

Environmental Justice/Injustice in Marie Clements's
Burning Vision: An Eco-critical Study

العدل والظلم البيئي في مسرحية "الرؤية المحترقة" لمارى كليمنتس:
دراسة بيئية نقدية

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Abstract

Contemporary First Nations Theater introduces a rich variety of diverse cultural discourses articulated by a group of prolific playwrights. An outstanding figure of this group of playwrights is Marie Humber Clements (1962) who is an award-winning Metis performer, producer, director, screen writer, and playwright. Clements's eco-critical play *Burning Vision* (2003) investigates environmental justice/injustice issues and their effect on indigenous people. One of the main aims of this paper is to investigate the play's innovative dramaturgy through which Clements depicts the intimate relationship between indigenous people and environment, exposes human/non-human colonization and exhibits the disastrous effects of resource exploitation and nuclear invasion on indigenous people and environment. Another important aim is to display, through analyzing *Burning Vision*, environmental justice/injustice as revealed by eco-critic Theresa J. May. In addition, the paper discusses Robert D. Bullard's theory of environmental justice with other critical perspectives of different critics. In *Burning Vision*, Clements challenges the colonizer's hegemony and attempts to contribute to ecological rejuvenation through the synergetic efforts of various indigenous groups.

Keywords: Marie Clements – *Burning Vision* – Environmental Justice/injustice – Theresa J. May – Robert D. Bullard

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ملخص:

يقدم مسرح "السكان الأصليين للبلاد" المعاصر بكندا مجموعة متنوعة ثرية من المحادثات الثقافية التي ينطقها مجموعة من كتاب المسرح ذوي الانتاج الخصب. مارى هامبر كليمنتس (١٩٦٢) هي نموذج بارز من تلك المجموعة وهي ممثلة ومنتجة ومخرجة وكاتبة سيناريو وكاتبة مسرحية من أصل "ميتيس". وتتناول المسرحية البيئية النقدية "الرؤية المحترقة" (٢٠٠٣) للكاتبة ماري كليمنتس قضايا متعلقة بالعدل والظلم البيئي وأثرهم على سكان البلاد الأصليين. واحد من الأهداف الرئيسية لهذا البحث هو تحليل فن التأليف المسرحي الإبداعي الذي استخدمته كليمنتس في المسرحية والذي تعرض من خلاله العلاقة الوطيدة بين سكان البلاد الأصليين والبيئة وكذلك استعمار القوى البشرية والطبيعية وتعرض الآثار المدمرة لاستغلال المصادر الطبيعية وأثر الغزو النووي على سكان البلاد الأصليين وعلى البيئة. هدف اخر هام للبحث هو تناول قضية العدل والظلم البيئي للناقدة تيريزا ماي وذلك من خلال تحليل مسرحية "الرؤية المحترقة". اضافة الى هذا يتناول البحث نظرية العدل البيئي للناقد روبرت بولارد مع مجموعة أخرى من الآراء النقدية لعدة نقاد. تتحدى مارى كليمنتس في مسرحيتها "الرؤية المحترقة" سيطرة الاستعمار وتحاول تحقيق التجدد البيئي من خلال الجهود المتضافرة لمجموعات متعددة من سكان البلاد الأصليين.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: مارى كليمنتس - "الرؤية المحترقة" - العدل والظلم البيئي - تيريزا ماي - روبرت بولارد

Environmental Justice/Injustice in Marie Clements's *Burning Vision: An Eco-critical Study*

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)

Introduction

Contemporary First Nations Theater appeared in Canada in the 1970s as a nationally focused theater that displayed plays exploring indigenous histories and cultures (Schafer 35). It introduces a rich variety of diverse cultural discourses articulated by a group of prolific playwrights. Among the most productive leaders of First Nations Theater are Vera Manuel (1949-2010), Tomson Highway (1951), Daniel David Moses (1952), and Drew Hayden Taylor (1962). Their plays are mainly concerned with the collision of First Nations' and the colonizer's culture that results in cultural oppression of indigenous people. Their work investigates colonization and its traumatic consequences on First Nations' people, and, as Henning Schafer points out, "contributes to the ongoing process of healing the wounds of colonization" (36). The intriguing work of these playwrights witnessed the beginning of modern First Nations Theater in Canada. Another group of First Nations playwrights investigate the relation between indigenous people and the natural world. A number of Native plays such as Donna-Michelle St. Bernard's *A Man a Fish* (2015), Colin Murphy's *The Breathing Hole* (2017), and Matthew Mackenzie's *Bears* (2018), to cite only a few examples, elucidate significant environmental issues and reflect the interconnectedness between indigenous people and the natural world.

Marie Humber Clements (1962) is an outstanding figure of First Nations Theater whose work investigates indigenous people's connection to their environment. Clements is an award-winning Metis performer, producer, director, screen writer, and playwright whose plays have been

performed across Canada, America, and Europe (R. Gilbert 147). Clements's work is distinguished from her counterparts' by displaying environmental justice/injustice issues that connect people from diverse temporal, spatial, and cultural regions and the hazardous consequences of environmental injustice on indigenous people.

Burning Vision (2003) is Marie Clements's innovative ecological drama that exposes the dual human/non-human colonization and deals with the disastrous effects of resource exploitation and nuclear industrialization on indigenous people and environment. As Helen Gilbert points out, *Burning Vision* is "a densely layered poetic composition" whose composer "wove threads of her story from her ancestors' experiences" (196). Spanning the period between 1880s and 1945, the narrative traces the journey of raw uranium ore mined from the Native Land in the Northwest Territories of Canada, conveyed to the United States to be processed and used in the manufacture of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan during World War II. The play's eco-critical discourse attempts to present valuable insights for environmental justice in order to achieve ecological rejuvenation. In four movements, Marie Clements demonstrates various fragmented narratives chronicling the periods before the atomic bombing on Japan and its aftermath.

