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THEATER AS A MEDIUM OF HEALING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *COPPER THUNDERBIRD* BY

MARIE CLEMENTS

By

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BA in Drama Studies, Jagiellonian Universtiy, Cracow, Poland, 2007

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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in Theatre

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Theater as a medium of healing: a critical analysis of *Copper Thunderbird* by Marie Clements.

Chairperson: Dr. Bernadette Sweeney

The idea of the healing power of theater reaches back to Aristotle and his concept of catharsis. Greek philosopher states that tragedy “with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions.”<sup>1</sup> The process of catharsis is interpreted as purification or purging of the audience members’ strong emotions as a response to the dramatic action taking place on stage.

Today very few western theater practitioners mention that particular aspect of theater in their artistic manifestoes. Yet in Native American theater narratives of illness and healing are ever present. The need for change, and faith in the power of theater to achieve it, fuels many Native American manifestoes, plays and scholarly works.

In this thesis I focus on the process of emotional, spiritual and physical healing in native communities. I specifically concentrate on the role of theater in the process of healing. I use the play *Copper Thunderbird* by Marie Clements, a Metis playwright, as a case study.

*Copper Thunderbird* is based on the life and art of Norval Morrisseau, the renowned Ojibway painter referred to by critics as the "Picasso of the North". Morisseau was not only a talented artist, but also a Great Shaman and a student of the traditional stories of his people.

Marie Clements portrays Morrisseau as someone who moved native art from museums to art galleries. Yet the playwright also boldly portrays the weaknesses and addictions of the painter, as well as his broken relationships with his family. Clements captures in her play Morrisseau's moral struggle of whether or not white people even deserved the opportunity to purchase his paintings.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Henry Butcher, *Aristotle's theory of poetry and fine art, with a critical text and translation of the Poetics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009).

I argue that the playwright leads the audience through three critical stages of healing: diagnosis of the illness while also defining the symptoms, identifying the roots of the illness, and the discovery of medicine amid the process of healing.

## Contents:

Paintings: .....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	2
The Three Stages of Healing .....	3
Healing Illness or Curing Disease? .....	5
Marie Clements .....	6
Norval Morrisseau versus The Old Man, The Young Man and The Boy .....	8
World premiere of <i>Copper Thunderbird</i> .....	11
CHAPTER 1: DIAGNOSIS OF THE ILLNESS AND ITS SYMPTOMS .....	16
Alcoholism .....	17
Broken Family .....	23
Physical Sickness.....	28
CHAPTER 2: IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES OF THE ILLNESS.....	30
<i>Copper Thunderbird</i> and post-colonialism.....	35
CHAPTER 3: FINDING MEDICINE AND THE BEGINNING OF HEALING .....	50
CONCLUSION .....	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY: .....	73

## Paintings:

Figure 1. Set for the production of <i>Copper Thunderbird</i> at NAC in Ottawa. ....	12
Figure 2. Set for the production of <i>Copper Thunderbird</i> at NAC, Ottawa. ....	12
Figure 3. Auntie the Nun played by Margot Kane .....	13
Figure 4 Three Dump Bears. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Figure 5 Details of the Norval Morriseau, <i>Artist and His Four Wives</i> , 1975.....	14
Figure 6 Costume design for one of the Three Norval Wives by Mary Kerr. ....	14
Figure 7: Norval Morriseau, <i>Artist and His Four Wives</i> , 1975. ....	27
Figure 8: Norval Morriseau, <i>Man Changing Into Thunderbird</i> , 1977. ....	53
Figure 9: Norval Morriseau, <i>Thunderbird Shaman Teaching People</i> , 1990.....	53
Figure 10: Norval Morriseau, <i>Indian Jesus Christ</i> , 1974. ....	63
Figure 11: Norval Morriseau, <i>Ojibwa Midawiin Sacred Bear</i> , c. 1959-62. ....	65

## **INTRODUCTION**

Staging plays is an European concept brought to the North American continent by the colonizing powers. Yet Native people took this art form and imbued it with a new quality in order to serve their purposes and enrich their communities. In the introduction to the anthology of First Nation Drama in English, Ric Knowles wrote: "In creating theater the First Nations artists are drawing on a known and lived sense of what is essentially ritualistic. They know that in all theatre there's a healing that takes place on the stage, in the audience, and between the stage and the audience..."<sup>2</sup> This deeply rooted reliability on the healing power of theater is what distinguishes Indigenous theater from its western counterpart. The western world sees theater predominantly as entertainment, especially in the U.S. where theater originated from forms such vaudeville, burlesque, variety shows, etc... Native theater artists approach the stage as a medium of healing, where the artistic creation impacts the audience and the performers on a deep level.

In this thesis I examine how the experience of healing is constructed at the textual level. I studied many critical works on Native theater, including various artistic manifestos, and these led me to the question of how healing is written into plays. Using *Copper Thunderbird* as a case study, I analyze how the author, Metis playwright Marie Clements, walks the audience through the process of healing in her play. Even though I write about the dramatic text, I refer to its

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<sup>2</sup> Ric Knowles, Introduction to *Staging Coyote's Dream: an Anthology of First Nations Drama in English*, ed. Ric Knowles and Monique Mojica, (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2003), v.

receivers as "the audience", not "the readers" since plays are written for the stage and are thus defined by their performative content.

*Copper Thunderbird* is a play based on the life and art of Norval Morrisseau, an Ojibway painter referred to by many as the Father of Contemporary Indian Art, or Picasso of the North. I argue that Clements play is built around the motif of illness and healing.

### **The Three Stages of Healing**

There are many elements in the process of healing, but in my work I focus on the three key stages of healing: diagnosis of the illness and its symptoms, identifying the causes of the illness and finding medicine.

The diagnosis of the illness involves the 'end of denial' stage crucial to effective healing. Wayne Warry, author of *Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government*, emphasizes, "First and foremost, people need to 'end the denial' about the problems that exist in their communities and that, to a great extent, are the products of colonial history."<sup>3</sup> In order to heal, the illness needs to be recognized and named: alcoholism, abuse, broken families, suicide, and poverty.

The second phase, identifying the cause of the illness, is described by a statement from Lyle Longclaws and popularized by Tom Highway who used it in one of his plays, "Before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed."<sup>4</sup> The explanation for many of the various problems in Indigenous communities rests in a few sources: the trauma of European

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Warry, *Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1998), 207.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Highway, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publisher, 1989), 6.



colonization, negative experiences while in boarding schools, the devastation of Native culture and traditions by outside forces, and the displacement of Indians from traditional homelands. Locating the cause of illness can also be important because it allows Indigenous people to use wellbeing and healing as an act of resistance against perceived oppressive powers.

The previous two stages of healing are vital and important, yet they carry a certain risk of perpetuating the image of the Indigenous people as merely victims. Monique Mojica, a Kuna and Rappahanock playwright, performer and scholar alleges that, “If we allow those wounds, that disenfranchisement, that disempowerment—that multigenerational trauma of colonization and genocide — to define our identities as Indigenous peoples, then that’s all we’ve got.”<sup>5</sup> Mojica also introduces the concept of performing “possible worlds into being”, where through the suspension of disbelief the audience could see what *could* be: wholesome, healthy nations that not only survived the first contact with colonization, but have overcome its impact and found ways to restore its future.

Mojica’s vision of theater focuses on the third stage of healing: finding medicine. After diagnosing the illness and pointing out its causes, it is time to apply medicine in the shape of old traditions, knowledge and the ways of life before the first contact with Europeans.

In my work I map the process of healing in the play: *Copper Thunderbird*. I examine how Clements includes all three stages of healing in the pages of her play. She exposes the illness of Morrisseau’s life: alcoholism, broken relationships with his family, and physical sickness. She

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<sup>5</sup> Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, “Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformation. Bridging Cosmologies” in *Performing Worlds Into Being: Native American Women’s Theater*. Ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and William A. Wortman, (Oxford: Miami University Press), 2.

identifies the causes of his condition: his difficult early experiences in boarding school, sexual abuse by some priests, and his struggle for an equal place in an art world dominated by white people. But most importantly, Clements explores Morrisseau's path to finding medicine for his people: Morrisseau's role as a great shaman, a spiritual figure collecting the stories of his people, located him beyond the role of just an artist, thus giving him a greater significance.

As Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo/Lakota writer, poet and literary critic, asserts: "The existence of mythic structures supposes a rational ordering of the universe"<sup>6</sup>. Allen stressed that the existence and proximity of a nation's mythology gives its people a certain sense of coherence and integration. Morrisseau gave the Ojibway people this crucial holistic vision of the roots and grounding for their cosmology, not only by painting, but also by writing *The Legends of My People, The Great Ojibway*, a collection of myths and legends portraying the gods, explaining the genesis of their rituals and helping to organize their traditions.

### **Healing Illness or Curing Disease?**

Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, in his work *The Illness Narratives*, distinguishes illness from disease. According to his theory, sickness describes the medical problem in its strict sense; illness, on the other hand, refers to the overall experience of sickness, with its symptoms, emotional and psychological effects, and one's response to treatment. Kleinman states that the "trajectory of chronic illness assimilates to a life course, contributing so intimately to the development of a particular life that illness becomes inseparable from life

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<sup>6</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 104.

history.”<sup>7</sup> The healing of an illness requires creating a meaning for it and in that sense becomes a spiritual experience as much a physical one. The reconstructing of self and redefining the meaning of one’s life under the new circumstances are the key elements in healing.

Kleinman’s concept was used as a focal point by Suzanne Crawford O’Brien in her book, *Religion and Healing in Native America*. O’Brien states that the separation of medicine (healing) from other spheres of life is specific for Euro-Americans, but not for Indigenous people for whom healing rituals are an integral part of sacred ceremonies. Like sacred ceremonies, Native American theater also makes use of healing as an essential part of the art.

## **Marie Clements**

Marie Clements is a Metis playwright, screenwriter, producer, director and performer. She is the founding artistic director of Urban Ink Productions (2001), a Vancouver theater company focused on First Nations innovative performances. She has published seven plays including: *Age of Iron* (1993), *The Girl Who Swam Forever* (1997), *Now Look What You Made Me Do* (1997), *Unnatural and Accidental Women* (2000), *Burning Vision* (2002), *Copper Thunderbird* (2007), and *Tombs of the Vanishing Indians* (in development, to be released in July 2012). Her play *Unnatural and Accidental Women* was developed into a movie script and produced in 2006 under the title *Unnatural and Accidental*. The film was directed by Carl Bessai and Clements played a small role in it as a bartender. Clements also created several multimedia projects: *Urban Tattoo* (1999), *Hours of Water* (2004), *The Red Diva Project* (2008), *Edward Curtis Project* (2010).

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<sup>7</sup>Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, (New York: Basic BooksInc., Publishers, 1988), 8.

During my research, I made several attempts to connect with the playwright and conduct an interview. My endeavors were unsuccessful. Clements professional website at <http://www.marieclements.ca/> is a main source of information about the playwright and her works.

Clements has a very minimal presence in the media, having very few interviews or articles written about her, but her lack of media attention does not diminish her achievements as a playwright. Two of her plays (*Unnatural and Accidental Women* and *Burning Vision*) were published in the two volumes of *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English* (2002 and 2009). Clements' plays are referenced in many critical works on Native American theater, including "Native American Drama" by Christy Stanlake, one of the first books dealing with a critical description of Indigenous dramaturgy.

Clements' style is a unique fusion of verbatim style deeply rooted in solid research with a highly poetic and abstract world created for the stage. The term verbatim describes the technique in which "the words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process...they are then edited, arranged or recontextualized to form a dramatic presentation..."<sup>8</sup>

In *Copper Thunderbird* Clements directly quotes or paraphrases Morrisseau's words from a few recorded interviews, his personal notes and other published writings. The majority of the dialogs are rooted in Morrisseau's own words, yet despite their verbatim components, Clements' plays are far from being documentary pieces. Jim McNabb, author of the *Copper*

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<sup>8</sup> Will Hammond, & Dan Steward, *Verbatim, Verbatim*, (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 9.

*Thunderbird* study guide, describes the style of the play as "non-realistic, dream- like, with magical transformations and visions of other worlds."<sup>9</sup>

Clements brings to life creatures from Morrisseau's visions and paintings, including animated bears, cats and dogs. The scenic fabric of the play uses Morrisseau's art as inspiration: saturation of the stage with bold colors, partial works of art being completed and acclaimed art pieces displayed. The locations of different scenes are culled from his actual life experiences.

### **Norval Morrisseau versus The Old Man, The Young Man and The Boy**

Clements splits Norval Morrisseau into three different characters, each from a different point in Norval's life: The Old Man, The Young Man and The Boy. Clements' explained her choice as follows: "Instead of having one Norval Morrisseau because he lived so many lives and was so big, I made him into three different characters, three different parts of himself."<sup>10</sup> The three Norvals dialog and interact with each other. They are all present on the stage through most of the play.

