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frames of mind:

Beyond Eden and *The Edward Curtis Project*

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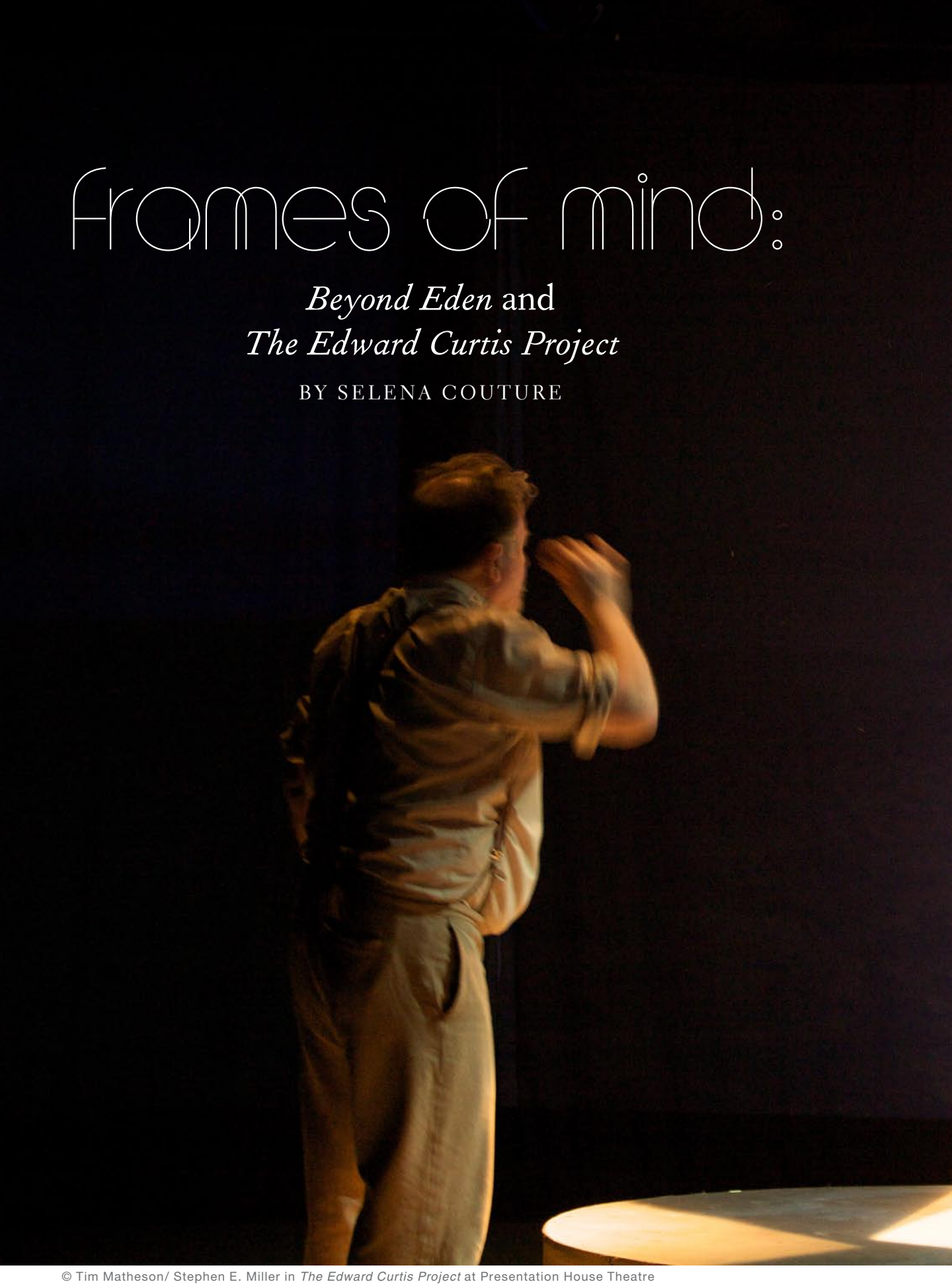
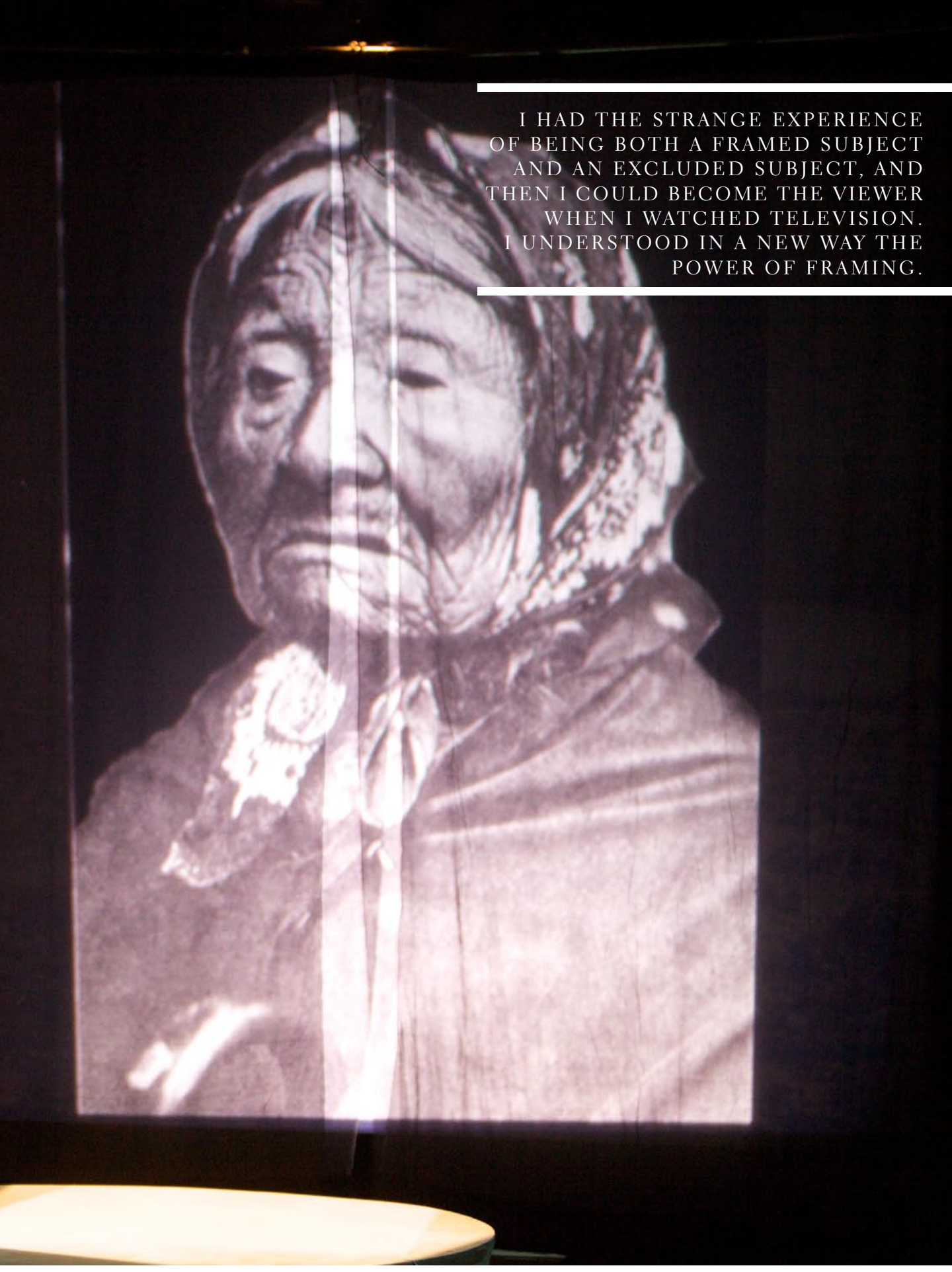


