

Performing Cultural Crossroads: The Subject-Making Functions of “I am” Declarations in Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife*

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Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife* tells the legend of a Cree man who lived in Saskatchewan during the end of the nineteenth century. After being arrested for killing a cow, he escaped prison and died in a shootout with over one hundred Mounted police. This essay explores the performed transmission of “I am” declarations in encounters between historical Indigenous figures and perceived white colonial audiences in Moses’s play. In a work that seeks to reshape earlier versions of the Almighty Voice myth, performative utterances are a key strategy for speaking back to colonial legends and a history of enforced Christianity in Canada. *Almighty Voice* features a series of “I am” statements, such as “I’m no ghost” and “I am the wife of Almighty Voice;” yet, the final attempt at self-assertion—“Who am I?”—does not leave the audience with truth claims but with questions. Integrating J. L. Austin’s concept of speech acts with Judith Butler’s performative identity theory and Miri Albahari’s theory of possessive subjecthood, this paper outlines four main functions of “I am” statements: 1) to constitute the self; 2) to perform belongingness; 3) to assert ownership over identificatory categories; and 4) to emphasize individuality. The conclusion returns to the larger questions of the subject-making capacities of self-narration in Canadian drama.

La pièce *Almighty Voice and His Wife* de Daniel David Moses raconte la légende d’un Cri vivant en Saskatchewan à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. Après avoir été détenu pour avoir abattu une vache, il s’est échappé de prison et a trouvé la mort dans une fusillade l’opposant à une centaine de policiers de la Gendarmerie royale. Dans cet article, Wright explore la mise en scène des « Je suis » qui ponctuent la rencontre entre les figures historiques indigènes et le public de Moses, perçu comme étant composé de colons blancs. Dans cette œuvre qui cherche à revisiter le mythe d’Almighty Voice (Voix du Grand Esprit), les énoncés performatifs sont une stratégie clé qui permet de répondre aux légendes coloniales et à une longue expérience de christianisme forcé au Canada. *Almighty Voice* met en scène une série d’énonciations du type « Je suis », telles que « I’m no ghost » (« Je ne suis pas un fantôme ») et « I am the wife of Almighty Voice » (« Je suis l’épouse de Voix du Grand Esprit »). Or la dernière tentative d’affirmation de soi laisse le public non pas sur une affirmation de la vérité mais sur une question : « Who am I? » (« Qui suis-je? »). Dans cet article, Wright s’appuie sur le concept d’acte de langage de J. L. Austin, de celui de genre comme performance développé par Judith Butler et de la théorie de Miri Albahari sur le sujet et la possession pour décrire quatre grandes fonctions de l’énoncé « Je suis » : 1) construire le soi; 2) jouer l’appartenance; 3) signaler son appropriation de catégories identitaires et 4) souligner son individualité. Dans sa conclusion, Wright s’interroge sur la capacité du théâtre canadien de construire le sujet par l’autonarration.



From 1994 to 2005, the famous “I am Canadian” advertising campaign marketed Molson products and nationalism. Among the most popular ads was “the rant,” which featured an average Joe who proudly defined his Canadian identity: “I believe in peace-keeping, not policing, diversity, not assimilation, and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal . . . My name is Joe! And I am Canadian!” (CBC).¹ With a playful parody of Canadian stereotypes, Molson’s “Canadian” brand used “I am” declarations to promote its product and its consumers. Provinces in Canada adapted the slogan, urging regional pride—“I am a Newfoundlander,” “I am Albertan,” “I am British Columbian”—and further filled the marketplace with self-defining statements. Most recently, the Canadian Centre for Diversity launched a campaign that instructs viewers to “see different” with a series of “I am” utterances, such as an African Canadian man who says “I am a woman when I am confronted with inequality.”² But what purpose do these declarations serve and how do they resonate with identity issues in Canada today?

In performing the experience of a troubled national, ethnic, or gendered identity, many Canadian plays use “I am” statements not only to describe an identity but also to help constitute it. Alan Filewod suggests that Canadian theatre companies “like The Canadian Stage Company or Ottawa’s ironically named Great Canadian Theatre Company” are “(self) positioned as a metonym of nation (a metonym encoded in the very phrase of ‘the theatre’)” (x). While Filewod investigates how “the nation is enacted in the imagined theatre” (xi), I explore how the individual is enacted in and shaped by Canadian theatre. Based on the constructedness of the racialized, sexualized, and gendered identity, drama offers the opportunity to consider the performativity of identity in the context of a national space like Canadian theatres.

Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (1991) is only one of many plays in Canada that use poignant “I am” statements to identify the speaker. Works such as Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas* (1991), Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas* (1993), and Nicole Brooks’s *Obeah Opera* (2012) similarly hinge on “I am” statements as a loaded refrain and marker of identity construction. In these plays and national campaigns, “I am” statements construct national, racial, and gendered subject-identities. In doing so, they simultaneously maintain the speaker’s individuality and form collectives. As Ric Knowles contends, drama “is a process of subject formation, of working out—negotiating—who, as a collective, ‘we’ is. And there is no better site for such a negotiation than the live, public forum that is theatre” (vi). The repetition of “I am” declarations in popular campaigns and in Canadian drama is symptomatic of a renewed interest in questions of self-identification.

