

## ***Pig Girl: An Indigenous Woman's Perspective Through "Scriptive Things"***

**Lyn Trudeau**  
*Brock University*

### **Abstract**

*Indigenous representation in various genres has always been questionable in regards to who has a voice, and content that is culturally sensitive and appropriate. This paper critically examines the controversial theatrical play Pig Girl (Murphy, 2013) through the lens of Robin Bernstein's (2011) "scriptive things" theory. Although Pig Girl sought to give voice to Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women, it instead was sharply criticized by Indigenous community members. This paper explores historical ideologies corresponding to the dehumanization of and violence perpetrated against Indigenous women based on the imagery provided by those who created and promoted the Pig Girl stage play. The paper discusses how such imagery can re-inscribe prior beliefs and be interpreted with "things" depicted within the play's narrative. The paper also addresses the function of interpellation and imagery, aesthetic intervention, and resulting associations.*

*Keywords: scriptive things, Indigenous resistance, power of imagery, deconstructing things, aesthetic intervention, reclaiming representation*

Lyn Trudeau is Ojibway from Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nation, Eagle Clan. She is a PhD student and instructor at Brock University who feels it is important to stay true to her cultural roots; she therefore integrates traditional teachings and knowledge both in the classroom and in her research. She is an artist/visual storyteller and scholar who uses visual representation within her works to keep the Indigenous culture alive and thriving.

Email: lyn.trudeau@gmail.com

*“A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it's finished; no matter how brave its warriors or how strong their weapons”* (Cheyenne proverb).

An Indigenous woman is placed on stage in a vulnerable state, violated, tortured, and hung on a meat hook for 90 minutes. She is in constant physical and emotional pain and cries out in anguish for someone—anyone—to help her. She is eventually strangled. This is a brief synopsis of the play *Pig Girl* (Murphy, 2013), written on the subject of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in Canada, for which the playwright Colleen Murphy won a coveted Governor General's Award.

### Context

Indigenous women in Canada have endured years of overwhelming destitution (Graveline, 1998; Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Maracle, 1996) derived from colonialism, racism, and non/misrepresentation which, unfortunately, continue to this day. However, Indigenous women in Canada are taking control and writing a new narrative for themselves. I too write from such a liminal space, from the perspective of both an artist and a scholar. As such, this discussion paper is congruent with the *Brock Education* journal's special issue exploring aesthetic intervention and social justice through various art platforms while deconstructing and/or reconstructing ideas surrounding hegemony and colonialism. Such themes are evident in the theatrical performance of *Pig Girl* that links normalization of violence and dehumanization of the Indigenous woman appearing in the play, and that also re-inscribes fallacies and misconceptions pertaining to Indigenous women.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between *Pig Girl* (Murphy, 2013) and Indigenous communities. The paper exemplifies the power and influence of visual presence and artistic expression in society, and the possible negative effects of underlying messages in theatrical performances and surrounding elements. Theatre can play a key role in perpetuating old stereotypes and biases by way of “things,” which are analyzed here through theorist Robin Bernstein's (2011) theory of “scriptive things.” This paper contributes to this journal's theme by looking at epistemological implications of social justice in the realm of arts culture as well as the field of education. Additionally, the paper interprets *Pig Girl* with Indigenous insight, adapted and used to create the power to resist and generate a new narrative using the same communicative mode of theatrical performance. The paper's antithesis thus resonates with the journal's special issue by taking on the task of aesthetic intervention as a means of a decolonizing aesthetic experience in artistic creation and representation.

Murphy's (2013) *Pig Girl* was rejected and deemed insensitive on numerous levels by the local Indigenous community after the play premiered in Edmonton in fall 2013, thus necessitating aesthetic intervention. Murphy authored *Pig Girl* ostensibly to voice opposition to police indifference towards Canada's MMIW (an acronym also includes young Indigenous girls). However, despite her good intentions, the play re-inscribes long-standing tropes about Indigenous women overall. The title and pivotal image of an Indigenous woman hanging from a meat hook stand as a graphic reference to Robert Pickton, the convicted serial killer charged in 2002 for the murders of 26 women on his pig farm. As noted earlier, the play's initial Edmonton production raised much controversy and indignation among the Indigenous community. As Meagan Wohlberg

(2016) reported in *EdgeYK* magazine regarding *Pig Girl*'s Edmonton premiere, the play "incensed the Indigenous community. ... Its initial run resulted in calls for a boycott" (para. 1). As Wohlberg noted, the play captured widespread response and warrants further inquiry on a socially responsible level.

