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## National Identity and White Supremacy in Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reevaluates Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose* from cultural and political perspectives. The effects of the white colonization and the formation of the Natives' authentic national identity are among the main concerns of the study. As presented in the play, white supremacy is the main reason behind the suffering of the Natives. The study confirms the responsibility of the white race and its legacy in the dilemma of Natives in Canada. It aims to correct the misconceptions regarding the real motives behind the racist notion of white supremacy as the results not from personal discrimination or prejudices but rather racialized educational, social, political, and cultural systems that infect the whole Canadian society. Interestingly enough, Lill concentrates on the problems of the Natives through the experience of Rose the white nurse. The study helps to credit her attempts to warn against the injustices felt by the Natives and the Whites' responsibility of them. Depending on textual analysis of the colonizers' and colonized attitudes in the play, the research exposes examples of the white supremacy approaches that cause harmful consequences on the Natives' identity in Canada. Lill has chosen three Western characters to resuscitate them in her play; Alice in Wonderland, Marlowe's Heart of Darkness, and Florence Nightingale's the lady with the lamp. The importance of these references is discussed in detail. The study calls for sympathy and a deep understanding of the Natives' problems and identity. It calls for embracing the Natives as a powerful constitutive of the Canadian society.

**Keywords:** National Identity, Wendy Lill, Natives, Reserves, White Supremacy, Racism, *The Occupation of Heather Rose*.

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### 1. Introduction

*The Occupation of Heather Rose* (1986) is about the journey of a White female character called Heather Rose to establish her career as a nurse. The play examines the meaning of being white in the North and asks important questions about race, power, and society. As an anti-racist activist and a parliament member, the Anglo Canadian playwright Wendy Lill (1950- ) has always sought to help

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Natives. She moved North of Toronto to work as a consultant for the Canadian Mental Health Association. She quit after six months because she felt that she is not doing much good in terms of the serious basic socio-economic problems faced by the Natives. This paper warns against the idea that the holy missions of the Whites in these reserves are not helping the Natives. Lill admits the whites' responsibility for poverty, unemployment, poor education, health, and housing of the Natives and seeks to alleviate these effects (Wasserman, 2000, p. 169).

Also, the main purpose of the study is to reveal how the white settlements in Canada have traumatized the Natives and caused the deformation of their identities, and forced them to form new ones. The importance of this research lies in being a cultural study that will bring into sharp focus the effects of racism implemented in Canada and define what it means to be discriminated against as a minority through the eyes of the colonizers. It is interesting to notice that this research uncovers through critical analysis of the selected play how the trauma of colonization interludes into public awareness and changes the identity of the Natives. Rose presents many examples of self-defeating attitudes of the Natives. She indeed belongs to the elite yet she manages to focus on the problems of the Natives. Through the differences in the attitudes of the colonized/colonizers, the real problems of the Natives appear.

Moreover, the paper attempts to posit answers to these questions: is desegregation the solution to the Natives' problems? Is the position from which the narrator is speaking determines how s/he considers the debate? As an outsider to the Natives, has Lill managed to form the Natives' national identity? In the study, the reader finds responses to these inquiries-among others-discussed in detail and with examples from the play.

## 2. Literature review

Much has been written about white supremacy and Canadian national identity. Many critics, as Brooks (2020) and Jones (2020), ascribe religion as the main reason for white attitudes toward the Natives. She discusses how "white American Christianity" has associated "whiteness—as color, as symbol, as identity—with innocence and blackness with guilt" (Brooks, 2020, p. 4). On the other hand, in ten thought-provoking chapters, Tettey, and Pupilampu's (2005) *The African Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity & Belonging* focus on racism and the formation of ethnic identity but from the perspective of African-Canadian. Moreover, Smith (2002) gives detailed historical accounts of white supremacy in *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship*.

White supremacy, immigration, Semitism, and Islamophobia are among the terms associated with racism in Canada (Satzewich, 2011). Many writers investigate the Natives' issues and problems from different perspectives. According to Darden (2004) spatial and social distance are among the main factors that lead to the notion of white supremacy in Canada. He states that to "maintain or reinforce white supremacy, people of color are set apart from white society" in reserves to maintain the purity of the supposed elite race (p. 7). They are forced to live in the margin of their lands so that the whites could enjoy the center.

Also, few scholarly articles discuss the literary works of Lill. Thus, the researcher hopes to ignite literary and academic interest in the creative works of this prolific writer. For example, Bexel's (2018) *Theme of Marginalization in Wendy Lill's The Occupation of Heather Rose* and Glaap's (2008) *Personal Conflict and Political /Concern in Wendy Lill's The Occupation of Heather Rose* focus on very important aspects of the play. On the other hand, this study holds the mirror in the face of the Western colonizers in Canada and forces them to admit their parts in the problems of the Natives.