Moses’s *Almighty Voice* grapples with questions of Aboriginal identity by dramatizing confrontational “I am” statements. *Almighty Voice* (Kisse-Manitou-Wayou) was a Cree man who lived in Saskatchewan during the end of the nineteenth century. In order to feed himself and his community, *Almighty Voice* killed one of his father’s cows. Colonial officials, however, believed that the cow—and all steers given to Native peoples under the treaties—was the property of the Crown and subsequently arrested *Almighty Voice* for stealing property. He was incarcerated in the town of Duck Lake, which is where the second half of Moses’s play

takes place. There was construction outside of the jail and Almighty Voice overheard a jailer jest that they were building a scaffold for Almighty Voice's impending execution. Thinking the joke to be true, Almighty Voice fled prison and was chased by the mounted police. "A tasteless joke," as Jo-Ann Episkenew says, "set in motion one of the biggest manhunts in Canadian history" (156). His escape ended in a shootout with, as legend has it, over one hundred mounted police and Almighty Voice was killed. Until Moses's play, primarily non-Native authors rewrote the myth and often acknowledged their cultural distance from the mythic hero. In an attempt to take back this myth, Moses retells both the story of Almighty Voice and the story of its appropriation by colonialist histories. Moses, as a result, contributes to the ever-growing field of revisionist drama—plays that retell popular narratives for a political or cultural purpose.

Moses's play crosses cultures, generations, and theatrical styles. In response to the lack of historical material on Almighty Voice's wives, Moses tells the story of Almighty Voice's marriage to a brave Cree woman named White Girl. Set in the nineteenth century, the first act dramatizes Almighty Voice's marriage to White Girl and battle with the Mounties. The second act is set in a present-day school auditorium and parodies the transmission of "Indian" stereotypes in contemporary culture. In act 2, Almighty Voice appears as his own Ghost and White Girl enacts the role of the white male Interlocutor at a high school where he is putting on an instructional production of Indian culture: both characters wear whiteface. *Almighty Voice* begins with the playful courtship of Almighty Voice and White Girl in act 1 only to revert to a minstrel and vaudevillian performance of Indian stereotypes in act 2. Moses's play, as Rob Appleford suggests, exposes the mainstream desire to possess Aboriginal peoples through representation of the "real" Native (21). Moses inverts the minstrel tradition and its use of blackface to parody stereotypes of African slaves by using whiteface to parody stereotypes of the red-faced Indian savage. White Girl, as the white-faced Interlocutor, falsifies colonial history's claims to truth, telling Almighty Voice (who is now Ghost) that "it's up to you and me to try and lie [. . .] convincingly" (32). The ordering of the play, which moves from Almighty Voice and White Girl to a White Interlocutor's second-hand version of their tale, enacts a larger narrative of historical revision. In the play's final scene, however, both Ghost and Interlocutor begin to question the whiteface roles as they rediscover their identities from act 1. *Almighty Voice* ends with the couple dancing by a fire as a symbol of their renewed and transformative selfhood (61).

In a work that reshapes earlier versions of the Almighty Voice myth, the performative "I am" utterances are a key strategy for speaking back to colonial legends and a history of enforced Christianity in Canada. *Almighty Voice* responds to the civilizing claims of the Christian education of Aboriginal peoples in Canada by dramatizing White Girl's struggle with school: "They try to make you talk like they do. It's like stones in your mouth" (8). Each act features a crisis of identity that culminates in self-assertive statements, such as "I'm no ghost" (10) and "I am the wife of Almighty Voice" (20). In the final attempt at self-assertion, Almighty Voice recognizes his wife by her "eyes"—a pun on the seeing "eye" and the subject "I"—and emphasizes the importance of self-defining "I" statements. Moses, however, also links the "I am" declarations to, what White Girl refers to as the Judeo-Christian "glass-eyed god" (20). But how do self-narrations engage with the Judeo-Christian "I AM" and earlier versions of the Almighty Voice myth without valorizing these very resonances? In re-appro-



Derek Garza (*Almighty Voice*) and PJ Prudat (*White Girl*) in Native Earth's 2011 production of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (directed by Michael Greyeyes). Photo by Nir Bareket.

priating religious rhetoric, Moses uses parody to at once repeat and undermine the earlier narratives of colonial settlement; most importantly, the parody has a transformative effect that changes the significance of the Judeo-Christian "I AM" by connecting it to *White Girl*'s experience in a residential school and by appropriating it as a symbol of her resistance. In short, "I am" takes on multiple meanings and conflicting resonances. This palimpsestic

experience governs Moses's re-conceptualization of the "I" as layered and performative. The "I am" declarations at once define the self and establish a pluralistic notion of identity as layered and changing, which is an integral basis for countering Indian stereotypes and accepted colonial histories.

In Moses's play, the chorus of "I am" statements complicates individual, singular identity by connecting the individual speaker to the audience, thereby forging a joined collective. As Paula Gunn Allen explains, "every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole" (60); for Allen, "repetition [in Aboriginal stories] operates like the chorus in Western drama" that serves to "reinforce the theme" while it "integrates or fuses" (63). The play's repeated "I am" declarations demonstrate the theme of individual identity in relationship to the First Nations shared, collective experience of Euro-colonialism. "I am" narratives—or, in Episkenew's words, "personal myths"—are relational acts that necessarily involve the audience (15). As Episkenew says:

Personal myths play a central role in the construction of identity. Without a complete and coherent personal myth, a person is prone to suffer from emotional and mental illness. By reconstructing a complete and coherent personal myth and then sharing that myth with others, one can heal from the effects of postcolonial traumatic stress response. (15)

Self-narration, then, helps alleviate individual trauma, and it is the act of sharing one's story that is at the centre of the healing process for both the speaker and the listener. In this way, "I am" declarations bring together the individual speaker and the collective audience (15). "Indigenous literature," Episkenew asserts, "transforms its readers from individuals often living in isolation to members of a larger community of shared stories" (16). In sharing one's personal narrative or "I am" declaration with others, the speaker and the audience not only come together as a joined collective but they can also begin to heal.