So, the question remains: How can we explain the gap between awarding-winning recognition to such discontentment for the same theatrical piece? More pointedly, how can an audience, already knowing the end, sit and watch an Indigenous woman being tortured and strangled to death?

As an Indigenous woman, I felt compelled to further interrogate such perplexing questions. *Pig Girl*, at least when it premiered, was produced solely by a non-Indigenous team without any involvement of the population to whom it meant to give voice, which may explain the confounding disparities in artistic appraisal. Arguably, the graphic violence enacted on stage functions to enscript violence against Indigenous women and re-inscribe ideologies that support the dehumanization of Indigenous women, binding them (us!) in places of inferiority and subservience.

Disturbed by the notion of portraying (and hence perpetuating) Indigenous women in such a weakened state, I begin by exploring and critically examining the elements surrounding *Pig Girl* through the lens of Bernstein's (2011) "scriptive things." Such elements include the play's title, its characters and initial theatrical poster, as well as the glaring violence on stage, all of which substantiate my thesis that the play dehumanizes Indigenous women.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is steeped in theories of "new materialism" referring essentially to non-human entities, and such objects' agency within performance artwork (Bernstein, 2011; Butler, 2011; Schneider, 2015; Sofer, 2016; Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012). Having said that, this paper draws explicitly from Bernstein's (2011) theory of scriptive things—which offers a novel approach "to analyze items of material culture" (p. 80)—and links this notion to how audiences interpret and make meaning of non-human entities. I refer to Bernstein's work and theory throughout the paper as a means of interpreting and analyzing *Pig Girl*.

Bernstein's (2011) scriptive things theory expounds on ideations of "thing theory" and posits that objects become things and things prompt behaviours that often (though not always) script an absolute performance. As Bernstein states, "a script is a dynamic substance that deeply influences but does not entirely determine live performances, which vary according to agential individuals' visions, impulses, resistances, revisions and management of unexpected disruptions" (p. 71). Bernstein's scriptive things concept forms relationships between the real and the fictional, and describes how the two interact. This interplay provides individuals and/or groups with underlying messages—implicit and explicit—and provokes a response. The overarching scriptive thing discussed in this paper is *Pig Girl*, which is inflected with artefacts like the aforementioned meat hook that become things that re-inscribe real events.

### *Pig Girl*

Murphy's (2013) contentious play reopened deep wounds within Indigenous communities as it reignited the horrors serial killer Robert Pickton perpetrated on (mostly) Indigenous women. As Mali Ilse Paquin (2015) reported in *The Guardian*, "Canada's worst serial killer ... targeted First Nations women," and Pickton "tortured and killed at least 33 Aboriginals before he was arrested in British Columbia in 2002" (Justice for the Missing or Murdered section, para. 1). Worst still, Pickton was claimed to have fed the murdered women's bodies to the pigs on his farm, thus fully eradicating the women's very existence. At the time of *Pig Girl*'s premiere, the Indigenous population and leaders already were pushing for an inquiry corresponding to the hundreds of Indigenous women who either had been murdered and/or were missing. The Indigenous communities' frustration regarding the stalled (or non-existent) inquiry coupled with the lack of collaboration in the making of *Pig Girl* undoubtedly aggravated their dissatisfaction with the play. Thus, while Murphy may have enscripted the real into fictional hoping to raise awareness of MMIW in Canada, she failed in her efforts. In this paper, I therefore explore *how* her attempts were unsuccessful, and how *Pig Girl* instead functions as obscene entertainment that dishonours Indigenous women. In this regard, since the onset of public interactions with the play and in accordance with Bernstein's definition, *Pig Girl* embodied a scriptive thing as it prompted and incited behaviours.

The overall construct of *Pig Girl* presented the public a place that asserted the dehumanization of Indigenous women. Journalist Paula Simons (2013), for instance, reported that "the shocking on-stage violence of the piece is morally problematic" (para. 26). The play reified desensitization in the treatment of Indigenous women and implied that their erasure does not matter, because they are imagined as complacent with a submissive status within society. There is a long history of violence against Indigenous women in Canada (see, for example, Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Maracle, 1996; Smith, 2015) and, as Bernstein (2011) explains, "Scriptive things contain massive historical evidence" (p. 80) that may have contributed to the continuing story—and acceptance—of violence against Indigenous women. Thus, scriptive things have the ability to prompt the audience to re-inscribe values and act them out through their behaviours in everyday life.

