
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

Winter 2018

Ojibwe Actor and Poet Mary Black

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

ART + LITERATURE: OJIBWE ACTOR & POET

MARY BLACK

A SOCIAL WORKER based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Mary Black has emerged as a powerful voice for justice. In October 2015, Black recorded and posted her slam poem “Quiet” on social media. Several weeks later, the poem had garnered hundreds of thousands of views. “Quiet” emerges from Black’s refusal to stay silent on the complex experiences of Indigenous women. She wrote and recorded the poem in response to media reports of domestic violence in Winnipeg. Since the video was first posted online, it has spread through widening circles of diverse audiences. In 2016, Black performed “Quiet” at the IWW Cabaret of Monologues: Stolen Sisters, hosted by Sarasvati Productions for International Women’s Week.

MRS: Where did your journey into writing poetry begin?

MB: I began writing when I was very young and used it as a tool to cope with the difficult life that I lived. I truly believe that if I didn’t have writing and performance, I would be dead. It was a method of release for me that helped me to cope with abuse, addictions, violence, sexual assault, and many of the other things I witnessed and experienced while growing up Indigenous in Winnipeg.

What philosophy drives your spoken word poetry and hip-hop performance workshops?

Art can save our people. Not just Indigenous, but all people—and what I teach is healthy coping mechanisms through art, such as spoken word poetry or the development of music. Everybody needs an outlet. I know, I would be dead if I didn’t have mine! Regardless of age, race, or any horrific event that has ever happened to an

individual—or any horrible crime they committed—they are capable of healing. We are all capable of happiness, of love, of peace with the self, and forgiveness. And I believe the greatest starting point on that journey of healing is finding an outlet.

Where have your workshops taken you, and what do you hope to achieve through them?

I have been all over the place. Mostly in communities in and surrounding Manitoba and Ontario. If I can help just one person, I have done what I am here to do. The greatest gifts on this journey have been the messages of hope that I get from people. Young people, elders, people who survived residential school—the list goes on and on. I can’t believe the strength of the people who have reached out to me and the lives they’ve endured. Their message is what keeps me going and fighting the good fight.

Who is your audience?

Everybody! I write for the uneducated, the educated, the poor, the rich, the sick, the healthy, the weak, the addicts, and those on their journey of sobriety. I write to tell my story and to speak for those who cannot. Mainly I write to educate and raise awareness for people who are unaware of Canada’s true history and the current condition of our Indigenous communities. I believe art is a method of bridging a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and helps us to communicate efficiently and effectively.

What, if anything, do you struggle with when writing?

The only things I really struggle with are barriers. I want my message to be delivered to all in a way that is

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

inoffensive, because if somebody feels offended by what I write or the message I am sending, many times they will just stop listening or shut it off. I struggle to find ways to get the messages across—messages that are often heavy and painful—in a way that is not going to hurt people or offend them. But with my most recent poem, I took a risk and I wrote it in a very aggressive and challenging way. That poem was directed toward Indigenous men, and there have been many mixed responses to it.

Since it was first uploaded in 2016, your slam poem “Quiet” has garnered hundreds of thousands of hits online. It was written and recorded in less than an hour, yet it continues to touch people well over a year later. This is a powerful work that derives from a place of anger and frustration and suffering. Can you tell me where “Quiet” emerged from and why you chose to write, record, and post it?

Honestly, I just needed to vent. I was very upset about another young Indigenous mother who had been murdered by her partner, and she had asked for a no-contact order but was denied. These stories are all too common for Indigenous peoples, and I believe these deaths are preventable. But many times, corruption within the system leads to such tragic outcomes. I wrote it as a rant. I didn’t edit it at all. I just wrote it, recorded it once, and uploaded it. I didn’t realize at the time that it would have gotten the attention that it did.

Can you talk about how you translate anger into art?

It is impossible within a society such as this, with thousands of missing

and murdered Indigenous people, with violence, addictions, disease, and suicide plaguing our communities, homes, and families, to not feel angry. Anger lives in us all and it must be handled in a way that is not destructive or toxic. I myself was stuck in destructive cycles of anger using drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. With art, you are able to take the anger you feel and create something positive and beautiful from it. I use my voice, so instead of yelling or screaming, I can project my words and use my diaphragm to deliver a message to the world. I can use my body to tell a story instead of smashing something. The anger is still released, it is still coming out, but now instead of being destructive it has been given a purpose.

Social media has been an effective means of reaching out to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences with your poetry. Why do you choose social media to present your poetry and music?

