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**Sarah MacKenzie. *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada: A Mechanism of Decolonization*. Fernwood Publishing, 2020. 184 pp. ISBN: 9781773631875.**

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In her monograph *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada: A Mechanism of Decolonization*, Anishinaabe/Métis/Scottish scholar Sarah MacKenzie examines subversive representations of gendered colonialist violence in plays by Monique Mojica, Marie Clements, and Yvette Nolan. Noting that sexual violence against Indigenous women "is a fundamental mechanism of the colonial project," MacKenzie argues that "[a]cknowledging this history," which has long been denied, "is essential to creating a new, decolonial future" (3). In her nuanced close readings of *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* and *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: The Story of Sacajawea* (both by Monica Mojica), *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and *Now Look What You Made Me Do* (both by Marie Clements), and *Annie Mae's Movement* and *Blade* (both by Yvette Nolan), MacKenzie posits that "gendered violence is represented as an embodied reminder of colonization, with Indigenous women portrayed as active agents of resistance as opposed to emblems or passive victims" (28). Expertly weaving together historical research with feminist post-structuralist, postcolonial, and decolonial thought to provide new critical insights into these ground-breaking plays, *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada* provides a compelling argument for the transformative power of feminist and decolonial theatre that represents Indigenous women not as empty, dehumanized ciphers "signifying colonial destruction, but rather as indomitable, empowered leaders" (14).

Although the scope of MacKenzie's monograph, which focuses on six plays by three Indigenous women written and produced in Canada during the period between the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, might seem narrow, the revisionist texts that she analyzes cover a vast range of historical, cultural, geographic, and nationalist contexts that open up a larger discussion of feminist and decolonial strategies of representation. In her discussion of Mojica's richly intertextual and creative reimagining of maligned, forgotten, and misrepresented Indigenous women in *Princess Pocahontas and The Blue Spots*, for instance, MacKenzie carefully unpacks the multi-layered historical references and cultural allusions that inform Mojica's revisionist staging of multiple and diverse voices. Deftly combining feminist post-structuralist theory with a great breadth of historical research, drawn from Indigenous and decolonial texts that include Mojica's own critical writing and source texts as well as more recent revisionist histories, MacKenzie thoughtfully analyzes Mojica's poetic and highly politicized representations of real-life Indigenous women from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, spanning multiple nations, lands, and cultures: among them, the Nahuatl translator Malina, more commonly known as La Malinche in Mexico; the Powhatan girl Matoaka who would later be remembered as Princess Pocahontas; the Métis, Cree, and Algonquin wives of the fur traders in the land now known as Canada; and the Quechua women "who fled the Spanish court, resisted Christianization and forged a new community of women in the Andes mountains" but whose legacy of resistance was later co-opted by the Catholic church into the image of goddesses and virgins (33). In the chapters that follow, the same careful attention to historical and biographical research is applied to contextualized close readings of plays by Clements and Nolan. In her perceptive analysis of Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*, for instance, MacKenzie examines biographical

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information, the misogyny of the male-dominated American Indian Movement, the failure of the masculinist and colonialist justice system, and contested accounts of the life and death of Mi'kmaq activist Anna Mae Pictou Aquash.

MacKenzie's selection of texts and her sensitive analysis provide an ethical response to the paradox at the centre of her study: the urgent political need for subversive representations of colonialist gendered violence that neither reify this violence nor reduce the women affected by it to stereotypical victims and emblems of colonial destruction. Not only does this approach to representation often pander to the voyeuristic white gaze and provide an outlet for what MacKenzie dubs "empathy porn" (128), the cultural fixation on violated victimhood dehumanizes Indigenous women while also running the risk of re-traumatizing survivors. The plays examined in her study, by contrast, employ creative and poetic means to empower these women, releasing them from the role of passive victims. Indeed, MacKenzie notes that surreal staging and magical elements are used as a decolonial tool that gives previously silenced women back their individual voices, identities, and human agency so that they can re-emerge as heroes and subjects of their own narratives. This practice also connects characters to their cultural roots and the spirit realm. MacKenzie's analysis of the spectral women whose strong personalities and sense of community take centre stage away from the unnamed serial killer in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, for instance, provides a clear demonstration of how revisionist theatrical texts and performances have the power to transform social and cultural scripts by resisting sensationalist media portrayals of gendered and racialized violence that fetishize violence and glorify male perpetrators. Nolan likewise rescues the historical presence of Annie Mae from the position of tragic victim, depicting her as a warrior woman who fights against intercultural and intracultural misogyny. The menacing supernatural figure of the Rugaro, representing male violence, is pitted against the protagonist whose courage and strength emphasizes her role as a powerful leader and a voice of resistance in Nolan's text. Tracing a similar trajectory in the work of Monique Mojica, who restores misrepresented women from the past to the sacred role of grandmothers, MacKenzie argues that these revisionist texts engage in an important feminist and decolonial project of cultural recuperation and healing.

This insightful study argues persuasively for the cultural and political value of feminist and decolonial theatre that counters colonialist stereotypes and misrepresentations by providing alternative herstories that celebrate women's power, agency, and resistance. Underlying this argument is an ethical appeal for challenges to representation not just for the sake of artistic experimentation but for social and political change. In her view, the feminist plays that she analyzes "not only revise colonial stereotypes but reimagine incidences of racialized and gendered violence in a manner that empowers Indigenous women, encourages understanding on the part of audiences and ultimately promotes healing" (28). Though this goal might seem utopian, the nuanced post-structuralist theory and historical examples that MacKenzie provides make a compelling case for the very real material and political effects of cultural representations and ideologies that construct social identities and power relationships.