The subservient status mentioned above is repeated and naturalized through varying contexts in the play. Although the most obvious is the rape, torture, and killing of an Indigenous woman, the latter's sister also symbolizes the accepted, apathetic treatment from authority figures (throughout the play, the police officer cannot be bothered to search for the Indigenous woman despite her sister pleading with him to at least file a missing person report). The very act of an Indigenous woman pleading and begging authorities to take action reasserts Indigenous women's meekness and reliance upon a dominant, White male figure to be the saviour in their world. Fortunately, Bernstein's (2011) "scriptive things" allows us to investigate and garner insight into the various functions and impacts "things" contribute to overall societal beliefs.

### **Title**

The title *Pig Girl*, herein understood to be an artefact (thing) that likely introduces audiences to the play, associated Indigenous women to farm animals, suggesting that they exist for and are

handled by those in power who do with her as they so desire. The title was demeaning and humiliating as it inferred that Indigenous women are actually held in less regard, because in this narrative it is public knowledge that Robert Pickton's victims eventually were fed to his pigs, thus ending all traces of the women's existence. Also, in Western society, being called "a pig" is a pejorative term that generally implies uncleanness. Moreover, the title also equates an Indigenous woman as being a girl, which therefore equates her as being infantile, immature, and not fully capable of taking care of herself. Indeed, the title prompted Tanya Kappo, an Indigenous woman and one of the founders of the Idle No More Movement, to boycott the performance based on the play's title alone (Simons, 2013). Bernstein's (2011) conceptualization of scriptive things apply here; her statement that "things also literally shape human behaviors" (p. 73) certainly corresponds to Kappo's action. Similarly, the accompanying poster initially shown in the *Edmonton Journal* was instrumental in Kappo's and other Indigenous groups' stance against *Pig Girl*. See poster – Figure 1 – at following link:

<https://edmontonjournal.com/life/homes/buying-and-selling/edmonton-wins-nine-awards-at-chba-alberta-annual-gala>

## Poster

The first poster, another artefact of *Pig Girl*, included graphics that presented "a script" to the greater population of theatre goers, which ultimately indicated that heinous acts are tolerable within the story of the Indigenous woman—in this case the titular Pig Girl. This "script" thus continues to perpetuate mistreatment of the marginalized population of Indigenous women. Bernstein (2011) argues that "the term *script* denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation" (p. 12). This theory implies that graphics as script or narrative are ultimately determined by and for the greater society's consumption.

When viewing the poster shown in Figure 1, the human eye reads left to right, and thus the spectator first perceives imagery of dirt showing the bloodied, carved inscription PIG GIRL on skin buried in the ground. Directly above the distorted carving is a partial tattoo of long black hair (a common genetic trait of many Indigenous women) reifying PIG GIRL with Indigenous women and being invisible. The woman is not granted a complete identity; she is not given a face but instead is allowed a place among the dirt and darkness. Following the eye's left-to-right reading, a black backdrop sets a dark overtone along with the red text used for the words PIG GIRL. The red cuts out on the right, acting like an arrow pointing back to PIG GIRL in the same blood red that first pierced the skin. Therefore, the natural human act of reading brings the viewer back to the initial graphic. This idea of normal function aiding in providing a script is aligned with Bernstein's (2011) notion of scriptive things, which states that "Things script behaviour not only through determined actions that are required for function but also through *implied* or prompted *actions*" (p. 77). The effortless flow of reading and viewers' uninterrupted gaze help re-establish that there is nothing wrong or jarring within the space/poster. And the poster itself was not alone in affording the overarching vulgar scriptive experience of *Pig Girl*.

## Characters

Similarly, the characters in the original performance of *Pig Girl* acted in a like manner to the poster—they were not assigned individual names but rather more generalized terms: Sister, Police Officer, Killer, and Dying Woman. The first three terms have generic, stand-alone applications; however, the fourth noun is assigned the adjective *dying* to ensure the spectator understands that the woman not only died (i.e., actually murdered by Pickton) but also will die today (in front of our eyes) and, perhaps even more significantly, will remain in a weakened, damaged state and keep on “dying.” By extension, the notion of Indigenous women perpetually dying reintroduces and invites harmful historical stereotypes and characterizations. Bernstein (2011) suggests that scripts can reignite both welcomed and unwelcomed historical beliefs and actions, and thus *Pig Girl's* portrayal of Indigenous women collectively as the Dying Woman character becomes the representative voice of Indigenous women, and implies that we must accept the fate given us no matter the situation.

