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White Men Talking

ABSTRACT In this essay the author discusses a new play by Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock called *Kabloona Talk* (2007). The historical context for this contemporary play is the 1914 murders of two Roman Catholic Missionary priests by two Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, followed by two sensational trials held in southern Canada in 1917. Several attempts have been made by writers and scholars to represent what happened and why, but Pollock's play offers a fascinating look at the political manoeuvring that took place behind the scenes as the white lawyers struggled with the conflict between the dictates of European law and the principles guiding the behaviour of a remote group of Inuit about whom white southern Canadians knew next to nothing. Rather than focus on either the murders or the trials, Pollock uses this actual event to explore the timeless issues of justice, and cultural encounter and misunderstanding.

KEYWORDS Sharon Pollock, Canadian, drama, Arctic, Inuit, cultural conflict, murder, colonization

We have arrived at the mouth of the Coppermine River. Some families have already left. *Disillusioned* with the Eskimos. We are threatened with starvation; also we don't know what to do. (Father Rouvière, 1913.)

These remote savages, really cannibals, the Eskimos of the Arctic regions, have got to be taught to recognize the authority of the British Crown. (Crown Council C.C. McCaul, 1917.)

We are now fast friends. Eskimos cannot be treated on the footing of master and servant. [...] Amongst these people, what one knows is known by all. (Inspector Charles D. LaNauze, 1916/1937.)

Qui refusera de communiquer un peu de lumière à ces intelligences rabougries comme les arbres de leur pays? (Paul Levesque, 1939.)

DEFENSE: This is what it really comes down to [...] Sinnisiak and Uluksuk had a reasonable belief, culturally founded and honestly held, that their lives were in danger, and they acted on that belief to preserve their lives. (*Kabloona Talk*, 2007.)

I

IN NOVEMBER 1913, less than a year before the beginning of the First World War, a violent double murder took place in Canada's Northwest Territories not far from Bloody Falls on the Coppermine River (see Fig. 1). Two Oblate missionaries, Fathers Jean-Baptiste Rouvière (1881–1913) and Guillaume Le Roux (1897–1913), who had been sent into the Coronation Gulf area in the far north to convert the Copper “Eskimos,” had not returned to their base at Imaerinik Lake. News travelled very slowly at that time: there were no roads, telephones, or mail services, and no easy way to get help if one encountered trouble. The isolation of the remote area was extreme and winters were (and still are) extremely harsh. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1914 rumours began to filter south that some Inuit had been seen wearing the garments of Roman Catholic priests and in possession of objects that were identifiably religious. These rumours, together with the fact that the priests themselves had not been seen or heard from for many months, led to a police search that started in the fall of 1915. This search eventually uncovered the scant remains of the priests and culminated in a confession by the Inuit encamped near the mouth of the Coppermine that two Inuit, Sinnisiak and Uluksuk, had killed the priests. The two Inuit were arrested, charged with murder, and brought south to Edmonton for a trial that began on 14 August 1917. But that is just the beginning – the bare bones, as it were – of the story.¹

Versions of what happened to Rouvière and Le Roux, and to Sinnisiak and Uluksuk, have been told and retold since 1917. The most sensational aspects of events, including charges of cannibalism, have guaranteed the case a place in the annals of Canadian murder stories. Depending on who retells the story and when they retell it, interpretations vary: the priests may be seen as heroes and martyrs, or they may be seen as dangerous, ill-tempered intruders attempting to force an alien belief system on an indigenous people; the Inuit may be seen as brutal savages, the very worst type of pagans, or they may be seen as acting in self-defence and then as the helpless victims of a foreign justice system that could not, or would not, make allowances for the actual circumstances of life in Canada's far North. Whichever way the story is approached and re-created, one thing is absolutely clear: the murder (for indeed the two priests were killed, of that there is no doubt) stands for a much larger issue and represents a symbolic moment in the cultural encounter of two peoples, two views of reality, two value systems, and two responses to the stresses of isolation, starvation, and power imbalance.

In this essay I will focus my attention on a contemporary play called



Fig. 1. This portion of the map from Helge Ingstad's *The Land of Feast and Famine* ([1933] 1992), shows the Northwest Territories as it appeared near the time of the murders and trials; spellings of place names are as they appear in the original. Ingstad has drawn it with 200 miles to the inch, which gives a good idea of the vast distance (as the crow flies) between Calgary and Edmonton in the south, and Fort Norman to the north on the Mackenzie River, or the mouth of the Coppermine River on Coronation Gulf in the Arctic.

