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About the Cover Artist: Janet Kaponicin is an Algonquin artist who currently lives in Vancouver, B.C. Her birchbark and acrylic painting, *The Spirit Behind Parliament*, appears in the artwork cycle on our [WWO Scholarworks home page](#). Of the original painting, she wrote the following statement in 2004:

My grandmother, Angeliqwe Kaponicin of Kitigan Zibi, told me a story when I was young, about a tragedy that happened to one of our ancestors. Some Algonquin people were camped at the Chaudiere Falls in Ottawa at the time when British soldiers were stationed there. A young woman was out walking along the river and she was captured by the soldiers; they raped her then killed her by impaling her on a tree branch. When her family retrieved her body for burial, they cursed the land there, declaring that nothing good would ever come from it. It was just below the site of our current Parliament Hill. I did this painting so the story would not be forgotten. - © Janet Kaponicin (2004), and reprinted from the Algonquin Trading Post by permission of the artist. We are grateful to Aimee Bailey of the Algonquin Trading Post for supplying us with a digital photograph of the painting.



THE SPIRIT BEHIND PARLIAMENT, BY JANET KAPONICIN, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Indigenizing *King Lear*

Michael K. Johnson, University of Maine, Farmington

Staged with an all-aboriginal cast, the 2012 production of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* at Canada's National Arts Centre creatively reimagined the play in a frontier New World setting. Directed by Peter Hinton, and starring August Schellenberg (Mohawk) as Lear, the production placed Shakespeare's drama in seventeenth-century Canada, amongst a group of Algonquin people on the outer edge of European colonialism and cultural contact.¹ The idea for this resetting of the play originated with August Schellenberg—some 45 years ago—who thought that *Lear* would be particularly adaptable to an indigenous / First Nations setting.² That it took nearly half a century to realize that vision says much about the difficulty of getting mainstream audiences and theater companies to consider the inclusion of indigenous peoples in cultural activities outside of often stereotyped and limited representational roles. By placing an all-aboriginal cast on stage at the National Arts Centre in the capital city of Ottawa, this unique production of *King Lear* intervened in a cultural discourse that has marginalized and excluded indigenous voices from the national arts scene.

An aboriginal *King Lear* set in North America in the era of contact also complicates our understanding of how to classify a "western" text (and how to decide who counts—Shakespeare?—as a western writer). As Amy T. Hamilton and Tom J. Hillard point out in "Before the West Was West: Rethinking the Temporal Borders of Western American Literature," the issue of how to define a specifically western literature—"questions of where and when to locate the American West and whose voices count as authentically western"—has been a troubling issue for scholars from the very moment of the

emergence of western studies, apparent in the contradictory definitions of western literature offered by different articles in the first issue of *Western American Literature* and in the Western Literature Association's own constitution.³ Hamilton and Hillard suggest the importance of a temporal understanding of region, as what we call "the West" has shifted continually. "What happens," they ask, "when we follow 'the West' both eastward and back in time?"⁴ If we understand the west in relation to the movement of European settlement westward, the "when" of this production of *King Lear* clearly places it to the west of such settlement in a time before national borders such as Canada and America were instituted, and in what would later become a borderlands space for Algonquin peoples whose territories would be divided by those borders. The when and where of this *King Lear* places it even further west than the frontier, which remains to the east of where the characters in the play are situated. Part of what makes this production of *King Lear* "western" is the effect that frontier—that contact zone of encounter between different cultures—has on the action of the play, an effect that the production cleverly suggests through performance and costuming.