One of the main aims of this paper is to analyze Marie Clements's eco-critical play *Burning Vision* that exhibits the intimate relationship between indigenous people and environment. The analysis displays the play's unique dramaturgy and non-linear structure through which Clements chronicles history from an indigenous standpoint challenging the colonizer's hegemonic chronology. Clements's multidimensional dramaturgy emphasizes the environmental justice/injustice issue through exposing the traumatic effects of nuclear invasion on indigenous and racially oppressed people.

Another important aim of this paper is to attempt to prove, through analyzing Clements's *Burning Vision*, the interrelation between theater and ecological issues such as environmental justice/injustice as revealed by eco-critic Theresa J. May. In her eco-critical theory, May challenges human and natural resource exploitation by colonial powers and thinks

about ethical values of environment that are reflected in literary texts, such as *Burning Vision*, with intense ecological indications.

Additionally, the paper discusses Robert D. Bullard's theory of environmental justice, a term he coined in the 1980s to challenge environmental racism and to protect minority communities and people of color from environmental hazards. In addition to Bullard's theory, other critical perspectives of different critics such as Glenn S. Johnson, Birgit Dawes, Greg Garrard, and David E. Newton will be discussed throughout the paper.

Theoretical Framework

Eco-criticism is an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between people and the physical environment as revealed in literary texts. It is a theoretical discourse that connects human and non-human beings. As an environmentalist and a professor of literature, Theresa J. May embraces this interdisciplinary approach and defies human actions that damage the environment. As May posits: "Community-based environmental issues – including environmental justice concerns – have found theater a viable tool through which to promote social change, open dialogue, or protest the status quo" ("Greening" 93). In so doing, she attempts to contribute to environmental rejuvenation.

As an eco-critic, May challenges human and natural resource exploitation and thinks about the ethical plights posited by the environmental degradation and about how ethical values are reflected in literary texts with intense ecological indications. In Marie Clements's *Burning Vision*, the intimate man/nature relationship is disturbed as a result of nuclear invasion and exploitation of uranium-rich Aboriginal land. Eco-criticism, as May explicates, "like gender, postcolonial, or multicultural theories, must address injustices felt in the body – the body of experience, of community, of land" ("Indigenous" 149). In *Burning Vision*, human and non-human beings are badly injured. Ore carriers, miners and people living in First Nations land are cancer stricken whereas plants, caribou, trout and other species are fatally contaminated.

While eco-criticism explicates the relationship between human and non-human beings, environmental justice refers to the relationship between environment and social and racial inequalities. Established by the African American sociologist Robert D. Bullard (1946) in the 1980s, environmental justice movement attempts to protect people of color and ethnic minorities who are likely more exposed to environmental injustices and hazards. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulation, and policies” (Bullard et al. 15). As this quote indicates, minority communities and racially oppressed peoples should not be disproportionately exposed to environmental degradation resulted from polluting industries such as uranium manufacturing and those that use hazardous substances.

Likewise, Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson point out that a “growing body of evidence reveals that people of color and low-income persons have borne greater environmental and health risks than the society at large in their neighborhood, workplace, and playgrounds” (555). In *Burning Vision*, Rose, the Metis bread maker, explains how her bread is contaminated with the black dust of uranium: “The wind is blowing it everywhere. The kids are playin’ in sandboxes of it, the caribou are eating it off the plants, and we’re drinking the water where they bury it. Besides everybody’s wearin’ it these days, so I guess there’s no harm if a bit gets in my dough. It’s as fine as flour anyways” (94). Deceived by the imperialist power, Rose thinks that uranium is not harmful. As the Dene Widow points out “[t]hat’s what they pay the scientists to say when the government wants something” (94).

Environmental racism, a form of environmental justice, as defined by Bullard and Johnson, “refers to any environmental policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (559). In *Burning Vision*, white capitalists/colonizers exploit the resources of Native peoples, who are greatly exposed to environmental hazards, for military purposes. In *Burning Vision*, in a summary of the day’s news,

Lorne Greene/Voice of Doom announces that the American government has ordered great amounts of uranium, more than “350 tons” from the Canadian mining company to be sent to the American Manhattan Project for military research (56). Further, Labine Brother, the white capitalist who prospects uranium in First Nations land states “The government knows what it’s doing and the government is behind me” (106).

In accordance with Bullard and Johnson, David E. Newton points out that environmental inequity “refers to a geographic reality, a pattern in which hazardous waste sites, polluting industries, nuclear waste dumps, and other environmental threats are more likely to be located within or adjacent to communities of color or poor communities” (3). The capitalist/colonizing powers pretend that they have nuclear industrialization for the benefit of indigenous and minority people. It seems that, according to Bullard and Johnson, “unequal interests and power arrangements have allowed poisons of the rich to be offered as short-term remedies for poverty of the poor” (572). In *Burning Vision*, the white uranium prospectors proclaim that they run a corporation of nuclear industrialization to keep the poor employed in order to feed their families.

Gregory K. Freeland and Frederick D. Gordon state that environmental justice “seeks to correct numerous industries placed on people who have been exploited and have not had substantive backing by the rule of law to improve their living conditions” (1). In *Burning Vision*, the imperialist government deceives indigenous people by pretending that they are digging for a substance to cure cancer. The capitalist prospectors deny the dangerous radioactivity of uranium on miners and radium painters who are dead from cancers. According to Newton, white colonizers think of minority communities as “dumping grounds for products and wastes that they, themselves, do not allow in their own countries” (37).