Social media is an effective way of reaching out to our young people who do not otherwise have access to resources. When I was young and I was a lost child, I turned to the media to figure out who I was supposed to be and wound up receiving all the wrong messages and directions. There are 11,000 children in care, 85 percent of which are Indigenous [in Manitoba, alone]. If those children do not have supportive families or access to stories, teachings, or positive role models, social media is a perfect way to reach those young people and possibly even save lives.

What are the differences between reading a poem online and publishing a poem on a blank page? What is lost, what is gained?

I believe what is gained by viewing a poem online or in a video is the message can be delivered exactly the way you want it to. You can use your voice and your body to create a



Mary Black. Image courtesy of the poet.

story and tell it exactly in the way you envisioned it. What is gained from reading a poem is the reader can create the pictures in their mind. The words of the author create the outline but the reader creates his/her own picture and can take what he/she chooses to.

As an actor, your performance of slam poetry reconciles two of your interests, acting and poetry. How does acting influence your poetry practice (and vice versa)?

Acting has given me tools to create and tell a story with my entire being—my body, my mind, my heart, my voice, the words—I can capture the true depth of every emotion within the story because of my experience as an actor, and bring to life the love, the sadness, the joy, the despair. The tools I have from acting are what give birth to the beauty in the poetry.

What have you been writing lately? Do you have any projects planned?

Well, I just play it by ear. I believe the Universe brings the right situations, events, and people into your life at the right time, and I trust Creator has a plan bigger than what I can see in this moment. I recently wrote a poem challenging Indigenous men to stand with women and beside women on issues such as domestic violence and what society refers to as “women’s issues,” and that poem has garnered a lot of attention as well, with over 80,000 views. I wrote it in an aggressive and challenging way, on purpose, and it has gotten very mixed responses. Some are beautiful, some are angry, some are cruel, some are compassionate, and some are downright life changing. I am looking forward to the potential partnership with a couple different resource centers for youth in my city: one that works with homeless youth and another that works with students seeking their post-secondary education. That would be very exciting!

Quiet

I will not be quiet
 we, as Indigenous women, have too much to lose to
 exist in silence while our people drown themselves
 in booze
 Trying to erase the memory of a damaged generation
 but it's easier to stay quiet than to heal an entire nation
 so we suffer

I will not be quiet
 our families were forced to keep their mouths closed
 and until we choose to speak
 the outside world cannot begin to know
 how deeply and badly we still feel the pain
 How the patterns strain my brain leave me feeling
 insane
 cuz I carry a world of hurt on my shoulders and the
 heaviness only increases as I get older
 So I will not be quiet
 or try to hide the cycles of repetition that our families
 and communities have been perpetually living in
 I refuse to carry the guilt or the shame from being
 sexually abused by the system in place that was
 created with the intention of 'keeping us safe'

No
 I will not shut up
 And I will not sit down
 until our 1,200 missing sisters are found, I will scream
 I will scream and I will yell because they have been
 silenced
 I will fight this silent battle with our women against
 violence
 And the most violent
 or benevolent being could not keep me from speaking
 the true meaning of "Free"

I will not be quiet
 As the system steals our babies and keeps us living
 with less
 The genocide isn't over, it just has a new name—C.E.S.
 When they told us they'd keep us safe, they lied
 If this was the case—then WHY?
 Why are there so many suicides?
 Why did my best friend suffer so deeply inside that he
 felt the need to take his own life
 When he hadn't even lived yet

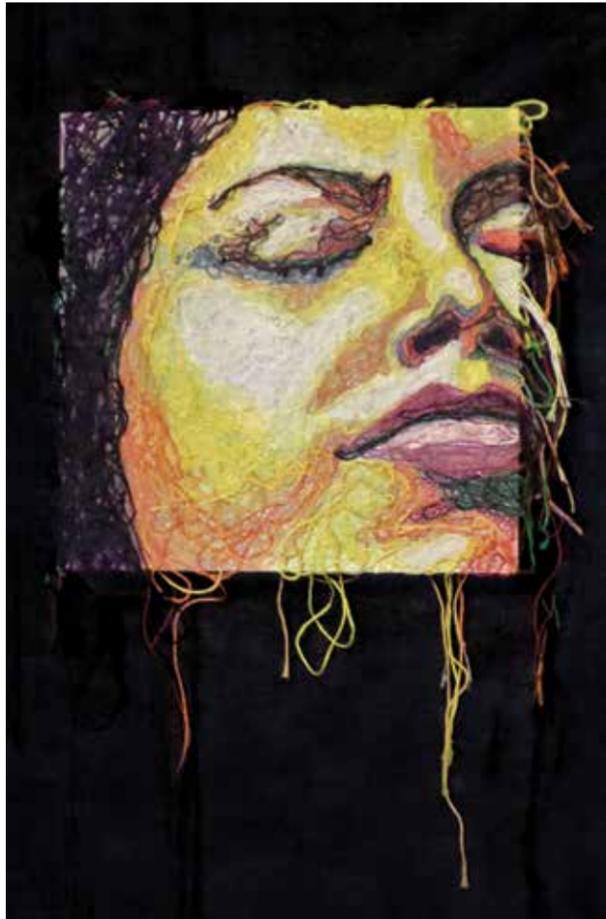
Why do our parents carry so much regret
 Why has so much damage come to our women
 Why, at the age of 12, did I become a victim
 of sexual assault
 And not just me, but so many of my friends and my
 family
 Women and girls who are beautiful beyond
 explanation—their bodies to become used and
 abused,
 Just another violation
 on an Indigenous
 Woman