© Tim Matheson/ Stephen E. Miller in *The Edward Curtis Project* at Presentation House Theatre



I HAD THE STRANGE EXPERIENCE OF BEING BOTH A FRAMED SUBJECT AND AN EXCLUDED SUBJECT, AND THEN I COULD BECOME THE VIEWER WHEN I WATCHED TELEVISION. I UNDERSTOOD IN A NEW WAY THE POWER OF FRAMING.

© David Cooper/ John Mann & Tom Jackson in *Beyond Eden* at the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre

The televised nationalistic fervor that gripped Vancouver during the 2010 Olympics was difficult to deal with if you had any problems with rabid flag-waving, corporate greed, and the mismanagement of public funds. At times this winter, I felt like I was walking through a television studio instead of my city and neighbourhood. Sometimes I was inside the squeaky clean frame created by the television camera, such as at the Aboriginal Pavilion presented by the Four Host First Nations; at other times, I was in places the corporate cameras failed to frame, like the Olympic Tent Village in the Downtown Eastside, organized as a protest against the homelessness and displacement caused by the Olympics (Walia). I had the strange experience of being both a framed subject and an excluded subject, and then I could become the viewer when I watched television. I understood in a new way the power of framing.

While I contended with these thoughts, I saw premieres of two Canadian plays (both part of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad) dealing with the legacy of colonial efforts to preserve and frame Aboriginal culture: Bruce Ruddell's *Beyond Eden* at the Vancouver Playhouse and Marie Clements' *The Edward Curtis Project* at North Vancouver's Presentation House.

But these productions were themselves contained in a frame: that of the Cultural Olympiad funded by the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC). Billed as supporting culture as the third pillar of the Olympic values (sport and environment being the first two), the Cultural Olympiad was a $20 million series of three festivals that started in 2008 and culminated in a sixty-day, 650-event extravaganza with an estimated attendance of 2.5 million during the Winter Olympic and Paralympic games (Griffin). Being part of the Olympiad meant that your event had some funding and was listed in the guidebook distributed throughout the Lower Mainland and online. There was some controversy when VANOC insisted that all artists involved in the Cultural Olympiad sign a contract stating they would "refrain from making any negative or derogatory remarks about the Games and its sponsors" (Chong). This is just one overt example of the power of how those with capital control the frames of containment.

The Playhouse's production of *Beyond Eden* had the potential to be a fascinating echo of its 1967 Canadian Centennial commissioned production of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. On the night of the performance, the capacity crowd was told to stand and welcome BC's first Aboriginal Lieutenant Governor and his wife, Steven and Gwen Point, as they entered the theatre and took their seats. The audience was then welcomed, as is the custom in most gatherings that are aware of the complicated legacy of BC colonialism, by members of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Tsleil-Waututh (Burrard) First Nations to their unceded territory.

The immediate contrast between *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*'s scathing condemnation of the treatment of Aboriginal people with this celebratory event forty-three years later, "welcoming the world" to BC, was marked. Care was taken to support and frame the performance with an intercultural display of syncretic power—the physical presence of Lt. Gov. Point representing both his people (Skowkale of the Stó:lo Nation) and the Queen, together with the official welcome from two members of the Four Host First Nations. These events created a tone of co-operation and prepared the audience to view a mixing of performance styles: a 1950s musical combined with Haida singing, dance, and costumes.

Beyond Eden is based on a significant event in BC/Canadian/Aboriginal culture: the 1957 expedition to retrieve the totem poles at Ninstints on Haida Gwaii by UBC anthropologist Wilson Duff and the young photographer/journalist—but not yet famous artist—

Bill Reid (Haida). Writer and compose Bruce Ruddell aimed to re-paint the event, giving consideration both to the colonizing forces and to the resistance in order to show the positive and negative legacy of the taking of the poles. The goal to create a multifaceted understanding was supported by the presence of a racially diverse cast and crew: the musical was co-produced by Theatre Calgary and the Vancouver Playhouse; it featured John Mann (lead singer of *Spirit of the West*) as anthropologist Wilson Duff (called Lewis Wilson in the play) and Tom Jackson as the Haida Watchman. I was curious how the creative team would be able to express the thematic subtleties and still give a cohesive performance.

At the heart of the ethical dilemma in *Beyond Eden* is the drive to preserve a culture perceived as vanishing. Ruddell's re-construction of a BC legend attempts to broaden understanding by recreating a sense of physical wonder. The set was a tilted ramp, which represented in turn a dock in Vancouver, a storm-tossed ship, and the Ninstints totem site. The off-kilter levels were an effective visual metaphor for a contemporary view of this unbalanced historical period, when the power differentials between colonizer and colonized were still so severe.