In the opening of the play Clements includes a disclaimer in which she states:

*While the play uses 1987 as its point of departure, it is a creative interpretation by the playwright Marie Clements, of Norval Morrisseau's possible musings about his past life. It is not a biography or in any way a complete story of the many complex aspects of the artist's thoughts and history. Rather it is a way of*

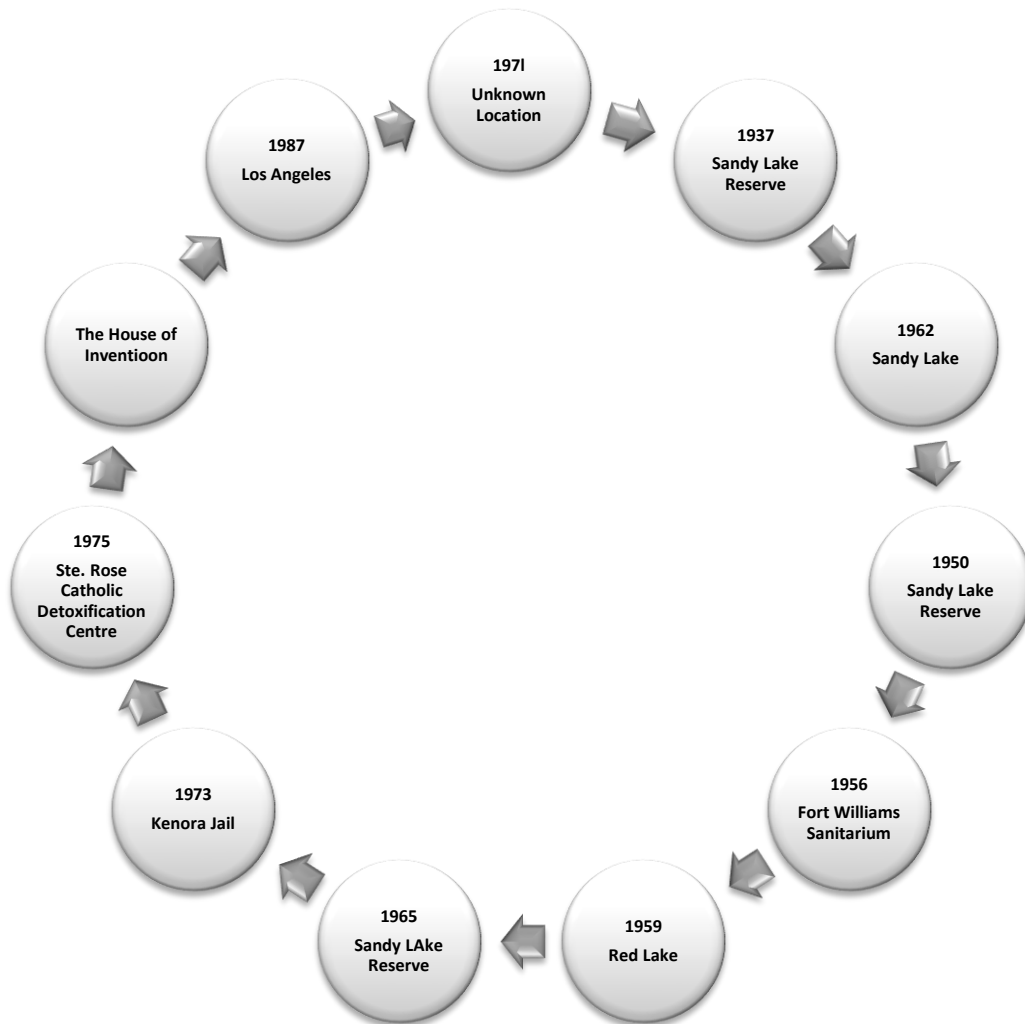
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<sup>9</sup> Jim McNabb, *Copper Thunderbird by Marie Clements: Study Guide*, last accessed: April 2, [http://www4.nac-cna.ca/pdf/eth/0607/copper\\_thunderbird\\_guide.pdf](http://www4.nac-cna.ca/pdf/eth/0607/copper_thunderbird_guide.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Clements' introduction to her reading of a part of *Copper Thunderbird* (and many more) at *Warren Cariou and Marie Clements at Play Chthonics*. <http://talonbooks.com/news/warren-cariou-and-marie-clements-at-play-chthonics>

*looking at what Morrisseau's work means to us as a country, a nation that is still surviving the collision of first contact over five hundred years ago.*

Clements based her character of Morrisseau on in-depth research from which she crafted the artistic vision of the painter's life. The order of events presented in the play is not obvious. Below I include a diagram showing the sequence of time and location for each scene in *Copper Thunderbird*.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> The time and location of the first scene of "Copper Thunderbird" is at the 12 o'clock position with each successive scene in clock-wise order.

Clements rejects chronological order in the construction of her play. The time and location are marked in the title of each scene. Clements does not provide any details regarding the look of the interiors where the action takes place. The stage directions included in *Copper Thunderbird* do not specify the set-up of the locations; they mainly describe the key moments in the play that require a visual representation of the important event in Morrisseau's life. As Clements stated in the disclaimer, the goal of the play is not to merely reconstruct events from the painter's life, but rather to indicate the significant role of Morrisseau's art.

Clements plays with the liminal space Morrisseau occupies: between white and Native society, between the Ojibway traditional beliefs and the Catholic faith; between the world of spirits and the human sphere. The playwright captures the paradox of Morrisseau by presenting him as three different characters: The Young Man, The Old Man and The Boy are the embodiment of his personal evolution and the different phases of the painter's life.

Morrisseau's experiences are unique, yet Clements' portrayal of his character becomes universal in the sense of a person's encounter with self from different moments from the past. The three Norvals interact with each other having different emotions: from annoyance to pity, from passion to fascination. *Copper Thunderbird*, in a sense, becomes a play about time travel, because Morrisseau gets to interact with himself at various ages as a time traveler would.

The play has a circular form: it starts and ends in the same moment of time (the year 1987). Morrisseau, by then known as a brilliant artist, is overcome by his addictions and living on the streets of Vancouver selling his valued art for just a few dollars in order to buy more alcohol.

## **World premiere of *Copper Thunderbird***

The first production of Clements' play took place on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2007, a little over six months before Morrisseau's death. The play was produced as a collaboration between the National Art Centre in Ottawa and Urban Ink, a company in which Clements is a funding Artistic Director and Producer.

This production of *Copper Thunderbird* was directed by Peter Hinton, a playwright, dramaturg, teacher and director, who in 2005 became the Artistic Director of the English Theater at National Art Centre. Hinton also directed another of Clements' plays, *Burning Vision*. He said of her work, "Clements' imagination is large and fully engaged with everything the theatre demands." The visual style of the playwright requires skilled costume, light and set designers. In the playwright's notes, Clements drew an analogy between the production of the play and a concept often mentioned by Morrisseau: the House of Invention:

*From the beginning the writing of Copper Thunderbird was conceived and inspired to honour the artistry of Norval Morrisseau in a language that is theatrical. The development of this production has grown to encircle the passion and talent of many of our finest artists regardless of race, gender, form, or geography. In this way, the telling has constructed its own House of Invention- a place where all artists can create with equality and respect, and where we stand with each other in the knowledge that artists in true practice are warriors and healers.<sup>12</sup>*

The telling of Morrisseau's story through Clements' voice creates a space that the designers, actors and director need to fill with their imagination. Mary Kerr, the set and

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<sup>12</sup> Marie Clements, *Playwright's Notes* in The Program for the production of *Copper Thunderbird* at NAC, May 22-June 9, 2007. [http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/media/program\\_notes/CopperThunderbird.pdf](http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/media/program_notes/CopperThunderbird.pdf)



costume designer for Hinton's production, crafted a multidimensional abstract space that transformed into the various locations where particular scenes took place. The picture below portrays the final product of Kerr's work.



**Figure 1.** Set for the production of "Copper Thunderbird" at NAC in Ottawa. Designer: Mary Kerr.  
Photo from: Artalive.ca <http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/index.php/en/explore/copper-thunderbird>

The set in some scenes became Morrisseau's house or a jail cell and in others the same space became the "House of

Invention." Video

projections of the author's captions for each scene, revealed the specific location to the audience. John Webber, the light designer,

used Clements' stage directions but also rooted his choice of



**Figure 2.** Set for the production of *Copper Thunderbird* at NAC, Ottawa. Light Designer: John Webber. Photo from: artsalive.ca <http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/index.php/en/explore/copper-thunderbird>



Figure 3. Auntie the Nun played by Margot Kane. Set and costum designer: Mary Kerr. Foto from *Theatre Research in Canada*. 31.2 (Fall 2010): pv. Accesed through [www.gale.cengage.com/AcademicOneFile/](http://www.gale.cengage.com/AcademicOneFile/)

lighting using Morrisseau's art as a guide. On the right is a photo of the stage bathed in several shades of blue. Blue was a very important color for Morrisseau, to him it indicated healing.....

Kerr's costume designs included realistic outfits for the three Norvals, but also included many unrealistic costumes, such as the one seen on the photo on the left. In the play Morrisseau's Auntie, appears in

several roles: a nurse, a nun, a broadcaster. In this photo nr.3 she appears as a nun. Kerr through her design captured a caricatured image of Auntie. She is

larger than life, so she is made into a sizable puppet navigated by the actor.

The photo below presents the Three Dump Bears interacting with The Young Man, The Old Man and The Boy. The Bears are oversized puppet-like creatures. The video projected captions informing about the



Figure 4 Three Dump Bears. . Foto from *Theatre Research in Canada*. 31.2 (Fall 2010): pv. Accesed through [www.gale.cengage.com/AcademicOneFile](http://www.gale.cengage.com/AcademicOneFile)

place and time can be seen on the back wall.

Clements extracted her characters from the life and art of Morrisseau. The script of *Copper Thunderbird* resembles the notation of a dance choreography supported with words and images rather than a traditional drama script. As I already mentioned, Clements writes into the play verbatim words spoken or written by Morrisseau. Kerr does the same thing with her costumes; she often borrows the designs and colors from Morrisseau's painting.

Below is Kerr's costume design for one of the Three Norval's Wives and next to it is zoomed in relief of the Morrisseau's painting *Artist and His Four Wives*. The inspiration for the costume design is evident even though the painting does not portray the wife's whole body.

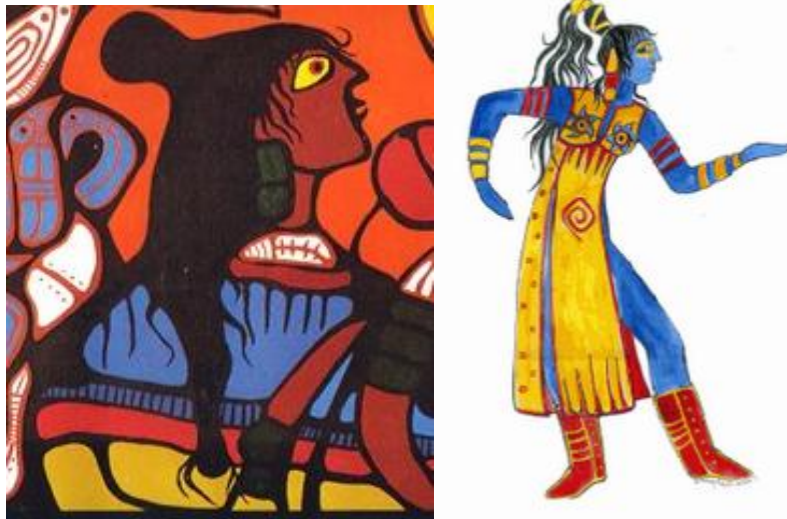


Figure 5 Details of the Norval Morrisseau, *Artist and His Four Wives*, 1975. Images scanned from *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* Sinclair and Pollock, eds., 117.

Figure 6 Costume design for one of the Three Norval Wives by Mary Kerr. Photo from *Copper Thunderbird* study guide by Jim McNabb [http://www.artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/copper\\_thunderbird\\_guide.pdf](http://www.artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/copper_thunderbird_guide.pdf)

The world premiere of the Clements' play became a tribute to the great painter. Morrisseau's presence was tangible through the designs inspired by his art and the script deeply rooted in the life and art of The Picasso of the North. As Clements put it:

*If Norval Morrisseau is our mirror, then certainly we are his reflection. We offer this piece in recognition and appreciation of the incredible contribution Norval Morrisseau has made to generations of Aboriginal artists and to the canon that is the Canadian art scene*<sup>13</sup>

Morrisseau played a key role for the Ojibway people, but he became a central character for the Indigenous artists. This *new tribe* creates and establishes its new identity in between the western and the traditional way of thinking. This unique fusion creates new quality separate from but inspired by many influences. What Clements calls "amalgams of influences, histories, educational backgrounds, performance styles, races, and genders" describes her work along with many other Native artists'; as it defined Morrisseau's art.

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<sup>13</sup> Marie Clements, *Playwright's Notes* in The Program for the production of Copper Thunderbird at NAC, May 22-June 9, 2007. [http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/media/program\\_notes/CopperThunderbird.pdf](http://artsalive.ca/collections/imaginedspaces/media/program_notes/CopperThunderbird.pdf)

## DIAGNOSIS OF THE ILLNESS AND ITS SYMPTOMS

*I think it [theater] exists, in part for healing, not only in the writer, but also for the reader/hearer. It should be like sand paintings which align themselves to the hurt to draw it out. Native theater is much needed in a culture with a 90 percent alcoholism rate, poverty, purposelessness, and low racial esteem.”<sup>14</sup>*

--Diane Glancy

*Copper Thunderbird* may be read as a story of one man, A Great painter, Father of Contemporary Indian Art, Picasso of the North, A Great Shaman. Such descriptions would allow very few people to identify with the man the story is about. Yet after a deeper reading of Clements’ play, one may notice that the story of Norval Morrisseau’s life does resemble the experiences of many Native people. The audience's encounter with the character from Clements’ work may become a mirror moment with a potential for healing.