## 3. White supremacy and national identity

Canada has been characterized by the lack of a single, national identity. Cameron (1997) believes that "there never was, and certainly currently is, no one way of being Canadian" (p. 15). Before the country of Canada existed, its land was inhabited by Native peoples, like the Indians, Cree, Ojibway, Metis, Inuit, and other Native tribes (Kirkness & Bowman, 1992, p. 4). They had their languages, customs, religions, and arts. French explorers arrived in the sixteenth century and brought with them the customs, beliefs, language, and religion of France. The British came one hundred years later and had the greatest and longest-lasting influences on Canadian culture (McMullen, 1869, p. 9). Over the

last few centuries, immigrants have come to Canada from all over the world to add to Canada's culture. Kalman (1947) states that in Canada inside everyone "there is a keen sense of being marginal" (p. 5). The Canadians of French, British or American descent are considered second class by their ancestors in their homelands. Also, the Ukrainian, Italian, South Asian, or Caribbean populations have been marginalized by the privileging of British and French ethnicity; all these nationalities are considered invaders to the Native peoples. Thus we can say that the Natives have been discriminated against in their lands by the French, British, Americans, and all the other immigrants.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the strength of Canadian cultural theory lies precisely in its vulnerability and in particular its openness to these different influences. It is, as Hulan (2002) believes, one of the most interesting facts about Canada; with many "official languages and no national language and many different official cultures and no national culture" (p. 9). The important question here is: are all cultures equally represented in society? Brydon (2007) states that "with decolonization, culture replaced civilization as the coded term for the self-assumed superiority of the West" (p. 7). This superiority causes many identity-crisis for the colonized peoples. Innis (1971) postulates that "cultural heritage is a more enduring foundation for national prestige than political power or commercial gain (p. 73). That is why nowadays many Canadian intellectuals are searching for what they called "Cultural Canadianization" or an authentic Canadian "sovereignty free from all forces of imperialism." They have begun to realize the importance to maintain an all-inclusive, national Canadian culture. Innis believes that Canadians "can only survive by taking persistent action at strategic points against American [and other forms of] imperialism in all its attractive guises" (p. 91). An authentic cultural Canadian identity demands the immediate disposition of the Canadian culture from the elite domination of the white West and the exclusion of paternalism to encourage a national project based on a wider and equal social base.

Canadian literature exists between shifting centers of power from France, Britain, and The United States on one hand and Natives and other immigrants on the other or between the "one" and the "other." The study focuses on the inferior position of the natives as contrasted to the supremacy of the main character in the play, Heather Rose. White Supremacy means the political, social, economic power of the White over the non-whites or natives in Canada. In one of his speeches, the Acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan postulates on the same ideas when he defines white supremacy as one of the most "potent ideologies" causing acts of violence in "our modern age. This continued menace of racially-based violent extremism, particularly white supremacist extremism, is an abhorrent affront to the nation, the struggle, and unity of its diverse population" (Sands, 2020). It is interesting to notice that Canadian literature usually reflects the current situations of the natives as a means to correct their situations in society. It is this constant shift of centers that makes Canadian Literature a contradiction.

It is generally believed that the literature of the Native Canadians and/or about Natives is literature that can no longer be ignored as do their culture and language. Native theatre survives in Canada, much like Native people themselves: tenacious, often invisible, poor, and diverse. Wasserman (2000) admits that "Canadian drama was born out of an amalgam of the new consciousness of the age-social, political, and aesthetic-with the new Canadian self-consciousness" (p. 16). To survive, as it does, Canadian Native literature insists on telling the stories of Natives living on this land. It is dedicated to the creation, development, and production of professional artistic expression of the Native experience in Canada. Godard (2008) believes that such literary texts can be considered "a testimony to the variety and vitality, the quantity and quality of cultural productions by Native artists." They are important signs of the "emergence of Native culture as a forceful presence in literary institutions" (p. 110). The focus of this study is on how Wendy Lill as a prolific writer has managed-her own way-to characterize the authentic Canadian cultural identity as represented in the Natives and their dilemma as part of Canadian society. In a very interesting and thought-provoking Alice-like story, she represents the idea of the North as opposed to the White supremacy in an Indian reserve.