The strength of this book lies not only in its nuanced close readings that draw on a wide range of contemporary theory and historical research but the way in which it allows the playwrights and their plays to lead the way in imagining a decolonial approach to theatrical representation. MacKenzie shows a deep respect for the works and the political

aims of the writers, as evidenced by her careful attention to their own words and sources, giving the impression that the concepts drawn from feminist, literary, theatrical, postcolonial and decolonial thought serve the texts and not the other way around. This is very different from some early postcolonial studies of Indigenous drama that used the plays programmatically to illustrate abstract theories, often problematically reinforcing colonialist forms of knowledge production in the process. The attention to the artists' voices and discussion of grassroots movements in this work provides a more broad-based understanding of the Indigenous political movements, communities, and ideas that inspired the texts under discussion. The cultural work of healing and reclamation that MacKenzie links to the aesthetic and political aims of the playwrights also influences her approach to the subject matter. Like the plays that she analyzes, MacKenzie pays homage to the legacies of the Indigenous women whose stories have been eclipsed and distorted by patriarchal and colonialist representations.

Offering a comprehensive theoretical, socio-political, cultural, and historical framework for understanding feminist and decolonial revisionist writing and performance, MacKenzie also provides useful and concise background on the playwrights and the theatrical production of their plays to contextualize their work. Arguing that her study is deliberately contained to Canadian drama and contexts, and thus bound to a particular white settler nation-state, she links this approach to her desire to explore the history of colonization in her own homeland and the benefits of local, "community-based activism" that has often led to "visible, immediate improvements in the lives of Indigenous women" (142). At the same time, she acknowledges the limitations of her monograph, which did not allow sufficient space for a detailed analysis of transcultural and cross-cultural Indigenous women's theatre. MacKenzie's engagement with Mojica's transcultural and transnational coalition building across Indigenous nations and continents in her plays and critical writing links Canadian texts and contexts to transnational Indigenous women's theatre histories and approaches, however, opening up a discussion of the political significance of working across cultural and national boundaries. The concluding chapter uses the example of Mojica's theatrical work and that of her mother and aunts who formed Spiderwoman Theater in New York, the longest running Indigenous theatre in North America, as a model for cross-cultural Indigenous theatre, inviting future scholars to take up the mantle of studying Indigenous women's drama in a comparative framework that is transnational. This call to action, like the plays MacKenzie analyzes, reminds the reader of the many lacunae in the study of Indigenous women's theatre, not unlike the premise of her book which seeks to redress the fact that more scholarly attention has been devoted to drama by Indigenous men than women in Canada. While the texts of Mojica, Clements, and Nolan have been studied in isolation, the act of reading these plays in conversation with each other and letting them point the way toward more ethical and empowering representations of Indigenous women, past, present, and future, serves as an important step toward creating a more diverse and inclusive view of Indigenous theatrical writing and performances. Though this is not explicitly stated, the fact that Mojica, Nolan, and Clements have been leading figures and innovators of Indigenous theatre in Canada for decades as artistic directors and founders of important Indigenous and feminist institutions, as noted in MacKenzie's contextualization of their plays, also suggests that they deserve more critical attention like the women leaders whose stories they reimagine on stage.

The notion of working across cultural differences and coalition building forms another crucial thread of the decolonial project envisioned by MacKenzie. This becomes another way to

dismantle white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in her view by unfixing binary constructions of gender, sexuality, culture, race, and nation. In raising this argument, she repeatedly draws attention to the notion of coalitions across Indigenous nations and cultures and between white settlers and Indigenous peoples as a form of resistance. This makes sense in the context of a study that examines Indigenous women's responses to, and subversions of, gendered colonialist violence; it also speaks to the question of Métissage represented in many of the plays and critical theories that Mackenzie studies by women who identify as MacKenzie does as Métis or of mixed ancestry. The question of coalition building could also be usefully explored in relation to the connections between Indigenous and Black women and women of colour. Djanet Sears, a leading figure of African Canadian theatre, for instance, served as both a director and dramaturg for Mojica's *Princess Pocahontas* in 1989. It is also worth noting that the period of the twenty-first century has seen a rise of intercultural and cross-cultural theatre in Canada that brings together artists of different racialized and cultural backgrounds. This is beyond the scope of the well-defined and well-argued parameters of MacKenzie's cogent study, of course, but it could be counted as yet another example of the gaps in knowledge that she addresses in her final chapter, which calls on future scholars to open up new directions for thinking about the diverse, and often overlooked, field of Indigenous women's theatre.

Due to its interdisciplinary approach, this book is essential reading not only for students and scholars of drama and theatre studies, but across the disciplines of Indigenous studies, gender studies, literary studies, performance studies, sociology, and history. Its careful articulation of decolonial and feminist thought, and its use of drama and theatre as a site for exploring these views in both historical and present-day contexts that extend across a range of transcultural and transnational contexts, makes a compelling case for the wider political and social significance of Indigenous women's drama as a medium for engaging in timely and relevant debates about decolonization, anti-racism, and violence against women.

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