In his work, *Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government*, Wayne Warry states, “First and foremost, people need to ‘end the denial’ that exists in their community, and that, to a great extent, are the products of colonial history”<sup>15</sup>

The ending of denial may ignite an action to deal with the problem. Morrisseau struggled with a few illnesses in his life. Some of them he admitted and fought against, and

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<sup>14</sup> Diane Glancy, “Native American Theater and The Theater that Will Come” in *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*, ed. Hanay Geiogamah and Jaue T. Darby, (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2000), 360.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Warry, *Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1998), 207.

some, he allowed to take over his life and hurt those around him. Alcohol was perhaps his greatest struggle.

## **Alcoholism**

Norval Morrisseau struggled with severe alcoholism throughout most of his life. He never denied his struggle with the abuse of alcohol. In the *Art of Norval Morrisseau*, a collection of his paintings and writings, Morrisseau admitted that he started to drink as a 13 year old boy. "Perhaps that's why I was a heavy drinker. As a matter of fact, I was often drunk as a child. I didn't believe in social drinking, or sipping some wine here and there. When I want to get drunk, I want to get drunk. So I drink as much as I can, perhaps a quarter at a time."<sup>16</sup> This honest confession does not mean that Morrisseau was blind to the effect alcohol had on him. He never encouraged drinking as something socially acceptable or useful. He continued, "Less alcohol, less confusion. You're learning by experience. When you're falling down, you let yourself down; not on your face flat on your face, of course. You must keep your head up. I have done it! Stick to the A.A. program and you will have help."<sup>17</sup>

Although Morrisseau's view on abuse of alcohol was honest and rational, he was never able to overcome his struggle with this addiction. He admitted that it was difficult to maintain pride and self-esteem when a person got intoxicated to the point of complete lack of control.

Marie Clements doesn't shy away from the difficult parts of Morrisseau's life. In her approach to capturing the life of this great artist she does not construct a hero, but rather equally explores both Morrisseau's genius as well as his struggles.

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<sup>16</sup> Norval Morrisseau, "My name is... Norval Morrisseau" in *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Morrisseau, "My name is... Norval Morrisseau", 42.

In fact, Clements opens the play with an image referring to a time in Morrisseau's life when he was already a well-known painter, but lived on the streets of Vancouver selling his drawings in order to be able to purchase alcohol. Morrisseau's addiction was a recurring struggle through most of his life. Some explain his drinking problem as a reaction to his unexpected fame and the significant sums of money his recognition gave to him. Others think that Morrisseau's drinking was an escape from his inner conflict about the ethics of selling native stories to white people.

Morrisseau underwent a few detoxifications and was able to stay sober for three years.<sup>18</sup> In early 1987 he was invited to Los Angeles to be a part of the exhibition of contemporary Canadian Native Art. During the opening of the exhibition, he was given a drink that caused him to relapse back into the addiction, leading Morrisseau to the situation in Vancouver referred to at the beginning of *Copper Thunderbird*.

Just like alcohol was a recurring struggle for Morrisseau over the course of his life, Clements allows the motif to come back over and over again throughout the play. In the last scene of the first act, The Young Man, The Old Man and The Boy are at the Pollock Gallery during the first exhibition in 1962. On September 12<sup>th</sup> of that year, Morrisseau had his first exhibition. It was a tremendous success; all of his paintings were sold. The commercial and artistic success left Morrisseau confused and conflicted. He could not reconcile the excitement of his artistic triumph with the deep conviction that the traditional Ojibway stories should not be used for commercial purposes. This is how Jack Pollock remembers the situation:

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<sup>18</sup> Greg Hill, "Norval Morrisseau, Shaman Artist" in *Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 24.

*At the end of the evening, everybody was delighted. There were red 'Sold' stickers on every painting. Senator Grossart...joined us for dinner at a Chinese restaurant, where we tried to teach Morrisseau how to eat with chopsticks and to prepare him for the social life of the Canadian art community.*

Even though Morrisseau's artistic debut shook the Canadian art world, he was not recognized as a great painter. Morrisseau was treated as a simple Indian who spent his whole life in the woods and needed to be taught "proper behavior" in order to gain respect beyond patronizing curiosity. Once again a Native person would need to be "civilized" or "converted" to the ways of the white men, "the right way". Pollock continues:

*He came away with a bad case of culture shock. The concrete and the glass, and above all, the psychological pressure of coping with so many human beings had understandably confused him. For hours he had fiercely held his emotions in check. Suddenly he unleashed his pent-up hostilities by getting gloriously drunk. Untamed rage broke up a façade of quiet reserve and torn apart by inner contradictions and dualities, he shouted in despair, "The white man does not deserve my paintings! They should be destroyed here and now to protect the mystical culture of my forefathers"<sup>19</sup>*

Clements recreates the situation from the Chinese restaurant in the seventh scene of the first act, Pollock Gallery, Toronto, 1962. She keeps many references to the actual event but, in her typical way, she creates a symbolic, poetic situation rather than a realistic recreation of the events.

The Pollock Gallery changes to a Chinese restaurant where "a Chinese dragon floats by and its mouth opens nightmarishly."<sup>20</sup> The Gallery Room Chorus and The Flooding Room

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Pollock, "A Personal Note" in *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 24.

<sup>20</sup> Marie Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007), 49.



Chorus create the crowd overwhelmingly pressing upon the personal space of The Young Man, The Old Man and The Boy. Distorted music, and the noise of the plates and glasses clinking escalate the effect of the suffocating tightness of the space. The Old Man pours wine into his and The Young Man's glass saying, "Drown' em out..."<sup>21</sup> The chaos gets thicker and louder. The Young Man begs for room to breathe and the Old Man voices his concern:

*I've made a big mistake...the white man does not deserve my paintings! They should be destroyed here and now to protect the mystical culture of my forefathers!*

Clements allows The Old Man to speak with the exact same words that Morrisseau shouted out in 1962. She recreates the experience of the painter by generating a cacophonous commotion which leads to the panic attack, which is only alleviated by alcohol. The Old Man shouts: "I'm gonna drink like there is no tomorrow"; The Young Man repeats these words as the final line of the scene.

In order to relieve his guilt, Morrisseau used the money from the exhibition to organize a party for his whole home village of Beardmore. As Jack Pollock recalled, "Within a week of receiving over two thousand dollars, Morrisseau was broke. He phoned me asking for more money, and gradually news filtered down that most of the Indian community of Beardmore had been drunk for a week. In an early morning fog, two men had been run over and killed by a totally innocent forest ranger after they had passed out in the middle of the road."<sup>22</sup>

Morrisseau's sense of belonging to his community combined with the guilt generated by

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<sup>21</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Pollock, "A Personal Note", 27.

portraying sacred for the Ojibway people images and selling them to the white men, caused him to use the full amount of money earned from the exhibition to buy liquor for the whole Beardmore community.

Clements includes this tragic incident in the play: in the first scene of the second act:

*The Old Man: I'm busy see...drinking as I can and...I'm remembrin' that time you got your first big time exhibition in Toronto...a real surprise to the society... and you came back with all this money... and you bought drinks for the whole town, for every one of us for weeks...*

*The Young Man: ...that was a good time then – wasn't it a good time – even if those two guys fell on the road and was runned over by that Smokey the Bear Forest Ranger. Not your fault they fell on their face. But it was a good time anyways.*<sup>23</sup>

A significant amount of the play's dialog revolves around the issue of drinking. The tragic condition of The Old Man and The Young Man as they abuse alcohol is alarming. Yet the fact that The Boy witnesses the drunkenness of the two men and eventually admits his own problem with alcohol makes the issue of this addiction quite overwhelming for the audience.

Clements' main objective was not to focus on the social issues of the Native American community. She also did not aim to merely inform the audience about Morrisseau's struggles with addiction nor to just find an explanation or an excuse for his drinking problem. Instead, she faithfully builds a comprehensive image of the famous painter. Clements avoids a didactic tone when approaching the issue of alcoholism; she quotes and paraphrases Pollock's or

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<sup>23</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 62.

Morrisseau's writings about certain situations. Without offering her own moral commentary, the playwright left the reaction and diagnosis of Morrisseau's problem up to the audience.

Drunk people tend to act similarly while under the influence. Clements required the actors, especially those playing The Old and The Young Man, to drink on stage and to adjust their acting accordingly. A proper execution of the role forces the audience into an uncomfortable situation of sharing the same space with a highly intoxicated person.

*Copper Thunderbird's* construction is circular: it opens and closes with the same situation. The first scene takes place in a hotel room and the captions from the newspaper inform the audience that it is the year 1987. In the last scene, we find out more about the condition of the famous "Ojibway boy painter from the woods, who had a vision of greatness when a bear whispered in his ear, as he is now living a reality all too familiar for his kind on the rainy skid row streets of Vancouver..."<sup>24</sup> This information is delivered by Auntie The Newscaster, a character who represents the white people close to Morrisseau, who often treat him with patronizing disdain. Auntie ends her description of Morrisseau's sad condition with a triumphant, "I told you so!"

Clements walks the audience through Morrisseau's struggle with alcohol. It becomes quite obvious that Morrisseau's life could be much different if his battle with addiction had been successful. Wayne states, "Ideas about recovery from alcoholism are closely connected to the need for cultural awareness and cultural esteem: a relationship succinctly summarized in the common phrase 'drinking is not Indian,' which stresses the need for Aboriginal people to

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<sup>24</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 80.

pursue a traditional lifestyle of total abstinence”<sup>25</sup> Morrisseau, despite his ongoing struggle with alcohol was advocating and encouraging Ojibway people to find their way back to their traditional lifestyles from before first contact with white people. Morrisseau wanted to remind his people about their rich culture by telling and painting Ojibway legends. Through his art, Morrisseau wanted to restore the cultural esteem of his tribe. The audience of *Copper Thunderbird* can witness the great potential of an Ojibway culture crippled by alcohol. Confronted with this collision, the audience may be inspired to take action against any substance abuse in their own life.

### **Broken Family**

Alcohol addiction is one of the major contributing factors to some of the difficult situations in Native communities. Some of the problems, domestic violence, abuse, and negligence of children may all be linked to alcohol addiction. All of these issues sum up the decay of a strong sense of community and can lead to many challenges for the Native family units.

Many native scholars note that what distinguishes western mentality from Native culture is the focus on individualism. Community was at the center of Native life. The organization of Native societies was far from the usual western concept of hierarchy, often placing one man in the dominant role. In her work *When Women Throw Down Bundles: Strong Women Make Strong Nations*, Paula Gunn Allen, a literary critic, novelist and poet states, “The status of tribal women has seriously declined over the centuries of white dominance, as they

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<sup>25</sup> Warry, *Unfinished Dreams*, 139.

have been all but voiceless in tribal decision-making bodies since reconstruction of the tribes through colonial fiat and U.S. law.”<sup>26</sup>

In her other writings, Marie Clements often focuses on women’s place in society, and the physical and emotional abuse they suffer. *Copper Thunderbird* seemingly does not belong in that group of works. Yet, even within the play focused on the life of Morrisseau, Clements brings to light the problem of broken relationships between men and women.

Among the myriad works dedicated to the life, art and spiritual journey of Norval Morrisseau, the name of his wife, Harriet Kakegamic, is the only detail of her life mentioned. Her story can hardly compete with the rich life of her husband. Yet Clements creates space on the stage for Harriet. The love story between the young Morrisseau and Harriet is told from the moment of their first meeting.

Morrisseau and Harriet met in 1956 at the Fort William Sanatorium where Morrisseau spent a year treated for tuberculosis. Harriet was visiting her sick father, David Kakegamic. Morrisseau’s time in the Sanatorium was very important; he had visions which gave him a sense of freedom and release to speak about the stories of his people. Harriet would listen to his descriptions of the visions and sometime during the year, a romantic passion sparked between them.

*Copper Thunderbird* includes a scene that takes place in the Fort William Sanatorium. Clements builds the image of deep sexual feelings between the two lovers. Harriet and The Young Man kiss and make love on the stage.

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<sup>26</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 30.

Harriet: *I had a vision I was your wife...*

The Young Man: *...I was your husband...*

Harriet: *And we lived in the woods...and you painted...*

The Young Man: *...and I looked after you.*

Harriet: *...and we made love...and had seven babies...and we lived together...*<sup>27</sup>

Harriet taught Morriseau how to write his Indian name, Thunderbird, in Cree. This became his identifying trait on his paintings and was later adapted by other Native painters.<sup>28</sup>

In the next scene The Young Man and Harriet are separated by The Old Man. Clements wrote very specific stage directions for the actors to physically capture the relationship between The Old Man and Harriet.

*The Old Man rolls The Young Man over and toward himself. They began to kiss. Harriett pulls away beginning to cry. She reaches to get back on frog-like to her man. There is a struggle between The Old Man and Harriet. The Old Man raises his hand to strike her. She backs away crying.*<sup>29</sup>

The Old Man's violent behavior toward Harriet is a graphic image of abuse, even though right after that The Old Man starts to cry and says, "Harriet, this is me." Harriet responds, "I don't know you...I don't know who you are..." The conflict between the physical action and the immediate verbal reaction points out that the violence toward women does not come from the ideological conviction of men's power over women but rather from the inner conflict of men whose identity seems lost. Clements uses the physical interaction between The Old Man and The Young Man to visualize the choice that Morriseau has to make between his lover and his

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<sup>27</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Greg Hill, "Norval Morriseau, Shaman Artist" in *Norval Morriseau*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 43.

destiny as an artist. He chooses his destiny and the pursuit of great art and fame rather than to prioritize his lover and their future family.