Nowadays, postcolonial works of literature focus on "questions of representation" i.e. "how the world is socially constructed and represented to us by us" (Barker, 2000, p. 5). The position from which the author is speaking is critical. Since being an Anglo-Canadian would imply power but also suggest being an outsider to Natives and their problems. The study of culture comes from the

realization that "questions of power have to be and always are lodged within representations" (Sherbert, Gerin & Petty, 2006, p. 4). Spivak (2006) suggests different meanings of representation where the subject of power "speaks for" in the political arena and re-presentation as in art or philosophy where the oppressed subjects speak for themselves. She states that although the two modes of representation are unstable and constantly colliding, "the relationship between the imperialist subjects and the subject of imperialism is at least ambiguous" (p. 297). Representation is concerned with the right to represent individuals or topics belonging to a minority culture. This raises an important question: can a writer who is an outsider to this minority represent its people or not?

#### 4. Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose*

The play is a monodrama narrated by the only character on the stage, Rose, in a long flashback. Rose is waiting to see her supervisor Miss Jackson who never showed up to narrate the details of her journey to the North. In the play, Lill is criticizing the colonial ideology of the White-man's burden to civilize the "Other" all over the world. The untrained naïve nurse has arrived at the reserve carrying all the characteristic attitudes of the imperial center toward the Natives. After her plane has landed in the reserve, she felt she "was... the Queen? [Heather gives a regal smile, even a wave]" (p. 18). The minute Heather Rose once arrives at the reserve, she wants to start "an exercise club for women to improve their self-image... and a good food club to work on their eating habits" (p. 26). Unfortunately, she did not think about proper sewage, or planting rice without water, or eating chemical fishes (p. 25).

Unable to impose her facile solutions on the Natives' complex problems, she turns for feelings of guilt and alcohol. Like Marlow, she returns from the heart of darkness to tell her story to the world. Lill cited two epigraphs at the beginning of her play one from *The Heart of Darkness* when Marlow says that he "went a little farther... then still a little farther –till [he] had gone so far that [he doesn't] know how [he]'ll ever get back" (p. 11). The other quotation is from *Alice in Wonderland* when she wonders "What sort of people live about here?" "In that direction," the cat said, "lives a Hatter and in that direction lives a March Hare. Visit either one you like. They are both mad" (p. 11). The play resembles *Alice in Wonderland* in its surrealism and *The Heart of Darkness* in its nightmarish atmosphere. The two quotes at the beginning of the play are very expressive of what Rose will face in her journey. The difference between her and *Alice in Wonderland* is that Rose's journey is from the city of Toronto to the Heart of Darkness or a reserve in the north of Canada. Rose considers herself as *Alice* traveling to the wonderland but she finds herself in the heart of darkness. When she is still in the plane she describes the flight as: "I was going down, down, drowned into another place, another time . . . I was *Alice in Wonderland*. Shall I fall right through the Earth? Splashing into a shower of diamond" (p. 17). The contrast between the two settings shows the ugly results of colonization. In winter, she keeps "hoping that it was a nightmare and [she] was going to wake up" (p. 37). Also, she would "see a raven or dream a raven and each evoked the same aloneness, the same gaping separateness" (p. 43).

The third reference in the play is to Florence Nightingale or the famous "The lady with the lamp" who is known to make rounds at night to check on the wounded soldiers during the Crimean War. McDonald (2001) describes Nightingale as "the second most famous woman in Britain after Queen Victoria" (p.1). She is the icon for nurses with selflessness and a keen passion to help the needy. Heather Rose converses with a "Mr. Blue Eyes" in the Community Hall, she frankly introduces herself to him as "I am Heather Rose. The resident Florence Nightingale" (2008, p. 39). She intentionally chooses the name because of all the associations with the character. Nightingale considers that nursing is a God-given call for her to offer help to everyone. She used to tend to wounded soldiers in the darkness with her lamp. The real question is: can we consider Rose another modern version of Nightingale? Sure no.

The play strips away colonial hypocrisy and exposes the self-defeating attitudes of the oppressed. For example, it is a common known fact about Indians that they "don't look you in the eye... Camilla looked at the top button of my uniform as if it had some mysterious power over her" (p. 23). At the end of the play, she gets so angry at the Natives that she says "I never know what you're thinking. Never know what you really want from me. Should I stand on my hands, tell jokes, disappear? Are you glad, sad, mad? Do you like me hate me, laugh at me, pity me, blame me" (p. 52). Lill satirizes some misrepresentations and stereotypes Anglo-Canadians perceive of the Natives. For example she believes that they are "broken" (p. 47) "inferior," "weird," "exotic" (p. 35). This raises a very important

question; can an outsider give a true expression of another culture? This is an important question related to Canada as to many other countries.

