

Mending the Scars of Colonialism: Expounding Klamath Tribe's Efforts to Evolve Back through Theresa May's Community Based Play *Salmon is everything* (2014)



Anjitha Gopi, Beena S Nair

Abstract: Barry Wayne McCovey, a Yurok member of the Tribal Fisheries Department writes "civilization will come and go, but the river will remain" (Barry, 2018) adding to the many voices that surged against the rotting images of Salmon on the Klamath river - the fish kills of 2002. The Klamath River forms an indispensable part of the native life, and for McCovey and all others in his community, the Klamath defines their origin, identity, sustenance and a spiritual connection. The tragedy of 2002 fish kills not only killed thousands of Salmons but also marked an inconceivable damage to the indigenous lives. Theresa May, a theatre artist and scholar, along with a group of committed collaborators created a community-based play named *Salmon is Everything*. This issue-engaged play speaks from the perspective of natives, the ones often overlooked in mainstream literature. *Salmon is Everything* (2014) is an attempt to create an alternative written documentation in order to preserve the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). This study also focuses on how far the genre of community theatre awakens Eco-consciousness. This would also address the question whether this artistic form becomes a tool to reclaim a neo-indigenous narrative? Lastly, this paper also encompasses ways in which community theatre becomes a strategy to secure Indigenous Futurity.

Keywords: Community theatre, Salmon kills, Klamath Tribe, Indigenous Futurity, Eco consciousness, Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bisecting the Cascading Mountain Ranges, the Klamath river marks its genesis in Oregon flowing through 257 miles before merging in the Pacific Ocean in Northern California. As one overlooks this confluence, the memories of 2002 fish kills comes back and forth as waves. On September 22 2002, over 34,000 Chinook Salmon lay dead on the Klamath watershed, an event that knew no precedence. The voices of Yurok elders resonated the same; "Never in our time have we, the elders of Yurok Culture Committee, seen such a mass destruction of

our Salmon resources" (May, 2011). The Klamath river forms an indispensable part of the native life and Barry Wayne McCovey proclaims that civilization will come and go, but the river will remain. (McCovey, 2018) - the Klamath defines their origin, identity, sustenance and a spiritual connection. The tragedy of 2002 fish kills not only ripped off thousands of Salmons from sacred river but also marked an inconceivable damage to the indigenous lives. In view of this, Theresa May; a theatre artist and scholar along with a group of committed collaborators "created a dialogical performance script" (May, 2014, 306) named *Salmon is Everything* over a period of three years of researching, interviewing, listening to the stories of people who were affected by the Klamath calamity. The issue-engaged play spoke from the perspective of natives and Nature, thus integrating it into the depth of Eco-consciousness. What makes this script interesting is the inclusion of different viewpoints- native, non-natives and all those in between who were affected and continue to do so by the fish kills. This research paper focuses on questions like how far does the genre of community theatre help in serving an environmental and cultural issue? Theresa May, a non-native artist in "Education of Artist" also voices her anxieties as to "what right do I have to gather the emotional artefacts of collective trauma?" (May, 2014, 109). In such light, it is an attempt to seek answers to Does this artistic form become a platform for communities to tackle the disaster? Or What are the limitations of a crossover between artistic engagement and community cause. Furthermore, this study on *Salmon is Everything* elucidates ways in which methodology of a community-based theatre gives voice to the collective memory and contribute to healing a historical trauma.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The third largest watershed in western United States, the Klamath river originates in eastern Oregon, defies boundaries and runs through five counties thus giving life to four federally recognized tribes. While the Upper Klamath is the traditional homeland of Klamath, Modoc and Yahoo skin peoples, the mid and lower Klamath serves as an ancestral land of the Karuk, Hupa and Yurok people respectively (May, 2014, 1-3). The river, therefore forms the life blood of these indigenous communities in compliance with the traditional native way of living. The native perception about nature is not dualistic, it does not view man as superior or different from nature, rather it enables people to live in harmony and reciprocity with nature.

