consume these textual productions and theoretical readings of them. (162)

Lavie and Swedenburg continue:

While the White Western consumer perceives such hybrid articulations as bizarre juxtapositions, these are matters of routinized, everyday life for members of the margins. [. . .] Hybrid products result from a confrontation of unequal cultures and forces. (162)

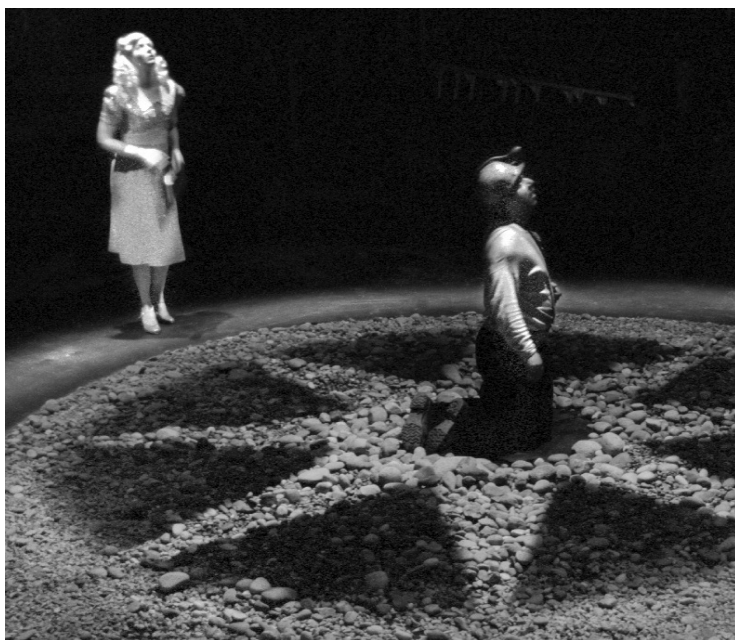
The notion that hybridization is part of everyday life on the margins is important when considering Clements as a Metis playwright. The existence of the Metis is a result of contact and miscegenation between First Nations and European cultures, yet because of the power imbalance between the colonizers and the colonized, people of Metis heritage are designated as Other. The fact that Metis people have been Othered throughout Canadian history demonstrates how hybridity itself is cast as Other. Hybridity's mere existence, even its acknowledgement by the colonizers, is not enough to dissolve hierarchies and create the free and open code that is Third Space, or to dissolve oppression. Britta Kalscheur points out limitations of Bhabha's conception of the Third Space in "Encounters in the Third Space: Links Between Intercultural Communication Theories and Postcolonial Approaches":

Enthusiastically, [Bhabha] searched for possibilities and ways for marginals to get heard; yet he forgot to prove if marginals, once they enter the third space, have a chance to be heard or not. The precondition would be that they have equal chances to articulate their interests as do the powerful representatives. Here lies the problem: although Bhabha aims to point out ways, which allow marginals to become more powerful, he paradoxically fails to consider aspects of power. Marginals do not have the same chances to articulate their interests and the powerful representatives surely have an interest to keep their powerful position. It is to be expected that they do everything to break down the resistance of the marginals who would then remain ineffective. (39)

This may be the underpinning of *Age of Iron*'s hybrid model. The Trojan Street Warriors are imprisoned on the lowest rung of society because their oppressors refuse to hear their experiences. But unlike Euripides's imprisoned Trojan women, who can do nothing but passively wait to be taken away by their Greek captors, the Trojan Street Warriors are shown to be actively looking for a way to renegotiate their present oppressed condition. While they do not succeed in having their experiences validated by white culture, there are instances in which the White and Other power binary is questioned as a social construct. Perhaps *Age of Iron* offers the possibility of a space for oppressed groups to renegotiate their own culture within their own communities, without the need for validation from their oppressors. While such a space may not yet eliminate the colonizer/colonized hierarchy, it may be a first step toward self-actualization.

Age of Iron addresses intersecting oppressions: the violation of First Nations and other non-white groups by white culture and the abuse of the women of marginalized groups by the men of their own communities, as well as by white men.⁴ Not only have the colonizers erected barriers that prevent marginalized groups from negotiating their own identity, but the internal strife that comes as a result of these barriers further inhibits self-actualization. These intersecting oppressions are particularly important when considering Cassandra's role. Clements's Cassandra is a hybrid figure, yet she is subject to various oppressions. She is devalued by white culture as a First Nations woman and a prostitute, as well as devalued by her own community as a woman. In addition, the role of Cassandra in Greek mythology is one of barred social power, cursed with the power of prophecy that no one will believe. Clements's variant is a figure to whom no one will listen. While the Third Space is intended to be a site of negotiation, Cassandra is denied the power to negotiate.