Kabloona Talk (which translates roughly as “whitemen’s talk”) by Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock, but I also want to situate the play in the wider context of representations of the events of 1914 to 1917 that have become popularized in the Canadian imagination as the case of REX vs Sinnisak and Uluksuk. As I see it, from my perspective in the early twenty-first century, this case affords a classic example of what Mary Louise Pratt has called a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992: 5–9). It is also one in a series of actual encounters between northerners and southerners (be they Canadians from southern, eastern cities or Europeans) that have been re-invented by

contemporary writers and, through these inventions, installed in southern narratives about the North. Within what I have called the “discursive formation” of the Canadian North, Sir John Franklin and his three expeditions to the Arctic have inspired a host of representations, but others like John Hornby, Albert Johnson (the so-called *mad trapper*), Mina Benson Hubbard (as well as her husband who starved to death in Labrador in 1903), and Martin Frobisher have provoked endless curiosity and mythologizing.² In short, the *storying* of Rouvière and Le Roux and of Sinnisiak and Uluksuk is part of a larger narrative about what happens to white southerners who venture North in search of glory, adventure, riches, the Northwest Passage, or in pursuit of some other agenda, such as conversion of pagans to Christianity or the establishing of Canadian sovereignty over the high Arctic. It is also part of a lesser known and more recently told story about the fate of northern peoples – Inuit, Dene, Northern Cree, Objibwa, Innu, and others – who came into contact with white southerners during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³

Inseparable from the story of Rouvière and Le Roux are certain aspects of the historical background of Canada between the 1890s and the First World War. During the 1890s, the Yukon Territory had experienced one of the great Gold Rushes of all time when thousands of miners and speculators flooded into the territory around the Klondike River in search of gold. Most of these men were Americans and it quickly became apparent to the distant Canadian authorities in Ottawa that they would lose control of this territory if they did not move quickly to establish a police force, mining regulations, banks, and a stable, domestic economy. One lesson learned from the Klondike Gold Rush was that sovereignty in the North had to be aggressively asserted by the Canadian authorities; the other lesson was that there were riches, possibly even untold riches, lying in Canada’s far north waiting for white, southern interests to claim and develop them. Just because indigenous northerners lived in these distant areas and had done so for centuries, this did not mean southern explorers, governments, and developers should not stake their claims to the land and its resources. Any perceived challenge to this southern control over northern lands was to be taken very seriously indeed and crushed unequivocally by the firm hand of British law. Amongst the most powerful and pervasive of southern institutions to infiltrate the North, apart from the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, were the Christian Church and the English- or French-Canadian educational systems. First the “Indians” and “Eskimos” were to be converted to Christianity – Roman Catholic, or Anglican and other Protestant sects – and then their children were to be educated in the colonizer’s languages and culture.⁴ Moreover, by the time Sinnisiak and Uluksuk were arrested and brought to trial in the

summer of 1917, Canada had been at war for three years: patriotic feelings were high; the rhetoric of support for and pride in all things British was at fever pitch; and the belief that civilization was under attack and must be defended at all costs could not be questioned. So-called *savagery* was not to be tolerated. Underlying these attitudes was a deeper and pervasive racism. According to the dominant views of the period, Canada was a "White man's country," and all non-white peoples, including First Nations and immigrants from Asia or Africa (and Afro-Americans), were viewed with suspicion and denied the vote and other basic rights. There had been race riots on the west coast in 1907, followed by a deplorable incident in Vancouver's harbour involving a freighter carrying Sikhs in 1914, and there was an entrenched belief that all Indians must be converted to Christianity, educated in white culture at residential schools, confined to reservations, and ultimately absorbed into mainstream life.⁵

No one attempting to retell the story of Rouvière, Le Roux, Sinnisiak, and Uluksuk can ignore the known facts as presented in the trials. The two priests, whom the Inuit called *Kuleavik* and *Ilagoak* respectively, were killed not long after they had left the Inuit camp in November 1913 and begun their journey south. The two Inuit had either followed the priests or met with them and then been urged, possibly at gun point, to pull the priests' sled. According to testimony given through a translator, Sinnisiak and Uluksuk became afraid of Le Roux, who had a violent temper; moreover, they believed that the priests had promised their people a rifle in return for previous assistance rendered but had refused to hand it over. Clearly, there was considerable cultural misunderstanding between these two sets of men, and this was exacerbated by an inability to speak each other's language; moreover, all four were struggling with severe winter conditions and the spectre of starvation. The situation could scarcely have been more volatile. Precisely what precipitated the violence is not clear, but the priests were killed, shot and/or stabbed by the two Inuit, and then each of the men sliced off a small piece of each priest's liver and consumed it. When they left the scene they took the rifle and other objects with them.

