



Review of Honouring the Strength of Indian Women: Plays, Stories, Poetry, by Vera Manuel/Kulilu Pa#ki, Butterfly Woman, edited by Michelle Coupal, Deanna Reder, Joanne Arnott, and Emale A. Manuel (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019) 391 pp. paper. # 5 First Voices, First Texts Series.

Vera Manuel (1948-2010) was an Ktunaxa-Secwepemc writer at the forefront of Residential School writing who did tremendous work as a dramatherapist and healer. Emaleene A. Manuel (also Ktunaxa-Secwepemc) worked with her sister, Vera, in Storyteller Theatre. In 2018, she completed her Masters of Education at the University of British Columbia.

Vera Manuel lived in Vancouver, studying history, Indigenous culture, and writing at the University of British Columbia, and also writing at Langara Public College, where she apprenticed. She was a featured poet at World Poetry venues and on their radio program. In 2006, Manuel was awarded

World Poetry Lifetime Achievement Recognition. She was an Artist-in-Residence for Aboriginal Media Lab and part of a "Strong Words" Conference in Vancouver, in 2008.

"Song of the Circle" was her first play and designed for the annual Union of B.C. Indian Chief's Conference in 1989. It is a story about abuse and healing, spiritual growth, though "We never told anyone" the secret. In part, she writes about St. Mary's Residential Boarding School, in Cranbrook, B.C. There was rampant sexual abuse, violence and isolation, all emblems of colonialism and genocide, missing aboriginal women.

Manuel manifested the idea of Story-Truth-Telling or "Akaminski" (the Krunaxa word for "telling the whole story"), so evident in "Strength of Indian Women", the only previously published play. The raw suffering came from Manuel's own family but prepared for the 1991 "Women in View" Festival Theatre, in Vancouver. It was first staged at the Firehall Theatre, on the downtown eastside, and performed by a cast of Indigenous women. The second annual Women's Memorial March was on Valentine's Day, in 1992. "Echoes of Our Mothers' Past", about how family violence affects generations, reveals: "I am a survivor" and "I am a spiritual warrior". "Every Warrior's Song" has characters who come to life and the final scene is about death.

This anthology contains four short stories, three of which were previously unpublished. In "That Grey Building", a boarded-up old residential school looks like a prison, where many children died, but not before they saw too much. Mary grieves for her cousin who has died ("Theresa") at the hands of Sister Luke, the strange English words, the abuse. Children were sent home when dead or nearly dead and their families were helpless. In "The Letter" she was one of the first Indian children from the reserve to board at the white school, in order to learn how to be integrated. Her father decided against sending her to the Indian school, in Kamloops. It is his alcoholism which spurs family separation and her escape. The short story "The Abyss" was first published in *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*, edited by Linda Jaine (Saskatoon: University Extension Press, Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, 1933). This story was the origin of the play "Strength of Indian Women" and how the residential school system was destructive. Many lost childhoods and scarred adulthoods were due to incest and sexual abuse. Manuel offers: "Thank you for giving me a place to let this story go."

The second section focuses on her poetry. Her sister Emalene A. Manuel favours two poems: "When My Sister & I Dance" for the reality Vera captured, and "When I first Came To Know Myself", an extension or parallel of the "Traditional Introduction to Self", by her sister Emalene Manuel (in the "Introduction"). Secrets emerge ("Woman Without A Tongue") whisper about childhood demons ("Ghosts & Predators"), of that "crazy life" ("L.A. Obsession Song") and disaffected lifestyle ("Addictions"). There are too many secrets ("Lies") and pain ("Life Abuse of Girls"). She harbours hope ("The Woman I Could Be"), despite "Fools", and pervasive "Loneliness". This is an intergenerational issue: "Abused Mothers, Wounded Fathers". Her father's suffering ("Hunger") a trigger: "That ugly, grey building" ("The Catholic Church"), sexual abuse ("Deadly Legacy"). This "Keeping Secrets" endures, until "Forgiveness", a learning curve. Self-esteem is celebrated in a centre-justified poem, ("The Girl Who Could Catch Fish With Her Hands") due to faith. The foster children are remembered, with a simple refrain ("Two Brothers"). Massacres breed helplessness ("La Güerra" is a Spanish for war or slang for a blonde white-skinned person). The Canadian Japanese Powell Street Festival is a venue for a "Drunk Indian/*Indian drunk*", more evidence of social alienation ("Keepers in the Dark").

Parental cautionary tales abound ("Inheritance"). Qu'appelle Valley and secrets escape ("For the Child Who Knew"), despite the alarmum "Never Ever Tell". Settlers displaced her ancestors ("Ottawa") and "Brown-skinned people were enslaved" ("The Truth About Colonization"), since "history" only began in 1492, closely followed by resistance. In a poem, ironically titled "Justice", she explores cultural oppression, forced assimilation, and genocide. In "Beric", she embraces words, letters, and light. The centre-justified "Christmas Inside of Me" extols the positive message of this Christian holy day. The sun makes love ("Spring Fever") with her and she poses as a bear. In "Megcenetkwe", she alludes to a tragic traffic accident. A father and his infant daughter "Megcenetkwe" passed on to the Spirit World. His wife and their other daughter miraculously survived. "Dying" is a long prose poem, in which "mountain climbing" is a trope or mantra, the angel appears in the sick room, with a prayer. The poetry aptly concludes, "There are no more thoughts of dying, only living a longer life and I accept that." "Afterwords" contains black-and-white photographs of friends and family members, all of which serve to depict domestic scenes, as well as Catholic residential schools. Michelle Coupal, in "Narrative Acts of Truth and

Reconciliation: Teaching the Healing Plays of Vera Manuel", applies her knowledge and experience to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. Coupal advocates for the pedagogical use of Manuel's plays, written between the 1980s and 1990s. The losses of indigenous culture, language, and separation of family members were due to forced efforts at European assimilation. The coined term "dramatherapy" refers to a response to "*decolonize theatre*". The 2012 TRC document "*They Came for the Children*" evokes this intergenerational oppression. Coupal points out how one of the plays, *Journey Through the Past to the Future*, ends with the restoration of lost language and "Women's Warrior Song", to honour Indigenous women.