A great deal of the play's action involves Cassandra's attempts to have her experience of abuse at the residential school acknowledged. An opportunity arises in Act 1 when the Sister Chorus first appears. In this scene, the three murdered First Nations women of the Sister Chorus are joined by Cassandra, plus three stars in the sky, to make up the seven Pleiades. The three women of the Sister Chorus (referred to only as Sister 1, 2, and 3), do not have individual names or identities and, therefore, stand collectively for women who have been erased. Their dialogue in this scene, as well as that of Cassandra and the Earth Woman, describe how they were abused, killed, silenced, or otherwise devalued by men.



Erin Wells and Marcus Hondro in the wheel of life, Rumble Productions's *Burning Vision*, 23 April – 11 May 2002, Vancouver. Photo: Tim Matheson

This is a scene of hybridity, in which the cultural significance of the Pleiades is reinscribed to address the present-day oppression of First Nations women. Both the ancient Greeks and First Nations, and indeed many other ancient cultures, have myths about the origin of these seven stars, stories usually centered on women.

Yet the Pleiades also signify cultural hierarchy, since the seven stars were “officially” named for women of Greek myth by the scientific institutions. Clements creates a new representation of the Pleiades: they are represented in part by women who have died in Urban Troy, in part by the stars themselves, and in part by the still living woman, Cassandra. In addition, they are joined by the Earth Woman, the ancient female deity to whom some First Nations people of the present, including men such as Wiseguy, still call on in attempts to reclaim their cultural identity. Thus, the scene removes the boundaries between cultures as well as the boundaries between the past and present by transforming the Pleiades into figures who stand for the current situation of First Nations women. They are acting out neither the traditional Greek Pleiades myth nor a myth of the First Nations. Instead, the

Pleiades are represented by First Nations women of the present, who find the agency to speak about their present conditions through a version of the Pleiades myth that they have created themselves. In this space, the voices of women, including Cassandra's, matter.

Although this scene has characteristics of a Third Space, in which cultures flow together and are renegotiated for the present, the effectiveness of the Third Space is limited because the scene does not necessarily completely dissolve cultural hierarchies. The use of the convention of the chorus may have a double-edged effect. The Greek chorus is a collective body, and within this collective identity the women are able to stand in solidarity with one another to speak of the oppression of First Nations women. Yet at the same time, the chorus convention highlights the erasure of the abused and murdered women's individual identities. Cassandra continues to be an individual character within the chorus, but her participation in it alongside the anonymous women also highlights her invisibility as an abused woman whom no one will believe. She even appears aware of the danger to her personhood, confiding in Hecuba following the chorus scene, "I think I will die like the Sisters" (215). The use of the chorus in this scene can be looked at in two ways, which may even be said to exist simultaneously—it empowers the women by drawing attention to their situation, but it also highlights the fact that so long as whiteness and Western culture are in a dominant position, abused First Nations women continue to be invisible. Cultures interact and flow together in this scene; however, the resulting space is one that *exposes* hierarchies. It is not able to fully *dissolve* the oppressive hierarchies.

Following her rape by Raven, Cassandra is interrogated by Detective Agamemnon, who is a member of the System Chorus. The scene appears to make it even more evident how whiteness continues to maintain the barriers to a fully functional Third Space. In the space controlled by the System Chorus, the trusted Sister Chorus transforms into the Muse Chorus that serves Apollo. Throughout the interrogation, Cassandra is unable to escape the touch of the Muses, "[t]he feeling that there are too many hands for her to control, and that they are everywhere" (225). When the Sister Chorus has been placed in a space where hybridity is devalued, Cassandra's allies can no longer uphold their agency and transform into parts of the system that oppresses Cassandra.