The physical set was enhanced by the lighting design, which included projections used to magically evoke the carving and painting of the tree trunks as they became totem poles, and then to show how the glowing totem poles were extinguished as they were finally taken down. These technologically precise effects were impressive, providing a small replica of the wonder one feels at seeing a beautifully carved totem pole, as well as the sense of loss when it is uprooted or decays.

The performance also represented the unbalanced power relations of 1957 in British Columbia—first in the natural world through the storm the expedition weathered in Hecate Strait and then in the human world through anthropologist Lewis Wilson's mental turmoil. Wilson loses his mind because of the ethical dilemma of whether to preserve the poles for anthropological study or to follow the warnings of the Watchman and the Haida spirits to leave them in place at Ninstints where they honour the dead.

Max Tomson, the Haida journalist played by Cameron MacDuffee, is the character who ultimately brings down the poles—deciding to take them to the city so that he can learn from them and reclaim the Haida art of carving. The extinguishing of the poles was a moment of defeat and sorrow. While their preservation by the team of anthropologists led to a revitalization of Haida art and the beginning of Bill Reid's career, it also marked an uprooting from place and a reification of the "traditional" art of the Pacific Northwest. These "artifacts," mass manufactured in factories in China, can now be purchased in Canadian airport gift shops. In *Beyond Eden*, Ruddell displays this story, but does not comment on the decisions made and their consequences. The play is a re/presentation of actions for us to admire and/or despise.

perhaps THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM IS THE DESIRE, ARISING OUT OF AN ASPIRATION TOWARDS RECONCILIATION, TO CREATE A HYBRID FORM—A FORM THAT IN THE END LACKS ITS OWN THEMATIC INTEGRITY.

This seeming neutrality is perhaps part of an effort at reconciliation, but it is weakened by some of the judgments and choices made to frame and tell a story. Ultimately, the play did not satisfy because of some basic structural, generic and stylistic decisions. Written in the style of a 1950s romantic musical, the play's main character is the anthropologist Wilson, and much of the plot is dedicated to his unhappy relationship with his wife and their son. We are supposed to care about Wilson and his wife finding happiness, but given the rest of the production's emphasis on the expedition, their relationship should be made secondary.

© David Cooper/
Jennifer Lines, Andrew Kushnir,
John Mann & Cameron MacDuffee
in *Beyond Eden*

Maybe Ruddell, working in an intercultural creative relationship with First Nations people and organizations, felt he should focus on this side of the story. *Beyond Eden* is an attempt at restitution—to revisit characters and know them better in order to forgive and then establish a respectful relationship. Perhaps Ruddell is using the structure of a dysfunctional family and its members' attempts to reconcile as a metaphor for post-colonial relations in BC.

However, if this is the intention, the play falls short of achieving it. The characters are too specific to be generalized, there is too little development to make the audience really care for them, and as they are a white nuclear family, they cannot approach the complexity of intercultural relations within BC's "extended family." Further, the focus on Lewis Wilson and his family takes the attention away from the journalist Max Tomson's character development. Some of his personal struggle is revealed through his actions and songs, but his connection to other characters is limited. Perhaps the root of the problem is the desire, arising out of an aspiration towards reconciliation, to create a hybrid form—a form that in the end lacks its own thematic integrity. Fundamentally, the play lacks an internal point of view to give it coherent meaning.

Three days after the opening of *Beyond Eden*, I went to the much-anticipated performance of Métis/Dene playwright Marie Clements' new work, *The Edward Curtis Project*. The production was part of Vancouver's PuSH Festival, whose aim, stated in their program, was to explore new forms of staging, storytelling, and combining of disciplines. The performance included an installation of photojournalist Rita Leistner's work in the gallery attached to the theatre.

Clements' play and Leistner's photos were concurrently developed to examine the work of Edward Curtis (1868-1952), the well-known photographer and self-styled ethnographer of the "North American Indian." Curtis was responsible for "one of the most significant and controversial representations of traditional American Indian culture ever produced"—the twenty-volume work *The North American Indian (1907-1930)* ("Introduction.").