The play's script is set in two timelines and literally invites the past into the present. At the start of the play, Dying Woman recounts a conversation she had with her adoptive parents about her time away at school and recalls that even then she was not valued and felt invisible. She was invisible in life, and she is invisible in death—she can be erased. Although author Colleen Murphy said Dying Woman “fights with everything she has ... [and] used all her smarts and wit” (Kelly, 2016, Audio Podcast), we know she is going to die even before the play begins. Therefore, the script reiterates that although an Indigenous woman can do whatever she wants—struggle, fight, cry out for help, and more importantly employ all her intellect—she will inevitably fail. She is still not heard or regarded as being of any substance in present day society; there is nothing more than indifference towards her. As such, the script re-inscribes colonial assumptions that Indigenous women are insignificant, inferior, and a burden on society.

Various indicators throughout the performance illustrate the aforementioned points. For example, the Sister character calls out to Dying Woman, “probably you don't have enough brain cells left” (Murphy, 2013, p. 6), and later says, “her welfare cheques haven't been cashed; her prescriptions haven't been picked up” (Murphy, 2013, p. 10). Also, in a conversation with Sister, Police Officer states, “we don't have any evidence that your sister's missing or that any of those other hookers ... are *actually* missing” (Murphy, 2013, p. 11). The problem with Police Officer's statement is that it implies that the missing women were all hookers. Consequently, *Pig Girl's* Dying Woman character is a drug addict, on welfare, and a sex trade worker whose voice falls on deaf (i.e., unsympathetic) ears throughout the play.

Conversely, the voice that does get heard and humanized to the point of being granted sympathy is Killer's (the Pickton character). He is large, overbearing, and in constant control of Dying Woman, violating and abusing her at will. Lyn Gardner (2015), writing about Murphy and voice in London's *The Guardian*, comments that the playwright “certainly unnecessarily, gives [voice] to the killer too” (para. 6). *Montreal Gazette* theatre reviewer Jim Burke (2016) similarly discusses “the damaged, lonesome Killer who tries to make a connection with her” (para. 1) and the play's “humanizing of all the characters, even the Killer” (para. 4). Author Colleen Murphy later spoke in an interview excusing this horrific behaviour, explaining that “There is the killer and there is no question about it, people, guys like this just don't do things like this out of the sky. Things happen

to them. They grow up in the same society, so he is a human being” (Kelly, 2016, Audio Podcast). But because “script” according to Bernstein (2011) “aims to discover not what any individual actually did but rather what a thing invited its users to do” (p. 11), the question remains: Are we meant to look past the brutality and heinous act and sympathize with Killer (i.e., Pickton) at the cost of his victim(s)? Is this what Murphy is essentially inviting and asking us to do? The art of rhetoric and predominant structure of this play would ostensibly lead us to this assumption, which again coincides with a re-inscription of a particular social order silences Indigenous women to the point of denying their (our) very humanity.

### **Glaring Violence**

The social order mentioned above is based on Western and colonial ideologies of patriarchy that underpin the play despite its female authorship. The script houses a patriarchal point of view through Killer and Police Officer. Killer's character, a White male, makes no apology for his intentions towards his victim, the Indigenous Dying Woman. After brutalizing his victim, Killer places the woman on a hook, prompting associations to the practice of slaughtering and butchering pigs for market. Such graphic imagery revives the harmful misconception that MMIW are not only dispensable but also trafficable, and is egregiously detrimental to the Indigenous communities and families of MMIW who have to deal with this supposition. What's more, within the scope of this social order, the Indigenous male is not involved in the *Pig Girl* narrative—he is not given a voice nor any representation and is omitted from the conversation altogether. Indigenous scholar Lee Maracle (1996) has commented on “things” such as this play, noting that “the dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as [thriving] women. ... The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female” (p. 17). In *Pig Girl*, the Native male is out of sight, out of mind; he is erased by not being acknowledged nor represented in any way. This again evokes Bernstein's (2011) notion of calling on historical components wherein scripts of mis/non-representation are often brought about from places of privilege.