However, a striking possibility about this transformation scene is that it demonstrates that white culture is, in fact, just as

hybrid as the cultures it Others. The Sister Chorus transforms into an oppressive form, the Muse Chorus, onstage; during the first part of the interrogation scene, the Sisters attempt to protect Cassandra, but eventually they “*detach themselves [. . .] taking on a new form. They will put on plastic gloves and become Apollo’s Muses*” (224). Thus, the chorus of women, as a collective force, represents both the colonizer and the colonized. Although they do represent a binary of opposing forces, the fact that the duality is contained in one chorus exposes the binary of White and Other as a social construct. Hybridity exists within the space of whiteness even if the white culture insists on denying it.⁵ Thus, even this white-dominated space has a similar effect to the Pleiades’s space, which is the effect of exposing and questioning oppressive hierarchies, although the dominant position of whiteness is not destroyed.

While the use of the Muse Chorus exposes whiteness as a false construction within a hybrid space, such a revelation is ultimately not enough to cause white culture to give up its oppressive power. The Sisters transform into the Muse Chorus again in Act 2 when Cassandra is again trapped by the System Chorus, this time in the form of social workers. At the close of this scene, in which the System Chorus and the Muse Chorus have been repeatedly denying and mocking everything Cassandra says, she makes a speech that indicates she has realized the futility of convincing the white culture to acknowledge her:

You do not see me. You do not understand ME, you do not believe ME, because you do not believe anything, you are incapable of belief [. . .]. This dress, why do I wear this dress? Picked out so carefully by you. All pressed proper against me so you can see me with wide open blind eyes. (268)

Following this speech, the Sister Chorus returns to Cassandra, and she is shown to shift her focus towards her own community by returning to the Trojan Street Warriors and appealing to Raven instead of continuing to seek validation from Apollo. She says to Raven, “Let it come from you, all ancient and new. It’s there rooted in you. You have a song. Sing it, so others might hear and know they are not alone, that we are all there in voices ancient and new, too many to be silenced” (270). By telling the Trickster that the song is already “rooted in you,” she is pointing out that First Nations communities have the possibilities to create a new song—a new culture—from within their own communities.

The fact that Cassandra is the one to appeal directly to the Trickster for a renegotiation of First Nations culture indicates a

change in the dynamics of the Trojan Street Warriors—Cassandra is no longer a devalued figure in her community, but a person with the power to negotiate. The white colonizers, in the end, show no sign of giving up their power and participating in a renegotiation of culture; thus it remains ambiguous at the end of the play if a true Third Space has been created, for the hierarchy of White and Other has not been truly dissolved. Yet the Trojan Street Warriors appear to have found a beginning in the effort to break down the barriers of oppression. The acknowledgment of Cassandra by Raven opens the possibility of addressing the oppression of First Nations women within their communities. The power of white culture to oppress marginal groups has not been destroyed, but it does appear to have been at least undercut within the Urban Troy community, since the Warriors are now focusing on their own community instead of the outside white culture. Although the marginal group of the Trojan Street Warriors does not have the power to force their colonizers to give up their power and renegotiate the entire culture with them, they can begin to break the barriers of oppression within their own community by valuing women like Cassandra and ensuring everyone in the community has full agency. ❁

NOTES

- 1 The author wishes to acknowledge Rosalind Kerr for her guidance with an earlier version of this paper, and Reid Gilbert for his help with later drafts.
- 2 See also Gilbert, “Shine” for further discussion on the layering of identities in *Age of Iron*.
- 3 See also: Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, “Culture’s In-Between,” “Frontlines/Borderposts,” and “Signs Taken for Wonders; and Rutherford, “The Third Space.” For recent discussions of Bhabha’s Third Space, see Ika and Wagner, *Communicating in the Third Space*.
- 4 Freya Schiwy, in her study of Latin American women’s approaches to decolonization, “Decolonization and the Question of Subjectivity: Gender, race, and binary thinking,” points out how the renegotiating of women’s roles is crucial to the process of renegotiating culture:

For many indigenous women, questioning gender paradigms in the process of decolonization has helped to constitute indigenous cultures as dynamic practices that are in need of re-invention rather than offering a return to an idealized past [. . .]

Asking how modern/colonial constructs of gender are perpetuated and contested also helps to better understand the

ways decolonization pushes against the building blocks of coloniality and where, at times inadvertently, decolonization recreates these. (272)

- 5 See Taylor, "Transculturating Transculturation" for a discussion of how cultures transform following contact even when an unequal power dynamic is present: "The theory of transculturation points to long term reciprocities, to the degree that the dominant groups that define, acquire, and impose culture are themselves transcultured sooner or later, whether they want it or not" (73).

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