Morrisseau had many sexual affairs outside of his marriage. Jack Pollock, in one of his published letters to his psychiatrist, referred to the volatile night at the Chinese restaurant after Morrisseau's successful art show. He described Morrisseau's panic and fit of anger and his later drinking binge. Pollock added that Morrisseau also demanded that they get him a woman or a man for pleasure. When his agent refused, Morrisseau left and spent the night with some unknown person. Pollock said, "To this day I don't know what he met, but I think it was a bear. I've never seen so many hickeys."<sup>30</sup>

Morrisseau found it difficult to marry his domestic role with his mission as an artist and spiritual leader. In one of his notes he writes:

*One time when I was having a lot of trouble at home, you know with my wife and so on, I knew I was going to have an important vision. So I relaxed and lay down. I could sense that this vision was going to appear, and as I lay down, I could see a blur, just like a television screen.*<sup>31</sup>

The vision Morrisseau predicted did arrive. He saw four beautiful women who told him: "Why do you torment yourself over this one wife of yours? She's only a Cree woman, and a Cree woman is just like a dog! For you to be in that state over nothing! We are supposed to bring you help"<sup>32</sup> Morrisseau titled one of his works, *Artist and His Four Wives*.

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Pollock, *Dear M: Letters from a Gentleman of Excess*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1989), 38. Perhaps this description sparked the idea for the Three Dump Bears, characters in the Clements' play

<sup>31</sup> Morrisseau, *The Art of Noraval*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Morrisseau, *The Art of Noraval*, 116.



Figure 5: Norval Morrisseau, *Artist and His Four Wives*, 1975.  
 Images scanned from *The Art of Norval Morrisseau* Sinclair and Pollock, eds., 117.

Clements shows the difficult fact that the great Shaman, The Picasso of the North was incapable of supporting his wife and building a healthy family. The exchanges between The Young Man and Harriet are often bitter:

Harriet: *Norval can you get up to see the children? Norval get up now... don't just lay there like a man. Norval!*

The Young Man: *I'm not just lying here. I've been going places. Anyways, you're the woman, I'm the man. I'm lying down now as you say, and I'm having a vision. A vision. So you go and see them. The crying.*

Harriet: *I can't see them either, Norval. Why? Because I'm having a vision I live in a house with a roof. You get up and let me lie here for a moment with this vision and let me think I live in a house with a roof, and a man that comes home every night... Oh, this vision is so good Norval, I wish you were here.*<sup>33</sup>

Clements gave Harriet her own voice; the playwright allowed her to verbalize the frustrations of being the wife of an artist and a visionary. She confronts the perception that man's role as a public figure is superior to the one owns at home. Through the whole scene The Boy is present on stage and at times the sound of the cry of a baby can be heard. The impact of the scene where the hurt woman is confronting her husband about her unhappy life in the

<sup>33</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 55.



presence of the child, even if the child represents Norval as well, is very powerful for the audience. It becomes obvious that the healing that might be delivered by Norval/The Young Man needs to come first to Harriet and her children and then to the wider community.

Clements, in the same scene, used the motif of The Three Norval Wives who appear, dance for him, and tell him, "This is how she talks to you Norval. She doesn't understand what it is to be an artist. She doesn't understand the burden of being a visionary... Why should you have to torment yourself over this one wife of yours? She's only a Cree woman, and a Cree woman is just like a pack of dogs! For you to be in this state over nothing!<sup>34</sup>" Once again, Clements borrowed lines from Morrisseau's notes and gave them to the characters in her play.

Clements portrays the illness of Morrisseau's life: his alcohol addiction that destroys his relationship with his family. But Morrisseau also struggled with a physical illness through his life. Clements included the motifs of the physical struggles from Morrisseau's life.

### **Physical Sickness**

Morrisseau's emotional health was ailing, but his physical body was also in a poor condition as well. The painter suffered from tuberculosis and at the end of his life from Parkinson's disease. Clements staged Morrisseau's sicknesses. In the scene at the Fort William Sanatorium The Young Man is sick with tuberculosis; he coughs and has a fever. Clements demands the actor embody the sickness even though it may not be the focal issue of the scene.

Another instance where an actor is required by Clements to stress the physicality of sickness takes place in an earlier scene. In 1950 Morrisseau got involved in a relationship that

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<sup>34</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 57.

led him dangerously close to death. The daughter of a certain medicine woman decided to poison Morrissette after he failed to reciprocate her feelings of attraction. She served him a powerful potion that caused him serious sickness. No one seemed to be able to help Morrissette, and he himself thought he was close to death. Clements, in the stage directions, enjoins The Young Man to “puke noisily”, to “stagger”, to “bend over to retch” and to “touch his nose and wipe the blood from it as it streams down”. As The Old Man describes his physical condition, The Young Man performs what could be considered a dance representing his sickness. The reaction of his body to the poison is narrated by the storytelling of The Old Man, who becomes a puppet master-like figure controlling The Young Man.

The diagnosis of the illness and its symptoms, and the act of "ending the denial" is the first step in the process of healing. *Copper Thunderbird* provides its receivers with an honest confrontation with the most arduous problems of Morrissette's life. The troubling elements of the story of the *Copper Thunderbird* resemble many stories of Indigenous people. Yet solely admitting the problems and bringing them to light is not enough to spark real change. In order to understand the strenuous issues of Morrissette's life, one needs to learn about the roots of his struggles.

## **IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES OF THE ILLNESS**

*Before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed*

--Tom Highway

As mentioned in the introduction, the exposure of the illness presents several challenges. The main challenge rests in the risk of perpetuating the image of Indigenous people as victims. Retelling the stories of genocides, boarding school traumas, arrested traditions, prohibitions from whites against speaking their native languages, etc. creates the risk of hopelessly rehashing the past without any prospects of future change. Yet as a native actress and playwright, Mojica states: "We need, then, to have hope with the wounds showing. What makes it moving, and makes it matter, and makes it hit the body, is the courage to have that hope while showing those wounds."<sup>35</sup> *Copper Thunderbird* reveals the wounds of The Old Man, The Young Man and The Boy.

Marie Clements includes the traumatic events from Morrisseau's life that resemble the scenarios of many native lives. One of the most powerful tools to bring about Indian assimilation to the white ways of life was the education system, specifically boarding schools. Boarding schools were founded in Canada and in the US as a tool of forced, cultural assimilation today often referred to as a cultural genocide. Richard Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, created an ideological motto that reflected the attitude of white men toward

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<sup>35</sup> Monique Mojica, "Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformation, Bridging Cosmologies" in *Performing Worlds Into Being*, ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, Kelli Johnson, and William A. Wortman, (Oxford: Miami University Press, 2009), 3.

Indigenous people: "Kill the Indian, save the man." Indian children were taken from their homes under the promise of obtaining an education and gaining new hope for a better life. In reality the philosophy behind separating children from their families can be expressed by the words of General Milroy, who in a petition for an industrial boarding school said: "Indian children can learn and absorb nothing from their ignorant parents but barbarism."<sup>36</sup>

One of the main objectives of these boarding schools was to instill in the Indian children the shame of being Native. Upon arrival to the school students' hair was cut, often publicly. Their clothes, medicine, drums, and almost everything else they brought with them from their Native community were often publicly thrown in a fire. This ritual of *auto da fe* was supposed to create a fear of "savage" ways in the Native children. Many students of boarding schools admit that the greatest tragedy rested in the strict policy against using one's native language. Many accounts recall the punishments for speaking one's Native tongue, such as getting your mouth washed out with soap, locking you in a closet for some length of time, and even more brutal punitive action like piercing a child's tongue.<sup>37</sup> Andrew Windy Boy, a student at the Wahpeton And Flandreau Indian School remembered coming back home from school and not understanding his grandfather speaking Cree. When his grandfather realized that the little boy no longer understood his native tongue, "he cried and held him".<sup>38</sup>

The educational goal was not achieved either; children were often trained to perform tasks typical for servants. The level of their education was held purposely low so that the

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<sup>36</sup>The Healing Has Begun: An Operational Update from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, May 2002, last accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/the-healing-has-begun.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> The Healing Has Begun.

<sup>38</sup> *Our Spirits Don't Speak English*, DVD, Directed by: Chip Richie, Dallas: Rich-Heape Films, Inc, 2008.

graduates of the boarding schools would be able to suitably provide white society with lower class services. Students were not taught skills that they could put to use on the reservation, such as trapping or hunting. They were expected to leave the reservations in the future and continue to assimilate into white society.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to the efforts of the builders of the Indian education system, the boarding schools did not achieve their set goal; the planned full assimilation of the Indians did not take place. Brenda J. Child, the author of *Boarding School Seasons* (borrowing from the scholarship of other authors)<sup>40</sup> states that “tribal identity was not erased but rather reinforced through gang loyalty”<sup>41</sup>. In the case of Morriseau, that statement proved to be true. In his own words he remembers his school experience as follows:

*I lived for a while at the boarding school. There we were, a hundred miles away from home, with the nuns, those strange creatures from outer space! Nuns! They sure were strange creatures! There used to be processions for the children to pray to the Blessed Virgin. It was no time until I was converted to that religion, on the surface, anyway. But deep down inside there was no conversion. I guess I rebelled. I have often rebelled. I got a lot of lickings, pretty well every day.*

The experience of the boarding school challenged the traditional Ojibway beliefs instilled in young Morriseau by his grandfather. It shaped his own religious convictions and placed him in the liminal space between the traditional Ojibway religion and Christianity. This

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<sup>39</sup> *Our Spirits Don't Speak English*, DVD, Directed by: Chip Richie, Dallas: Rich-Heape Films, Inc, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> The authors Child is refereeing to are T. Lomawaina, the author of *They called it prairie light: the story of Chilocco Indian School* and Sally J. McBeth, the author of “*Indian Boarding Schools and Ethnic Identity*”. Brenda J Child collected the stories, accounts, letters and notes of the Ojibway people placed in the boarding schools.

<sup>41</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding school Season, American Indian Families 1900-1940*. (Lincoln: University Of Nebraska Press, 2000), Xiii.

blend of separate world views later allowed Morriseau to create unique paintings that combined elements of both religions.

One can argue that for Morriseau, as an artist, the collision with the Catholic religion allowed him to develop new artistic techniques. As a human however, the time spent in the St. Joseph Roman Catholic residential boarding school in Fort Williams (now Thunder Bay), wounded him for life:

*I stayed at the school as far as the grade two, although I went to school for six years, more or less. You see, the first year you get there they put you in the kindergarten. Maybe the next year you come back, and they put you in the kindergarten again. Next thing you know you are in the grade one. Then, the following year, you come back again and start grade one all over again. Maybe you stay in grade one all over again and stay in grade one three of four years. Well, just give me four years of that kind of thing and I'll be totally screwed up in the mental place, not forgetting that they also brainwashed me not to speak Indian. I don't know how many times the nuns tried to brainwash me to stop me from speaking Indian. Once they locked me up in a locker. And they make damn sure you know "ole Christee" too! You are being continually pushed. Every five minutes of the day. "Go on your knees! Pray!"*

Invasive cultural assimilation, through harsh punishments was just one of the abuses young Morriseau experienced in the boarding school. He also experienced sexual abuse at the hands of three priests. In my research I did not come across Morriseau's direct accounts of the sexual abuse in the boarding school. The information about his molestation comes from his friends. Tom Hill, Morriseau's friend, said, "I remember he was saying he was raped by the

priests and it made an imprint, obviously and it makes an imprint throughout his whole career.<sup>42</sup>

When Morrisseau lived on the streets of Vancouver, he met another homeless man, Gabor Vadas, who later became his close friend and business manager. In a documentary *A Separate Reality: Norval Morrisseau* by Paul Carvalho, Vadas recalls, "Norval was abused in the school. Norval told me that he liked it. It really bothers me because what it tells me is that there is a lot of pain, a lot of denial that exists deep down there because who likes this? Who really likes to be raped?"<sup>43</sup>

Clements avoids overstating the difficult past and she does not allow the audience to linger long in the bitter memories. The playwright allows *The Old Man and The Young Man* to mention the sexual incidents from the boarding school in a very intense and graphic way, but she only gives it one exchange of lines. The sobering words end with laughter from the Old Man.

The Young Man: *What about your bear friends? Now that you're lonely they'll probably come and feel you up "just right"... just like them three priests from residential school.*

The Old Man: *Well...once you been raped by priests there's no competition... the first time is the deepest.*<sup>44</sup>

Faithful to Morrisseau's story, Clements stays away from didactic statements about the schooling system as a key element of colonialism. Yet the few words the audience hears leave

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Hill in *A Separate Reality: Norval Morrisseau* by Paul Carvalho.

<sup>43</sup> Gabor Vadas in *A Separate Reality*.

<sup>44</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 59.

an impact especially because the exchange takes place after Harriet picks up The Boy who is crying and takes him away. The Boy has a dual role. He is the core of the construction of the play and he represents Morrisseau in his childhood. But in the scenes with Harriet he becomes Morrisseau's children, who had to cope with the brokenness of their family and with a difficult, alcoholic father. The Boy becomes an emblem of all Native children who have to grow up with parents incapable of handling the wounds of their own childhood.