As Bullard and Johnson posit, “Environmentalism is now equated with social justice and civil rights” (555). In *Burning Vision*, Clements exposes how human and non-human worlds are sacrificed for capitalist interests and imperialistic hegemony. Through displaying the environmental crisis resulted from atomic detonation, she calls for an

ecological revival through which Native people restore their intimate relationship to environment. From an interdisciplinary perspective, eco-critical theorists, as May suggests, “can empower playwrights by illuminating those dramaturgical strategies [like Clements’s] that move toward an ecological theater – the theatrical styles, devices, characterizations, settings and stories that tell the human story within the ecological story” (“Greening” 93). In *Burning Vision*, the natural scene is intertwined with the play’s fragmented incidents. The movements of the play are intervened with scenes of cherry trees, whizzing of trout in fishing rods, and caribou herds moving across the earth space.

One of the major environmental injustice issues is air and water pollution. As Greg Garrard points out, pollution is “an ecological problem because it does not name a substance or class of substances, but rather represents an implicit normative claim that too much of something is present in the environment, usually in the wrong place” (6). In *Burning Vision*, a great amount of First Nations uranium is mined under Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories of Canada. The play’s emphasis on air and water pollution exposes the hazardous effects of environmental degradation on indigenous people. The pollution resulted from mining uranium poisons the whole environment; water, air, plants, and animals. Clements defies pollution as a form of environmental injustice legislated by the colonizer.

Distinctive Dramaturgy in *Burning Vision*

In her innovative, multimedia play, *Burning Vision* (2003), Marie Clements deftly displays multiple histories, cultures, and languages. Through sound and sight effects that help to cross geographical and historical borders, Clements delineates the traumatic events of the atomic detonation and their disastrous effects on Japanese people who desperately search for beloved family members and friends amidst the burning ruins of the explosion. After the atomic detonation, the whole landscape becomes a “charred landscape of hell” (40). However, the Japanese are not the only victims; people from disparate races (Dene and Metis) are correlated through trauma and environmental degradation caused by nuclear invasion.

In writing *Burning Vision*, Clements is inspired by a prophesy of a Dene medicine man, Ehtseo Ayah (the character of the Dene Seer in the play), who portended in the 1880s the advent of atomic war on Japan about six decades before it occurred. While he was camping near Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories of Canada during caribou hunting, Ayah saw white men with metal tools climbing into a hole in the earth digging out black rock. He predicted that the substance taken from the Dene Land would cause devastation a long time in the future (H. Gilbert 199). As a matter of fact, the mined black rock was actually used by the United States in the creation of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War II.

In order to connect diverse histories, cultures, and places, Clements uses a unique technique with non-linear structure and untraditional theatrical elements. Clements's multidimensional dramaturgy includes distinctive stage directions, music, songs, dances, bomb blasts and flames, clicks of radar and Geiger counter, ticks of radium painted dials, multilingual radio announcements, proficient lighting, ghosts from the spirit world, and double cast. The play's innovative visual and acoustic imagery helps to elucidate disparate historical events and their effects on characters.

In her creative dramaturgy, Clements uses a complex, non-linear structure in which time and space collide. Native drama has been identified by Christy Stanlake as usually being "non-linear" that has "cyclical plot structure" like "storytelling" (23). In four movements, various fragmented narratives chronicle historical events from an indigenous standpoint connecting human and non-human worlds. *Burning Vision*'s dramaturgy "reclaims one indigenous temporal and spatial logic, that of Dene peoples, displaced by European linear timekeeping and mapping systems during acts of colonization" (Whittaker 131). The play's narratives trace people across diverse cultures, races, and spaces with the incidents before the atomic bombing on Japan in World War II and its aftermath.

In *Burning Vision*, fragmented events from different times and nations are placed in a way that suggests their interrelatedness. The play's

non-linear structure, as Whittaker suggests, “bridges the markers of the Roman calendar, national borders, natural geography, and the elements of fire, water, earth, and air” (147). At the outset of the play, the scene of Labine Brothers, the white American prospectors with their flashlights and Geiger counter, prospecting the black rock of uranium from the Aboriginal Land in Canada in 1930s intervenes with the scenes of a mourning Dene widow lamenting the loss of her ore carrier husband as a result of exposure to radioactivity, two cancer stricken lovers; the Miner and the Radium Painter, and a Japanese grandmother separated from her grandson during the atomic bombing on Japan. Subsequent scenes introduce Native stevedores working on a ship, Radium Prince, that carries sacks of uranium ore in a long journey from the Native Dene Land to the south for refinement, a young Metis bread maker, Rose, whose bread is contaminated with the black dust of uranium, and a Japanese fisherman, Koji, who is in a sudden splash conveyed from Japan to the Dene Native Land in Canada at the time of atomic bombing: “There was this light in the sky when I was talking to this trout and then I was flying and I landed on a branch” (79).

A following scene shows a racially oppressed Japanese woman, Round Rose, who was forced to work as a propaganda wartime radio announcer, Tokyo Rose, and an American bomb test dummy, Fat Man, who is waiting anxiously for the atomic detonation in a deserted small house, his bomb shelter. The play’s fragmented scenes are intervened with caribou herds moving across the earth space with the sound of their hoof beats. The sounds of caribou herds floating through the play are used by Clements as “markers that time’s passing in an indigenous culture is of nature’s doing; time is not manmade” (Whittaker 138). To her human cast, Clements adds a group of non-human beings such as a trout, caribou herd, and a Japanese cherry tree.

The scenes of fragmented narratives are interceded by the Dene Seer’s ominous songs while radar and Geiger counter sounds are heard “*clicking aggressively*” in the background with clocks’ ticking and heart beating (102). Clements’s use of the term movement rather than act “suggests her almost musical orchestration of the different voices of her dramatis personae to achieve a unified whole from the fractured shards of

scenes generated by the production of uranium and the detonation of the atomic bombs" (Farfan 238). The play's narratives connect events and characters from Northwest Territories of Canada, North America, and Japan.