By the time Inspector LaNauze found the priests' remains little was left except a jaw bone, a few pages of a diary, and blood-stained clothing; these items were presented as evidence at the trials. LaNauze also received a confession from the Inuit and then returned with them to Edmonton. During their August 1917 trials Sinnisiak and Uluksuk sat in their heavy clothes with their feet in buckets of cold water while the white men around them talked at great length in English and the Judge dozed off in the summer heat. Then, to the horror of the Judge and the Prosecutor, Sinnisiak, who was tried alone for the murder of Rouvière, was acquitted by the all-male, white

jury. Furious with this result, the Prosecutor and the Judge agreed to hold the second trial in Calgary with a new jury, which would be sequestered, in order to try both Inuit on the charge of murdering Le Roux. This time the jury returned a verdict of guilty of first-degree murder which required the death penalty. In the event, the Judge sentenced the Inuit to death and then commuted the death sentence, as he had intended to do all along, to life imprisonment at Fort Resolution on the shores of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories (see Fig. 2). After two years of working around the police detachment, Sinnisiak and Uluksuk were deemed to be model prisoners and released in 1919. They returned to the Coronation Gulf area, which is now called Kugluktuk, but by 1924 Uluksuk was dead, possibly murdered by his people for being a dangerous bully, and Sinnisiak was dead by 1930. The great lessons about law and order supposedly delivered by the trials brought little or no benefit to the Killiniqmiut (formerly called *Copper Inuit*, or *Eskimos*, by white southerners).

II

The earliest re-tellings of these events that I have seen are in French and consist of plays, stories, and essays assigned by the Roman Catholic clergy in 1938 to young men attending the church colleges across the country. The winning submissions were published in 1939 in a volume called *Martyrs aux glaces polaires* and, as the title suggests, Rouvière and Le Roux are classified as martyrs in a holy cause – the conversion of the heathen – and the two “Eskimos” are labelled monsters, while others of their race are depicted as evil incarnate. The authors of the plays, in particular, do not hesitate to create “Eskimo” characters and to put violent and horrifying dialogue in their mouths. By contrast, the white characters are represented as honest, kindly, and good, and the priests as self-sacrificing, forgiving saints. In one play, when the Judge is considering the death sentence, the Catholic Bishop, Gabriel Breynat, O.M.I., intervenes to urge clemency because “Christian charity is more powerful than the law” (p. 171). The essay by Paul Levesque from which I quoted at the beginning, is the most fanatical in its treatment of the subject, but all the creations conform to the ideology and rhetoric of Christian sacrifice and missionary self-righteousness.

In *British Law & Arctic Men*, R.G. Moyles writes as a scholar with a distinctly post-colonial understanding of cultural encounters in the Canadian North (Moyles 1979). He provides an accurate account of the known facts supported by extensive quotation from court records, and he re-creates the trial scenes as clearly as possible, noting the crowds that gathered outside



Fig. 2. The central figures in the 1917 trials were (back row, left to right) C.C. McCaul, Inspector D. LaNauze, James Wallbridge, and Constable Wight, and (front row, left to right) Ilaviniik (a translator), Koeha (a witness), Uluksuk, Sinnisiak, and Patsy Klingenberg (another translator). Photograph: Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary.

the Edmonton courthouse, the throng of national and international newspaper reporters, and the celebrity-status of Sinnisiak and Uluksuk, who were entirely out of their element in the heat and babble of a city summer. "Edmonton buzzed with excitement," he tells us, but no one knew how the Inuit felt about the situation (p. 35). Moyles's use of the court records allows us to *hear* how the Judge and the lawyers sounded, what views they espoused, and what they expected from the trial. As the Crown Prosecutor, Charles Cursolles McCaul, is quoted as saying (in addition to the remark I cited at the beginning), he hopes that the "savage notions" of the Eskimos will be "effectually dispelled" so that the northern regions of the country will be safe for the "many white men" who go there to explore (p. 39). Moyles goes on to describe the evidence and to single out for special attention the passage from Father Rouvière's diary that I quoted at the start: "Désenchantement de la part des Esquimaux," was translated at the trial as "Disillusioned with the Eskimos" (p. 43), but James Wallbridge, lawyer for the Defense, was unhappy with many aspects of the translation process during the trial and Sharon Pollock would seize on such issues for her play and focus on this phrase "Désenchantement de la part/ Disillusioned with" to dramatize the problem.