Jim LaBelle, an Inupiaq and a student in boarding schools explained the cycle of sexual violence created in the schools. Children who were victims of abuse from a very early age, as teenagers would then start to violate the younger students, even at ages as young as five, six and seven years old. LaBelle admitted, "I was also sexually assaulted by a matron and by another student and I think that contributed to my own promiscuity as a young adult and well into my adulthood."<sup>45</sup> In a similar way, Morrisseau's sexual drive that caused him to be unfaithful to his wife, could be traced back to his experiences of sexual abuse in the boarding school. Greg Hill, a friend of Morrisseau, pointed to the traumatic events from Morrisseau's childhood as the source of his "difficulties with substance abuse later in his life."<sup>46</sup>

### ***Copper Thunderbird and post-colonialism***

Attaching the post-colonial label to the works of Marie Clements would be pigeon holing her ideas into a single concept. *Copper Thunderbird* is "a way of looking at what Morrisseau's work means to us as a country, a nation that is still surviving the collision of first contact over

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<sup>45</sup> Our Spirits Don't Speak English.

<sup>46</sup> Greg Hill, "Norval Morrisseau, Shaman Artist" in *Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 16.



five hundred years ago".<sup>47</sup> Clements states that her play is a subjective and artistic rendering of a story of a great artist and the attempt of capturing the meaning of his work to Indigenous people. Even though the playwright focuses on Morrisseau's life and art, the post-colonial motifs are inherent. *Copper Thunderbird* could be analyzed through the lens of post-colonial theory. Even though in this thesis I do not attempt to present such analysis, in the next several pages I present an overview of the elements of post-colonialism in Clements' work. The post-colonialism in *Copper Thunderbird* is part of the process that Tom Highway refers to as "exposing the poison so the healing can take place".

Joanne Tompkins and Helen Gilbert, authors of *Post-Colonial Drama*, borrow a quote from Alan Lawson who states that post-colonialism is a 'politically motivated historical-analytical movement [which] engages with, resists, and seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in the material, historical, cultural-political, pedagogical, discursive, and textual domains.'<sup>48</sup> This "dismantling" in *Copper Thunderbird* takes place through several characters and situations. One of those characters is Auntie, whose caricatured construction places colonial attitude in certain light.

The character of Auntie is very telling of the attitude toward Native traditions and yet her character is quite humorous. The use of humor in Clements' writing accompanies the most difficult and vulnerable points of Morrisseau's life. These difficult points of his life can be representative of the colonial experience of many Indigenous people. The Auntie character reappears in the play with different titles: Auntie the Nurse, Auntie the Nun and Auntie the

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<sup>47</sup> Clements, "Copper Thunderbird Disclaimer", *Copper Thunderbird*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.

Newscaster. Auntie appears as the first character with whom The Old Man and The Boy dialog. Clements describes her in the stage direction as an “ultimate Auntie who ruins everybody’s lives”. She storms onto the stage shouting, “What’s going on in there?” The Old Man instructs the Boy, “Nothing...Don’t say nothing...she’s a bitch of an Aunt...once a bitch always a bitch...”

Auntie verbalizes criticism toward Morrisseau and all other Indians. She throws around words like "savages" and "bullheaded Indians", she refers to The Old Man/The Boy’s paintings as "pagan scratching" and the Ojibway language she calls "devil speak."<sup>49</sup> Even though her interactions with The Old Man can at times be amusing to the audience, when she criticizes The Boy at one point, the audience's laughter can easily turn to anger. In one of his writings Morrisseau described his aunt with these words, “my auntie, my father’s sister, a white woman, she liked all these finer, dainty things in life. Although she was a very nice lady, she had a lot of pretentiousness, a strict Catholic holier-than-thou attitude”.

Clements, in her construction of the Auntie character, captured Morrisseau’s tone while describing his aunt and the attitude he had toward his father’s sister. In the same note, the painter said, “‘Why don’t you send these children to school?’, my auntie said. ‘They are more like savages. They are learning all these things from their grandfather. This is not the way people should be.’ Just on account of that, I never realized how much auntie bugged up my life.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Norval Morrisseau, “My name is... Norval Morrisseau” in *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 41.

Auntie may seem like Clements' caricature of a stereotypical attitude of a white person, yet the study of Morrisseau's life points that this was indeed a very accurate account of his relationship with his aunt. There is a certain ambivalence in his words about her, on one hand he refers to her as a nice lady, yet on the other hand he talks about her as a real thorn in his side. Clements nearly borrowed Morrisseau's words describing his aunt and put them in the Auntie's mouth. Morrisseau remembered his aunt saying, "See that bullheaded boy! One of these days he's going to learn his lesson; he's doing things the way he wants to do them. There he goes, running around with these shamans, talking with the old people. When he should be playing with the other young boys"<sup>51</sup>

*Auntie: I can see what you are up to...which is no good. You should go to school that's what you should do. Get a trade. You should go to school and learn something useful instead of drawing those stupid pictures.* <sup>52</sup> [...]

*Stop that useless pagan scratching when I'm talking. That boy is rude and useless. Bullheaded! Try to give an Indian advice and see where it gets you. Nowhere. What do I care?* <sup>53</sup> ...*One of these days he's going to learn his lesson.*

In Act 1, scene 5, in the Fort William Sanatorium Auntie the Nurse criticizes The Young Man and Harriet who passionately make love. Clements uses the image of the copulating frog to portray the passion of the young lovers. In the stage directions, the playwright instructs Harriet to "raise her legs and arms around The Young Man like a frog"<sup>54</sup>. The Auntie calls the couple "bullheaded intercouring frogs"<sup>55</sup> The significance of the frogs Clements found in *Legends of My People*, a collection of stories Morrisseau wrote and illustrated. The frogs in the

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<sup>51</sup> Morrisseau, "My name is..." ,45.

<sup>52</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 36.

Ojibway tradition were a love charm. “The Ojibway Indians of the Lake Nipigon area would go to a frog pond in early spring, and if a man saw two mating frogs he would make a sharp-pointed stick and try to pierce them together without separating them and would say, ‘In the same manner that you are enjoying together, let me be loved by the woman that I desire to be loved by.’ The two frogs would be dried in that position, and when the Indian tired of his partner would hit the frogs apart the love-spell would release its hold on her.”<sup>56</sup>

The audience unacquainted with the Ojibway traditions would not be able to catch the reference, but the use of meaningful details is a very unique trait in Clements’ writing. Most of the images, stories and situations included in the play are deeply rooted in the writings of Morrisseau, his autobiographical notes, his recordings of the Ojibway legends, and in his paintings. Clements’ in-depth research informs most elements of the world of the play.

When Auntie appears as a Nun in act 2, scene 3, in the Saint Rose Catholic Detoxification Centre, 1975, she addresses The Boy with the harsh statement, “There is no door to heaven for an Indian...but you have to have blind faith anyways...” to which The Boy “begins to cry silently.” Auntie may be a humorous character with her caricatured features while she interacts with The Old and The Young Man, but when she speaks to The Boy, the audience witnesses the struggle of many Native children who became a target of many negative colonial attitudes and attacks. That verbal attack on The Boy will evoke intense emotional responses from the audience: bitterness, pain connected to the opening of old wounds, outrage, justification, pity, anger. Whatever the response may be, it is a valid element of the audience’s experience while watching *Copper Thunderbird*.

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<sup>56</sup> Norval Morrisseau, *The legends of my people*, (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965), 56.

In the final scene of the play, Auntie the Newscaster announces that, “The Ojibway boy painter in the woods who had a vision of greatness when a bear whispered in his ears is now living a reality all too familiar for his kind on the rainy skid row street of Vancouver... I told you so”<sup>57</sup>. The closing scene of the play is a direct reference to the opening scene of *Copper Thunderbird*. The Old Man appears in his hotel room “disheveled, bloated and alone” just as he was when he first appeared before the audience. Auntie’s triumphant “I told you so” is a fulfillment of the threatening promise she made to The Boy in the first act during their first interaction. She prophetically declared “You’re going to learn the lesson of your life. Which is... nobody gets to live their own life...and I’m gonna be here to say “I told you so””<sup>58</sup> Auntie’s satisfaction over the fulfillment of her predictions concerning the fate of The Three Norvals becomes a symbol of the colonizer’s attitude toward Indigenous people.

The risk of the relapse of the colonial story where the white man claims superiority over the Indigenous person is ever present in the relations between Morriseau and the white people he meets during his artistic journey. The art world was dominated by white people, who at first resented the Indian artists, and later exploited their “novelty”. Morriseau, as a young artist, was well aware of the risk of being patronized, or being used for commercial benefits, or becoming an exotic novelty. Clements captures these concerns in her play.

The Act 1, scene 3, is a recreation of the famous meeting of Morriseau and Jack Pollock, gallery owner and art agent who organized Morriseau’s first art exhibition. Clements blends two events into one: Morriseau first met Pollock during a summer workshop in a small

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<sup>57</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 17.

schoolhouse, after that meeting Morrisseau invited Pollock to his home. In *Copper Thunderbird* the first meeting happens when Jack comes to The Old Man and The Boy which may be an indication that the events takes place in Morrisseau's house.

Jack appears in the "long tunnel of a doorway", he "smiles down at The Boy trying to set him at ease"<sup>59</sup> Jack informs The Old Man: "I was just traveling through and your name was mentioned to me by a number of people..." Jack Pollock, the Canadian art agent who "discovered" Morrisseau and through that gained international recognition, was obviously a key person in the painter's career. In one of his revealing letters written from Pollock to his own psychiatrist<sup>60</sup>, he wrote as follows:

I told her [Susan Ross, graduate student of Ontario Collage of Art] the last thing I wanted was as Indian who painted on birch bark. There I was, Jack Pollock, gallery owner, feeling sophisticated, professional, promoting modern art. [...] I purposely avoided him. In almost every town I went someone told me about this Indian. I wasn't interested. I did not discover Norval Morrisseau. He discovered me, because in Beardmore, I couldn't avoid him ...<sup>61</sup>

Clements reconstructs the atmosphere of the first meeting of Morrisseau and Pollock. In the summer of 1962 Pollock was leading classes and workshops for art teachers. During one of them "the door opened and a tall Indian with a roll of pictures under his arm walked in."<sup>62</sup> Morrisseau unrolled his pictures for Pollock who, struck by the power of the images, asked whether he could visit the painter at his home to see more paintings.<sup>63</sup> The meeting of the two

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<sup>59</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Many of his letters were later collected and published titled "*Dear M: Letters from a Gentleman of Excess*" creating an account of Pollock's life as well as his relationship with Morrisseau.

<sup>61</sup> Jack Pollock, *Dear M: Letters from a Gentleman of Excess*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1989), 37-38.

<sup>62</sup> Jack Pollock, "A Personal Note" in *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 17.

<sup>63</sup> Pollok, "A Personal Note", 18.

men was quite ambivalent; both of them carried power unknown to the other. Pollock was a white gallery owner, familiar with the hermetic Canadian art world. Morrisseau carried the inner power of a “warrior of another time”. Pollock remembered that “There were however, in those moments of our first encounter, vibrations of inbred strength which gave me a sense of shaman awe.”<sup>64</sup>

Clements captures the combination of the nervous atmosphere, the mutual impact both men had on each other, and the vibrations Pollock referred to in her script. Jack arrives and attempts to have a conversation with The Boy whose intimidation does not allow him to speak with the stranger. The Old Man intervenes and “pulls mightily and the body of the tall handsome Young Man emerges wet and spread out on the floor at the feet of Jack.”<sup>65</sup> This significant meeting literally created Norval Morrisseau, a famous painter recognized not only outside his community, but around the world.

Clements chose to reproduce the act of the creation of the artist in a very literal way. The Young Man introduces himself with the repetition of: “I’m Norval Morrisseau. My Indian name is Copper Thunderbird.”<sup>66</sup> When Jack asks to see the paintings, The Old Man and The Young Man agree but The Boy motions “No”.<sup>67</sup> As Jack unrolls the scrolls and looks at them The Young Man and The Old Man have two different reactions. The Young Man talks about “watching for anything in his [Jack’s] body that gave way to his eyes and then his words.”<sup>68</sup> With the anticipation he awaits the reaction to his art. The Old Man at the same time said, “I

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<sup>64</sup> Pollok, “A Personal Note, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 21.

hoped the white suit would not patronize me. That big city head wouldn't say 'how adorable, or 'isn't it nice that someone was documenting the primitive images of a long gone people' ".<sup>69</sup> During these key meetings early in his career, the white representatives of the art world had the power to either appreciate Morrisseau's work as a real piece of art or dismiss it with a belittling attitude of someone well-acquainted with the "real art."

When Jack is finished viewing the pictures, he stands up and looks at The Young Man as "two equals... like an Indian meeting John Wayne"<sup>70</sup> Clements uses Jack Pollock's actual words, "you are a good artist and you deserve to be known."<sup>71</sup> A close relationship was established between the two men. Morrisseau after many years admitted, "Jack became my blood brother, my agent and my friend."<sup>72</sup>

When The Young Man's position as an equal partner for Jack is established, he starts to ask Jack, "Are you part Indian?" When Jack denies it, Morrisseau calls him a liar. That is an allusion to the personal story of Jack Pollock and his family heritage.

Pollock's grandmother kept her Indian roots a secret. No trace of her heritage could be found in her look, her behavior or her home. No one from the family knew where she was born. In the book *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, Pollock said: "I was a young man of twenty when one evening, sitting with my grandmother on the verandah of her house in Toronto, I heard her make a kind of quiet confession. She told me had been born an Indian on a reservation near Orillia. When she was a child her family moved to Toronto where, apparently,

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<sup>69</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 21.

<sup>70</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Norval Morrisseau, "My name is... Norval Morrisseau" in *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 46.

<sup>72</sup> Morrisseau, "My name is...", 46.



she had met strong prejudice and intolerance, then the automatic reaction to any of our native people. The only way to survive these pressures was to ruthlessly deny her background.”