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According to indigenous viewpoint, man is as much as part of nature as nature is part of man, a stark contrast to the Euro American superiority of man over nature. Perhaps it is this collision of culture that escalated further to the fish kills of 2002. Gordon Bettles in the foreword of *Salmon is Everything* elicits that dominant nature of man traces back to the Euro American origin story that "instructed them to tame creatures [nature] into service" (May, 2014, xiii). A harmful cycle between man and land is further unleashed into believing that "land is a resource, a commodity to be harnessed for the good of mankind" (May, 2014, xiii). This belief manifested with the dawn of the nineteenth century when white settlers included Klamath basin as part of their idea of Westward expansion. Huntsigner in "A Forest for the Trees: Forest Management and the Yurok environment" writes, "The Klamath Basin is fragmented into layers of contested history" (Huntsigner, 1995, 169). Settler colonialism sow its seeds by confining the natives to checker boxes of Indian Reservation Policy of 1830. Whyte elicits in conjunction to the same thought, "the reservation marked the inception of systematic infliction incurred by the white settlers on the tribes" (Whyte, 2017, 158). Kyle Whyte's definition of Settler colonialism can be understood better with the analogy of Klamath history. She writes "Settler colonialism refers to the complex process in which at least one society seeks to move permanently on to the terrestrial, aquatic and aerial places lived by one or more societies who already derive economic vitality, cultural flourishing and political determination from the relationships they have established with plants, animals, physical entities, and ecosystems of those places" (Whyte, 2017, 158). To move permanently into the native land and dispossess the indigenes, Dawes General Allotment Act was introduced. Kinship systems within the native tradition was disrupted with the allocation of individual lands bases. The land and resource acquisition through Dawes Act directly transferred the locus of control to Euro Americans thus reinstating Kyle White's definition of Settler colonialism. Furthermore, the United States Federal Government regulated and changed policies conveniently to "capitalize the region's rich farmland and abundant timber" (May, 2014, 3). This pattern of over exploitation on the Klamath river basin escalated in 1906 when United States Federal Government began selling the federally owned lands (drawn into their hands by Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 by breaching treaties) for agricultural development on one hand while the Bureau of Reclamation proposed the building of several dams across Klamath river to facilitate proper irrigation for homesteads. This allocation of water resources for agricultural purposes, along with the construction of dams for development contaminated the river and its aquatic habitat in general and salmon in particular. Such was the case that by the mid-1990s, the Klamath Coho Salmon featured under the Endangered Species Act. Things turned worse when drought hit eastern Oregon and water from the Klamath River was redirected for the economic survival of farmers. With low levels of water and a higher temperature, September 2002 became a reality. Thirty-four thousand Coho and chinook salmon corpses lay floating along the riverbank (May, 2014, 3-5).

III. METHODOLOGY - UNDERSTANDING SALMON IS EVERYTHING

Salmon is Everything is a product of a community university collaboration called the Klamath Theatre Project led by Theresa May as a native response to the unprecedented salmon kills of 2002. May was the assistant professor at Humboldt State University, Oregon almost 40 kms south to the mouth of Klamath. As her preoccupation of research in theatre and environmental issues, she was invited to "emergency meeting of scientists, fish and wildlife officials, and water policy folks" (May, 2011). In an article for Oregon University's Journal titled *Research Matters*, she jots down two prominent things that led her to conceptualise the project. She writes that the loss of Klamath's traditional ways of living was not the topic of the discussion, instead

"I noticed two things at the meeting that stayed with me for weeks that followed : 1) the room was electric with antagonisms, perceptible even through the veil of academic presentations; 2) the back of the room was crowded with people from the tribal communities, for whom the catastrophe was not only economically measurable, but profoundly painful... The several elders at the back of the room were silent in even as the policy wonks and government officials presented theories about the causes of fish kills and suggested potential for watershed management" (May, 2011)

The Klamath Theatre Project is an answer to 'what can theatre do', an artistic representation of vital needs and opinions of often silenced communities. In the words of Cohen, "Community based theatre derives its existence from the ability and willingness to reflect on the issues that are essential for life, awareness and identity of a specific community." (May 2011). Resonating the same idea, *Salmon is Everything* was developed over a period of two years through interviews and multifarious discussions with the members of the Klamath tribe, biologists, ranchers, farmers to bring in an inclusive perspective of the event. A reflective approach was taken in conceiving the project by carrying out creative writing sessions to reading out scripts in community meetings in order to ensure that all the voices are equally heard. For instance, the title *Salmon is Everything* was adapted by an elder tribal member's description of salmon's importance to the community. (May 2011)

For the Indigenes, the fish kills were not only an environmental or ecological issue but a cultural and spiritual crisis. Salmon is central to life of Klamath river tribes- Yurok, Hupa and Karuk. The relationship between Salmon to the indigenous communities is nuanced and multi-layered. It sustains their livelihood, forms a source of economy, is a significant part in their annual spiritual ceremonies. Julie, a Yurok Karuk character in the play elucidates that "salmon are our relative... it is a relationship created from thousands of years of co-existence" (May, 2014, 34). Will, Julie's husband, a Yurok Karuk Native fisherman also exemplifies the reciprocity of native traditions, "Salmon is everything, Salmon is the centre of our world, our brothers" (May, 2014, 33). The repeated renditions of "Salmon is family", "Salmon was my daughter's first food" in scene one and three brings in the spiritual connotations of salmon to the indigenes of Klamath watershed.