Moyles continues his narrative with a description of the uproar that followed the "Not Guilty" verdict. Rumours began to spread that the jury was biased against Roman Catholics or influenced by gossip about the priests'

relations with Eskimo women or swayed by sympathetic reports about the Eskimos from members of the public. As a result, the Crown persuaded the Judge, Chief Justice Horace Harvey, who had wanted a guilty verdict and required little persuading, to order that the second trial be held in Calgary with a new jury, which would be sequestered, and a new charge: Sinnisiak and Uluksuk would be jointly charged with the murder of Father Le Roux. In his account of the second trial, Moyles quotes extensively from the arguments of the Defense, who took great pains to explain matters from the Inuit perspective, to describe why Sinnisiak and Uluksuk were afraid for their lives and how Le Roux had forced them at gun point to pull the sled. In the words of Wallbridge, what happened near Bloody Falls in November 1913 was a “tragedy” arising from complete cultural miscommunication and the over-riding fear of starvation (p. 66). Sinnisiak and Uluksuk had done the only sensible thing possible under the circumstances *as they understood those circumstances*. Moyles concludes his narrative unequivocally: “The trial of Sinnisiak and Uluksuk went for naught” (p. 87) because neither man learned anything from it. The lesson Moyles draws from the story he has told is that these trials, “the first for any Inuit under the ‘king’s law,’ were a significant part of the process of neo-colonialism” that would lead to the “ultimate disintegration of the Copper Inuit culture” (p. 90).

When McKay Jenkins published his new account of the Rouvière and Le Roux affair in 2005, he took a different tack. His title, *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine: Madness, Murder and the Collision of Cultures in the Arctic*, sets the stage for what is, finally, a rather sensationalized, lurid re-telling of events in which Jenkins creates Inspector LaNauze as the hero of the day because he was admired by the Inuit, treated them with respect, and travelled for many months over many hundreds of miles to investigate the disappearance of the priests and then to find and arrest the perpetrators – all without firing a shot. Like Moyles, he describes the Inuit as being afraid of the priests, especially Le Roux, and he interprets the eating of pieces of the priests’ liver as a ritual act of appeasement (pp. 174–75). He dramatizes the Crown Prosecutor as a ranting racist – clearly the villain of the story – and he dwells upon the actual debate that took place over the translation of Rouvière’s diary entry: “Désenchantement de la part des Esquimaux.” As reviewers have noted, Jenkins makes several mistakes in his narrative, but what I find interesting in his version are the emphases he places on the sensational aspects of the case (blood, madness, violence, and ritual cannibalism), his elevation of Inspector LaNauze to the status of romantic adventurer/hero/Mountie who conquers the Barrens to get his man (or men), and his demonizing of Crown Counsel McCaul. *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine* is long on dramatic action but short on sober reflection.

When Sharon Pollock took up the subject, she created something completely different from the pious rhetoric of the early French pieces, the objective reporting of Moyles' narrative, or the heroics of Jenkins's adventure story. *Kabloona Talk* asks white audiences to reflect closely on what *might* have happened in a back room of the Edmonton courthouse immediately after the jury returned their verdict of "Not Guilty" in the first trial. As we know, the second trial was moved to another city with a new jury, which was ordered sequestered. How and why did this happen? There are no Inuit in Pollock's play; she refuses to create men from another race and to put words in their mouths. She does not retry them or take sides with them, nor does she dwell on the deaths of the two priests. Instead, Pollock invites us to consider how those in power – in the government and the justice systems – manoeuvre and connive to maintain and enhance their power because, as she sees it, "the ultimate victim may be Justice itself" ("Playwright's Notes"). There are only four characters in the play: the Judge, the Crown Prosecutor, the Defense, and a fourth man called Smith. This naming, or absence of names, is important because, with respect to the lawyers, their identification by function allows them to stand for powers beyond individual men in a specific time and place and to represent the general force of the law or the justice system – then and now.

Smith is a special case and a pure invention on the playwright's part; he is also the most important figure in the play. The play opens as he arrives alone on stage, which is set as a back room of the courthouse, within moments of the rendering of the "Not Guilty" verdict. He is expensively dressed, aloof, business-like, and authoritative, and he brings with him a box marked "REX vs Sinnisiak" and a rusted 44 Winchester rifle. The set design instructions call for a simple but stately room with high ceilings, doorways and windows, plush draperies and armchairs, and a liquor cabinet; however, in the middle of this elegant room is a plain, utilitarian table with a "bare, barren" top, and it is set at a slight rake and will be dramatically lit at certain points in the play. The first impression given by this set is one of incongruity: this table looks out of place in such a room. During the opening moments of the play, the man will silently lay the rifle and some objects from the box on the bare table – a bloodstained cassock, a few pages from what may be a diary, and a human jawbone. When the Judge enters he instantly knows who this man is; he also understands why he has come and called this meeting. The Prosecutor enters, furious with the acquittal; the Defense enters, pleased with the verdict. The stranger says nothing, but he observes the others as they enter, argue with each other, and pour drinks. When finally asked to identify himself he says he is simply "Smith," one of the most common of English surnames. From there the action unfolds quickly as

first the Prosecutor and then the Defense realizes that a power beyond the law and the courts has come to intervene in the progress of the case.