The play's "I am" declarations dramatize the legacies of past traumas and shared performances of Indianness. Whereas J. L. Austin imbues the speaking subject with the power to act through language, Judith Butler emphasizes the authority of the performed convention itself. *Almighty Voice*, however, illustrates a symbiotic connection between the authority of the language and the authority of the speaker. To apply Austin's speech act theory, the "I am" declaration performs an action and gains its authority from both the speaker and the speaker's delivery. Yet as Butler's theories of performative identity would suggest, the history of the "I am" statement resounds with each delivery and, as a result, the declaration invokes authority through citation. There are four main functions of "I am" utterances in Moses's play: 1) to describe and thereby constitute the self; 2) to forge belongingness to a community; 3) to assert ownership over identificatory categories; and 4) to emphasize individual identity as distinct from yet simultaneously connected to a group.

Moses ultimately harnesses these four functions in order to destabilize notions of the "real Indian" as well as the authority of the Biblical "I AM." "The *indian*," as Gerald Vizenor reminds us, "is a misnomer, a simulation with no referent" because "Indians are the other, the names of sacrifice and victimry" (27).³ Through the multiple and changing "I am" declarations, Moses challenges the significance of the Judeo-Christian "I AM" by connecting it not to a single divine entity but to Almighty Voice and White Girl's mutable identities. In

using “I am” declarations to perform layered identities, the play dramatizes John Pizer’s contention that “[a]uthentic origins are inherently plural and divergent, and an extended mediation upon them both reinvigorates attention to history and subverts the supremacist claims of particular groups by showing that their ethnicity, religion, or discipline is ‘always already’—from the origin—entangled with others” (14). *Almighty Voice* presents the self as an adaptation that is “inherently plural” and “‘always already’ [. . .] entangled with others”: like the play’s literary form as an adaptation, *Almighty Voice* and *White Girl*’s identities are layered, informed by earlier myths of the legendary Kisse-Manitou-Wayou, and connected to a larger collective of Aboriginal narratives and peoples. As a revisionist adaptation, *Almighty Voice*’s dramatic form reflects and reinforces the play’s performed notion of transformative, palimpsestic selfhood.

Almighty Voice and His Wife: Four Functions of “I am”

Self-defining utterances describe and create the speaker’s identity, as in the “I am Canadian” speech. Applying Austin’s speech act theory—which claims that to say something is to do or create something—to “I am” statements exposes the constitutive functions of self-assertive declarations. The beginning of Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife* demonstrates this self-defining strategy as *White Girl* and *Almighty Voice* establish their individual identities and familial unit. In the very first scene, *White Girl* declares “I am a crazy one” (5) and tells *Almighty Voice* that “I’m going to be your wife now” (6). When the treaty agent tries to rename *Almighty Voice* “John Baptist,” *Almighty Voice* rejects the Judeo-Christian appellation and asserts his own identity, proclaiming “I’m *Almighty Voice*” (10). *Almighty Voice* later recalls this self-assertive moment and defines himself as someone “who’s not afraid to say his name” (16). In fact, when *White Girl* struggles with her traumatic memories of residential school, *Almighty Voice*’s name rekindles her self-knowledge:

VOICE: [. . .] You married *Almighty Voice*, who’s not afraid to say his name. Let your glass god hear it. *Almighty Voice!*—who has listened to our fathers and heard what they say. *Almighty Voice*, who remembers our Creator and our people’s ways. *Almighty Voice* knows how to fight for you. Do you hear what I’m saying? Do you?

GIRL: Yes. Yes, I do.

VOICE: Who is saying it?

GIRL: *Almighty Voice*.

VOICE: Remember who you are. Remember what your mother taught you.

GIRL: *Almighty Voice*, the husband of *White Girl!* (16)

Almighty Voice’s name acts as a punctuating marker and metonym for their rejection of the Judeo-Christian “glass god,” belief in “our Creator,” and knowledge of “our people’s ways.” In order to remember “who you are” and “what your mother taught you,” *White Girl* repeats *Almighty Voice*’s name as she chants, “*Almighty Voice* [. . .] *Almighty Voice*” (17). Marking her self-realization, *White Girl* finally becomes the primary named subject when she defines *Almighty Voice* as “the husband of *White Girl!*” (17). In these opening scenes, their empowered self-naming is rooted in agency and self-constitution.

I would like to complicate the first function of self-assertions by accounting for speech acts that demonstrate an inner confusion and self-loss. White Girl's self-identifications as "Marrie" (10), "crazy one" (5), "White Girl" (13), and "wife" (20) exemplify her inner instability as she oscillates between her Judeo-Christian and Cree identities. White Girl's troubled self-naming signifies the lack of historical records on Almighty Voice's wives and her absence from the popular legend. Episkenew explains that "[t]he historical Almighty Voice is reported to have had four wives—evidently, he was not a Christian—but nothing is known of them. Those who have authored the documents that form the historical record have rarely considered First Nations women sufficiently important to record their names and stories" (157-8). Speaking to her omission from national records, White Girl tells the audience and Judeo-Christian god, "You don't know my name" because "I'm only a crazy squaw" (20). White Girl's self-naming, then, not only signifies her self-constitution but also her erasure from history. Butler warns that "as much as it is necessary to [. . .] lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories" (174). For Butler, the history of the identificatory category also signals the "history of the usages that one never controlled" (174). Almighty Voice's name, for instance, elicits the history of the Judeo-Christian "Almighty" God just as "squaw" and "White Girl" resound with the history of colonial stereotypes and white settler culture, respectively. Self-naming, then, constitutes the self, but the history of the identificatory category—such as "squaw," "wife," "husband," Virgin Mary (or "Marrie"), and "White Girl"—also signals the previous usages of the label that the speaker did not control. In fact, each "I am" function has both a self-affirming and a self-effacing potential, which I outline below. With "I am" statements, therefore, the speaker lays claim to the identificatory label, yet paradoxically, this very label may also constrain the speaker's autonomy.⁴