When Jack denies being Indian, The Old Man calls him a “closet Indian, and there be a lot of closets” referring to Jack’s homosexuality which he could never fully admit publicly. Clements allows the audience to learn something about Jack but even more, she shows the power of pride an Indian like Morrisseau had on those who started to believe it may be better to erase the marks of their Indian heritage. That is one of the examples where Clements oscillates between the ‘traditional’, realistic construction of the characters and their functioning as a representation of a certain attitude and way of life. When Jack is done talking with The Young Man, he joins the audience in watching the story unfold.<sup>73</sup>

The meeting between Morrisseau and Pollock was free from the common colonial inequalities Natives faced, yet the painter’s struggle for an equal place in the white men's art world marked his whole life and Clements wrote it into the script as a recurring motif of the play.

Another white character that appeared upon Morrisseau’s path is Doctor Weinstein. This is how Morrisseau remembered Dr. Weinstein:

Now when I was living in Red Lake, something important happened. I met Dr. Weinstein. He and his wife were collectors of antiques and he was an artist. His wife, too, was very well travelled. Dr. Weinstein knew what culture really was. He also liked art and books. Then he one day comes to a little hole in the ground called Red Lake! As a matter of fact, here he is, coming from London, England. And Dr. Weinstein is very surprised to find someone here in the woods – doing art! With his vast amount of knowledge about art, he recognizes that someday I

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<sup>73</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 23.

will be something. He sees I am a real artist, and he wants to support me. I certainly wanted to have someone criticize my work, but I was not completely satisfied when Dr. Weinstein was advising me.<sup>74</sup>

Weinstein was a mining company physician but art was his passion.<sup>75</sup> Weinstein was the first white person who showed interest in Morrisseau's paintings and he wanted to connect him to the world of contemporary art. Clements shows the contrary feelings in Morrisseau regarding the foreign European showing interest in his art. The Young Man feels gratitude toward the man who supports his craft, but The Old Man shows a lack of trust and his interactions with Weinstein are marked by cynical confrontations.

Dr. Weinstein: *Well, I have a little flask here of brandy... would you like a sip?*

The Old Man: *You are in my living room and I will do the offering... Can I get you a beer?*

Dr. Weinstein: *European or domestic?*

The Old Man: *Domestic and wild...you could say.*

The Old Man does not allow the other characters and the audience to forget that within every meeting of a white man with an Indigenous person, there is a possibility of a replaying of "first contact" with all of its devastating consequences. The Old Man restlessly reminds everyone that there should never be any space for Europeans to feel superior toward him or any other Native person. He especially challenges The Young Man to be proud and to not fall into the trap of a relationship of the colonized and the colonizer. He tells him, "You usually can't trust a European that collects things...especially if you're an Indian".<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Morrisseau, "My name is...", 46.

<sup>75</sup>Greg Hill, "Norval Morrisseau, Shaman Artist" in *Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 18.

<sup>76</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 41.

Morrisseau, like many indigenous people, had to live his life in a state of constant battle for respect and an equal place in the modern world. Colonialism has changed its shape since the time of first contact. In the 21st century different kinds of colonization occur; the western world with its overwhelming focus on materialism is on a “quest for authenticity”<sup>77</sup>.

Sara Bryant-Bertail, in her essay *Old Spirit in a New World*, borrows the concept of authenticity as an act of resistance to materialism. She got this concept from Dean MacCannell, the author of *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, who states that modern, western society is attracted to the “sacred in primitive society”, because the spirituality in primitive societies makes them feel more authentic than their materialistic western world.<sup>78</sup> Even though seemingly this fascination states a certain superiority of Indigenous people over westerners, there is usually a sense of control of the fascinated over the fascinating. Many western tourists travel to reservations to observe and perhaps participate in the rituals of Indigenous people, yet their interest is conditional. Traditional Indian ceremonies need to occur at predictable, scheduled times in order for the tourists to view them. The tourists then become merely spectators, ready to receive the performance of authenticity rather than actually witnessing a piece of truly authentic Aboriginal culture. Morrisseau, with his focus on Ojibway traditions, certainly dealt with that kind of exploitative fascination with him.

Clements captures the challenges Native people still face living in the modern world with its lingering colonial attitudes in the final scene of the first act which takes place in the Pollock Gallery in 1962. On the September 12<sup>th</sup>, Norval Morrisseau had his first exhibition. The

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<sup>77</sup>Sara Bryant-Bertail, “Old Spirits in a New World” in *Native American Performance and Representation*, ed. S.E. Wilmer (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>78</sup> Bryant-Bertail, “Old Spirits”, 43.

event was a tremendous success and all the paintings were sold. Once again Clements faithfully constructs her scene based on the accounts of Pollock and Morrisseau. In the gallery The Boy, The Young Man and The Old Man are all present. The Boy is painting. The Young Man is welcomed by Jack with a reprimand for being late, he offers the excuse that he had difficulty finding a suit on the reservation. Asked to perform a speech, The Young Man says:

*I am Norval Morrisseau having the Indian name of Copper Thunder. I am a born artist —some people are born artists and others are not, this is the same way with Indians. I have grown up with many stories and legends of my people and I have made paintings of these legends on great sheets of birchbark, loadstone these with tempered water, colors and some on the plywood, but very few people have obtained these, as of the present time... These paintings are worthy to be exhibited in the gallery, if accepted. These paintings depict a legend or some other Ojibway belief... Each one is a part of me, a part of us and is as purely uncorrupted as possible for a modern Indian... I do not wish my work to be exploited in any commercial way but to be properly used as an art form.<sup>79</sup>*

The speech of the Young Man is based almost in its entirety on a speech Morrisseau prepared for his first exhibition. The same speech was later edited and served as an introduction to his book, *Legends of my people: The Great Ojibway*. As the Young Man is giving his speech, he is constantly interrupted by the Gallery Room Chorus and the Flood Room Chorus. The first chorus represents the fascinated crowd craving any semblance of tribal authenticity. The Gallery Room Chorus' comments are intertwined with The Young Man's speech.

*He speaks English quite well. Those people are sure coming along... I wonder if he's going to sing for us. It's so, so deep. Excuse me, could you drum and sing for us?... I think those Indians just have to move on from the past. They lost. They just have to accept that and try to be like everybody else... Doesn't he look like a*

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<sup>79</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 45-48.

*little boy up there? ... I almost feel sorry for him... How does it feel to be Indian? How does it feel to be primitive? Tell us a story, Norval. Look this way for us. You are a Chief, are you not? The Chief of a conquered people. Or, are you a Shaman? Can you drum? Can you draw one of your cute line drawings for us? Have you ever been to the city before? Have you ever seen so many people?*<sup>80</sup>

The Flooding Room Chorus represents those entitled to criticize Morrisseau for his artistic endeavors in the Canadian art world, instead of keeping his art for Natives eyes only. The Flooding Room Chorus refers to “our secrets” which indicates that its members are part of the Native community. Clements uses the Flooding Room Chorus to comment on the difficult task for an artist to maintain their as an artist not just an indigenous person. Clements deals with the frustrations of Native people not allowing an Native artist to exist outside of an indigenous label. Even though the playwright does not explore this problem in-depth, the existence of the Flooding Room Chorus and its function confirms that Clements is interested in Morrisseau’s story, his struggles and dilemmas, rather than just engaging in the wider political discourse.

The Flooding Room Chorus also interrupts The Young Man’s speech to say:

*Look at his suit. It looks too small for him. An Indian shouldn’t wear a suit, anyways. Trying to be a white man will only make him look more Indian... How did he learn to talk like that? Look at him smile. How’d he learn to smile like that? Probably residential school. He looks assimilated alright. Small. There he goes talking like a white man selling our secrets like a pair of moccasins. There he goes...You sold your own people out. You sold us out for the white man.*<sup>81</sup>

Clements captures the dilemma of a Native artist caught between the desire to share his art with a wider audience and the fear of being misunderstood and exploited. I cannot help but wonder whether this difficult situation was an experience Clements faced herself. Clements as

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<sup>80</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 44-48.

<sup>81</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 44-48.

a Metis playwright whose plays have been published and produced by white people, and have to a great degree been embraced by the white population, perhaps she dealt with similar emotions and dilemmas that Morrisseau wrestled with during his lifetime. I was not able to interview Marie Clements for this thesis, so the question will remain unanswered for now. But it would be useful to flush out the similarities between Morrisseau's life and Clements experiences.

Morrisseau lived his life in the liminal place between cultures, religions and tradition. This in-between space never became comfortable and home-like, but rather remained the source of much of his dilemmas and emotional torment. Reading and studying Morrisseau's life, it is easy to conclude that the struggle for an equal place in the colonized world was a cause of many of the personal difficulties of this great artist. Morrisseau physically and emotionally never overcame the impact of some of the colonial weapons used against him, yet ideologically in many ways he moved on from the imposed oppression. His belief system was a form of restored traditions and beliefs of the great Ojibway. Clements portrays his spiritual journey back to the traditions of his fathers.

## FINDING MEDICINE AND THE BEGINNING OF HEALING

*By embodying that wholeness on the stage, we can transform the stories that we tell ourselves and project into the world that which is not broken, that which can be sustained, not only for Aboriginal people but for all the inhabitants of this small, green planet.*

--Mojica

Exposing the illness and identifying its roots are two important stages of healing yet by themselves they cannot fully fulfill this process. Ric Knowles and Monique Mojica, in the book *Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformation. Bridging Cosmologies*, describe the risk that comes from retelling the stories of oppression of the Indigenous people. The risk rests in perpetuating the image of the Native People as victims, as those who need help to move on with their lives. Knowles and Mojica created a new concept of Indigenous theater. Mojica states:

*We are not healed yet. The wounds are still fresh. And paradoxically, we cannot wait to be healed. The vision must be put into practice for the vision contains the healing. We must be willing to ask ourselves and our audiences to suspend our disbelief, to the extent of envisioning a world where Indigenous is not synonymous with victim, nor with the hoop of nation that has been broken. There are links, bridges, medicine paths intact that can bridge what is known, or unconsciously known, and bring it into consciousness by performing possible worlds into being<sup>82</sup>*

Clements exposes the wounds inflicted on many Indians and the effects on Indigenous people as a whole, but most importantly, she constructs a "possible world" in her play; a world of Ojibway traditions and beliefs that are not only present in the consciousness of the main

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<sup>82</sup> Monique Mojica and Rick Knowles, "Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformation. Bridging Cosmologies" in *Performing Worlds Into Being: Native American Women's Theater*. Ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and William A. Wortman, (Oxford: Miami University Press).

character, but are physically present in the world of the play. The significance of Morrisseau's international recognition rests not only in him being an Indian who placed traditional works of Indigenous people in art galleries, rather than museums, but also in him being a spiritual figure in the Native community. In 1986, Morrisseau was honored with the title: Great Shaman of the Ojibway. John Grim, author of *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing Among the Ojibway Indians*, states that a shaman is "the person, male or female, who experiences, absorbs, and communicates a special mode of sustaining, healing power."<sup>83</sup>

Greg Hill authored the essay, *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, where he drew a parallel between an artist and a shaman proving that the famous painter was a perfect fusion of both. The western audience of Morrisseau's art may fall into a trap of treating a description of the painter as a shaman in a more metaphorical way; as a description of his tremendous talent rather than a depiction of his actual role in the Ojibway community. It is important to realize that a shaman in Ojibway culture, as well as most tribal communities, is a central role. A person, in order to be recognized as suitable for that role, has to undergo several spiritual experiences. Morrisseau described some of these experiences that would point to his special role as a shaman.

Grim states that: "A shaman receives his or her healing and vitalizing power from the spirits. After experiencing this power personally, he or she brings the sustaining energy to the community."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> John A. Grim, *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing Among the Ojibway Indians*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>84</sup> Grim, *The Shaman*, 8.



Morrisseau experienced healing in his life. The most powerful moment was in the creation of his spiritual identity. This is how Morrisseau described it:

*When I was nineteen, I became very sick. A woman that was interested in me had given me this potion to drink. I went to see the doctor, because at first it was just like an ordinary sickness. It was like a pain in the chest. The doctor couldn't understand what was happening so he gave me some kind of pills...*

*Finally, I was going down and down. I was getting sicker and sicker, with nosebleeds. It's a nice way to die; you just float away. I certainly thought I was going to die because of that Indian medicine that had been administered to me. You see, this woman that was interested in me, her mother was a medicine-woman, and her mother gave her the herbs. All because I refused her advances.*

*After about ten days of losing weight, I was like a skeleton. So my mother got a very good medicine-woman for me. She came to look at me. She talked to me. She had already befriended me many times before. Then she performed the sucking ceremony<sup>85</sup>, sucking out the objects or the medicine that was lodged somewhere in my inside. She would spit these things out and there would be a good feeling.*

*And then she did something special. You see, this is the custom of the Ojibway Indians when everything is hopeless, when even Indian medicine is hopeless...*

*...This is the highest sort of power that can be given to any one that is sick: and that is to give him a new name, a powerful new name. It is just like administering extreme unction, like the Jesuits do, almost like a last rite.*

*So at that special moment she gave me a new name, the name of Copper Thunderbird. That was a very, very powerful new name; and it cured me. From then on I changed, because that was a bane whose power you could actually feel...*

*My name was changed to Copper Thunderbird. I sign my paintings Copper Thunderbird.*

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<sup>85</sup> Healing ritual where Medicine Woman "cures by sucking on the patient to remove an intruded object that is the cause of the illness. Most often they place their mouth directly on the patient. Others use hollow bones, reeds, horns, or other such tubes". From: William S. Lyon, *Encyclopedia of Native American Healing*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1996), 264.