Smith proceeds to ask the two lawyers to review the facts of the case for him, and the Judge reminds them, more especially the Defense, that this case is a "seminal legal event" because "the Canadian Government is just now extending its Dominion" (p. 29) throughout the North. As the two lawyers rehearse the facts (and argue with each other over the interpretation of them), Smith sets up an elaborate map on the table to represent "the scene" – that is, the Barrenlands of the Northwest Territories between Edmonton and Fort Norman, one thousand miles to the north, where the headquarters of the Saint Theresa Mission run by Bishop Breynat is located, then, to the east, the cabin of the priests at Lake Imaerinik, and finally the boundaries created by the great waterways of the Mackenzie and Coppermine Rivers, Great Bear Lake, and Coronation Gulf in the Arctic, where the Inuit have their camp. Smith even places a red cross at a point on the Coppermine River to mark Bloody Falls, where the murders were believed to have occurred. In short, what he has done is to map the vast territory between the southern city of Edmonton and the Arctic Ocean, an area, as he notes, which is immense and may well be rich in mineral wealth. This mapping and naming of the Barrenlands controls it, contains it, brings it under the scrutiny of southern eyes that have never seen the real thing, but it also reminds us (audience and readers alike) of the physical presence and scale of the territory in which the tragic events of November 1913 occurred. When the table with its mock map is lit by "shimmering white" light at the end of the play, it will convey a mysterious, haunting quality of significance, possibly even of dread that lingers after the end of the play and persists, with the passage of time, into our present. That such a symbol should glow like this in the middle of a sophisticated back room in a southern, urban, Canadian court house suggests that just beneath the surface of our civilized systems and self-righteous rhetoric is another reality that will not go away and cannot be pushed aside by political or legal manoeuvring.

But this significance is also emphasized through words because Smith's plans to ensure a guilty verdict at the second trial quickly take shape while he listens to and then interrupts the lawyers' arguments. He wants a guilty verdict, one way or another, because like the Judge and the Crown Prosecutor, he must secure Canadian sovereignty over the North. "White men are pouring into the North," he tells the Defense, and "we know there's copper there, gold discovered in the past, diamonds may be found tomorrow. Who knows what lies beneath the surface?" (p. 69). As far as Smith (and the government he represents) is concerned, it is imperative that white men show the Inuit, and all other indigenous northerners, exactly who is

in charge of the North by extending the government's borders "geographically" and "morally" (p. 70). The Defense rejects this reasoning. He argues that a guilty verdict reached for government purposes (be they economic, moral, geographical, or political) is not "Prosecution or Justice. It is Persecution" (p. 71). But the Defense loses the argument this time. The Judge and the Crown Prosecutor agree with Smith; the larger stakes in the case must be served regardless of "Justice." And the outcome of this debate is that sufficient reason is found to request a change of venue and a new jury on the grounds that the first jury was unduly and improperly influenced by rumours and by people with sympathy for the accused. The play ends with the Judge, the Prosecutor, and Smith in agreement: the next trial will be organized to bring in the desired guilty verdict. The Defense lawyer is defeated before he even begins, outmanoeuvred by the powers of the State in collusion with the courts, both of which serve the interests of the South against the North, white developers against non-white inhabitants, civilized Christians against savage pagans. Smith is pleased and he compliments the Defense for his willingness to fight even when he cannot win: "I like you," he says. "Without men like you the system wouldn't work" because it needs "a few like you to make it all [...] look right" (p. 82). Smith's suave cynicism robs the Defense lawyer of his last shred of belief in justice and the Inuit of their freedom to live according to their own culture and traditions in their ancestral lands. The killing, whatever led to the tragedy, of Fathers Rouvière and Le Roux by the Inuit has provided the Canadian authorities with the excuse they need to take control of this part of the North.