Marking the second and third functions, self-defining utterances often assert a sense of belonging to and ownership of the identificatory categories and of the self. In establishing belongingness, Episkenew asserts that self-defining "stories show us that we are not alone" and "can help dislocated 'tribal relations' reconnect with their communities" (16). As a form of self-narration, "I am" statements transform isolated individuals into "members of a larger community" of identificatory categories and of "shared stories" (16). The speaker also stakes a proprietary claim over the identificatory label at once belonging to and asserting ownership over an appellation. As Miri Albahari argues, thoughts of "me,' mine,' or 'I am'" express a sense of "possessive ownership" (53). "I am" declarations, however, can also reduce the speaker to the property of an identificatory category; as mentioned above, a treaty agent tries to rename Almighty Voice as "John Baptist," which White Girl explains is "the name of one of their ghosts" (10). White Girl's Christian name, which she mars by comically mispronouncing Mary as "Marrie" (10, emphasis added), similarly indexes the Christian school's attempt to convert her. These acts of renaming suggest a belonging to the Christian faith and to the political project of converting the Aboriginal peoples. Yet Almighty Voice adamantly rejects the new Biblical names prescribed by the treaty agent, thereby renouncing any sense of belonging to the Christian religion when he declares, "I'm no ghost" (10). Although Almighty Voice rejects the Biblical pseudonym, White Girl interprets her new name as a potential disguise and survival tool: "Their god won't be able to touch us. Just call

me Marrie” (10). The play, however, warns against this acceptance of socially prescribed identities when White Girl later confronts the “Great White God” (20) and her forced Christian name. The problematic strategy of donning a colonizer’s mask is also carried out with disturbing results when Almighty Voice and White Girl wear whiteface in the second act.

Moses capitalizes on the Biblical resonance of “I am” when White Girl reclaims ownership over the power to name herself. White Girl uses tools of Christianity—“I AM,” a prayer, and the Eucharist—to defy the Judeo-Christian god as she recalls memories of sexual abuse at the residential school (20). “Her ‘marriage’ to god,” as Episkenew explains, “takes on another dimension when god’s helper, as husband by proxy, is the one who consummates that marriage” (160). As her hybrid name “Crazy Marrie” suggests, White Girl struggles to harmonize her two identities as the White God’s Mary and Almighty Voice’s wife. In a prayer, she further confuses her Native and Biblical names, asking her “husband god” to “see what a little girl I am” (20). This panicked prayer blends Almighty Voice’s appellation “little girl” with the Biblical “I am,” revealing the tension between her Cree and Christian selves. Repetition marks internal conflict as White Girl relives her experiences of sexual abuse at the residential school:

Mister. Mister! Mister God! I see your glass eye. Eye-eye! Stinky breath. It’s me. Marrie! Marrie, your wife. Wife wife wife! God, look at me like before. How they taught me at school. How how. Here’s my hair. Look. Here’s my skin. How how, husband god, see what a little girl I am. Great husband god, see what a little girl I am. Great White God of the ghost men, mother is here. (19-20)

The structural repetition inherent in the act of remembrance frames the stylistic repetition of certain words (“look,” “wife,” “eye”) and phrases (“see what a little girl I am”). As Cathy Caruth argues, there is a doubleness to trauma—the traumatic event itself and the memory of it that replays in one’s mind and through one’s stories of the past. Her prayer employs epizeuxis, that is, the successive repetition of single words, to accelerate the rhythm and emphasize the forcefulness of her memory: “husband god, see what a little girl I am. [. . .] Blood blood blood between my thighs. [. . .] Oh yes, yes, you’re rotten, rotten meat, but wifey wife will eat you up. [. . .] Come on! [. . .] Eye-eye! See! Eye-eye” (20). As “*the bloody moon rises*” in the backdrop (19), her repetition of “Blood blood blood” encourages the audience to imagine the blood spreading between her thighs as an emblem of the violent consummation of her marriage to the husband god. The heated repetition of “yes,” “Come on,” and “Eye-eye,” rhetorically climaxes while it signals Mister God’s (or the priest’s) physical orgasm. Repetition, as a result, at once marks her traumatic memory as well as her strategies to redefine herself as an autonomous “I.”

In her repetitious prayer, White Girl not only performs her conflicted identities but also challenges god, shouting “stupid god, this is what you want!” (20). Although Episkenew suggests that “the result [of her time in residential school] is unresolved trauma that White Girl self-diagnoses as craziness” (160), White Girl enacts control over her past traumatic experiences by instigating the memory, confronting the White God, and appropriating the self-constituting power of the “I am” declaration. This sexual monologue imbues White Girl with power: by adopting the language of the Eucharist, she “will eat” the White God and reclaim

authority. The repeated “eye-eye” at once references the all-seeing god, the stereotypical sound of chanting Indians, and the individual “I.” After this speech, she shifts from the god’s ocular “eye” to her own individual “I” when she announces that “I am the wife of Almighty Voice” and, further separating herself from the Christian God, says, “You don’t know my name” (20). With White Girl’s speech acts, Moses re-identifies her as White Girl and exposes the power of performative “I am” utterances to reclaim rather than merely describe an identity.