The narratives of racism and cultural identity differ according to the narrator and his/her representations of the debate, which is very clear in the play. Fluck (2011) suggests a close relationship between "identity formation and subject positioning in literary and cultural analysis" (p. 380). From Rose, we learn the truth about the reserve and the other characters. The play does not bring any Native character on stage or attempt to tell the Natives' story. The grounds on which her claims of authority to liberate Natives are the familiar liberal humanist grounds and one of the imperial justifications for settlements in Canada. Her desire to help the Natives is meaningless in face of her blindness to the importance of the acknowledgment of their ancient rights to the possession of their land.

The play is a confession. Rose admits that "all those [...] high-paid whites coming through to help the Indians-not little me! Flying in and out, in and out... talking about the reserve from the plane to the community hall, to band office, being helpful and advisory, then back in the air" (2008, p. 49). She acknowledges the responsibility of the Whites in the problems of the Natives. She narrates the story of the White teacher Annadora "inviting Indian boys over after school" and how also the substitute White teacher Lorraine loved all Indian men (p. 29). She discovers that the White pilot is a "bootlegger" (p. 30) who "flew the booze to the reserve" (p. 36). Everyone in the reserve knows that the place is surrounded by "dusty roads that went nowhere" (p. 35) and that Indian students "come in and out of school like casual visitors. They never carried books or pencil cases" (p. 35).

## 5. Conclusion

The play is like a monologue or a warning that life in the reserve is not as easy as it seems. She was alone in the reserve and she is alone in Miss Jackson's office, in the middle of civilization. No one can fault Lill's approach for giving a one-sided speech about the Natives. The study helps to credit her attempts to warn against the injustices felt by the Natives and the Whites' responsibility of them. At the beginning of the play, Rose wants to engulf the Natives "to hug each one of them" (p. 24) at the end, she is engulfed by them. She tells the Chief she did not "want to see the next sad-eyed dark-skinned Indian coming through the door. [she] wanted to see a smiling, bouncing, blonde-haired, lacy, pregnant white woman" (p. 53). The play is a lesson accompanied by blackboard illustrations. While waiting for Miss Jackson, Rose writes four words on the blackboard "INDIANS" (p. 22), "WHITES" (p. 27), "CULTURE" (p. 31), and "ALCOHOL" (p. 46). Whenever she writes a word, she tries to explain it or narrates a story about it. She says that one night she wrote the word "INDIANS," "four hundred times on [her] dining room tablecloth" (p. 23). Her definition of "CULTURE" is very appealing. She believes that "saying someone has a different culture is just a polite way of saying they're weird. Not special, not privileged. Not exotic. Not mysterious at all" (p. 35). It is interesting to notice that Wendy Lill has chosen a female to be the only character in the play. Lill depends on the relationship between notions of tolerance, accepting, yet also at times angry and resentful" (Hutcheon, 1997, p. 65). This is truly the case with Heather Rose. At sometimes she is passionate and caring concerning the Natives and their problems; at other times she believes that they brought misery on themselves because of their powerlessness. Another explanation for Lill's choice of a female as her leading character is that some critics believe that the female voice "politically and culturally personifies Canada" (Irvine, 1986, p. 11) as the "male voice personifies England" (Gallant, 1981, p. 269).

Heather Rose loses all that she believes in this journey. The movement from/to the center is not that easy. Rose expresses the same idea saying that "at orientation, we spent a whole afternoon on culture. Miss Jackson told us that moving from white to Indian culture was like going from your rumpus room into your fruit cellar" (2008, p. 32). The best description of the play is that it is a journey from arrogance and self-centeredness to knowledge. It is a narration of some of the ugly consequences of racism and colonization as well as the supposed supremacy of the Western-Whites. In short, we can say that Wendy Lill has managed to represent a glimpse of the world of the Native Canadians. In her unique way, she has proven the responsibility of the Whites in the plights of the Natives. The play calls for sympathy and a deep understanding of the Natives' problems and identity.

This study intends to expose the deformation of the Natives' identity as the direct result of the whites' settlement in Canada. The play is a necessary step toward an open discussion of the Natives'

problems and pains. The study demonstrates that the play has been neglected despite being a masterpiece of her writer. This neglect could be attributed to people's fear that the discussion of such problems would create dissent between existing ethnic groups. It also emphasizes the importance of the study in its field. The paper is a criticism of colonialism and racism executed by the Western whites. It echoes Lill's call for social equality, justice, and shared political powers regardless of class, race, ethnicity, gender, or any other dehumanizing differentiations. Moreover, the paper shows how provocative Lill's play is in its presentation of the Natives' struggles and pains. Hopefully, this study contributes to acclaiming for the writer and her text the credit she deserves.

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