The play opens with "*foreboding scenes of human suffering: pain, grief, loss, and isolation*" (7). Then a US radio announcer starts the countdown as thirty seconds remain for the atomic bombing. Little Boy is a Native boy who personifies raw uranium ore that was mined by the white prospectors from the Aboriginal land in Canada. He appears at the outset of the play naked and piled at the center of the earth. On hearing the footsteps of Labine Brothers, he states: "It is only a matter of time . . . before someone discovers you and claims you for themselves. Claims you are you because they found you. Claims you are theirs because they were the first to find you, and lay claims on you" (8-9). Little Boy is scared of being discovered and exploited by American colonizers for the destruction of the world.

Important theatrical elements in Clements's unique dramaturgy are the play's stage directions and imagery that display ghosts from the spirit world. The Dene Widow appears on stage gathering a few small branches to make a fire pile. As Clements's illuminating stage directions indicate, "*As the embers of the fire begin to light up, the sound of static as a phonograph needle goes round and round in the tracks of a record. The sound of static begins to crackle like fire. Long shadows of firelight flicker, suggesting a man's body rising*" (11). Through fire, the Dene widow conjures the spirit of her deceased ore carrier husband who is a victim of radioactivity: "I am in parts, this life now hollow so his spirit can pass in front of me, whispering and drifting like smoke and staying like a shadow" (77).

Clements's distinctive stage directions depict the horrible moments before the atomic detonation and its aftermath through which the atomic explosion penetrates the bodies of all characters: "*The sound of the Geiger counter gets closer and closer and it is now louder than it's ever been as it clicks towards Rose, circling in on her [. . .] The sound of the bomb falls downward and into their bodies that glow bright*" and a

“huge light whites out their world into blackness . . . black dust has settled over everything” (109,110). US Defense War Propaganda Clip describes the bomb blast as “[t]he most beautiful thing in the history of mankind” (110). After the atomic detonation on Japan, according to Clements’s nonlinear structure, the Dene Seer announces his future burning vision in the last movement of the play concluding that: “This burning vision is not for us now . . . it will come a long time in the future. It will come burning inside” (111). As Theresa J. May suggests, the indigenous perspective from which the play is written “allows for simultaneity of past, present and future” (“Kneading” 7). Marie Clements uses the play’s creative dramaturgy to call for an ecological revival through which her indigenous people can reclaim the past, restore their cultural identity as well as their intimate relationship to environment.

Strategic double cast in Clements’s dramaturgy is another innovative device that proves the interconnectedness of various indigenous, racially oppressed people who undergo environmental injustice as a result of nuclear invasion. Toward the end of the play, the Japanese grandmother takes off her long red kimono and transforms to the Dene Widow who kneels to the ground and gathers the blackened body of her young ore carrier husband from fire and talks to him: “You have carried our burden long enough; you do not have to carry me. I will carry you inside. I will still say I love you out loud. I will still wait for you. I will still wait for you to come home . . . till I die” (112). After her speech, the ore carrier husband is released, walks toward the fire shadows of other Dene ore carriers, and disappears into the spirit world.

Before she transforms to the Dene Widow, the Japanese Grandmother appears on stage after the atomic bombing on Japan, with the sound of the Japanese drums, and *“makes her way across the blackened land, through small notepapers of folded cranes, through charred bodies and small fires, through the turning steps of the Radium Painter, the bride-to-be”* (110). In a dreamlike vision, Koji, the Japanese fisherman, sees his grandmother carrying his child-self (Koji the Grandson) down a long tunnel of light while he stares at her in amazement as she passes in front of him: “I am riding on my Grandmother’s back. This is what I see. I am riding on her back yet I am

a man. All man legs and tall arms. I am a man and yet she is carrying me like I weigh nothing" (19). She assures Koji to wait for her at the cherry tree that represents hope for reunion: "If we ever get separated wait for me here . . . and I will come for you. Remember this tree, remember my words. . . . I say, you will be safe as long as you talk to the cherry tree's back" (21). The Japanese Grandmother repeats these words in Japanese as a sign of racial pride and challenge to the American colonizer.

Double cast is also used when Little Boy eventually transforms to the Dene Seer as he emerges from the back of the TV, and embodies the Sahtu Dene Seer: "*His small body wears clothes that look too big for him. He walks in the light, his shadow projecting a tall elder as he eventually circles the space, retelling his story*" (93). The play's multiple castings help to cross borders and, as Alana Fletcher emphasizes, "deepen the play's critique of believing that people are separated by racial lines" (33). Clements's theatrical convention of double casting accentuates the interconnectedness of indigenous people in spite of temporal and spatial distances.

Clements's innovative dramaturgy places her characters in discrete times and spaces. In the play's list of characters, the Dene Seer, for example, is placed in "the late 1880s" in Port Radium in the Northwest Territories of Canada, and the Radium Painter is described as "A beautiful American woman who paints radium on watch dials in the 1930s" (1). Fat Man is described as "An American bomb test dummy manning his house in the late 1940s and 50s" and Labine Brothers are the prospectors "who discovered uranium at the base of Great Bear Lake in the 1930s" whereas Koji, the Japanese fisherman, "transforms himself to the other side of the world" just before the atomic explosion in 1945 (1). Clements's characters collide throughout the play's movements, as May points out, "like atoms in a nuclear explosion" ("Indigenous" 152). In a creative literary form, Clements re-vision various historical events and creates a kind of correlation between disparate times and spaces.