The final function of self-assertive statements—to posit individual identity as distinct yet connected to a group—occurs due to repetition. I argue that it is not merely the identificatory category or descriptor, but the first person singular pronoun “I” and the subject’s delivery that has self-defining properties. In repeating “I am” declarations in succession, the individual speaker reinforces the existence of the “I.” When White Girl repeats, “see what a little girl I am” in the above speech (19, 20), she at once demands attention from the Judeo-Christian God and emphasizes her individual selfhood.⁵ Her invocation, “Eye-Eye! See! Eye-Eye, Mister God. Eye-Eye!” (20), reaffirms this doubled identification through the homophonic pun “eye” that at once underscores her own “I” and calls upon the God’s all-seeing “eye.” The emphatic repetition of the performative “I” utterance can authorize the speaker’s selfhood as much as the descriptor or name itself.

Whether empowering or disempowering, “I am” statements place the declaration and the speaker in relation to the citational history of the utterance—a genealogy that includes previous “I am” assertions in the play itself as well as in the play’s multiple intertexts and interperformances. Moses uses multi-generational intertexts (Biblical to contemporary), multiple languages (English, Cree), various styles (realism, vaudeville, melodrama), and cross-cultural allusions (Canadian, American, Cree, colonial European) in order to expose the dramatic text as a heteroglossic and formally diverse medium. Almighty Voice’s series of “I am” declarations is performed in the context of a colonial legend and vaudeville theatricality. Moses speaks back to the many different versions of the Almighty Voice legend, including Pauline Johnson’s poem “The Cattle Thief” (1900), Rudy Wiebe’s short story “Where is the Voice Coming From?” (1974), and Pierre Berton’s historical account *The Wild Frontier: More Tales from the Remarkable Past* (1978), among others.⁶ In particular, Moses’s second act parodies Leonard Peterson’s historical play *Almighty Voice*, originally performed by Young People’s Theatre of Toronto in 1970, which casts children as wild “*chanting and dancing*” Indians (12). Referencing Peterson’s school productions that directed the audience of children to act as “volunteers for our outposts at Duck Lake” (15), Moses sets his second act in a school’s auditorium at Duck Lake. Moses’s Interlocutor even asks for a performance of Indianness that echoes Peterson’s “*dancing*” Indians: “Would you now consider performing, Mister Ghost, for our attentive friends, that charming curiosity you called a dance?” (41). With the stylistic shifts between acts, Moses distances the second act’s parodic enactments of Native stereotypes from the first act’s more spectral portrayal of Almighty Voice and White Girl’s loving relationship. As well as responding to versions of the Almighty Voice myth, the second act’s minstrel show also references the Geronimo legend, Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West exhibitions, and Mister Tambo.⁷ The individual “I am” statements as well as the play are connected to these intertexts and performance traditions. The play’s interperformances (minstrelsy, mortgage melodrama, Wild West shows), religious allusions (Biblical “I AM,” Virgin Mary, John Baptist), and response to earlier variations of the

Almighty Voice myth (Johnson, Wiebe, Peterson, Berton) complement the notion of the self as multiple and diverse: both the dramatic text and the self are layered. These layers reinforce the complexity of the text and self while simultaneously referencing past versions that were authored and controlled by others.

Who am I? Understanding the Self as Adaptation

Despite Almighty Voice's and White Girl's defiant "I am" utterances in the first act, the initial threats to their identities are realized in act 2 when White Girl appears as an agent of colonial doctrine in her role as the White Interlocutor and Almighty Voice appears as Ghost. Both Interlocutor and Ghost wear whiteface. The second act, with its vaudeville renditions of Indian jokes, songs, and skits all performed in whiteface, recalls the minstrel traditions of nineteenth-century America "when white men (and black men, and sometimes women) applied a coal-black makeup made from burnt cork, and behaved in front of an audience as if they were African Americans" (S. Johnson, "Introduction" 2). By enacting minstrelsy, *Almighty Voice* highlights the similar performance techniques at work in stereotypes of black-faced African Americans and red-faced Indians. Moses's Interlocutor demands entertaining performances from the Indian Ghost just as audiences across nineteenth-century America celebrated the musical minstrels. Moses, then, reveals the popular Indian figure to be another articulation of minstrelsy.

Yet *Almighty Voice* does more than apply minstrel dynamics to performances of Indians. The play—with Aboriginal actors playing Interlocutor and Ghost in whiteface—inverts minstrelsy's racial othering of African Americans and Aboriginal peoples by using face paint to signal a white race and by reducing settler-invader culture to a pale skin colour. Moses himself argues for the subversive potential of whiteface because "Once white itself is a ghost, colour will be just a too-simple beginning of rich and strange complexities" ("How My Ghosts" 81). Exemplifying the play's metatheatrical intricacies, the Interlocutor enacts racechange and cross-dressing when she pretends to be a white male Mountie disguised as a Native woman in "The Playlet" scene (51).⁸ *Almighty Voice* is ground breaking in its implementation of whiteface to parody the red-faced Indian and presents white as "a too-simple" performance of racial complexities.