Discussing *King Lear* as a western text raises the question: is William Shakespeare a western writer? This is not to suggest that Billy (the Kid) Shakespeare physically participated in cattle drives or staked a mining claim. However, Shakespearean performance, as Eric Brown points out, was a distinctive and pervasive feature of westward expansion, as indicated by the prevalence of U.S. place names such as Shakespeare, New Mexico, the Ophelia Mine (Colorado), and the Shakespeare Saloon (operating in nineteenth-century Central City, Colorado).⁵ Although "the popularity of Shakespeare in the boomtowns and mining camps of the Old West has not received a great deal of attention," Shakespearean performance was popular throughout the U.S. west of Brown's study.⁶ "The great Shakespearean actors of the day," Brown observes, "could make ten times the money out West that they could in the East, and even barnstorming troupes were welcomed by the populace."⁷ The actual presence of Shakespearean performance in the west was visible enough to make its way into fictional representations of western and frontier life (e.g., the actors/con-men the Duke and the Dauphin in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Owen Wister's Virginian listening attentively to Molly's recitation of Shakespeare's plays, multiple scenes in western films depicting Shakespeare performances in saloons).

If Shakespeare himself was not a western writer, his plays have been particularly amenable to being adapted to western settings, as Brown demonstrates through his discussion of the Shakespearean elements of *My Darling Clementine* (1946; *Hamlet*), *Get Mean* (1976; *Richard III*), *Tombstone* (1993; *Henry V*), and *Yellow Sky* (1948; *The Tempest*). To that list, we might add John Wayne's *McLintock* (1963; *The Taming of the Shrew*) and the 2002 television production, *The King of Texas*, which reimagines *King Lear* as a cattle baron. *King Lear*, Brown observes, "has been an especially popular Westernized play," with allusions to it apparent in *Broken Lance* (1954), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), and "perhaps" *A River Runs Through It* (1992).⁸ Craig Johnson's recent *A Serpent's Tooth* (2013), part of his popular series of contemporary westerns about Wyoming sheriff Walt Longmire, not only borrows a quotation from *Lear* for its title but also makes multiple allusions to the play.

All this is to say that *King Lear* is a dramatic text that is particularly open to interpretations that place it in a western or frontier context. Casting the play with First Nations actors and actresses—many of whom are familiar to contemporary audiences through film and television series with specifically western (and often Old West) settings—adds another layer of allusion to that western context. Among more recent roles, August Schellenberg appeared as Sitting Bull in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (2007) and as Powhatan in *The New World* (2005). In addition to Schellenberg, the play also featured: Tantoo Cardinal (Métis/Cree), perhaps best known as Victor's mother in *Smoke Signals*, as *Lear's* daughter Regan; Monique Mojica (Guna and Rappahannock), who played Thomas Build-the-Fire's

grandmother in *Smoke Signals*, as Lear's daughter Goneril; Lorne Cardinal (Cree), known for his roles in the television series *Corner Gas* and *Arctic Air* (set in the Northwest Territories), as the Duke of Albany; Billy Merasty (Cree), who played Young Man Afraid in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, as the Earl of Gloucester. Additionally, there were several other standout performers in the production: Jani Lauzon (Métis), who doubled as Cordelia and the Fool; Kevin Loring (N'lakap'mux) as Edmund; and Gordon Patrick White (Mi'kmaq) as Edgar. Though the audience might recognize some actors in the play from western screen performances, the most relevant context for understanding the 2012 Ottawa production of *King Lear* is not the genre western but the First Nations setting of the play, one that shifts the perspective on the frontier encounter away from the European experience to an aboriginal one.

In the talk back after the performance, actor Billy Merasty observed that the cast had "had a lot of conversations about how to indigenize" the play, to make it not just a play with First Nations actors playing English characters, but to find a way to bring an aboriginal perspective to the material—to make the play work in a seventeenth-century Algonquin context—in a more meaningful way than simply dressing the actors in leathers and feathers. One of the interesting elements of the production was the thoughtful way the cast and crew approached that problem throughout. To "indigenize" the play suggests a parallel idea to the concept "minor literature" as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: "A minority literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language"⁹ The "deterritorialization" that Deleuze and Guattari claim as an essential element of minor literature is almost literally realized in the production, as the major literary work is in this case taken from its original territory and then reset and reterritorialized. To restate Merasty's comment in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, part of the goal of this production was to take a major literary text and, so to speak, make it minor, by "operat[ing] from within, using the same elements as it were, but in a different manner."¹⁰ Speaking from within the major language (the Shakespearean text), the artists collaborating in this production of *King Lear* used the familiar elements of the play but performed it in a "different manner" than the usual *Lear*.