The play also helps in translating the sanctity of Salmon to the Klamath people particularly through scene six, when Julie addresses Kate, non-native biology graduate, "for my family, if the Salmon don't survive my grandmother will die of a broken spirit" (May, 2014, 44). This heightens an understanding about the multifold meanings of salmon to the lives of indigenous populace across Klamath. The dialogic performance also brings forth non-Native inability to conceive this idea of kinship between salmon and man. Julie narrates the comments of her Anglo classmate regarding salmon extinction, "if there are no more Salmon, just go to McDonald's!" (May, 2014, 34). This underscores the insensitivity within the Anglo community in absorbing native cultures and also speaks volumes about the ineptitude to accept Traditional Ecological Knowledge with open hearts and minds. We also get to seep through Western perception of protecting nature as external force and not an internalised process of living when Julie proclaims these in a heated debate with Kate, "if the Salmon goes extinct, you'll find some other species to save" (May, 2014, 44). Theresa May's attempt to combine these native stories into the play creates a forum to understand native way of life and also feel why salmon kills had an unfathomable impact on them. Suzanne M Burcell, in "A Call to Action: We have to do something" talks of the haunting "smell" of rotting fish, the smell that is impossible to escape. She elicits that she cannot eat because food reminds her of rotting salmon on the river banks which represent her people's wasted food (May, 2014, 16).

IV. COMMUNITY THEATRE- A MULTIVOCAL EXPERIENCE

Salmon is everything, as a community-based theatre also comes forth as multivocal and brings to the table the perspective of both native and non-native, the ones directly or indirectly affected by the unprecedented fish kills. The best expression of multiple stories is portrayed in the town hall scene, where each one, native, non-native, the salmon people, the ranchers, news reporter, the politician, fisherwoman engages in a monologue and puts forward their stories. While salmon kills are the effect, the root cause of it is allocation of water by the federal government. Water, a vital resource for survival plays different role in different lives. The natives Rose and Will questions "how much water does it take to protect fish?" (May, 2014, 61). However, Tim a rancher feels that "water is overallocated" (May, 2014, 62) and the politician wants to strike a middle ground by working in collaboration with the natives and ranchers to seek a plausible solution. The fisherwoman, on the other hand with "the whole coastline closed" (May, 2014, 63) has lost her source of economic subsistence and the white-water guide had to close down rafting due to low water levels. This scene stands out in the entire play, as, it performs the function of a Native theatre, combining different voices and variegated perspective. The methodology of Theresa May's community theatre in general and the town hall scene in particular is deeply entrenched in George Session's anthology *Deep Ecology for the 21st century*.

"Deep Ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only towards all members of the ecosphere but even towards all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. Thus, this attitude is intended to extend, for example to such entities (or forms) such as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social systems considered in

their own right." (Session, 1995, 21-22) The play through its effective portrayal of Salmon, the community members, farmers, ranchers, biologists, policy makers dives into spaces of Deep Ecology to proclaim the idea that man is only an ingredient of the ecosphere and not the whole of it. Hence, it imperatively brings forth an eco-conscious attitude towards all things living and puts into perspective humankind's cause-effect relationship to nature.

V. OBSERVATION

In hindsight, Theresa May ties up threads of different voices to help us seep into a nuanced analysis of Salmon kills, the effect caused by the problem of water allocation. Through the medium of community-based theatre, she centres her narrative in Klamath basin to express real time concerns. But, the question remains, does this narrative embedded in the form of a community theatre provide a solution to the issue? What power do these performance-based research hold? In *Salmon is Everything*, Theresa May ends it on a rather optimistic note when Tim, along with other ranchers agree to turn off their water pump when "the first salmon comes" (May, 2014, 86) in order to protect the species from further kills. Well, does this solve the problems in the river basin? In reality, the ranchers would probably do it for a day or two and then turn oblivious to it. So, how does a community-based theatre serve? The paper looks at both sides of the argument. Eugene van Erven identifies community theatre as "moving, pertinent, powerful, and effective in strengthening the groups of people it caters to" (Erven, 2001, ix). Theresa May treads on similar lines in creating *Salmon is Everything* as she engages in a movement, a movement that shift feelings of the audience. It enables each one to change the position of their connection to the events and look at it through new windows. To the audience in the words of Theresa May, "The performing arts do not merely illuminate the facts in new ways, rather; these forms represent possible interrogations that lead to new knowledge. In theatre, empathy is both a methodology and a way of knowing. The empathy which may emerge from participating in or witnessing a community based performance can lead to deeper, more complex understandings, form new relationships across difference, and lay the groundwork for socially responsible action" (May, 2011). By participating in or witnessing a performance based research, people are engaging in reality, "to mark and call attention to the grief experienced by the members of Lower Klamath tribal communities, and to illuminate the current and ongoing debates about dam removal, species preservation, Indigenous rights and sustainable use of resources" (May 2011). In an interview with Snyder, a Kickapoo tribal member; also, a doctoral student in the Oregon State University throws light on how participating in a performance-based research helped him understand the community dialogue better. He took part in the play reading of "Salmon is Everything" as one of the lead characters in conjunction with an extra credit assignment for the course Native Theatre. He says, "You can't understand the Native theatre unless you were there- you can't even feel it. You can't describe it. I don't have the words right now.