While some critics, such as Dorinne Kondo and Helen Gilbert, argue that whiteface references the minstrel tradition and the white oppression of minority groups, I contend that Moses's use of whiteface demonstrates the performativity of racial identities and thereby destabilizes minstrelsy as an artificial performance. Susan Gubar, on the one hand, argues that racechange involves "the traversing of race boundaries" and exposes the "mutability" of racial identities (5). Kondo and Gilbert, on the other hand, each warn against Gubar's over-idealization of whiteface because racechange works within a history of racial stratification: Kondo argues that racechange is "systematically encoded and maintained in structures of white privilege that persist despite individual intentionality" (100); Gilbert similarly interjects that "racial impersonation often indexes white power" (681). However, in addition to mimicking racist discriminations against Aboriginal culture, Moses uses whiteface to expose minstrelsy and redface as strategic exaggerations of race that not only index white power but also racial prejudice. Although the historical use of minstrelsy as a strategy for reinforcing

racist codes informs the reception of whiteface, Gilbert concedes that whiteface “can also set up opportunities to de-essentialize race” (681). In *Almighty Voice*’s second act, the artificiality of whiteface emphasizes the constructedness of self-defining utterances and the sheer performativity of Aboriginal stereotypes.

W. T. Lhamon Jr. maintains, “at least three core groups organize themselves around signs of blackface” (34). The first group “deploys its codes to scandalize blacks, believing that the stereotypes they have imputed to blacks deserve scornful laughter” (34). Group two, by contrast, “appropriate[s] those negative codes” of blackness in order “to invert them” and expose their “bigoted condescension” (34). The third group “work[s] to outlaw the scandalized sign of blackness—burnt cork and its gestural surrogates”—and thereby functions outside of the minstrel performance tradition (35). Moses, to apply Lhamon’s categorization of minstrel codes, participates in the second group’s strategies by adopting the minstrel tradition in order to reveal both the prevalence and the uncomfortable entertainment value of the red-faced Indian figure in popular culture. *Almighty Voice* targets the minstrel performers and the audience. Just as the history of minstrelsy reveals key moments of reversal where “the target was not the actor but the public who cheered what he portrayed” (39), Moses indicts the audience as a complicit participant in the reification of the red-faced Indian.

Almighty Voice’s vaudevillian performance and breaking of the fourth wall call attention to the role of the viewers by reminding the audience that they are watching an artificial production of Aboriginal culture. In fact, the play alienates the audience by prompting them to disassociate themselves from the racist Interlocutor who addresses the viewers as “dear friends” and expects them to share a concern over the “indigent Indian problem” (40). Enacting the imagined audience’s reaction, Ghost responds “Bravo! Bravo, Mister Interlocutor” (40). In this instance, misrepresentations of Indians extend to an uncomfortable misrepresentation of the off-stage audience. Moses here encourages the audience to identify themselves in relation to the play’s imagined racist audience: the viewers can echo the Ghost’s model of applause for the Indian stereotypes or they can refuse to participate in the applause and distance themselves from the Interlocutor. Although each audience member either chooses to share in or deny the applause, the viewer’s role is not such a divisive one because the entire audience experiences, however begrudgingly, the entertainment of the minstrel show. In a review of *Almighty Voice*, Peter Dickinson explains that the play accomplishes the “double task of exposing both real and representational violence to us, theatricalizing Aboriginal stereotypes and then catching us in the act of succumbing to them.” Moses avoids a simple bifurcated relationship between a politically correct, morally upstanding audience and the Interlocutor’s detestable political incorrectness by demonstrating the entertaining allure of the very stereotypes he seeks to challenge.

Along with implicating the audience in the perpetuation of Indian stereotypes, *Almighty Voice*’s use of whiteface offers the cathartic opportunity to remove a white mask. The play ends with Ghost and Interlocutor’s racial striptease as they wipe away the white layers from their face and as the Interlocutor asks, “Who am I?” (61). The stage directions note that White Girl’s “gloved hands begin to wipe the whiteface off, unmasking the woman inside” as she becomes “White Girl again” (61). Ghost offers her the many different conceptions of her Native self from act one and re-names her “White Girl,” “crazy little girl,” “my wife,” and finally “*Ni-wiki-makan*” or “my wife” in Cree (61). But it is in articulating White Girl’s multiple identities that



Derek Garza (Ghost) and PJ Prudat (Interlocutor) in Native Earth's 2011 production of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (directed by Michael Greyeyes). Photo by Nir Bareket.

Ghost simultaneously begins to redefine himself as her husband. This renaming enacts Almighty Voice and White Girl's rediscovery of their Aboriginal selves without the framework of a didactic "Indian" showcase. The removal of whiteface and the return to their roles as Almighty Voice and White Girl does not suggest that there is an essential, static Aboriginal identity but rather a complex, transformative identity that can be sifted out from the deluge of racial stereotypes. In "deliberately refusing to satisfy the settler audience's desire" for a "real" authentic Native, Episkenew asserts that "Moses characterizes Almighty Voice as a mere mortal, a flawed human being like the rest of us" (162). Moses, according to Episkenew, rejects the characterization of Almighty Voice as the "almighty Native voice" and as a "homegrown superhero" with "the realism of Act 1" (162). Building on Episkenew's reading, I argue that Moses further critiques the mythic characterization of the cattle thief when Almighty Voice and White Girl struggle to return to their identities as wife and husband in the closing moments of the play. Moses's treatment of the self parallels his representation of the Almighty Voice legend: just as the characters' self-identifications ("I am") underscore and constrain the speakers' autonomy, the earlier versions of the Almighty Voice legend at once reinforce Almighty Voice's historical significance and distort him into a man of mythic proportions.