Most indigenous cultures in the "new world" did not share European culture's gender hierarchies. Men and women shared power (much to the confusion of the English in particular, who had a difficult time recognizing women in power), and that dynamic works quite well with *King Lear*, which (as this production made clear) can be focused quite easily on two women, Regan and Goneril, as they take the land and the power that once belonged to Lear. A more traditional take on the play, the recent touring production starring Ian McKellen as Lear and filmed for television in 2008, emphasized a European gender hierarchy in its staging.¹¹ Comparing how that play imagined the staging shows clearly how the Canadian production undermined assumed gender roles to adapt the story to the Algonquin context. When actors are on stage in the 2008 production, we see men everywhere. Lear is surrounded by soldiers, for example, in the opening scene, and the stage is filled with male extras in most subsequent scenes. The Canadian *Lear* emphasized a gender balance onstage. Most of the extras, the members of the court as well as Lear's followers, were members of the Four Nations Exchange, a workshop the production sponsored with the local aboriginal community (mostly Anishinaabeg), and they were evenly divided by gender. Whenever Regan and Goneril were onstage, they were placed in ways that made them the center of the action and the central focus for the audience. When Gloucester's eyes are plucked out, Tantoo Cardinal's Regan does not stand by and watch while her husband does the dirty work—she actively participates in the act of blinding.

The doubling of Cordelia and the Fool (both played by actress Jani Lauzon) also contributed to the sense that this was very much a woman-centered play. The doubling of those roles has been done occasionally, as there are a number of moments in the play that suggest a relationship between the two

(not the least of which is that they both die by hanging). In this production, the portrayal of the Fool drew from both indigenous trickster traditions and English theater. The costume evoked the motley worn by the traditional jester, although the materials (fringes, beadwork, part of a British flag) drew from both cultures. The Fool's coxcomb suggested Coyote's ears, and Lauzon's performance involved stylized head movements that similarly suggested a coyote. In this case, the costuming subtly suggested the influence of European contact, visible in the fragment of the British flag, even if actual European settlement remained to the east (and off-stage).

Props also contributed to realizing the setting—including a nifty canoe that glided across the stage as smoothly as if across calm water. For the ubiquitous letters that go back and forth throughout the play (and that contribute to the various schemes and misunderstandings), the production appropriately substituted birchbark scrolls. When the Earl of Gloucester tells Edgar, "Here, friend, 's another purse; in it a jewel / Well worth a poor man's taking," he accompanies his words with the medicine bag / pouch he wears around his neck (IV.vi).

In the talk back after the performance I attended, Kevin Loring talked about the development of his character, Edmund, the scheming bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester. He alone was costumed in European dress, his weapon a sword. (Edmund is killed by Edgar, ironically and aptly, by that very sword.) At the beginning of the play, Gloucester observes of Edmund, "He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again" (I.i). Building on the line, Loring developed Edmund as a mixed-blood character, his nine-year absence imagined as his having been in the colonies with his European mother. There's further textual support for that reading in the Duke of Albany's reference to Edmund as a "Half-blooded fellow" (V.iii). The thoughtful development of Edmund's character (and the subsequent costuming to suggest that back story) is another example of the way the production realized the seventeenth-century Algonquin context, with a group of people still on the outer edge of European contact, but nonetheless beginning to feel its effects. Viewed in the context of western studies, Edmund is a distinctively recognizable archetype, a frontier character on the border between two groups of people, a "Half-blooded fellow" whose motive for his villainy may have emerged from those circumstances.