Figure 6: Norval Morrisseau, *Man Changing Into Thunderbird*, 1977.  
Image scanned from *Norval Morrisseau* by Greg Hill

The story of his sickness, healing and transformation became a defining moment in Morrisseau's life. His identity was forever changed and from that moment on, he would introduce himself with these words: "My name is Norval Morrisseau and my Indian name is Copper Thunderbird. I am a born artist."<sup>86</sup> Morrisseau included the motif of the Thunderbird on many of his paintings. The one below is titled "Thunderbird Shaman Teaching People". The painting above titled "Men Changing Into Thunderbird" is a visual representation of the transformation the painter underwent. This healing was one of the key ways in the Ojibway culture that a shaman would receive his calling.<sup>87</sup>



Figure 7: Norval Morrisseau, *Thunderbird Shaman Teaching People*, 1990.  
Image from <http://norvalmorrisseau.blogspot.com><sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Norval Morrisseau, *The legends of my people*, (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965), 1.

<sup>87</sup> There are three distinct forms of calling: a healing, a word from a family-shaman spirit, and by the will of a mountain spirit. Grim, p169

<sup>88</sup> NORVAL MORRISSEAU BLOG: "This Blog is posted in honour of the Spirit of Norval Morrisseau a.k.a. Copper Thunderbird - Grand Shaman of the Ojibway. Also, this is the first and the only Blog incepted during Norval

Morrisseau, in his research project on the legends of Ojibway people, calls a thunderbird a “protector”, his eyes shoot lightning and thunder and he is the giver of electric power.<sup>89</sup>

Clements captures this prevailing event from Morrisseau’s life in the fourth scene of the first act: Sandy Lake Reserve, 1950. Morrisseau lived in Sandy Lake Reserve in a small cabin near the dump. Clements includes in the scene the characters of the three Dump Bears who interact with The Old Man and The Young Man. The dump is an important part of the scenic atmosphere. Clements wrote the interactions of the characters with the set detailed in the stage directions. The scene begins with “The sound of a 1950s heap of garbage drops down on The Young Man.”<sup>90</sup> When The Young Man complains about his condition, he “digs in the dump and pulls out a bottle of prescription pills.”<sup>91</sup>

The Old Man tells the story of the sickness, healing and transformation as The Young Man is experiencing it. Once again, The Old Man speaks with direct quotes and close paraphrases of Morrisseau’s actual words.

The Old Man: *The thing is I was having this real nice courtship with this medicine woman’s daughter... Real nice...and then all of a sudden she has to ruin everything by telling me she loved me...And when she asked me if I loved her I said...*

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Morrisseau’s lifetime. It is dedicated entirely to the preservation of his artistic legacy along with the living presence of the Ojibway peoples on the North American continent.”

<http://norvalmorrisseau.blogspot.com/2009/12/exhibition-that-ended-institutionalized.html>, last accessed, April, 2.

<sup>89</sup>Morrisseau, *Legends of My People*, 4.

<sup>90</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 23.

<sup>91</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 25.

As The Old Man says these words “A wave of nausea hits The Young Man... he bends over to retch...”<sup>92</sup> The Old Man continues:

*Anyways, so I tell her I don't love her...everything is fine for a minute. She gives me a nice tea like a real trustworthy woman. I drink it and then look down into the cup and all sorts of leaves and herbs look back at me. Never a good sign. No future in that tea cup.*

The Young Man: *Hey...there's blood coming' from my nose...See...*

Surprised The Young Man “stands in disbelief, touching his nose and wiping the blood from his face it as it streams down.”<sup>93</sup>

The Young Man covers himself with debris to die. The Old Man recalls the feeling of coming close to death and then remembers "my mother got me a more powerful medicine woman"<sup>94</sup> As he says these words, The Young Man “rises up with hope”. The Young Man responds to the words of The Old Man with curiosity and anticipation. Then The Old Man continues:

*The Old Man: She sucks out the objects, or medicine that was lodged in my insides to get a good feeling. She waits but nothing good is happening...so in desperation... she does the last thing she can do... She gives me the highest sort of power a medicine woman can give when everything looks hopeless. A last rite of sorts...She gives me a new name. A powerful name that cures me...<sup>95</sup>*

The Young Man: *I am.*

The Old Man: *Copper Thunderbird*

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<sup>92</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 25.

<sup>94</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 26.

<sup>95</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 27.

As The Young Man receives his new name he hears “the sound of thunder as The Young Man looks up and rain begins to baptize him...” The water and its cleansing power is a reoccurring motif in *Copper Thunderbird*. Clements uses the duality of Morrisseau’s belief to mark this central event: the Catholic ritual of baptism where a baby receives a name and the Ojibway ritual of conferring a new name on a person. The baptism of The Young Man reflects his new calling in life: to save the Ojibway stories; to tell them in a new way; to make them known to others.

The moment of transformation is envisioned by the playwright in a very specific way in the stage directions:

*The Young Man backs onto the wall behind him and, as he does, lights flash in and out of the room. The Young Man’s body shines out as a copper petroglyph of a Thunderbird. Below him The Old Man’s body appears spread out like an offering on the bed, his feet touching the standing feet of The Young Man. They look at each other like two sides of a reflection in water. The thunder increases as does the sound of the rain, leaving droplets of sweat marks on the black wall like clouds and raindrops. The thunder and clouds begin to move and to separate The Old Man and The Young Man. The Boy climbs closer to the Copper Thunderbird petroglyph and The Young Man inside it. He begins to draw the outline of The Young Man Norval. He draws the Thunderbird Headdress throughout. The Boy sings under in Ojibway.<sup>96</sup>*

This key moment in Morrisseau’s life becomes the central scene of the first act. The Young Man experiences not only healing, but a powerful transformation into one of the key beings in the Ojibway tradition: a thunderbird.

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<sup>96</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 28.

After The Young Man becomes Copper Thunderbird, The Old Man explains to him the meaning of the thunderbird in the Ojibway tradition with the words taken verbatim from *The Legends of My People, The Great Ojibway*. The Young Man gives the vow:

*I am going to breathe these stories into the world. I am going to draw them the way I feel them. The way I see them and like a Thunderbird, like a Copper Thunderbird that is me, this new power will allow me to draw the line, the power lines, that will leave the stories of my people on the world so that they too can not only see them, but feel them, be a part of them, a part of the knowing that we, the Ojibway will always be here.<sup>97</sup>*

The promise of The Young Man is rapidly interrupted by The Dump Bears who push him out of the image, challenging his new calling by saying that his dreams will end up in the dump just like those of all others Indians. Clements captures the collision of the stark reality of poverty with the high dreams and visions of a restored Ojibway community, one that remembers its roots and former glory.

In the introduction to the *Legends of my People, The Great Ojibway*, Morrisseau addresses the Ojibway people, "My people, be proud of your great culture that was once mighty..."<sup>98</sup> He calls them to go back to their traditions and to break the dependence on the white men's ways of life. Morrisseau encourages his people to educate themselves on the traditions of the old Ojibway, so that they are not forgotten and so the traditions can once again re-enter their lives.

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<sup>97</sup>Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 29.

<sup>98</sup> Morrisseau, *Legends of My People*, 2.

He closes the introduction with these words: "One would not like to open a book to read that we were tough, ignorant savages or a bunch of drunkards, but rather a people who were proud of their culture."<sup>99</sup> In a way Morrisseau, by writing *The Legends of my People* and by making his paintings, was "performing possible worlds into being." He painted the vision of a culture restored by memory and the re-telling of the great stories.

Another indication that Morrisseau was a shaman, in its actual meaning rather than a metaphorical meaning, was his ability to travel outside of his body. Grim states, "One of the primary rituals in shamanistic practice is the enactment of a journey to the spirit world."<sup>100</sup> Morrisseau described his experience in a note included in the album of his paintings titled: *Return to the House of Invention*. He states, "Being a Shaman, I was taught different things. What I was taught was how to leave my body and be able to go to the other worlds, which we talk about today as Eckists... During many travels as a young person, or a middle-aged person and so on, I seemed to discover many things, I did not understand at first what they were."<sup>101</sup> Morrisseau referred to these experiences as "Travels to the House of Invention" where all the great artists traveled and brought back their masterpieces and where all Indians were able to travel before the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries.

In the same note Morrisseau described one such trip when The Inner Master (the main host of the House of Invention), taught him to use a great variety of colors that have healing power. The Inner Master told him, "You are the one who's going to pick up all these colours and

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<sup>99</sup> Morrisseau, *Legends of My People*, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Grim, *The Shaman*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Norval Morrisseau, *Return to the House of Invention*, (Ontario: Key Porter Books, 2005), 14.

explain how this works.”<sup>102</sup> Since that experience, Morrisseau believed that colors have a capacity to heal those who look at them. This belief shaped his individual style of painting with the use of many vibrant colors. He no longer saw himself as an artist using his creativity, Morrisseau believed that his role was more of a channel to a healing power that would come through his paintings. “Now, when I paint the picture I just allow myself to be used. I pick up the pencil and the canvas. I allow the interaction with soul to reflect in the mind, to put down these images of people, men or women or children especially.”<sup>103</sup>

The fourth scene of the second act takes place in the House of Invention. The three Norvals undergo a transformation: The Old Man becomes Norval Grand Shaman, The Young Man turns into Norval Thunderbird Warrior, and The Boy becomes Norval Boy. The three Norvals meet Picasso, Martin Luther King, Black Elk<sup>104</sup>, Einstein and Leonard Cohen. This meeting reflects Morrisseau’s belief that inspiration for all great work comes from The House of Invention, an astral “source of all knowledge and invention”.

In the conversation between The Old Man/Norval Grand Shaman and Picasso, the latter says: “This painting you gave me in Paris and signed 'From one great artist to another', has stayed with me.” This remark is a reference to an actual event when Morrisseau gave one of his paintings to Picasso through Dr. Weinstein, a personal acquaintance of the great European artist. According to the unpublished notes of Dr. Weinstein, Picasso “contemplated the fine drawing for few moments, nodded his head as a sign of appreciation, and his face broke into a

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<sup>102</sup> Morrisseau, *Return*, 16.

<sup>103</sup> Morrisseau, *Return*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Sioux Indian, a visionary.



broad smile when he read the dedication at the bottom of the picture 'from one great artist to another, signed Norval Morrisseau, Copper Thunderbird'<sup>105</sup>

Morrisseau, because of his “supernatural” experiences, had confidence in his art and his mission as a great artist and shaman, and he refused a European understanding of hierarchy based on fame and recognition. In *Copper Thunderbird*, Picasso in *The House of Invention* says to Norval Grand Shaman, "Till we meet again...Picasso of the Woods." Norval Grand Shaman responds, "Till then, Morrisseau of Europe."<sup>106</sup>

Morrisseau struggled to establish his place in an art world dominated by white people who often approached him with an air of superiority. Yet, after his spiritual experiences he gained a certain sense of pride that came not only from his unique technique unseen before, but mainly from the powerful subject of many of his paintings: the Ojibway traditions. John Grim mentions that “each person in the audience participates in the ritual and absorbs its meaning into his or her own life.” If Morrisseau’s Grand Shaman ritual is a painting then all those who are the audience, the receivers of his art, absorb the meaning of the stories told on the canvas. This creates a correlation with Morrisseau's conviction in the power of colors to heal those who are viewing them. He states, "I believe that everybody has a color space. When one looks at the picture, the picture and the colors reflect in the mind or in the soul or in whatever part of the body has the color space inside of you. So now for a brief moment you

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<sup>105</sup> Greg Hill, "Norval Morrisseau, Shaman Artist" in *Norval Morrisseau*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 30.

<sup>106</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 74.

are more or less in tune with it. When you do that you heal yourself. The color heals you. I don't heal you. The spirit doesn't heal you. It's the color that does something."<sup>107</sup>

After the transformation that takes place in Sandy Lake Reserve in 1950, The Boy, The Old Man and The Young Man are in the Fort William Sanatorium in the next scene. Morrisseau spent a year at this location being treated for tuberculosis.<sup>108</sup> Here he met his future wife who came to visit her sick father, David Kakegamic. Harriet became Morrisseau's wife and they have seven children together. Clements portrays Harriet as a very affectionate wife who listens to Morrisseau's fears and visions and supports him. The playwright informs the actors in the stage directions that the interactions between the lovers are full of passion and intimacy, "She wraps her arms around him deeply, she kisses him softly, she moves her face close to his seductively."<sup>109</sup> Harriet also whispers to The Young Man "I have loved you from the beginning."<sup>110</sup>

During his time in the sanatorium, the painter has a dream that changed him and the direction of his artistic endeavors. Morrisseau described it as follows:

*Behind me is a grizzly Bear. In front of me, two water gods chewing on bones. Something stronger than myself is protecting me from them. Like shadow. The shadow starts moving. The bear shows his claws. The water gods towards me. I know fear. I run after the shadow. 'Great Spirit! Help me! I am much afraid!' It says, 'I'm the Great Manitou. I'm testing you. Now here's a charm for you'. And he throws down two pieces of silk, little flags, yes. Light blue and dark blue. Day*

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<sup>107</sup> Morrisseau, *Return*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> Hill, *Norval Morrisseau*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 33.

<sup>110</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 33.

*sky and night sky. 'These will protect you. Go ahead and do these things. Never fear. I will help you.' I woke up. Since then I am not afraid.*<sup>111</sup>

This event from Morrisseau's life was frequently recalled by the painter during interviews.<sup>112</sup> It was a key moment that not only confirmed Morrisseau's calling but also removed the fear of breaking the taboo of painting traditional Ojibway stories and presenting them to the public. Presumably this was the moment when Morrisseau gained faith in himself as a shaman. He no longer needed affirmation from the Ojibway community.