Andrea Smith (2015) conjoins both Maracle's and Bernstein's analogies and states that “The analysis of and strategies for addressing gender violence have failed to address the manner in which gender violence is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also serves as a tool of racism and colonialism” (p. 1). Simply put, the hanging of an Indigenous woman on a hook conjures historical, barbarous acts of racism and oppressive behaviours and mentality. Maracle (1996) further comments on the implications of texts like *Pig Girl*, saying “each time I confronted white colonial society I had to convince them of my validity as a human being” (p. 14). Similarly, although the focus of Bernstein's (2011) *Racial Innocence* is the African American experience, the same mode and analysis functions within the marginalized Indigenous population: Bernstein links behaviours in relation to *how* violence manifests in a historical context, which applies to *Pig Girl*. While the play invites the audience to consider the violence perpetrated against Indigenous women that has occurred for centuries, the viewer ultimately decides the manner in which such violence is interpreted; in short, does the viewer challenge and protest the flagrant violence, or sit passively hidden in the darkened audience?

The stage in *Pig Girl* is the imagined space in which the final act of a male strangling an Indigenous woman with his legs and killing her takes place. Because such action happens openly and brazenly in the performance, it invites old ideologies of Indigenous women as being deficient and of lesser value than their non-Indigenous counterparts, or at best maintains the status quo. In other words, the act corresponds to statistics showing that the “violent victimization of Aboriginal females [is] most often committed by males” (Statistics Canada, 2009, para. 8) and that the “victimization of Aboriginal women close to triple[s] that of non-Aboriginal women” (Statistics Canada, 2009, para. 4), thus perhaps reducing the horror of the stage performance given that it is a not uncommon occurrence in the lives of Indigenous women. This enactment also interpellates the violent behaviour, but unfortunately this only happened within the Indigenous community.

Bernstein (2011) describes a comparable association, noting that “by entering the scripted scenario, the individual is interpellated into ideology and thus into subjecthood” (p. 77). Interpellation happens when the script leaps out and calls out to the receiver to stop and pay attention—or moreover demands attention. As Bernstein (2011) puts it,

Stylized bodily performances in everyday life are utterances of thoughts that can not be expressed in words. These thoughts are neither conscious nor unconscious, neither wholly voluntary expressions of intention nor compulsory, mechanical movement. Things invite us to dance, and when we sweep them onto the dance floor, they appear to animate. (p. 74)

Therefore, the grave physical actions, underlying narrative, and symbolic imagery in *Pig Girl* echoed throughout Indigenous communities. Following *Pig Girl's* November 5, 2013 premiere, a panel was created to discuss the play's ramifications. Although Indigenous activist Kappo had refused to accept *Pig Girl* as being representative of Indigenous women and boycotted the play, she wanted to take part in panel discussions. To her and many other Indigenous people's dismay, there was no one else from their own community on the panel to speak with about *Pig Girl*. While the play is based on true events, the author is non-Indigenous, as were all cast members. Without any collaboration with the Indigenous community, the play purposes to tell the story that predominantly and dramatically affected this community. Overall, the play falls in line with Bernstein's (2011) scriptive things when she explains that “an object becomes a thing when it invites a person to dance” (p. 73). Upon being invited to dance, the Indigenous community expressed their discontentment by renouncing many colonial assumptions, and they voiced concerns that *Pig Girl* did not include Indigenous people respectfully and instead bound Indigenous women as inhuman and inferior by killing the protagonist Dying Girl over and over again. *Pig Girl* hailed the Indigenous community! Hailed, in this context and according to Bernstein (2011) means to provoke and incite a response.

### **Glaring Violence—Intermission**

In the same year as *Pig Girl's* premiere performance, multidisciplinary artist and Indigenous (Ntlaka'pamux) playwright Tara Beagan (2013) introduced *In Spirit*, a play and theatrical performance on the same tragic subject of MMIW. Beagan's script brought to life an actual account of a missing Indigenous girl—12-year-old Molly, whose loving family and community immediately are aware of Molly's absence. Molly is not an addict nor lost to society; everyone looked for her. Molly is given a bicycle for her birthday, not new but new to her, representing

previously established narratives bestowed upon young Indigenous girls who are handed a history not of their (our) making. One day Molly rides the bicycle out towards the highway and disappears; all that is left behind is a discarded, broken bicycle by the roadside. Her remains are found decades later and her community gathers for ceremony to release her Spirit. Throughout the play, Molly reaches out to the community and family members by telling her story, all the while rebuilding her broken bicycle. Molly's bicycle is the prominent visual "thing" that she rebuilds in front of the audience—she rebuilds this *scriptive thing* and reclaims her story. Indigenous women often were (and still are!) handed a history, a painful past, but now we are recreating and writing new scripts: a broken bicycle and a trapped Molly are transformed into a rebuilt bicycle and a Spirit released.

