

YVETTE NOLAN.

*Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture.*

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2015. 169 pp.

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*Medicine Shows* by Yvette Nolan (Métis) is written with the authority of lived experience. As Nolan explains, it is not a chronological summary of Indigenous theatre produced in Canada, nor is it an academic treatise; Nolan writes personally of the work she has witnessed and produced in more than three decades of active involvement in Canadian and Indigenous theatre. The strength of this book is in the connections Nolan makes between artists, productions, histories, and themes. She is describing a performance culture, offering an entry point from which to appreciate the ongoing development of Indigenous theatre in Canada.

The Indigenous concept of medicine informs Nolan's understanding of theatre performance and frames the book: "Indigenous theatre artists make medicine by reconnecting through ceremony, through the act of remembering, through building community, and by negotiating solidarities across communities" (3). The book is structured thematically and offered as a medicine bundle to foster connections between the past, present, and future of Indigenous performance, and between Indigenous theatre artists and the larger artistic community in Canada.

The first chapter, "Poison Exposed," refers to a quote from Lyle Longclaws chosen as the epigraph to Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*: "before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed" (7). The poison referred to is the disconnection between men and women forced by the dominant settler culture's assimilation attempts, including the legacy of residential schools. This is a theme treated in many of the plays discussed, from Highway's *Dry Lips* to Ian Ross's *fare Wel* to Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes*. While the works included here have enjoyed some recognition, Nolan laments that few plays cross over to the mainstream and the ones that do seem to reinforce the same theme, namely that "First Nations are damaged, and even within our own communities, we cannot heal" (19).

"Survivance," the second chapter, begins with *Jessica*, co-created by Maria Campbell, Linda Griffith, and Paul Thompson in 1982, which Nolan recognizes as, in many ways, the beginning of Indigenous theatre in Canada. Shirley Cheechoo's *A Path With No Moccasins*, Darrell Dennis's *Tales of an Urban Indian*, Clifford Cardinal's *Huff*, and more work through the poisons that have impacted the lives of their characters—substance abuse, incarceration, violence, suicide—often using humour as an act of resistance

"Remembrance" examines plays that reconstruct history, uncovering the dead to dispel the specter of the "imaginary Indian" (Francis) promulgated through North American culture. While many of the plays featured in this chapter, such as Marie Clements's *Unnatural and Accidental Women* and Keith Barker's *The Hours that Remain*, speak of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, Nolan draws in Daniel David Moses's observation that, "the protagonist of a Native theatre piece is very often a community and not an individual" (41). This choice, in itself, is a rewriting of history, a reclamation

of Indigenous culture, and a resistance to the co-optation of settler narratives and western theatrical forms.

Providing a further remove from Western theatrical forms, the plays discussed in “Ceremony”—Margo Kane’s *Moonlodge*, Waawaate Fobister’s *Medicine Boy*, and Turtle Gals’s *The Scrubbing Project*—use ceremony to allow the characters to enter journeys of healing. This theme is extended to the next chapter, “The Drum,” which focuses on social gathering. Nolan cites the use of the drum in *Tales of an Urban Indian*, Fobister’s *Agokwe*, *The Scrubbing Project*, Daniel David Moses’s *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, and the performance art of Archer Pechawis.

“Making Community” builds on Moses’s assertion that Indigenous plays are about communities, not about individual protagonists. The plays referred to in this chapter are Native Earth productions: *Death of a Chief* (an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*), Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*, Melanie J. Murray’s *A Very Polite Genocide or The Girl Who Fell to Earth*, and Nolan’s own play, *The Unplugging*. Nolan is cognizant of the deracination experienced by Indigenous peoples through residential schools and the “60’s Scoop,” when Aboriginal children were taken from their families and adopted by white families. As a result, many contemporary Aboriginal theatre artists, living in large cities, have lost their connection to their home communities. Rebuilding, reconnecting, and understanding what it means to live in community is a survivance strategy that has been a focus of Native Earth and other urban Indigenous organizations. Nolan returns to her experience as Artistic Director of Native Earth later in the book in “Bad Medicine,” where she acknowledges the negative impact of racist and uninformed reviews on the likelihood of Indigenous work being produced in mainstream theatre and challenges the critical establishment to do better.