Reciting the final lines in Cree, Ghost and Interlocutor respond to non-Native's stories of Almighty Voice and highlight Moses's own use of the English language:

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

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

Here, White Girl calls Almighty Voice by his Cree name for the first time, at once drawing attention to the Cree language and to Moses's use of the English language throughout most

of the play. Reflecting on his first encounter with the Almighty Voice legend in school, Moses says that he “hadn’t realized how much space there might be between the lines of such [historical] documents, hadn’t seen the difficulties in translation between the language of English and, for instance, Cree, between the respective cultures and sets of values, between, for instance, what each community thought was the definition of human” (“How My Ghosts” 70). The ending of *Almighty Voice* responds to this space between the languages of English and Cree. With the last line of Moses’s play, White Girl re-identifies Almighty Voice as Kisse-Manitou-Wayou, which, in turn, helps them confront and grapple with their Cree identities. This final scene marks yet another shift in theatrical form as Almighty Voice and White Girl transition from the minstrel tradition to a freeing dance. Ultimately, Almighty Voice and White Girl can only respond to the question “Who am I?” in the Cree language and through a ritual dance. Signalling future growth and continued transformation of self, White Girl “lifts a baby-sized bundle to the audience” as Almighty Voice “continues to dance in the fading lights” (61) of the play’s final moments. The baby-sized bundle gestures towards future generations’ inheritance of the Almighty Voice legend and of self-defining strategies. The play ends not with a return to their earlier Aboriginal identities but with the creation of a new life and of future promise as symbolized by the fire, dance, and child.

Moses’s final scene and use of Cree offer a response to Rudy Wiebe’s short story “Where is the Voice Coming From?” As the title of the short story suggests, Wiebe questions the narrativization of the First Nations legends and history. Beginning with an announced awareness of narrative’s history-making potential, Wiebe declares that “the problem is to make the story” (78). While Wiebe’s short story poeticizes Almighty Voice as “an incredible voice that rises from among the young poplars ripped of their spring bark, from among the dead somewhere lying there” (86), it ends with a pronounced and regretted distance between the narrator and subject. The narrator can only describe Almighty Voice’s poetic cry as “wordless” because, unfortunately, “that is the way it sounds to me . . . For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself” (12). As a response to this difficult untranslatability, the final lines of *Almighty Voice* call attention to the difference in language while still retaining Cree as a rich signifier of cultural identity. By introducing Cree as a mode of expression at the end of the play, Moses participates in a school of criticism that refutes the normative image of an English-speaking white Canada and the “previously assumed standard” of English or French literature and drama (Coleman 4). As Daniel Coleman explains, “many commentators have celebrated the veritable explosion of multicultural or minority writing over the past thirty years in Canada, because they see in it the potential to pluralize what had been a bicultural image of Canada” (4). Moses exemplifies the potential to pluralize the “normative concept of (English) Canadianness” through his complex characterizations of Almighty Voice and White Girl as well as his use of the Cree language (4).

Throughout the play, the “I am” statements perform many revisionist moves by giving Almighty Voice and White Girl authority over their own names, re-appropriating Biblical rhetoric, challenging the truth-claims of colonial history, and exposing the theatricality of racialized identities. Yet the final pursuit of identification—“Who am I?”—leaves the audience with more questions than answers. Almighty Voice and White Girl’s identities cannot be fully defined in English because although the “I am” statements have a self-constitutive function they also inevitably constrain the speakers through their reference to the history

of naming and stereotypes that Almighty Voice, White Girl, and Moses never controlled. *Almighty Voice* recasts stereotypes of the so-called “real Indian” by presenting the “real” self as illusive and transformative. Trinh T. Minh-ha—whose theories also emerged from experiences of colonization—explains that dominant ideologies conceive of the “genuine, original, authentic self” as un-changing or homogenous, which renders difference oppositional to the “real” core self and “supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I” (415). I see Moses as working alongside Minh-ha to re-define difference not as antithetical to but as an intrinsic part of the self. Moses at once challenges traditional notions of an original text or performance and an unambiguously unified self.

Self-assertive speech acts are a microcosm for the revisionist play as a whole. In the context of *Almighty Voice*, the “I am” statements have a complex lineage, including Native mythologies, contemporary works, colonial histories, and the Bible. Both the individual “I am” statements as well as the play as a whole are connected laterally to these intertexts because they refuse to privilege a singular text as the authoritative source. In contributing yet another narrative variation (or layer) to the Almighty Voice myth, Moses’s narrative creates a palimpsestic identity of the mythic figure: the “I am” statements’ intertextuality and interperformativity highlight Almighty Voice’s layered, transformative identity. The literary form of revisionist adaptation, therefore, not only parallels but also contributes to the re-theorizing of the self. As one of many identity and narrative layers, Almighty Voice is simultaneously a singular “I” and a collective “we”—he belongs to White Girl, the many different versions of the myth, and the collective of Aboriginal peoples that this play speaks to. The play’s final question, “Who am I?” is not simply replaced but necessarily accompanied by the question of “Who are we?” As with the “I am” declarations and misrepresentations of Aboriginal culture, this question of identity extends to the audience as we collectively and individually ask: who defines this “we” in Canada?