As previously mentioned, an important element in Clements's dramaturgy is time and space collision. In her play, Clements crosses temporal as well as spatial borders. To the White Miner's inquiry "Hello?

Is anyone there?” while he is mining uranium in the Canadian region of Port Radium in 1930s, the bomb test dummy Fat Man replies “Who’s there” while he is in New Mexico in 1945 (34). Also, when the Dene widow strikes a match to make fire, a “skeek sound” is heard by Labine Brother Two who is prospecting uranium in the Northwest Territories (10). Further, the thud made by Rose’s falling sack of flour is heard by both Fat Man and the Miner who are in different places. From Canada, Labine brother hears the whiz of a fish caught by Koji in Japan, and “*flashes his light toward the whiz and lights the fish [...] and lights the face of the fisherman, Koji, as he grabs a fish from his line*” (15). According to this strategy, as Alana Fletcher suggests, the play’s message is that “separateness is itself constructed, fictitious, [and] illusory – that multiple, often unapparent connections exist among times and spaces that appear physically and temporally disconnected” (38). In *Burning Vision*, disparate times, spaces, human and nonhuman beings are inextricably connected through environmental concerns. Furthermore, Clements’s nontraditional dramaturgy, as May points out, “deconstructs the separation between audience and actor, and produces new levels of audience participation and reciprocation” (“Greening” 96). Through the play’s idiosyncratic dramaturgy, Clements presents environmental justice/injustice issues that contribute to ecological restoration.

The Burning Vision

In her challenging drama, Clements articulates Aboriginal, environmental, and multi-cultural issues using innovative theatrical elements, non-linear structure and overlapping themes. In so doing, she rebels against the colonizer’s narration of history, and attempts to restore the First Nations’ silenced voices by re-visioning history from their standpoint. In *Burning Vision*, Clements, as Nelson Gray points out, “manages to connect issues of place – identity and environmental justice with transnational and cross-cultural concerns as well, making links between the deaths of her Dene ancestors from the toxic effects of uranium mining in Northern Canada and the Japanese victims of the holocausts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (29-30). Based on actual events, Clements’s award-winning eco-drama displays the diverse indigenous groups in Canada, Metis, Dene, and Japanese, who are interconnected by

the disastrous effects of nuclear power. In a socially and politically-directed discourse, Marie Clements investigates the relationship between environmental crisis and class and race differences. Her eco-critical treatment, to use May's words, represents this kind of "ecocriticism" that "exposes the mythic underpinnings of unsustainable resource extraction and human exploitation, that complicates past environmental rhetoric, and illuminates a nuanced and complex interrelatedness with the more-than-human [natural] world" ("Beyond Bambi" 104). The play depicts how indigenous people are racially oppressed and their uranium-rich Aboriginal land is exploited by colonial and capitalist powers.

The fragmented narratives of the play connect a group of indigenous people through oppression and environmental degradation. Rose, a Metis woman living in the Northwest Territories of Canada, falls in love with Koji, a Japanese fisherman, whom she meets on *Radium Prince*, the ship that carries uranium ore sacks on the Canadian waterways for processing. When the Dene Widow asks Rose about Koji: "Indian? He looks sorta like an Indian but there's something different going on," Rose replies: "He's Indian enough from the other side" (96). Rose's response indicates that both Indians (Dene) and Japanese are similarly oppressed and subjugated by the white colonizer.

According to eco-critic Theresa J. May, there is an evident relationship between theater and ecological issues such as the issue of environmental justice. In agreement with Bullard's, Johnson's, and Newton's idea of environmental justice, she asserts that, like the environmental justice movement, "theatre forces the question of human ecology" examining "the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor, the working class, and communities of color" ("Greening" 86-87). In *Burning Vision*, the Dene widow laments her young deceased ore carrier husband and condemns the oppression and exploitation of Native people (coolies) by the colonizer: "Coolies. Some word for people that do dirty work, I guess. The people that get their hands dirty. The coolies, the Indians, the Dene, the people – our men, my man, worked hauling those sacks, in long lines, from one man to the next, one coolie to one coolie, one Indian to another. A chain passing the rock. A rock we called the money rock" (70). Clements exposes how the Dene

ore carriers are cancer-stricken as a result of exposure to radiation while mining uranium in their Native Land in the mid-twentieth century. In this regard, Bullard and Johnson state “Radioactive colonialism operates in energy production (mining of uranium) and disposal of wastes on Indian lands. The legacy of institutional racism has left many sovereign Indian nations without an economic infrastructure to address poverty, unemployment, inadequate education and health care, and a host of other social problems” (571). In addition to these social and economic plights, Indigenous people get malignant diseases caused by uranium mining, transportation and waste disposal.

The curse of nuclear power is not limited to Native Dene people, but extends to plague other indigenous groups. When Rose, the Metis bread maker, appears, her “*clothes and face and arms are smudged with black [the black dust of uranium], as is the loaf of bread she carries in her hands*” (95). The uranium rich Aboriginal land becomes, to use Bullard’s and Johnson’s term, a “sacrifice zone” whose inhabitants undergo environmental injustice by facing hazards of radioactivity (574). Having been integrated to the environment, Rose thinks that uranium is not harmful since it is an element of the earth. As May suggests, bread and ore are both “material aspects of the earth’s body and become our bodies” (“Indigenous” 153). Feeling that she is an inseparable part of the natural world, Rose describes herself as a “perfect loaf of bread” that is “plump with a rounded body and straight sides . . . with slightly elongated cells; the flesh of this bread is multi-grained” (47). As this quote explicates, the human and non-human beings of the play are closely interconnected. This shows that, to use May’s words, a “matrix of belonging” and a “living tissue” between man and environment have been created (“Greening” 94).