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You are different after you are done, after you have experienced it.” (Rosales, 2018) Snyder whose tribe doesn't have a prominent connection with the fish, unlike the Klamath, Yurok or the Hoopa speaks volumes about how collaborating on a community cause is a medium to understand better and heal deeper. “I get it. I get it that you are nothing without the fish [salmon], but why I get it is because of things like the play.” He adds, “You feel Native people in a story like this and you can't get that any other way ... You have to feel us because we don't get listened to” (Rosales, 2018) Snyder's point of view intertwined with the ideology of Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal enunciates that main objective of Theatre of the Oppressed is to change people - spectators, passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon -into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action (Boal, 1985) In addition to transmuting feeling, community theatre also works as a medium to transfer knowledge about a particular community more effectively. A study of women's perceptions about widowhood was propagated through performance in *Translating Research Findings into Community Based Theatre: More than a Dead Man's Wife*. The researchers choose to disseminate their research findings using theatre; they argued “it has been reported that theatre and storytelling has been used as a means of representing life through entertainment, education and communication for many years and in many community settings” (Fledman, Dickins, Hopgood, 2013).

VI. RESULTS

Henceforth, through the module of community theatre, an authentic community dialogue without mainstream dominant voice is initiated, inherent with emotions of the affected individuals, thus making it adhere to the idea of personal is political. This community dialogue stands significantly different from the initial meeting that Theresa May was invited to, as former encourages people to listen to other's stories. In one of the scripts reading meetings with the Klamath tribe, Theresa May notes the elder and younger members state in unison, “This is the only way we are going to solve these issues, by listening to one another's stories; not through governments and lawyers, but through people” (May, 2011). In addition to this, she writes , “Over time, a play changes position, moving from the documentation of current events to a record of collective memory, but when the play is re-staged, it allows the past to live in and participate in the critical present” (May, 2011). This is particularly true as May's collaborative effort found a place among the heated debates and politics of water allocation in the Klamath watershed. By steering collective memory, it has engaged in conversations of paramount significance on the political front in removal of dams, thereby recalibrating the idea that “At the heart of the community based theatre is the knowledge that the land holds stories, and like layers of sediment, these stories deserve to be told not only to know our local and regional histories, but also to allow the past to participate in our decisions about the future” (May, 2011).

While the positive impacts of community theatre stand true to itself, we cannot neglect the other side of the spectrum. Although it provides social awareness, transports general community voices, we are not ultimately sure whether all the voices are heard. It is indispensable that we analyse such spaces with objectivity and understand where the importance

is placed. Do these voices come from privileged native spaces? While crafting a performance-based research on the indigenous communities, it is critical to note that they do not reinforce power structures, contrary to the native thought. Instead of unravelling silences, it should not perpetuate privilege within the community.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the case of *Salmon is Everything*, Theresa May has crafted with diligence a variety of voices - both native and non- native to avoid privileged spaces within the Klamath Theatre Project. While one cannot agree that May through her methodology does provide an immediate solution to the problem of fish kills, it definitely turns head into the dispute. Perhaps, theatre does not lead to a journalistic approach of problem solving, it definitely steps back from lashing each other and view things differently. We cannot turn our heads the fact that native theatre unleashes past voices and memories to imprint resistance thereby securing an Indigenous future. In the words of Sean Teuton, “such indigenous revivals must be viewed as expressions of futurity, operating in resistance to those assumptions that consign Native American people and lifeways to the past” (Teuton, 2018, 56). Through the diverse voices of Klamath Theatre Project, Theresa May envisions hope, a revitalization of Klamath life and living - the people who were fed with the Vanishing myth narrative, an idea that the future doesn't include them. *Salmon is Everything* gives the natives, a power, a capacity to assert their past, secure their future and in this process, heal. Once again, Native theatre moving from aesthetics to the cause reinstates the idea that “stories can build relationships, crack long standing, open new possibilities and reshape the social, political and ecological landscapes of our lives” (May 2011). These are “stories worth telling, bodies of knowledge worth documenting, and issues that are part of Oregon's history and future.

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