In western culture, comedy and tragedy are traditionally regarded as separate and even incompatible. Indigenous cultures do not have that same tradition, and indigenous texts are more likely to include a mixture of humor and sadness. As Craig Womack writes in *Red on Red*, "In oral tradition stories, humor is less of a distinct genre than in Euramerican literature, the comic often being an element of creation stories, religious stories, migration stories, hero stories, and many other kinds of narrative. The inclusion of comic elements is not the same as tragicomedy in that it flows in and out of many kinds of narratives more fluidly."¹² The influence of the role of humor in oral tradition, of including humor in all types of stories, may have contributed to the emphasis on—and the flowing in and out of—humor in this production of *King Lear*. (During the talk back, Jani Lauzon's first comment to the audience was, "Thanks for laughing.") Given the tragic and even horrific events in *Lear* (e.g., the blinding of Gloucester), the play text itself nonetheless seems to suggest a lot of humor (or at least seems to be available for humorous readings). The Fool is not the only foolish character in the play. Schellenberg's Lear is at various times presented as foolish, comic, mad, sad, and tragic. Effectively balancing and juxtaposing these different tones and emotions was one of the achievements of the production, realized in particular by Billy Merasty's performance as the Earl of Gloucester. Gloucester first appears to us as comic. When Kent responds to Gloucester's statement about his bastard son ("His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge") with a puzzled "I cannot conceive you," Gloucester's witty response is, "Sir, this young fellow's mother could" (I.i). Gloucester's foolish disregard for his illegitimate son (other than to note that "there was good sport at his making") contributes to Edmund's motivation to bring down his

half-brother Edgar and to ally himself with Regan and Goneril against Lear and against his own father (I.i). However, when the sisters reject Lear and force him to spend the night exposed to the storm, Gloucester is the sole character to object to this inhumane treatment. When he is blinded on stage (punishment for his treasonous loyalty to Lear), it's the most horrific moment in the play, and he emerges as a pitiable if not tragic figure.

What happens next is that Gloucester decides to commit suicide by throwing himself off the cliffs of Dover, aided (unbeknownst to him) by his legitimate son Edmund (in disguise), who tricks him (for his own good) into thinking that he stands atop the cliffs. When Gloucester survives his fall, Edmund uses this as a sign to convince him to continue to live. Different productions of *Lear* stage this scene in vastly different ways (the 2008 production plays it very seriously). The Ottawa production emphasizes the humor of the scene. Gloucester crouches lower and lower until he is almost on the ground, and then tips over the rest of the way and promptly passes out. He remains face down on the stage throughout Edmund's speech, and when Edmund finally rouses him, his "Away, and let me die," is delivered from the same position without moving, and the effect (combined with the actor's reading of that line) is very funny (IV.vi). One of the highlights of the play was Merasty's ability to make the jumps in tone associated with his character work so effectively.

The production premiered to mixed reviews, with the most accurate being J. Kelly Nestruck's review in *The Globe and Mail* in which he describes the play as an "almost triumph" (and I would drop the "almost" from that). The title of the review, "A *King Lear* in Need of a King," suggests the central criticism, a dissatisfaction with Schellenberg's performance as Lear. Most of the rest of play receives high praise (including the brilliant costuming and set design).¹³ The suggestion that this *Lear* was missing its king is partially right, although not in the way the reviewer means it. This was *King Lear* presented as an ensemble and not centered on the title character. Whether as a consequence of editing of the play text or staging (or a combination of both), characters such as Regan, Goneril, Edgar, Edmund, Kent, and Gloucester seemed to receive as much emphasis as Lear himself. In the talk back, Schellenberg noted the physical demands of playing Lear and that he was the oldest actor to have attempted the role, so there may have been some editing of the part to accommodate the actor's age. (Schellenberg's recent death from cancer on 15 August 2013, barely more than a year from the end of *Lear*'s run, at least suggests the possibility that he overcame illness to perform the part.) Also, Tantoo Cardinal, in her first Shakespeare production, was so dynamic in the role of Regan that the director may have chosen to give more emphasis to her character. The production felt like an ensemble piece, and that may have been quite different from some audience members' expectations of what a production of *King Lear* should be. And whatever the cause of the decentering of Lear, the effect was to further indigenize the play, to place the narrative emphasis on telling the story of a community rather than an individual.