Similarly, Koji, the Japanese fisherman who is suddenly transported from Japan to the Northwest Territories of Canada in a great flash of light, is transformed into a trout and fished by the stevedores of Radium Prince. When one of the stevedores sees Koji, he says: “Goddamn, get that trout pulled up now,” and as the stage directions indicate, the stevedores “*go on talking and hauling him up as if he is a trout*” (78). Koji’s transformation into a trout emphasizes the harmonious

relationship between man and the natural world. Before he is transformed to the other side of the world, Koji frees a fish from his fishing line while talking intimately to it: "You will no longer breathe water and send out the sea through your mouth. You will no longer lie beneath the world . . . There will be no tidal waves while I am the fisherman and you are the trout" (16). For Koji, the trout "forms part of this organic system, which determines his own fate" (H. Gilbert 202). Like a fish, Koji's environment is contaminated and inequitably exploited by the nuclear invasion of the imperialistic power.

The Dene Widow bemoans the peaceful past days before uranium mining: "We used to be able to tell where we were by the seasons, the way the sun placed itself or didn't, the migration patterns of the caribou. Time [. . .] By the way we dressed, or how we dressed or undressed the ones we loved. Time" (33). For the Dene, natural occurrences such as change of seasons, caribou migration, and climate change are all troubled. The Dene way of life as well as the harmonious relationship between human and non-human worlds is disturbed. As a matter of fact, environmental laws are violated by this shift in environmental conditions caused by the colonizer's nuclear invasion. As May posits, geological and ecological conditions have informed human affairs, and human activities have far-reaching effects on environments ("Beyond Bambi" 102). Before the nuclear invasion, as the Dene widow points out, "there is no word in Dene for radioactive" (102). In *Burning Vision*, Clements provokes ethical questions about human responsibilities toward environmental degradation.

The Dene widow expresses devotion to the land and how Dene people are closely mingled with it. As she laments the loss of her ore carrier husband to cancer, she says: "I miss the smell of sweat on his clothes after a long day hunting. I miss how the land stayed in the fabric even when he got inside the cabin" (33). According to Dawes and Maufort, this intimate relationship to the land is termed "ecospirituality;" the "aspect of ecocriticism dealing with the spiritual bond between indigenous people and the Earth" (14). In a dream vision, the Dene Widow pulls her deceased husband to her and says: "There are plenty of

trout and caribou to last us till we die” (60). In so doing, she emphasizes intimate connection to their environment and defies its deterioration.

Likewise, in a subsequent scene, the Dene Seer draws attention toward violation of environmental laws by nuclear industrialization and its effect on human life:

Can you read the air? The face of the water? Can you look through time
and see the future? Can you hear through the walls of the world? Maybe
we
are all talking at the same time because we are answering each other over
time
and space. Like a wave that washes over everything and doesn't care how
long
it takes to get there because it always ends up on the same shore. (65)

The Dene Seer's words assert that human life can only be attuned through adherence to environmental ethics. According to May, environmental history “is not geologic history, it maps human history from the point of view of its impact on, and interfere with, ecological (and sometimes geologic) changes in the land” (“Beyond Bambi” 102). The Dene Seer's words also emphasize the possibility of communication in spite of spatial and temporal distances. In her play, as Marc Maufort points out, Clements “engages in a process of historical excavation” (171). From an indigenous standpoint, history is chronicled in a non-linear way that explicates the connectedness of different people in discrete times and places through intimate relation to their environment.

Fragmented narratives and characters are tethered by the Dene Seer's songs that intensify the play's tempo. He finally announces his prophesy of the catastrophic burning vision in the last movement: “I looked up inside my vision. I saw a flying bird, big. It landed and they loaded it with things . . . I watched them digging something out of the hole in the earth and I watched them raise it to the cool sky until it disappeared and reappeared. Burning” (99). In his vision, he refers to uranium mining from the Aboriginal land in the Northwest Territories of Canada to be used in bombing Japan in World War II. Having been intimately connected to the natural world, the Dene Seer uses elements of

nature to describe what he has seen in his burning vision. For him, the plane is a big “flying bird.” In his prophetic vision, the Dene Seer concludes: “The people they dropped this burning on . . . looked like us, like Dene” (111). He alludes to the close relationship between the Dene and Japanese who are similarly colonized and oppressed by the imperialist powers. As explained earlier, this is termed by Bullard and Johnson as “environmental racism” according to which the colonizer persecutes minority communities and indigenous people.

It is worth mentioning that the play's multidimensional dramaturgy, as May points out, “fire our ecological imaginations” (“Kneading” 5). In *Burning Vision*, the natural scene is always present as it intervenes with the human scene throughout the movements of the play. The acoustic imagery used in the play reminds audience of the physical world. The sounds of “caribou hooves,” “a fishing line whizzing through space,” “a huge splash into water,” and a continuous sound of “a strong heartbeat” intensify the interconnectedness between the human and natural worlds.

In *Burning Vision*, according to May, “the fictional story is woven into the landscape as either planned inclusion, in which collaboration with the environment was designed into the work, or as spontaneous intrusion, in which the unpredictable, dynamic landscape emerges as player” (“Greening” 96). In Clements's eco-drama, non-human beings are displayed as actual characters. The ore of uranium is a “beautiful Native boy” (the character of Little Boy) who personifies “the darkest uranium found at the centre of the earth,” that is prospected, discovered, and mined by the white exploiters (1). Similarly, Fat Man, the bomb test dummy, is an American man in his forties. Little Boy represents both the uranium ore mined in the Northwest Territories of Canada and the indigenous people living near the ore mines. In so doing, he intrinsically symbolizes the colonial exploitation and oppression of both environment and indigenous people alike. Clements's depiction of the ore as a living being proves, as May points out, that “the stuff of the earth is alive and must be treated with respect and discretion” (“Indigenous” 153). After having been discovered by the white prospectors Labine Brothers, Little Boy expresses his desire to “go home,” and to come back to earth because he

realizes that the “real monster is the light of these discoveries” (29). As a Native, Little Boy is scared of being exploited and used by the colonizer for the destruction of the world. He challenges the imperialist force’s exploitation of his Aboriginal land.