See, the system was designed to have us take our own
 lives
 To keep the blood stained hands of the guilty clean
 And keep the death on the hands of our children and
 our babies
 And as long as we are idle and silent
 Our children will keep dying because they are
 surrounded by violence
 Violence and addictions—confused by the abuse
 And how badly they must hurt, to want to tie a noose
 around their neck or stick a gun to their head
 when at the same time some children lay peacefully in
 their beds
 while our babies are dying
 While our children
 are crying

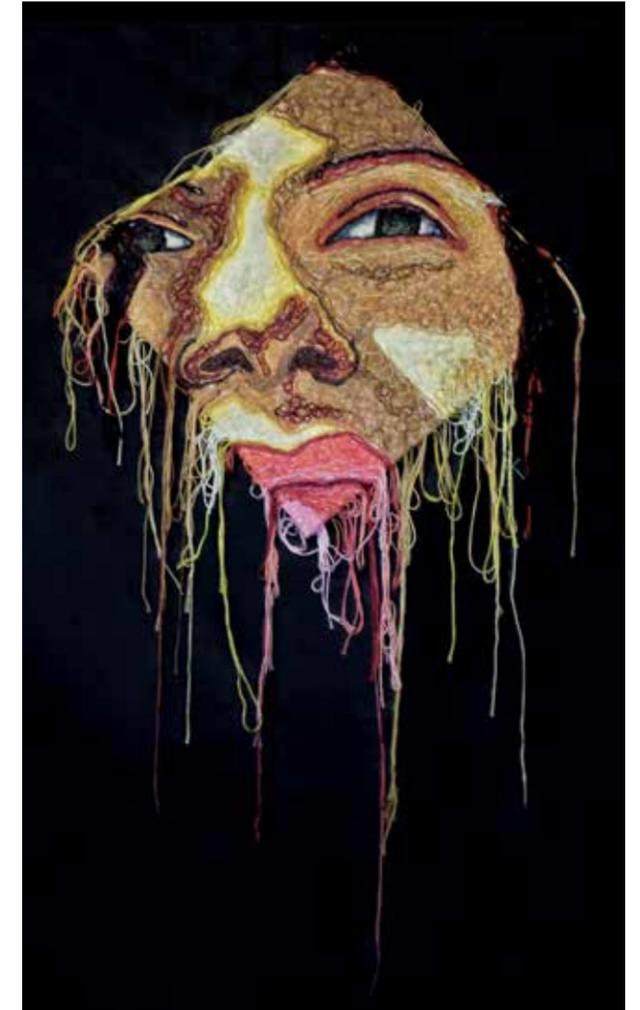
Until we speak and stand up as a family
 we are going to keep losing our girls to the streets
 And our lives will be conquered by the blood that we
 see
 and instead of the knowledge our children will seek to
 erase the history of our grandparents deceased
 Who died enraged at the people that we
 would turn out
 to be
 Because without our knowledge, our stories and our
 traditions,
 we have become the ones who cage us
 in this Hell
 that we are living in.

So no. I will not
 be quiet

—Mary Black



April Holder (Sac & Fox-Wichita-Tonkawa),
A Day in the Life, 2016, acrylic, embroidery
 floss, archival glue on panel. Image courtesy
 of the artist.



April Holder (Sac & Fox-Wichita-Tonkawa),
String Theory #4, 2016, acrylic, embroidery
 floss, archival glue on panel. Image courtesy
 of the artist.

APRIL HOLDER (Sac & Fox-Wichita-Tonkawa) is a painter and mixed-media artist based in Shawnee, Oklahoma. She earned her BFA degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and taught studio arts at Sinte Gleska University in Mission, South Dakota. She has shown throughout the United States and in Italy, and her work garnered the 2014 Power Award and the 2011 Purchase Award at the Red Cloud Indian Art Show in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Holder's first solo exhibition, *April Holder: Full Spectrum*, is on display at the Sioux Indian Museum at 222 New York Street, Rapid City, South Dakota, through January 18, 2018.