Travelling with Clements to Aboriginal communities throughout Canada and the US, Leistner's work was created as a response to Curtis' practice of posing his subjects with regalia from his own collection to create authenticity. In Leistner's photo diptychs of contemporary Aboriginal people from many communities, she allowed the subjects to frame themselves; as Leistner explains in her artistic statement distributed at the gallery, "The diptych series [...] became a central scheme of *The Edward Curtis Project*—an exploration of past and present, traditional and modern, as presented by the subjects themselves"(2).

In many of Leistner's diptychs, the first part of the portraits are of people in modern clothing and the second of people in the same pose but wearing traditional clothing. Her photos are an artistic display of the surviving and vibrant people Curtis had framed as "vanishing," while he created monovalent single images that effectively erased the present in favour of romantically celebrating the past. As Gerald Vizenor explains, "Edward Curtis created pictorialist images of natives, but most of the interpretations are ethnographic." His photos aided the construction of the scientific body of knowledge called ethnology, which Vizenor describes as the "sacred association of the studies of native cultures." But the photos were really visual analogies which were then interpreted by "linguistic authority."

Leistner's photographs and Clements' play are connected through the recognition that photographic documentation is seductive in its apparent truth-telling, but that it is always a process of choosing what to include in the frame and what to exclude from it. By presenting the photo installation and theatrical performance at the same time—one working in Curtis' medium but consciously foregrounding the framing of a subject and the other bringing a subject to life to interact with Curtis—the audience is given access to multiple points of view and possible truths.

Clements' play is partially based on the tragic freezing deaths of two young girls in January 2008 on Saskatchewan's Yellow Quill Reserve: in the middle of the night during a snowstorm, Christopher Pauchay left his home while under the influence of alcohol with his two daughters, 15-month-old Santana and 3-year-old Kaydance. He was found at 5 a.m. and taken to the hospital; the children were found dead after an extensive two-day search (Friesen). The play has a small cast of four actors playing eight characters.

The main character, Angeline, a Dene/Russian-Canadian journalist, is focused on finding meaning in life after taking part in the search for the lost children. Angeline is struggling with grief and doubt about her ability as a journalist to represent some truth about Aboriginal people. The responsibility of the journalistic frame has become too much for her. The complicated nature of contemporary Aboriginal life—its tragedies, triumphs, and even banality—is more than she feels she can represent. As she attempts to heal, she encounters a physical incarnation of the photographer Edward Curtis. Through Angeline's interaction with the character of Edward Curtis on stage, it becomes clear that while Clements respects him as an artist, she recognizes that his work has helped to construct the mythology of the vanishing Indian—through the freezing of cultural heritage by photo documentation, through the objectification of living subjects.

This is where Clements' power as a poet becomes evident—the frozen children and Angeline's state of suspended animation represent the same kind of cultural freezing that occurred when Curtis published

THIS IS WHERE CLEMENTS' POWER AS A POET BECOMES EVIDENT—THE FROZEN CHILDREN AND ANGELINE'S STATE OF SUSPENDED ANIMATION REPRESENT THE SAME KIND OF CULTURAL FREEZING THAT OCCURRED WHEN CURTIS PUBLISHED HIS PHOTOS.

his photos: something was preserved but at the expense of recognizing that cultural meaning evolves. His work gives credence to the idea that there is a "traditional" culture whereby things are done in the correct way and that everything since that time is in a state of decline on its way to vanishing. This is the state of mind that Angeline must fight against: she has to recognize that despite the wretched deaths of the children there is still life and hope.

Like *Beyond Eden*, the production of *The Edward Curtis Project* was a hybrid form whose installation and emphasis was on the perception of the visual. However, unlike Ruddell's play, Clements' provided a coherent theatrical experience. The stage was a black platform framed by scrim on all sides—including the front, which was pulled back after the first scene. Words and photos of the contemporary characters as well as Curtis' photographs were projected on these surfaces. This staging helped to establish the intellectual examination of Curtis' work and Clements' play.

Curtis "framed" or staged the photos he took; he then "framed" them as ethnographic studies even though they were not accurate. The photos have power because of his skill as an artist, but that power was abused—first by Curtis seeking fame and influence and second by colonial society[1] seeking a way to frame the "Indian problem"; by preserving a romanticized past, they would thereby erase the problematic and complex living people.