When Little Boy asks Fat Man to let him go home, to go back inside the hole of earth, Fat Man says:

Like we are digging a hole so deep none of us will be able to get in, or out,
because the hole is getting filled with all those immigrants: Asians and Pakistanis
and Hindus and Indians. I’m no racist; I’m just saying nobody knows their place.
Nobody knows they’ve been conquered. They just keep it coming. Stretching the
hole deeper with immigration and retribution. Soon there’s nothing left.
(37)

As the above quote indicates, both indigenous people and environment are victims of capitalist/colonial powers. *Burning Vision*, according to Robin C. Whittaker, “counters and re-encounters received histories in ways that deny the colonizer’s and aggressor’s oppressive strategies” toward colonized, racially oppressed people (147). Indigenous people, miners and ore carriers are oppressed, exploited and sickened to death.

Although Little Boy and Round Rose are members of the nuclear family headed by Fat Man, the latter considers them aliens since they belong to indigenous groups: “I want you two aliens to get the hell out of my living room. You hear me? I said I want you two ungrateful aliens to leave [. . .] Leave everything that is mine. And if you’re in my house, it’s mine” (88). His speech exposes the imperialist attitude toward Native people. Although Fat Man shows remorse, Round Rose asserts the futility of remorse, especially if it comes from the oppressor: “You can’t really be sorry for something you don’t want to remember, can you . . . Don’t be a sorry ass, be sorry before you have to say you are sorry. Be sorry for even thinking about, bringing about something sorry – filled” (90-91). Round

Rose condemns the aggressive bombing of Japan by Little Boy and Fat Man, “the codenames of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945, killing over 210,000 people by the end of 1945” (Wong 169). Round Rose is oppressed and subjugated by the Americans because she is neither “blond enough for someone to love” nor her skin is “light enough for someone to save” (30).

In *Burning Vision*, Clements exposes the colonizers’ deceit of indigenous and poor people whom they exploit in mining uranium telling them that it “can cure the world of cancer. We’re out here ‘cause we’re gonna discover the radium for radiation treatments” (25). To this claim, the Dene Widow states: “The money rock will make anybody say anything as long as they can keep taking it out of our ground and, if everybody is making money, it doesn’t matter about the people” (94-95). The prospectors Labine Brothers laid claim to the ore they discover and discuss what to transact for their claim: “What’s an Indian gonna do with money? We’ll give him some lard and baking powder and he can bake some bread. Sure! What the hell! What the hell is an Indian going to do with a rock anyways, at least he can eat the bread” (26). Indigenous miners or “coolies,” to use the Dene Widow’s term, are sickened and die of cancer. Since they belong to minority communities, they, as Newton posits, “are exposed to hazardous and toxic wastes, dangerous working conditions, polluted air and water, and other environmental insults” (3). The burden of environmental degradation has disproportionately fallen on indigenous people.

It is worthy to note that in *Burning Vision* indigenous people are not the only victims of the hazardous effects of nuclear power. The poor white miner pathetically explains to his lover, the beautiful American Radium Painter, how mining the black ore is dangerous as he “could go sterile” (51). The American Radium Painter, who paints dials with radium “so that men at war can see the face of their watches when it’s dark,” contracts radiation poisoning because she points the tip of her paintbrush by licking it (82). Both lovers are cancer – ridden; the miner coughs drastically and is dying and the Radium Painter’s “*half face is missing and her beautiful hair is entirely gone*” (108). Environmental degradation is apparently reflected in the decayed face of the American Radium

Painter, as May states, to demonstrate that “what we do to and on the land is writ in our bodies. Like the land, we are living archives of human action” (“Indigenous” 153). As this quote shows, man and land are inextricably linked; both are exploited and deteriorated by the colonizer’s power.

Agonized by the colonizer’s violence and atomic invasion, Rose asks Koji: “If you make me yours, do we make a world with no enemies?” To her inquiry Koji replies: “If we make a world, we will make one where there are no enemies” (86). Rose’s and Koji’s coalition indicates their longing for stopping the imperialistic exploitation of environmental resources for the destruction of the world. They found in their love reconciliation for what they have both suffered. In a following scene, Rose, now eight’s month pregnant, hopes for a happy future by having a biracial child whose father is Koji: “His [The baby’s] heart is so strong. You have to believe in the world . . . My baby’s going to be mixed again, but I’m happy about that ‘cause I think he can give the world my hope. Listen. Beat . . . Beat . . . Beat” (105). The sound of the baby’s heart beating is mixed with the sounds of radar beeping and Geiger counter clicking whose target gets closer. When the sound of radar beeps closer, Rose “cradles her belly in protection” (108). Although Koji’s country is devastated by uranium mined from Rose’s land, their love and their “mixed” baby, Koji the Grandson, carry the hope for a better future.

In the play’s last movement all the fragmented themes are merged together. As the stage directions indicate, “*The waves of radar getting closer to the heart of everything. The visions, the bombing, the burning. The sound of worlds, and hearts beating, truths colliding, and the tunnels of internal time digging deeper*” (93). After explosion, the Japanese Grandmother gets close to the blackened dead body of Koji as he lies at the base of the burnt cherry tree that represents hope for reunion while his hand is holding the Grandmother’s note she has given him earlier. She takes the note from Koji’s hand and begins to read it while crying. After the Japanese Grandmother takes off her red kimono and covers Koji’s dead body, she turns to become the Dene Widow. This transformation indicates that geographical, temporal, and racial borders can be possibly crossed in order to challenge the colonizer’s hegemony.