### Glaring Violence—Resumed

The theatrical performance of Beagan's (2013) *In Spirit* did not speak to Indigenous communities in the same manner as Murphy's (2013) *Pig Girl*. To garner a greater understanding of how *Pig Girl* hailed the Indigenous community, we must first take a step back and reflect. Bernstein (2011) paralleled objects and things with *studium* and *punctum*, whereby the former is understood to be an area of study or matter that is being viewed, and the latter as an anomaly that punctures its way through the subject at hand and draws the attention of an individual or collective experiencing the expanse of studium:

The punctum is an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces" an individual viewer. In other words, a patch in what would have been studium becomes punctum at the moment in which it leaps forward to pierce the spectator. (p. 72)

The studium in this case was the topic of MMIW in Canada. Many Indigenous communities across Canada were holding vigils, ceremonies, peaceful public gatherings, social media campaigns, and marches on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to create awareness of MMIW. Projects such as the REDress (Black, 2014) and Faceless Dolls (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2015) were established in the hopes of gaining support and drawing attention to calls for an inquiry into the disappearances of Indigenous women over the past decades. Such initiatives illustrate Bernstein's (2011) theory that "both *studium* and object are orderly; each orients toward human thoughts and intentions" (p. 73).

In contrast, Bernstein (2011) notes that "punctum and thing are unruly, unpredictable rogues" (p. 73). In this instance, *Pig Girl* is punctum that pieced this studium, interpellating the Indigenous community and inviting us to dance. Bernstein also addresses further potential reactions to punctum:

The ontological distinction between things and objects is that things *hail*. And they do so persistently, constantly, when we are alone and when we are in groups; when we think about them and when we do not; when we respond obediently and when we resist; and when we individually or collectively accept the invitation to dance, refuse it, accept but improvise new steps; or renegotiate, deconstruct, or explode the roles of leader and follower. (p. 77)

In relation to the above quote, the Indigenous community was hailed and we "danced," which according to Bernstein generally means to connect, engage, and interact by prompted scripts. Upon encountering the various signifiers involved in *Pig Girl*, the Indigenous community reacted. The

concern was the lack of mindfulness paid to these women and the emotional upheaval stemming from negative portrayals of our culture throughout the generations.

Our communities were and are still in the process of healing from the ripple effects not only of the horrific events that occurred on Pickton's farm but also all MMIW stories and the injustices done to our People and culture overall. The latter portion of Bernstein's citation above speaks to various aspects of our communities' responses. Resistance to colonization was evoked and as much as *Pig Girl* was first met with frustration and hurt and pain, our communities also understood this as something that we collectively needed to "renegotiate, deconstruct, or explode the roles of leader and follower" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 77). The intervention may have started with Kappo and the local Indigenous community surrounding Edmonton where the play premiered, but would soon spread across Canada as indicated at the outset of this discussion paper.

During the months that followed the initial outcries from Indigenous individuals and communities, changes were made to the overall production of *Pig Girl*. An aesthetic variation markedly noticeable was the lead role of Dying Woman, which was taken over by an Indigenous woman named Renelitta Arluk. Arluk felt that Indigenous women need a voice and place within this play: "we need to bring a voice. We need to bring our voice" (Kelly, 2016, Audio Podcast). Thence, our women started owning this content and giving a co-narrative to Dying Woman, who no longer gave way to an absolute script but rather opened a new dialogue that included our presence: One solitary Indigenous "dying woman" opened the door to a story that included the whole of Indigenous women. Yes, she is on stage dying and inevitably dies; however, she will live beyond the stage and speak alongside her colleagues on panels about the plight of MMIW. As Indigenous women, we danced and continue to dance after the show is over.

### **The Intervention**

*"Dignity, love, and, life. These basic principles ground social movements for justice, movements for social change"* (Smith, 2015, p. xv).

The play *Pig Girl* interpellated Indigenous communities, allowing us to internalize playwright Colleen Murphy's artistic expression and to react, resist, and ultimately refuse to accept the "script" that was being presented. *Pig Girl* subsequently was adapted and produced in August 2016 by Sacred Roots Productions, a Native production company helmed by Akwesasne Mohawk women, which provided Indigenous women agency without re-stigmatizing old belief structures and insolences suffered throughout history from the dominant population. The collective voice of Indigenous women in Sacred Roots Productions was a means of responding to *Pig Girl*. The reaction of the Indigenous communities is reminiscent of Bernstein's (2011) view that "the set of prompts that a thing issues is not the same as performance because individuals commonly resist, revise, or ignore instructions" (p. 71). These Indigenous women indeed resisted, revised, and ignored instruction by creating a new script and did not give in to the old underlying stereotypes and ideologies housed within the original play.