III

I began my examination of these representations of the trials held in 1917 that brought two Inuit south charged with the murders of two priests by describing the *case* as an example of a "contact zone," a term developed by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* to describe the colonization of South America (Pratt 1992: 5-9). In her book, Pratt is at pains to understand the complex interaction (linguistic and cultural) that occurs over time when a European culture arrives on foreign soil in an alien and alienating space and stays to claim, survey and control, and develop/exploit that territory. However, the area in which the two groups meet becomes a "contact zone" not simply because these groups come into contact (usually violent) with each other but because, over time, influence may become mutual, a two-way phenomenon that changes the invading culture as well as the invaded, indigenous one. Accommodations will be made; compromises reached, usu-

ally out of necessity or expediency. Different areas within the Canadian North, which since 1999 has comprised the three territories of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories (today a much smaller area than it was in 1917), and Yukon, as well as Labrador and large tracts of provincial norths across Canada, have developed unique cultures out of their distinct histories of indigenous traditions, non-indigenous exploration, and settlement. These differences and distinctions are imagined in literature and, therefore, can be traced through their representations, especially when those representations acknowledge the experience of contact as a fluid, evolving, dialogic aspect of their story. One key problem with the representation of North as a contact zone arises when the stories being told are created by and for southerners, when neither the story-teller nor his audience has any personal experience of the North being represented. Another inescapable problem – more perhaps in the nature of a dilemma – faced by anyone who chooses to recreate such stories, is the persistence of unacknowledged stereotypes and assumptions.

In the stories created about Sinnisiak, Uluksuk, Rouvière and Le Roux, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, the lawyers, and the trials, both southern ignorance of the Coppermine area of the North and a set of stubborn stereotypes and assumptions have conditioned the kind of stories that could be told and have determined their reception. Perhaps understandably, given their faith and their mission, the Roman Catholic Church in the 1930s would insist upon representing the North as a battleground for souls, with room for only one victor – Christianity – in the contest between good and evil. By the 1970s, it was possible for a scholar like Moyles to see beyond and around such basic dichotomies to the political ramifications of the case and to the longer-term consequences of what Canadian politicians have called the opening up of the North. And yet even Moyles, who relies on careful research into court records and newspaper coverage of the trials, sets up a winner/loser opposition in which the Killiniqmiut people of the central Arctic lose to the powerful forces of southern assimilation, greed, and colonial development. Although Jenkins revisits the history with twenty-first-century eyes and cannot ignore the fact that many groups of indigenous northerners in all three territories continue to survive and adapt, despite real inequities and hardships, he nevertheless *constructs* his narrative as an action-packed adventure story with exciting challenges, a white hero (Inspector LaNauze) and a white villain (Crown Counsel McCaul). The two Inuit, like the two priests, slip into the background of his story, and the opportunity to explore the complexity of contact is lost.

Whether or not Sharon Pollock's *Kabloona Talk* can correct this imbalance in representation by exposing and analyzing the contact zone em-

bedded in REX vs Sinnisiak and Uluksuk remains to be seen. A play, unlike a novel or a non-fiction narrative, only exists fully in performance, and to date this play has received a workshop reading and a complete dramatic reading but not a professional stage premiere. Much will ultimately depend on the actors, the design, and even the theatre venue; a production in Yellowknife, NWT, will be received differently from a production in Calgary or Edmonton.⁶ Nevertheless, the potential of a live theatre production to engage an audience in the experience of a contact zone is enormous, and this play could well achieve that result – one which, I believe, is intended by the playwright. By focusing exclusively on four white men, by avoiding the creation of Inuit characters, by dramatizing the verbal contest over language, and by staging the contact zone itself on a bare table top, Pollock invites us to see the situation arising from and informing a particular historical case *differently*, with something other than imperial eyes. Let me revisit each of these four aspects of the play in turn to present my case.

By using only white men who will argue with each other, and by denying them specific names (Smith scarcely qualifies as an identifier), Pollock positions her characters as representatives of points of view that still exist in Canadian society; she also resists the temptation to paint these men as simple villains, thoughtless racists or, in the case of the Defense, as an altruistic humanitarian with a heart of gold. To be sure, the Defense is not only doing his professional job – defending the accused – he is also struggling to see things from the *others'* perspective and that *other* is completely foreign to him. More than either of his colleagues, he is sensitive to the “cultural lens” (*Kabloona Talk*, unpublished script, p. 34) through which the Inuit and the priests necessarily viewed each other. But Pollock's Judge and Prosecutor are also trying to do their jobs as best they can, and each of them is concerned with the bigger picture of Canadian sovereignty and northern development. They may be more ethnocentric than the Defense and more committed to a narrow application of British law, but they are not villains. Smith is a more disturbing figure, a type of puppet master who controls the outcome of the play, and as such he is a favourite Pollock type because he embodies what she has always seen as the real devil in society – the system, any system, that operates bureaucratically, impersonally, relentlessly to reify the status quo and silence debate; and he is a suave, impervious devil who happily marginalizes opposition and erases the individual conscience (in this case that of the Defense). As we watch and listen to these men talk, it is impossible not to see them as representing us and as expressing a range of familiar, conflicting, yet often convincing arguments. If Pollock had created roles for Sinnisiak and Uluksuk, she could not have avoided objectifying them, dressing them (literally or figuratively) in skins and furs, fixing them in a frozen past that