“Trickster, Rougaru, Mahigan, and the Weeping Forest” takes a jab at the prevalent academic exercise of “Spot the Trickster,” so called by Moses as a wry recognition of scholars’ tendency to fasten onto the trickster figure as a potent and attractive force in many Indigenous plays, from Nanabush in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, to the rougaru in *A Very Polite Genocide*. In Spy Dénomomé-Welch’s opera *Giiwedini*, plants and animals are given voice and influence over the character Noodin-Kwe. The trickster figures in Indigenous performance are medicine, having transformative and spiritual power.

Nolan’s addition to the Anishinaabe prophecy of the Seven Fires, or generations from European contact, “The Eighth Fire,” constitutes the book’s final chapter. The time of the seventh fire is now, when the sacred fire is being rekindled by Indigenous artists. Nolan looks ahead to the eighth fire when settler and Indigenous peoples will walk together, pointing to the Idle No More movement and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as signs of its advent. Nolan examines several works under this rubric, from Peter Hinton’s National Arts Centre productions of Clements’s *Copper Thunderbird*, George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and all-Indigenous version of *King Lear*, to work produced by multicultural companies such as MT Space and Onelight Theatre. She concludes the book by calling for more critical discourse within the Indigenous Theatre community and between Indigenous and mainstream theatre.

A valuable appendix to the text is a list of Indigenous productions from the past four decades. The list of close to 400 productions is part of the medicine bundle that Nolan begins in this work, one that will continue growing with the contributions of emerging Indigenous artists. It is also a reminder of the scale of the work that has been accomplished, mostly to little recognition beyond its immediate audiences.

## Works Cited

Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1982. Print.

ERIN HURLEY, ed.

### *Theatres of Affect. New Essays on Canadian Theatre, Volume Four.*

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2014. 296 pp.

ERIN HURLEY, ed.

### *Once More, With Feeling: Five Affecting Plays.*

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2014. 257 pp.

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In an October 2014 post on her popular blog *feministkilljoys*, Sara Ahmed challenges prevalent theorizations of *affect* that set it against *emotion*: “Affect,” Ahmed writes, “is given a privileged status [. . .], becoming almost like a missionary term that ushers in a new world, as a way of moving beyond an implied impasse, in which body and mind, and reason and passion, were treated as separate.” A fundamentally “gendered distinction,” this critical move undermines scholarship that positions the body and mind not only within *the* world but within *an emotional* world, resulting in an act of erasure of such “touchy feely”—that is, often, queer and feminist—scholarship from the adolescent canon of affect studies (Ahmed).

Erin Hurley’s collection *Theatres of Affect* (like her 2010 monograph *Theatre & Feeling*) offers a similar act of critical disruption, casting affect not as something to be read onto experience within theatregoing and –making, but as an intrinsic part of that experience. “[T]heatre matters because of its ‘life,’ which is to say, its affecting address and force that affirm the audience’s own liveliness,” Hurley writes in her introduction in reference to Annabel Soutar’s *Seeds*, a documentary play that explores the legal actions the American biotechnology corporation Monsanto took against Saskatchewan canola farmer Percy Schmeiser in the late 1990s (1). Documentary theatre, with its premise of truth-telling, may seem best suited to an examination of how theatrical provocations of affect play out in relation to the un-staged experience of an event. However, as the range of essays in this collection demonstrates, affect’s impact—its “impression,” to use Hurley’s term (after Ahmed)—is integral to an inclusive dramaturgical experience that is itself absolutely predicated on feeling and on emotion: “the affect-producing machine of theatre lets us know that we are (by letting us feel that we are here)” (3).

*Theatres of Affect* is divided into four sections: Affective Training and Emotion Management (or Acting); Feeling (Too) Close; Awkward Feelings; and Empathy. Each section contains, as complement to the thematic essays, an Artist Statement (the first section has