As Bernstein (2011) further explains, because "the evidence delivered through scriptive things is crucial to the histories of oppressed people" (p. 80), we must strive to think of the scriptive thing "as a thing in use" (p. 9). Thinking of scriptive things as "in use" allows them to be addressed and rather than accepted as a static, non-refutable narrative. Therefore, despite being witnesses to the

horrific images in *Pig Girl*, we can expose and address them with a move towards positive change. It would be socially irresponsible to hide, forget, or pretend that offensive material like that shown in *Pig Girl* never existed, which is why Sacred Roots sought to revisit and rebuild the narrative (much like Molly's bicycle) in response to *Pig Girl*. The Indigenous women were able to nourish this *scriptive thing* with elements from their own lives, inserting or changing symbolic colours and materials in order to make this play their own, for Indigenous communities. Thus, after being hailed, these Indigenous women were enabled to respond in such a way to resist and intervene by revising the script so that it included positive images and *things* for the betterment of an oppressed people. The Akwesasne Mohawk women of Sacred Roots did not see any dignity in hanging an Indigenous woman from a hook for the duration an entire play like *Dying Woman* in *Pig Girl's* premiere, and instead metaphorically rebuilt their bicycle as did Molly in *In Spirit*.

Alex Jacobs (2016), writing about MMIW in *Indian Country Today*, similarly argued that *Pig Girl's* script was improved by "adding native culture, language, song and spirituality" (para. 3; see Figure 2)—none of which had been included in the original narrative. Alongside the idea of inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, Smith (2015) notes that

Native spiritualities have always been a cornerstone of resistance struggles. These spiritualities affirm the goodness of Native communities when the larger society dehumanizes them. They affirm the interconnectedness of all things that provides the framework of re-creating communities that are based on mutual responsibility and respect rather than violence and domination. (p. 5)

First and foremost, among differences between the original and the Sacred Roots productions of *Pig Girl*, the hook in the reworked play is considerably and meaningfully smaller, suggesting we can overcome what it represents. It can be held in one hand and does not loom overhead, holding an Indigenous woman in place and in servitude. The stage is also rife with artefacts that resonate within our communities as positive and healing elements: women wear customary regalia on stage, and the red dress—the visual "thing"—that many Indigenous women are wearing in the background is significantly present. The red dress is a *scriptive thing* in our communities because it represents all the missing and murdered Indigenous women; when we see this, we remember and honour all our endeared missing and murdered girls and women—lost but never forgotten. See image – Figure 2 - at the following link:

<https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/pig-girl-a-play-about-mmiw-portrayed-by-akwesasne-mohawk-women-KYv3lgVjXk6HylCtsBVNug/>

The significance of the red dress is also illustrated in the aforementioned REDress Project, initially a travelling art installation created by Métis artist Jaime Black in 2011 to acknowledge and pay tribute to all MMIW in Canada. The artist draped empty red dresses from various locations (campuses, parks, and art exhibits) to represent all the Indigenous women who disappeared and were murdered in our country. The red dresses are void of anything solid as an evocative reminder that women once filled these spaces. When asked in an interview by Samantha Edwards why she chose the colour red, Black (2014) responded, "Red is a really powerful colour in Indigenous communities. It's the colour of life and blood. It's what connects all of us to each other. It's a very sacred colour, and it also represents the violence that these women are facing" (para. 3). The REDress Project is also an aesthetic response to MMIW in Canada, which again reiterates the power of a visual presence. It was carried out nationally and still has a presence online and across

Canada. In numerous communities, red dresses were and still are being placed in various sites, and gatherings are held to respectfully pay tribute to MMIW.

The women wearing red dresses shown in Figure 2 are also positioned physically higher than the “live” characters, thus signifying their worth. After public showings of the second version of *Pig Girl*, *Indian Country Today* reporter Alex Jacobs (2016) observed that “On the final dates of the performances at both Mohawk communities the actors were thanked by family members of victims of violence” (para. 6). Therefore, as Bernstein (2011) posits, scriptive things are situational and subjective depending upon the interpreter’s perspective. As such, an individual or collective *can* resist and reconstruct the “things” that constrict and contain us, thereby, allowing all peoples the opportunity of countering hegemony.