no longer applies, or perhaps putting incomprehensible Inuktituk or broken English in their mouths. To do this would have invoked all the familiar stereotypes and assumptions made about the Inuit and the North by southerners. To have them talked about, sympathetically by the Defense and critically by the Crown Prosecutor, who will not forget the dead priests, is to make us (readers and audience) identify with these shifting perspectives in turn and to analyse them for ourselves, in short, to ask ourselves how we see things.

Integral to the choice of characters and setting – legal, professional, in an Edmonton court – is Pollock's stress on a spoken language which is, of course, the medium but also the focus of legal debate and a key subject of the play. The lawyers must fight with words and in terms of words and their meanings, and in the course of the play it becomes very clear just how slippery words can be. Can Sinnisiak and Uluksuk be called "murderers" when they are charged with but not convicted of murder? Did Sinnisiak understand the translator's questions and explanations? Indeed, how could he have when, for example, having what you say used against you in a court makes no sense in the Inuit culture? Was the priests' rifle *stolen* or were the Inuit *promised* the rifle? Are *we* the "foreigners" in their land or they in ours? Where do embellishment and speculation take over from facts? As far as the Defense is concerned, as white men from the South we cannot presume to understand Inuit from the North: "We misread them, we're culturally illiterate in their world," he says, at which the Prosecutor protests: "We're not the ones who're culturally illiterate" (p. 49). But of course, as the debate thus far has amply demonstrated, we are. And to further complicate this murky business of words and meaning, the translation between English and French is also problematic.

At a crucial juncture in her play, as Smith summarizes his understanding of events, Pollock pauses to reflect on this matter of translation. Smith thinks he is driving home a point by rendering the passage from Father Rouvière's diary – those water damaged fragments displayed on the table beside his jawbone and bloodstained cassock – as "some families already gone; *disappointment from* the Eskimos; threatened with starvation and do not know what to do," but the Defense corrects Smith: "'disillusioned with Eskimos' is what was quoted at trial" (p. 39). When the Prosecutor insists that there is no relevant difference between "disappointment from" and "disillusioned with," the Defense protests that there is and that the difference sheds light on the general situation and the motivation for what happened. Whether we accept one English translation or another, agree with the Defense or the Prosecutor, this much is indisputable: words are hard to understand and yet upon their meaning much rests, possibly even life or death, justice or injustice, innocence or guilt.

But perhaps the most telling and certainly the most theatrical representation of a contact zone is the rough table sitting at a slightly raked angle, centre stage, in this otherwise elegant, formal room. It is on this table that the exhibits have been placed by Smith and they have lain there, deliberately lit to emphasize their presence, throughout the play. In addition, Smith has *staged* the Northwest Territories, to the extent that he knows the geography and action of the tragedy that unfolded there in November 1913. This double move – the display of poignant *real* exhibits, joined later in the action by the false, toy-like props used to map the vast northern landscape – should create a number of interesting reverberations for anyone watching the play because their juxtaposition is disturbing and provocative. As we watch Smith we must ask ourselves exactly what we are looking at and what meaning these real and fictional objects could possibly have, why they occupy the same imagined space, and how they relate to each other as they lie there during the play or, indeed, when the lights go down and the play is over. It seems to me that many possibilities come to mind and that they are all prompted by this creation, this staging of a visual representation of a contact zone or of what I might better call, because it is a staging within a performance, a *meta*-contact zone. In Pratt's use of the concept to analyse travel writing, a contact zone is always an attempt to represent "the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures" (p. 7). Moreover, once contact between colonizers and colonized is established, the contact zone represents the space of "interactive, improvisational" relations that usually involve "conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (p. 6). By creating a *meta*-contact zone in *Kabloona Talk*, and by making that zone so central to the play, a haunting inescapable presence emphasized theatrically by the lighting design of the play and by the physical positions of the four actors, Pollock invites us to admit our ignorance, to contemplate the incommensurability of Smith's small mock rivers and cabins with the real physical geography of the North, and finally to witness the violence Smith's mapping does to the reality of what occurred *there* and then to grasp, to understand, the coercive power of such stagings of events.