Clements in a very specific way recreates all the elements of the dream and Morrisseau's words. The Sacred Bear from Morrisseau's painting appears and scares The Young Man. He starts to run from the bear, the sneaks and the demi-gods. The Boy joins him, and The Old Man follows them both.

*The Young Man: Dear Manitou, help me! Help me, I'm dying*

*THE BOY: Holy Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death... I mean Manitou...*

*THE YOUNG MAN: I mean Jesus Manitou*

The call for help comes directly from the Morrisseau's account of the dream, but along with that Clements introduces another subject: the different religious influences in Morrisseau's life, his Catholic education instilled in him by his grandmother and the nuns during his time in boarding school. Later in his life, Morrisseau went through a phase of combining both beliefs and during that period he painted "Indian Jesus Christ."

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<sup>111</sup> Olive Patricia Dickason, *Indian Arts in Canada*, (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs, 1974), 92.

<sup>112</sup> It is included in movies: "Paradox of Norval Morrisseau" and "Separate Realities"

Morrisseau's spirituality and love for Ojibway tradition was instilled in him at a young age by his grandfather. Morrisseau was the oldest of five sons and according to Anishnaabe tradition he was brought up by his grandparents.<sup>113</sup> Moses "Potan" Nanakonagos, the boy's grandfather, told many stories to the young Morrisseau. He became a central figure in the painter's life, "My grandfather was religious in a sense, but it was more the things he would utter out of himself, out of his own experience. For hours, three or four hours at a time, he would speak to us all, and tell us stories. My grandfather was the most influential person in the whole of my life."<sup>114</sup>



Figure 8: Norval Morrisseau, *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974. Images scanned from *Norval Morrisseau* by Greg Hill, 131.

He was the one that assisted the young Morrisseau in his first spiritual encounter. When Morrisseau was twelve years old, his grandfather took him on a vision quest. Fasting for a few days from food and drink was the traditional way of initiation to manhood. Boys would seek a spiritual guide to lead them through their adult life. Young Norval and his grandfather Potan, built a scaffold out of birch trees on which Morrisseau then spent the next four days.<sup>115</sup> His grandfather warned him that when the vision arrived he should not open his eyes. The terrified boy was left alone after Potan made a promise that he would be close by in case the boy needed his help. On the third night the awaited vision finally came in the form of a bear. The Boy heard sniffing and thumping, he was so scared and curious at the same time that he

<sup>113</sup> Hill, *Norval Morrisseau*, 15.

<sup>114</sup> Morrisseau, *The Art of Norval*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Armand Garnet Ruffo, "Man Changing Into Thunderbird" in *Artist Shaman*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 81.

opened his eyes. He saw the huge, powerful bear, a figure that would later appear on many of his paintings. Filled with fear, the boy ran to his grandfather and told him about his vision and confessed that he had opened his eyes. With disappointment, Potan informed Norval that because he opened his eyes the vision for his life would only be partially fulfilled. He also told the boy that the powerful bear owned three cities: Chicago, New York and Montreal.

Marie Clements includes this event from Morrisseau's life in the second scene of the first act, the Sandy Lake Reserve, 1937. At the beginning of the scene The Boy "emerges from the water."<sup>116</sup> The Boy asks The Old Man to tell him the story, The Old Man begins:

*The Old Man: My grandfather is the most important person in my life.*

*My grandfather is the most important person in my life.*

*My grandfather the Mythman. Moses the Mythman took me into the woods straight into the woods and there I was to...*

*The Boy (this could be spoken in Ojibway)*

*...make myself a man*

*The Old Man: Make a man of myself. A vision<sup>117</sup>*

The Old Man telling the story to The Boy resembles the relationship of the grandfather and grandson. The story-telling becomes real, The Boy is no longer a listener, he starts to experience the events described by The Old Man.

*The Boy: A bear. I can feel a heavy bear coming... sniffing...*

*The Old Man: Is that so? Take it from an old man...whatever you do...keep your eyes shut...*

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<sup>116</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 9.

<sup>117</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 10.

At that moment a “large, black- outlined vision bear takes shape”. The bear gets closer to The Boy and sniffs him. The memory so often recalled by Morrisseau becomes a reality in the world of the play. Morrisseau dedicated a lot of his paintings to the motif of the bear and Clements does not specify on which painting the dramatic interpretation of the bear should be based.



Figure 9: Norval Morrisseau, Ojibwa Midawiin Sacred Bear, c. 1959-62. Image from: <http://norvalmorrisseaublog.blogspot.com/2011/11/ojibwa-midawiin-sacred-bear-c-1960.html>

As the sound of the bear grows, The Boy gets scared and calls for help. The Old Man responds to him:

*The Old Man: You should be scared. Big city visions are sniffing you... paving a path for you to Chicago, New York, and Montreal... grrrr... bear visions... You really want to be a great artist... hmmm? Then keep your eyes shut if you want a wish to come true. Grr...*<sup>118</sup>

*The Boy: Grandfather please...please help me. My eyes are opening I can't help myself. My eyes want to see it coming. I want to know where it's coming from.*

<sup>118</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 11.

*The Old Man: The bear told you not to look. I told you not to look. But you looked because you got no self control. And because you got not self control everything is fucked, everything is half-assed. Nothing is full and everything is half of what it should be.*<sup>119</sup>

Clements indicates that The Boy treats The Old Man as his grandfather. Later in the same scene in the stage directions she says, "The Boy climbs up on the bed and takes The Old Man's hand like a grandson to a grandfather."<sup>120</sup> Yet The Old Man never becomes Potan who, according to many of Morrisseau's accounts, was a gentle man who comforted his terrified grandson rather than reprimanded him harshly. This interaction of The Old Man with The Boy signals the regrets that The Old Man may have had. The sacred bear became Morrisseau's spiritual guide and carried a great significance in his artwork. The connection between the spirit and the shaman is a vital element of a shamanic spiritual journey.

The last unique distinction characterized in a shaman is a certain sense of alienation. Grim, in his work on shamanism, indicates, "he or she performs a vital function in the tribe and is a central figure in the community. Yet the experience that enables shamans to function in this manner also makes of them marginal or 'liminal' people. They cross the threshold into another world. In this ambiguous position they move at times to the center of society and then return to the margins. They draw freely from tribal traditions and yet spontaneously create their own responses to new situations."<sup>121</sup> The ambivalence of a shaman can be seen in the life of Morrisseau who lived in between cultures, religions, and physical and spiritual worlds. His experiences in boarding school, stories told by his grandfather, his visions, his acquaintance

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<sup>119</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 11.

<sup>120</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Grim, *The Shaman*, 13.

with the Canadian and European art world, his spiritual mission of bringing healing to his people, all of these made him both a key character for the Ojibway community, but also separated him from the other members of his tribe. Morrisseau struggled with this separation even during his childhood.

While reading various notes and listening to the interviews with Morrisseau, a sense of alienation from his earliest years can be easily found. In one of his personal notes, Morrisseau remembers, “My grandfather showed me how to do interpretations of the shaman beliefs on birchbark. When I was playing with the other children, I was already playing the role of a shaman. I was away from the mainstream of these young people. Already I was acting a role. I was not really playing with them. You never really saw me playing with the sixteen-year-olds. I was a loner. The other kids thought I was like a woman, always staying home, and talking to the old people.<sup>122</sup>”

In *Copper Thunderbird*, The Old Man recalls this memory from his childhood:

*THE OLD MAN: I wanted to paint on the scrolls. I wanted to paint on as many scrolls as I could. They said I was too young... That it wasn't right... that I was a threat to the society. That it was a taboo. They said I was too young to keep company with the elders. "You should spend time with boys your own age"*

But the character of The Boy marks his alienation even more strongly; he is present through the whole play, yet often he does not participate in the interactions of The Old Man and The Young Man. In the second scene of the first act, next to several lines of The Boy, Clements states, “this could be spoken in Ojibway.”<sup>123</sup> For instance when The Old Man

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<sup>122</sup> Morrisseau, *The Art of Norval*, 45.

<sup>123</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 10.



reprimands The Boy that he should not have opened his eyes when the vision of the bear arrived to him, The Boy apologizes, "Sorry... I shouldn't have looked" and the stage directions indicate that "this could be spoken in Ojibway"<sup>124</sup> Clements does not explain why the language variation is optional and when each language should be used. Perhaps the playwright wishes that the Ojibway language is used when the play is performed in front of Ojibway people. Yet the use of the language that most of the audience would not understand could create an even greater sense The Boy's separation. Use of the Ojibway language would be a bold choice that would create a risk of brining confusion to the audience, but even in that it could be a very powerful statement.

Floyd Favel Starr, native actor and director, emphasis the importance of staging native languages, "Language is related to place; it is our umbilical cord to our place of origin, literally and symbolically."<sup>125</sup> By The Boy speaking Ojibway it creates a link between the origin of the Ojibway people and the other characters and finally to the audience. With other words, he opens the door for "links, bridges, [and] medicine paths that can bridge what is known, or unconsciously known, and bring it into consciousness by performing possible worlds into being."<sup>126</sup> Building the bridges in *Copper Thunderbird* that Mojica refers to starts with using the Ojibway language and continues by telling the stories of Morrisseau's experiences that reflect the traditional Ojibway ways of living: vision quests, healing rituals, connections to the spiritual world, shamanism, etc...

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<sup>124</sup> Clements, *Copper Thunderbird*, 12.

<sup>125</sup> Floyd Favel Starr, "The Theater of Orphans/ Native Languages on Stage" in *Aboriginal Drama and Theater*, ed. Rob Appleford, (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>126</sup> Mojica, "Creation Story Begins Again", 2.

By staging the Ojibway mythology, Clements participates in, what Allen calls, “renewing our [Indian] ancient relationship to the universe”<sup>127</sup>. This sense of coherence and integration allows Indigenous people to find their way back to their ancestors whose lives were whole, not broken and consumed by illness. Finding a way back, making connections, and building bridges: these are expressions that illustrate the process of healing. Morrisseau became someone consumed by the passion of telling and re-telling the stories of the Great Ojibway. Clements, by choosing to portray Morrisseau’s story in her play, participates in the healing process of restoring relationships and ‘linkages’.

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<sup>127</sup> Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 104.

## **CONCLUSION**

The audience of *Copper Thunderbird* is confronted with the illnesses consuming Morrisseau's life. The play provides an explanation regarding the roots of his illness, but more importantly, it offers the medicine that can bring healing. While describing the possible healing that can take place in theater, it is important to remember that the process of restoring requires a certain attitude from the audience. Obviously healing is not guaranteed and it would be naïve to expect that a great revolution can occur during the performance. Yet, the healing described in this thesis is possible if the audience, as Mojica indicates, is willing to "*suspend disbelief, to the extent of envisioning a world where Indigenous is not synonymous with victim, nor with the hoop of nation that has been broken*"<sup>128</sup>. The audience needs to enter a certain state of mind where their imagination can be led to the place of envisioning themselves in a world that has been restored. In that sense, *Copper Thunderbird* becomes a vision quest for the audience. Just like Morrisseau, who as an eight year old boy took a trip into the woods to receive a vision, the audience is encouraged to expect to receive a vision that will mark their life for the future.

*Copper Thunderbird* achieves its effect on the audience by Clements' use of the process of healing in the writing of her play. She effectively diagnoses Morrisseau's illness: addiction, broken family, and inner conflict. The severe alcoholism the painter struggled with is a recurring motif in the play. Clements boldly tells many stories that capture Morrisseau's helplessness. She also addresses the difficulty he had with reconciling his identity as a father with his identity as a great artist and shaman.

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<sup>128</sup> Mojica, "Creation Story Begins Again", 2.

Clements then identifies the causes of his sickness: his early trauma while at boarding school, sexual abuse by some priests and a distrust of his right to sell his paintings describing cherished Native traditions to white people.

Most importantly, Clements finds medicine: Morrisseau's desire to embrace more traditional Ojibway ways of life, including fulfilling his role as a grand shaman to his people. The spiritual journey of Morrisseau captured in Clements' play is a story of a modern Native man searching for a way back to the times when Indigenous traditions were an integral part of everyday life. For many centuries Native beliefs have been ridiculed, forbidden and fought against by European colonizers. Morrisseau, through his art and his book, *The Legends of My People*, calls the Ojibway people to awaken their faith in the traditions of their fathers and make them their main source of strength. His mission was to fully restore the traditional beliefs of his tribe, but even more than that to encourage his people to be proud of those traditions. The unprecedented situation of a Grand Shaman becoming a world renowned painter modeled for the Indigenous people the challenge of taking ownership of their origins and becoming confident with expressing their traditional beliefs to the outside world.

Marie Clements believes in the power of the story. In one of her interviews she states:

*Mostly, as an artist you try to create change, and change comes from a story; and stories come from an ability for people to connect, to identify with, to transcend gender or race, even culture sometimes, to put us all in the same room and to be responsible to each other. That's why I believe that a story remains such a powerful force for change.*<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with Clements for ArtSAYER <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6qe5xDVP6Y> last accessed June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

While reading Clements' plays it becomes clear that it is the story she serves. She does not aim to merely entertain her audience but rather to facilitate space for change. In *Copper Thunderbird*, Clements found the story of a fascinating artist and she re-told his story with her unique voice so it could become alive on stage and become a force for healing.

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