Clements engages with the fallout of the concept of a frozen "traditional" culture using the metaphor of the frame in multiple ways. Angeline is enclosed in her frame: frozen by depression, she lies on her bed in emotional pain she is not able to acknowledge. Yet she is both frozen and active: she and Curtis share stories, and he cares for her, making her food and telling her about his life. In the conclusion of the play, she challenges him to take a picture of the vanishing of the frozen children.

Angeline's hybridity as a person of Dene and Russian heritage is also enacted by this duality—she is both subject and object in the act of viewing. Playing Angeline, Tamara Podemski's riveting physicality served to emphasize that she is a living subject, not just an image. Her embodiment of the journalist's emotional wounds through precise dance-like movement, the framing of her body through music, light, and the set design all emphasized the importance of her "live-ness."

The play opened with Angeline lying on her side, her hand illuminated by a tightly focused light. The hand—what it can and cannot do—served as a visual metaphor for the entire production, articulating the artist's dilemma as she asks: What will the effects and consequences be of the judgments I make about how to frame the story I want to tell? When Angeline revealed her horrific experience of finding the dead children, I didn't feel like an observer: I felt like I was momentarily in her world, inside her frame. This was not only an experience of connection but also of the fear of possibly remaining as if forever in this traumatic space.

Clements is generous and hard on Curtis at the same time; she is struggling with the beauty of Curtis' work, which resonates despite its ultimate function. Clements' concern is with the ethical implications of irresponsibly collecting cultural artifacts—as Curtis did through his photography—and with the responsibilities of an artist. She shows how it is possible to love and hate while trying to survive and create, as both Angeline and Curtis do. Curtis' drive to document what he considered "the vanishing race" finds its parallel in Angeline's fight against personally vanishing. Through her physical and emotional connections with her partner and sister, neither of whom give up on her, she is held back from personal extinction through her mental illness. *The Edward Curtis Project* seems to me a excellent example of what Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles describe in their essay "Creation Story Begins Again": "We need, then, to have hope *with the wounds showing*. What makes it moving, and makes it matter, and makes it hit the body, is the *courage* to have that hope while showing those wounds" (3, italics original).

On February 23, as the city of Vancouver was submerged in celebrations of the Winter Olympics, I stood on the sidewalk in front of my neighbourhood community centre. It wasn't raining, although it was dark, damp and windy as February often is in Vancouver. I was standing beside a sign for a "pay-what-you-can" Urban All-Nation Revue that was part of the ninth annual Talking Stick Festival put on by Margo Kane's Full Circle First Nations Performance. I had volunteered to help with the event, which eventually led to my standing outside on the sidewalk, trying to direct patrons to the difficult-to-find venue and encourage people to come.

The evening's schedule was a rich buffet, including local hip-hop artists Ostwelve and First Ladies Crew, Edmonton spoken-word poet Anna Marie Sewell, and contemporary dance by Daina Ashbee (*Talking Stick Festival 2010*). My neighbourhood is a particularly culturally vibrant and diverse place, where the arts and performance are usually well supported, but that night only four people attended the show. I was both frustrated at the lack of attention the artists received and glad that the corporatizing Olympic media was not present to warp the event through its interpretations and framing.

Although more media gives momentary attention and possible monetary benefit, the consequences of mis-framed events are not worth it. That evening of the Talking Stick Festival, which has been staging contemporary Aboriginal performances since 2001, had little audience to engage with, but the festival and that

night's performances also helped to hearten me, along with some of the work done for *Beyond Eden* (despite its flaws) and the vitality of *The Edward Curtis Project*.

I felt grateful to the artists and activists who despite everything work to explore and stage difficult concepts and mentor young people in the arts, sometimes without acknowledgment. They may not be in the official frame, but I am able to view them personally. These experiences help to remind me that being part of the official frame is desirable for the neoliberal economy, but working outside of it and questioning those who have the power to frame events is an act of resistance in this postcolonial world. Frustrations abound, as the BC government serves corporate greed and gluttony, but so does an abiding energy and connections that will nourish despite it all.

NOTE

1 Capital for the project was funded by J.P. Morgan, American financier (Gidley np)

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BIO

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