In "Every Warrior's Song", self-harm leads to self-healing. Coupal is an indigenous scholar, who draws on Elder knowledge through research for storytelling and encourages non-indigenous teachers to do the same. She recounts a theatre history of performances as well as an analysis of the photographs, which have become part of the record, such as the fictionalized St. Ignatius Residential School. This is in the short story "The Abyss", with the actual St. Eugene Residential School in the play *Strength of Indian Women*.

Deanna Reder, in "Embedded Teachings: Vera Manuel's Recovered Short Stories", regards Manuel's work as "path-breaking" because she was one of the first to find, in aboriginal trauma, a path of healing. She came from a prominent First Nations' family, she and her siblings are high profile activists, educators, and cultural workers. Yet, as a family and a nation, they had suffered abuse by colonial institutions. Manuel was unable to complete her novel during her lifetime.

Joanne Arnott, in "Through Poetry a Community is Brought Together": Vera Manuel's Poetry, Poetry Activism, and Poetics", reviews the locations, oral tradition, and personal touches of her work. Manuel performed "The Catholic Church", one of her poems, at the launch of *Rocksalt: An Anthology of Contemporary BC Poetry* (Saltspring Island, B.C.: Mother Tongue Press, 2008). Her artistic statement "Where Poetry Comes From" was first published in this anthology. She knew Maria Campbell, born in 1940, whom her father invited to teach in their community, in the 1970s, and served on a conference panel with Campbell, author of *Halfbreed* (1973) and Lee Maracle, born 1950. Arnott strives to associate Manuel's paper "Words that Move & Tell Truths" with other conference participants, as well as the

legacy of Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), Chief Dan George (1899-1981), and George Clutesi (1905-1988). The Aboriginal Writers' Collective West Coast was established. Manuel published in *Salish Seas: An Anthology of Text + Image* (Aboriginal Writers Collective). Arnott hosted Storytellersplayspace online, to which Manuel and other Indigenous women writers contributed. A blog, *Versa Manuel Theatre*, was initiated after her death.

The "Appendix" contains "Indians and Residential School: A Study of the Breakdown of a Culture", an essay by Manuel which she submitted for a fourth-year history class. She was an undergraduate student, in 1987. Her list of "Works Cited" is wide-ranging and impressive, and, more than a few, obviously wrought from her own family's demons. One of her sources is Marceline Paul, Kootenay Elder, Drug and Alcohol Councillor, Bonaparte Indian Band, 1987. Another was John Munro, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, *Indian Conditions: A Survey* (Ottawa: Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1980) and others of the same ilk (Department of Indian Affairs, *Annual Reports*, 1885, 1895, 1900-01, 1902-03, [Duncan] Campbell Scott was quoted). Another was Millie Poplar, "Assimilation Through Education", Union of British Columbian Indian Chiefs to educate people on Master Tuition Agreement. These texts she made part of her creative vision and the journey on which First Nations peoples have embarked. The personal experiences, in "And Then We Prayed Again: Carrier Women, Colonialism, and Mission Schools" by Jo-Anne Fiske (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1981) could have inspired her to recount those of her own family members. She does allude to George Manuel, Shuswap leader and Elder, who had published with Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1974), Marceline Paul, Mary Mitchell, Kootenay Elder. How the missionaries and the government sought to evangelize and assimilate was framed by Celia Vayro, in "Invasion and Resistance Native Perspective of the Kamloops Indian Residential School" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1968) must have been immediately relevant. So too, Margaret Whitehood, *The Cariboo Mission: A History of the Oblates* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1981).

This documented approach includes some excerpts from the "Department of Indian Affairs Sessional Paper on the Kootenay Industrial School in Cranbrook, B.C. 1900-1" is chilling. While Manuel's ancestry is Secwepemc and Ktunaxa, it was her Ktunaxa mother Micheline Paul who attended St. Eugene residential school in Cranbrook, B.C. (and Mary Paul,

Vera's grandmother, was Micheline's mother). No doubt she offers an original version of her "Traditional Introduction of Self" and she achieved a Master of Education thesis "Story-Truth-Telling", before her untimely death. Joanne Arnott (Métis/Mixed Blood), writer, editor, and arts activist, received the League of Canadian Poets' Gerald Lampert Award for first book and Vancouver Mayor's Arts Award for Literary Arts. Michelle Coupal (Bonnechere Algonquin First Nation) is Canada Research Chair in Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Literatures, and Associate Professor at the University of Regina. Deanna Reder (Métis), Associate Professor in First Nations Studies and English at Simon Fraser University, is a lead on "The People and the Text: Indigenous Writing in Northern North America up to 1992."

Anne Burke