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Honouring the Strength of Indian Women: Plays, Stories, Poetry. By Vera Manuel (Kulilu Patki). Edited by Michelle Coupal, Deanna Reder, Joanne Arnott, and Emalene A. Manuel. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019. 391 pages. \$27.95 paper; \$70.00 electronic.

Honouring the Strength of Indian Women is a challenging, emotionally draining, and tragic book. It is also heartfelt, necessary, and important. Known primarily as Vera Manuel (her Christian name), Kulilu Patki (Butterfly Woman) was Ktunaxa and Secwepemc from an area near Cranbrook, British Columbia, and lived from 1948–2010. Many of the plays, short stories, and poetry in this anthology have been previously unavailable and are now bringing the author's legacy to a broader public. Three First Nation scholars and activists, together with the author's sister Emalene A. Manuel, edited and contributed essays to the volume, which is part of the *First Voices, First Texts* series, an initiative to reconnect contemporary audiences with Aboriginal literature, contexts, and neglected classics.

The anthology consists, beyond the thoughtful introduction, of four sections. The first two parts offer five plays and four short stories. The third section provides soulful sustenance, with thirty-three poems that vary in length and subjects of concern. The final part puts Manuel's life and work into context: three thoughtful, impassioned essays reveal Manuel's history and the groundbreaking significance of her methods, a contribution that helped forge the overdue recognition and accounting due to Canada's First Nations people.

Manuel began writing plays in December 1988. Trained as a drama therapist, she decided on the day her mother died that her mother's untold stories, those of the community, and her own must not be forgotten and should be "reawakened." She recalls, "One thing that our mom said repeatedly is that whatever you do in life is for the people" (6). Seeing theater, poetry, and storytelling as medicine for individuals and communities, Manuel established Storyteller Theatre to tell the unresolved grief that haunted her, her family, and the Indigenous people of Canada. A self-taught writer, Manuel offered her pain and passion to heal others and in doing so, inspired a movement. Recognized by many as ahead of her time, Manuel's work profoundly contributed to our understanding of Indigenous peoples' trauma, its generational transmission, and the social, cultural, and psychological damage it continues to produce. Her writings, activism, and spirit served as a catalyst, spurring national self-examination and reconciliation long before Truth and Reconciliation came to the attention of the broader public.

Based on stories she was told and her own experiences, most of Manuel's plays concern the legacies of Indian residential schools, the dark era when Native children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in a misguided attempt to "colonize" their minds and spirit. Essentially cultural genocide, the governmental program forbade Native children from the ages of six to eighteen to use their mother language, forced them to abandon traditional ways and beliefs, and to conform to an alien culture, "to live like white people" (229). Throughout the anthology Manuel expresses a wide range of raw-wound emotions, bringing to light complex, contradictory, and unresolved feelings: "Tell me again that the residential school was good for you. Talk to me more about forgiveness so that I can get angry. At least when I am angry, I know that I am alive. I know that I'm feeling something. The rest of the time, it's like I'm frozen" (60).

Each in its own way, the five plays (*The Strength of Indian Women*, *Song of the Circle*, *Journey Through the Past to the Future*, *Echoes of Our Mothers' Past*, and *Every Warrior's Song*) strives to "decolonize theater" (325). Each presents a perspective on the short- and long-term damage wrought by forced colonization. *Song of the Circle* traces how long-hidden wounds metastasize into poverty; generational, substance, and sexual abuse; and suicide through the lives of a young couple, James and Mary, who live with their newborn beneath the shadow of a haunted past. Inspired by her mother's regretful, "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you when you were a little girl," *The Strength of Indian Women* derives from stories told by Manuel's mother (25). *Echoes of Our Mothers' Past* addresses how future generations will be affected by the present unless things are set right; a journey through the past leads to the future. Ceremonially, this play applies movement and masks—the use of mask being both a

metaphor for the hidden self and the spirits—to reawaken and explore an expression organic to the holism of Indigenous cultures.

Faithful to the intent of the Storyteller Theatre, these plays were written to give voice to the Native community, not for a non-Indigenous audience. The subject matter of these plays is the primary source of their power and meaning, and their content asks readers to keep in mind how, why, and for whom these plays were written. They need no exposition, for the characters and context are familiar and lived. These works are about intimacy and storytelling and dramatic action is not emphasized. Instead, language and stories reveal the weight of the past and how it creates the stasis of the present, a theme and atmosphere which pervades the anthology. Each play is surrounded by a haunted past living in the present.

The short stories and poetry similarly portray heart-wrenching, disturbing situations that at times make tough reading: sexual assault, rape, infanticide, physical beatings and whippings, mental and emotional abuse, medical experiments, countless humiliations, and despair. However, the act of telling, of being witnessed, to unburden and face the demons that surround oneself is an act of courage, working as a medicine bundle. The act of surviving to tell the story is an assertion of selfhood, unity, and collective healing. There is a need to move beyond for purification and spiritual growth: “The hope is that we start with this small circle of feelings. I found this circle, other circles will grow and continue to grow, until it stretches across the entire continent and beyond so that all our people are joined together in strength, dignity, and health” (71).

The short stories and poetry are where Manuel’s writing matures, is most varied, nuanced, and confident. This may be because they came after she tested her voice and themes in her playwriting. Her poetry, like her life and work, is a cleansing and needed prayer. She writes, “An Elder told me once that ‘poetry is a gentle way of talking about painful things’” (362). Manuel’s work is a gift generously given. Her work expresses deep and unimaginable hurt, is often raw, then heartfelt and hopeful, but always full of love, compassion, and surprises.

When my sister and I dance
We move in perfect harmony
To the four directions
We give thanks

Thank you to the north
Thank you to the east
Thank you to the south
Thank you to the west

Thank you
For bringing us back home
For bringing us back to life again. (289)

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