Reviewers seem to have missed the point in a couple of cases, and the complaints raised about the play had more to do with a production that effectively and intentionally made minor literature out of a major work than with any flaw in the concept or execution of the production. Writing in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Patrick Langston in "All-Aboriginal *Lear* Doesn't Quite Work" observed that Schellenberg "rarely sparks our awe or pity; on the weather-battered heath, one of the great scenes in English drama, he seems intent only on getting through the text as quickly as possible." He also suggests that the "First Nations interpretation" gets in the way of "heartfelt fervour."¹⁴ On the night I attended the play, the audience indicated quite a bit of heartfelt fervour for the production, and I suspect that the reviewer didn't quite get what was going on with the production and with what he referred to as the introduction "of a lot of ritual into the production."

The “Blow, wind” scene on the heath was for me one of the standout moments of the production—a very original interpretation of this famous scene. Lear is encircled onstage by his enemies, and while we hear the sound effects of the storm, the actors stare in at Lear as they simultaneously strike handheld drums. This is a visually and aurally awesome moment in the play, and it surprises me that the reviewers failed to mention this element of the staging of this scene. Granted, Schellenberg’s delivery is fast-paced here, but the effect created by the staging is that Lear is speaking to a rhythm set by his enemies, that he is as propelled through that speech by their drumming as he is driven by the ferocity of the storm. He is no longer in control of his kingdom, his destiny, his own mind, or even the pace of his own words.

In what is otherwise an accurate and observant review of the play, Nestruck writes of Schellenberg’s Lear that “He’s a puny, human-sized king – which would not necessarily be a terrible choice, except Schellenberg is clearly aiming for a larger Lear and falling short,” noting that “Only late in the play, do we get a taste of what Schellenberg on top of his game might be capable of in Lear’s marvelously poignant reunion with Cordelia, and again, walking on stage cradling her lifeless body.” Again, my sense of what the production was trying to accomplish differs here. I’m not so sure that Schellenberg was “clearly aiming for a larger Lear.” As Schellenberg’s performance as Sitting Bull in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* demonstrates, the actor is perfectly capable of embodying a larger-than-life tragic figure. As with the Earl of Gloucester, we have a multifaceted Lear, one who is indeed at times “human-sized,” who at times behaves foolishly, at other times majestically, and whose folly is often presented to us through humor and humorous scenes (including a marvelous moment when we see at the back of the stage a gleeful and partially-dressed Lear being chased by two of his followers while two other characters are conversing at the front of the stage). That he saves the character’s most affecting moments until the end doesn’t seem counter to the story itself. In some ways, that seems a reasonable interpretation of this character—that it is only in the discovery of the death of his daughter that he has realized the full tragedy of his folly. That he comes to this recognition only in the final moments of the play is part of the tragedy.

Notes

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1. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, dir. Peter Hinton (National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Canada, 17 May 2012), Performance.
2. Peter Hinton, "Artistic Director's Notes," National Arts Centre Theatre's *King Lear* Program, 2012, 4-5.
3. Hamilton and Hillard, "Before the West Was West: Rethinking the Temporal Borders of Western American Literature," *Western American Literature* 47.3 (Fall 2012), 293.
4. Hamilton and Hillard 288.
5. Eric Brown, "The Bard Comes to *Yellow Sky*: Shakespeare's Tempestuous Western," in Eric C. Brown and Estelle Rivier, eds., *Shakespeare in Performance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 138.
6. Brown 138.
7. Brown 139.
8. Brown 140.
9. Deleuze and Guattari, from *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (1975/1986), in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Literature and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1598.
10. Simon O'Sullivan, "Notes Toward a Minor Art Practice," *Drain: Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture* 5 (Oct 2005): n. pag. Web. 21 Sept 2013.
11. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, dir. Trevor Nunn (Richard Price TV Associates, Channel Four Television, 25 December 2008).
12. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 89-90.
13. Nestruck, "A *King Lear* in Need of a King," *The Globe and Mail* 13 May 2012.
14. Langston, "All-Aboriginal *Lear* Doesn't Quite Work," *Ottawa Citizen* 12 May 2012.

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