### **Conclusion/Moving Forward**

This paper has shown how a visual presence and/or “thing” (in this case a meat hook, a bicycle, or a red dress) can have either grave consequences or carry hope and create new narratives for generations to come. More specifically, a “thing” such as *Pig Girl* can become either a piercing arrow or, with collaborative vision, a meeting place where diverse cultures can reconcile and possibly heal together. Colleen Murphy saw the first show in Akwesasne and said, “Theatre is a safe environment to confront painful events because there is catharsis in witnessing” (Jacobs, 2016, para. 12). Murphy added that “a play belongs to everyone who performs it and to everyone who watches it” (Jacobs, 2016, para. 12). Being actively involved with/in an event affords feelings of connection. Therefore, instead of attempting to give voice to others, perhaps it is best to ask questions and work collaboratively with others so as not to silence anyone. Had Murphy heeded her own words a few years earlier and included Indigenous people, she and the Indigenous community may have avoided a polemic situation.

## References

- Beagan, T. (2017). *In spirit*. Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Black, J. (2014). *The REDress project: About*. Retrieved from [http://www.redressproject.org/?page\\_id=27](http://www.redressproject.org/?page_id=27)
- Burke, J. (2016, January 29). Theatre review: Pig Girl delves into real-life heart of darkness, honours the missing. *Montreal Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre-review-pig-girl-delves-into-real-life-heart-of-darkness-honours-the-missing>
- Butler, J. (2011). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Edwards, S. (2017, March 24). Q&A: Jaime Black, the artist hanging red dresses around U of T campus. *Toronto Life*. Retrieved from <https://torontolife.com/culture/art/qa-jaime-black-artist-hanging-red-dresses-around-u-t-campus/>
- Gardner, L. (2015, January 13). Pig Girl review—The dead and their murderer speak into the silence. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jan/13/pig-girl-review>
- Graveline, F. J. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming eurocentric consciousness*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Jacobs, A. (2016, October 20). “Pig Girl”—A play about #MMIW portrayed by Akwesasne Mohawk women. *Indian Country Today*. Retrieved from <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/pig-girl-a-play-about-mmiw-portrayed-by-akwesasne-mohawk-women-KYv3lgVjXk6HylCtsBVNug/>
- Kelly, J. (Producer). (2016, January 30). *Carol Bolt award winning play “Pig Girl” at The Centaur* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2683083692>
- Lawrence, B., & Anderson, K. (2005). Introduction to “Indigenous women: The state of our nations.” *Atlantis*, 29(2), 1-8. Retrieved from <http://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/view/1041>
- Maracle, L. (1996). *I am woman: A native perspective on sociology and feminism*. Vancouver, BC: Press Gang Publishers.
- Murphy, C. (2013). *Pig Girl*. Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.
- Native Women's Association of Canada. (2015). *Building on the legacy of the NWAC faceless dolls project: Create your own dolls*. Native Women's Association of Canada. Retrieved from [https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2012\\_Building\\_on\\_the\\_Legacy\\_of\\_NWAC\\_Faceless\\_Doll\\_Project.pdf](https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2012_Building_on_the_Legacy_of_NWAC_Faceless_Doll_Project.pdf)
- Paquin, M. (2015, June 25). Unsolved murders of indigenous women reflect Canada's history of silence. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jun/25/indigenous-women-murders-violence-canada>
- Schneider, R. (2015). New materialisms and performance studies. *TDR/The Drama Review*, 59(4), 7-17. doi:10.1162/DRAM\_a\_00493

- Simons, P. (2013, November 16). Pig Girl: On race, voice, respect and artistic freedom. *Edmonton Journal*. Retrieved from <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/pig-girl-on-race-voice-respect-and-artistic-freedom>
- Smith, A. (2015). *Conquest: Sexual violence and American Indian genocide*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sofer, A. (2016). Getting on with things: The currency of objects in theatre and performance studies. *Theatre Journal*, 68(4), 673-684. doi:10.1353/tj.2016.0123
- Statistics Canada. (2009). *Violent victimization of Aboriginal women in the Canadian provinces, 2009*. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2011001/article/11439-eng.htm>
- Van der Tuin, I., & Dolphijn, R. (2012). *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.
- Wohlberg, M. (2016, January 26). Playing dead in *Pig Girl*. *EdgeYK*. Retrieved from <https://edgenorth.ca/article/playing-dead-in-pig-girl>