In a multicultural ceremony, the play concludes with Japanese, Canadian and Slavey (Dene) radio announcers inviting all loved ones for a family union to heal the injuries they have desperately experienced: "Hello, Granddad, brother, sister, son, husband, father, cousin, nephew, friend, my teacher, my love . . . We love you and miss you." To their call, Koji the Grandson replies: "They hear us, and they are talking back in hope over time" (113). The play ends with a tableau of "*Glowing herds of caribou move in unison over the vast empty landscape as cherry blossoms fall until they fill the stage*" (113). In *Burning Vision*, Clements, as May points out, decides to "exercise the power of story to effect ecological healing" ("Indigenous" 149). Intervention of human and non-human worlds at the end of the play creates a hope for an environmental rejuvenation and prosperity.

Conclusion

Contemporary First Nations Theater has witnessed the emergence of discourses that investigate the relationship between human and natural world and show a basic concern for environmental issues such as that of environmental justice/injustice. These eco-critical discourses discuss environmental degradation, its connection to race and class distinctions as well as its hazardous effects on indigenous people. Theater, as Theresa J. May points out, "reclaims its ancient roots as a site of ritual celebration of the reciprocity between people and the natural world" ("Greening" 100). First Nations playwrights create a body of ecological drama through which they prove that indigenous supremacy and environmental prosperity are interdependent. This genre of literature challenges the imperialist oppression and exploitation of human and natural resources.

As a prominent figure in the First Nations Theater, Marie Humber Clements defies the colonizer's human/non-human exploitation and exposes the hazardous effects of nuclear industrialization on indigenous people and environment. In her innovative eco-critical play *Burning Vision*, Clements uses a unique dramaturgy through which history is traced from an indigenous perspective in a nonlinear trajectory that connects people from disparate times and spaces. Through her idiosyncratic dramaturgy, Clements displays the intimate relationship between indigenous people and environment. She provokes

environmental justice/injustice issues and exhibits diverse settings, disparate human and non-human beings that are connected by environmental degradation throughout the course of the play. As Birgit Dawes concludes, “within these permeable spaces and temporal environments, human identities – both Native and non-Native – are constructed as fluid and flexible, far from any essentialism, and with the full responsibility of acknowledging their ecological embeddings” (41). In *Burning Vision*, people from different indigenous groups, Dene, Metis, and Japanese, are correlated through the hazardous effects of the atomic invasion. In the play’s non-linear structure, the 1880 prophesy of the Dene Seer is intervened with 1930 scenes of white uranium prospectors and 1945 atomic detonation. *Burning Vision* reflects an indigenous cosmology in which the past is inextricably connected to the present and future.

In *Burning Vision*, articulating the ecological discourse is closely linked to the political agenda. Clements condemns the historical catastrophe of the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945. In four movements, she demonstrates various fragmented narratives chronicling the periods before atomic bombing and its aftermath. The narrative traces the journey of uranium ore mined from Port Radium in the Northwest Territories of Canada to be processed in the United States for the manufacture of atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War II. In her play, Clements addresses issues of environmental justice/injustice and their effect on indigenous and racially oppressed people. For Clements, environmental degradation and indigenous subjugation are closely interrelated.

In an age of unparalleled ecological challenges, literary critical discourses, especially those of the theater, intend to explore man’s relationship to the natural world as well as the consequences of ecological collapse on indigenous people and minority communities. As an environmentalist and a professor of literature, Theresa J. May attempts to contribute to environmental problems and defies human and natural resource exploitation by the colonizer. She discusses environmental justice/injustice issues and their ethical rules as reflected in literary texts. May emphasizes the role of the theater in exposing environmental degradation and its hazardous effects particularly on indigenous people.

Ecological drama or, to use May's term, "green dramaturgy" encourages us to "reconstitute the world, to re-conceive our notions of community in such a way that the very boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, begin to dissolve" ("Greening" 100). In *Burning Vision*, man's harmonious relationship to environment is troubled and rituals of indigenous life are disturbed by nuclear invasion and the colonizer's exploitation of uranium-rich Aboriginal land. Human and non-human worlds are drastically damaged; uranium miners, ore carriers and residents of Native Canadian land are cancer-ridden whereas air, water, plants, and animals are fatally poisoned.

Environmental justice/injustice deals with the relationship between environmental degradation and race and class inequalities. Initiated by Robert D. Bullard in the 1980s, environmental justice movement attempts to protect racially oppressed people and minority communities who are likely more exposed to environmental hazards and degradation. According to Bullard, "people of color and poor people inhabit some of the most environmentally degraded and economically segregated communities" (25). Indigenous people are exposed to inequitable amounts of environmental risks as a result of working in hazardous industries. In *Burning Vision*, nuclear industrialization is a catastrophe created by capitalists and colonizers and suffered disproportionately by poor and indigenous people. *Burning Vision*, as Marc Maufort posits, "could be decoded as a vast oratorio for voices, an idiosyncratic technique that admirably serves Clements's questioning of official and imperialistic discourses of history" (171). In her eco-critical play, Clements instigates ethical questions about man's responsibility toward environmental deterioration.

Through her depiction, Clements emphasizes the fact that, to use Bullard's and Johnson's words, environmental protection is considered "a right, not a privilege reserved for a few who can 'vote with their feet' and escape or fend off environmental stressors" (558). At the end of the play, through reunion of all suffering indigenous groups, Dene, Metis, and Japanese, Clements attempts to create ecological reconciliation. Her analysis demonstrates that environmental degradation can only be confronted by synergetic efforts of various indigenous groups.

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