Notes

- 1 The CBC Digital Archives provides a news report on “just how huge a phenomenon” the “I am Canadian” and Joe’s “rant” had become in the new millennium (CBC Television).
- 2 In 2011, the Canadian Centre for Diversity’s televised and billboard advertisements also showcased a Chinese man proclaiming that “I am a Jew when I am learning about the Holocaust” and an able-bodied woman asserting, “I am a person with special needs when I am realizing how inaccessible our world is.” These declarations, among others used by the campaign, are connected through montage in the televised advertisement. In this way, the speakers are linked thematically (as idealized empathizers) and stylistically (with quick film cuts), which suggest a homogenous experience. The Canadian Centre for Diversity directs the viewer to “see different,” yet the slogans and filmic technique of montage privilege similarity by presenting difference as a universal experience. The campaign serves as a cautionary example of the assimilative potential of “I am” declarations when used to define a group. See the Canadian Centre for Diversity website for information about the campaign and national diversity.
- 3 In its critique of simulated Indianness, *Almighty Voice and His Wife* targets the popular and long-standing commodification of the manufactured, racial “resemblance” of African Americans and

Aboriginal peoples; minstrelsy, as Dale Cockrell explains, speaks to “a time when ‘resemblance’ was advertised as the real and was sold through the power of music” (65).

- 4 This same paradox holds true for literary adaptations because an adaptation’s connection to a source enriches the adaptation’s narrative layers and market value while simultaneously impeding its originality. Though adaptations benefit from their relation to a known source or popular narrative, Robert Stam explains that critical commentary on adaptations often involves accusations of parasitism with pejoratives such as “‘infidelity,’ ‘betrayal,’ ‘deformation,’ ‘violation,’ ‘vulgarization,’ ‘bastardization,’ and ‘desecration’” (3). See Stam’s *Literature through Film* and Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* for further discussion of the commercial benefit of adaptation as well as common denunciations of adaptations as second and therefore secondary.
- 5 The Bible further demonstrates how successive “I am” declarations can give authority to the message while validating the speaker as an independent, truth-teller. Theologians explore the interrelated significance of the narrating “I” and repetition in the Christian epic tradition and the Old Testament. By analyzing the subject-making powers of language in the Bible and literature, William Franke notes that “only in being repeated can revelation be realized and validated” (157). Richard S. Briggs similarly argues that repetition validates the Ten Commandments and suggests that we “hear this testimony to the word of God twice, because it is to be taken as reliable” (110). Applying these theological examples to the contemporary usage of “I am” declarations not only demonstrates the Biblical lineage of the “I am” statement but also the history of this very function.
- 6 Just as Moses concludes his play with the image of Almighty Voice’s baby, Johnson ends “The Cattle Thief” with the voice of Almighty Voice’s child. Johnson’s poem describes the “band of cursing settlers” as they kill “the famous Eagle Chief” (28), and, most poignantly, features Almighty Voice’s daughter who demands that the settlers “Go back with your new religion, we have never understood” (28-29). In “Where is the Voice Coming From?,” by comparison, Wiebe challenges the historicization of the myth as a celebration of a Cree man’s death. Just as Moses responds to the lack of historical record on Almighty Voice’s wives, Wiebe questions the validity of the different historical versions and museum artefacts (such as a photo, a piece of Almighty Voice’s skull, and the Mounties’ canon). Unlike Johnson and Wiebe, Berton is quite critical of Almighty Voice, describing him as “a restless and volatile youth” who indulged in a “consuming but transitory interest in young girls” as evidenced by his four marriages (213). While Johnson blames the settlers and explains that Almighty Voice was “hollow with hunger” (29), Berton critiques this “motive” and suggests that “Almighty Voice and his seventeen-year-old crony, Flying Sound” killed the steer on a whim (214). Moses’s depiction of White Girl seems to respond to Berton’s vilifying portraiture of Almighty Voice’s “crony” as much as it does to the lack of historical records on Cree women.
- 7 Geronimo (1829-1909), like Almighty Voice, has been shrouded by legend. A Chiricahua Apache leader, Geronimo is perhaps best known for leading battles against Mexico and the United States in efforts to stop their expansion on Apache tribal lands; legend purports that Geronimo sought vengeance against the Mexican soldiers who killed his family in 1858 and surrendered to the US after a lengthy pursuit in 1886. Robert Utley explains that Geronimo was not actually a chief—a commonly held belief—and that “the real person beneath the legend is more of a ghost” (x). Buffalo Bill, or William Frederick Cody, was a Buffalo hunter and theatre practitioner who is best known for his Wild West shows, which integrated vaudeville and rodeo elements by dramatizing

glorified battles between cowboys and Indians among other feats that represented the American frontier. While Buffalo Bill helped popularize stereotypes of the wild Indians, Mister Tambo is a stock character of minstrel shows and represents a stereotypical Black character that joyfully plays the tambourine. Mister Tambo and an interlocutor were standard characters in the nineteenth-century minstrel shows. For more information on Geronimo, Buffalo Bill, and Mister Tambo, respectively, see Utley's *Geronimo*, Robert A. Carter's *Buffalo Bill Cody*, and Stephen Johnson's (editor) *Burnt Cork*.

- ⁸ The Playlet scene enacts a mortgage melodrama wherein a Sweet Sioux (White Girl/Interlocutor) cannot pay the mortgage on her father's farm and the Chief Magistrate (Almighty Voice/Ghost) tries to take both the farm and the woman. When the Chief Magistrate (Almighty Voice/Ghost) is about to rape the Sweet Sioux (White Girl/Interlocutor), she reveals herself to be the Corporal Red Coat of the Mounted Police and arrests the Chief Magistrate. In this scene, the actress who played the role of White Girl in act 1 now performs racechange and cross-dressing in the layered roles of Interlocutor/Sweet Sioux/Corporal Red Coat. The scene concludes with the Corporal Red Coat of the Mounted Police (White Girl/Interlocutor) killing the Chief Magistrate (Almighty Voice/Ghost) in yet another version of the vanishing Indian narrative. Dying, Ghost says, "the only good Indians are the ones who are sainted" (56).

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