By virtue of its staged presence as a literalized metaphor, this inspired theatrical trope serves ultimately to warn and remind us about the unreliability of representation on the one hand and our reliance upon such stagings and narrative retellings on the other. How, we are left asking ourselves, can we understand the nature of what happened between Fathers Rouvière and Le Roux, and the two Inuit, Sinnisiak and Uluksuk? And if our understanding is limited by culture, strategies of power (like maps, narratives, and plays), slippery translations across languages, and self-interest, how can we

imagine communities or even contact zones in which interaction is more than coercive and violent? The play does not answer these questions, nor should it. It leaves us thinking about what happened in the Canadian North almost a century ago and what still happens today in Canada and around the world. It leaves us with the haunting image of a contact zone that eludes, exceeds, and possibly subverts all the talking of white men.

NOTES

- ¹ For the facts of the story I have drawn on books by Moyles (1979) and Jenkins (2005), although this latter, rather sensational account is, in my view, less reliable than Moyles'. My prefacing quotations are, in sequence, from Moyles, Jenkins, *Martyrs aux glaces polaires*, and the script of Pollock's play *Kabloona Talk*. My thanks to Sharon Pollock for permission to quote from the play prior to its publication in volume 3 of her *Collected Works* and to the "Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada" for the funds that enabled me to travel across the Canadian Arctic in the 1990s and to conduct my research for Pollock's biography.
- ² I develop my concept of the discursive formation of North in Grace (2001: 23–30). Franklin has been indigenized as a Canadian myth (despite his British origins) by numerous Canadian stories, plays, paintings, novels, and non-fiction books; for an overview of these works, see Grace (1995). Hornby has been the subject of stories, biographies and plays. His death from starvation on the Thelon River in 1927, together with a young relative, Edgar Christian, whose diary was found later by police, and a third man, provides the basis for Lawrence Jeffery's play *Who Look in Stove*. Albert Johnson, who died in a shoot-out with police in 1932, remains a mysterious figure because he died without revealing his identity or his name; see Rudy Wiebe's *The Mad Trapper*. Mina Benson Hubbard (1870–1956) has become an icon in Canadian culture, with plays, songs, biography, films, and re-enactments celebrating the centenary of her 1905 crossing of Labrador, see Grace (2006) and the Introduction to the 2004 edition of Hubbard's book, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. Martin Frobisher (1539–94) was little better than a pirate, but his three voyages to what is now Baffin Island have inspired several drawings, historical accounts, and, most recently an opera, see Murrell & Estacio (2007).
- ³ Among the most compelling recent novels and plays to explore the violence of contact from northerners' perspectives are Marie Clements' play *Burning Vision* about the discovery of uranium near Great Bear Lake and the development of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan during the Second World War; Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which turns tales of cannibalism inside out to show how southerners have cannibalized the North; Robert Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*, a painful re-telling of the abuse suffered by Dene children in residential schools and the long-lasting effects of that trauma; and Joseph Boyden's remarkable novel about Indian soldiers in the Great War, *Three Day Road*. I have discussed aspects of this northern "writing back" in Grace (2001: 229–260).
- ⁴ I do not wish to imply that all representatives of church and state did nothing to assist northerners, but the general impact of colonialism in Canada's North has been devastating and the consequences of past policies and practices are still with us today. But

for a broader discussion of this history see Eber (1997), Levasseur (1995) and Tester & Kulchyski (1994).

- ⁵ This is not the place to review the history of early-twentieth century racism in Canada; for a discussion of the problem see Ward (1990). In 1976 Pollock premiered her important play about the 1914 Vancouver harbour scandal called *The Komagata Maru Incident* and she has explored historical instances of cultural conflict and racism in several other plays such as *Walsh, Fair Liberty's Call*, *The Making of Warriors* and *End Dream*. For a discussion of *The Komagata Maru Incident*, see Grace & Helms (1998).
- ⁶ Pollock received a commission for this play from Stuck-in-a-Snowbank Theatre in Yellowknife, NWT. To date, the play has not been performed there or had a professional premiere. It has received two readings, the first a workshop reading with professional actors in Calgary, and the second a complete dramatic reading, again with professionals, at the 2005 PlayWorks Ink Festival in Calgary, Alberta, sponsored by Theatre Calgary and Alberta Playwrights Network. The reading of *Kabloona Talk* was held on 6 November 2005 with Larry Reese as the Judge, Joe-Norman Shaw as the Prosecutor, Peter Strand Rumpel as the Defense and Grant Reddick as Smith.

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