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## **“Truth will out”: Politics, religion, and gender in Daniel Berrigan’s *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine***

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how Daniel Berrigan, the playwright-cum-protagonist of *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970), sets out to use theatre as a podium, at a time of great political turmoil, to provide the facts of what is going on in the Vietnam War. In doing so, he documents the facts using the tribunal theatre, a genre derived from documentary theatre. Mary Canal’s theory of Inclusionary and Exclusionary otherness, as expounded in her article “Othering: Toward Understanding of Difference,” is adopted as a methodology. The paper attempts to find answers to the following questions: How are documentary theatre and its offshoot tribunal theatre used as revolutionary theatres? What are the forms of othering present in the play? How is gender bias present even in resistance? How does religion become an underlying cause for Inclusionary othering? The paper concludes that politics, religion, and gender are fused in the experience of the tribunal theatre of the Vietnam War.

**Keywords:** Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, tribunal theatre, Mary Canales, othering

### **1. Introduction**

LAUNCELOT. Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that knows his own child Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son: give me your blessing: truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long; a man’s son may, but at the length, truth will out (Shakespeare, 1911/1600, p. 61).

In William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot, the disgruntled servant of Shylock, speaks to Gobbo, his half-blind father, teasing the old man for not recognizing him. Nevertheless, old Gobbo soon realizes the truth, then Launcelot declares his famous line, “but at the length, truth will out,” asserting that the truth will prevail no matter what the hardships are.

In theatre, truth and illusion are at loggerheads. Since the time of the Greeks, the theatre was an imitation of nature. It used illusion and identification to make the spectators reach a state of catharsis. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century and buttressed by the advancement in technology, theatre ventured into documentation. The German director Erwin Piscator “rejected all art which had no direct relevance to real conditions of life and no aim but amusement” (Innes, 1972, p. 16). He along with Bertolt Brecht succeeded in laying the foundations for what is called today the documentary theatre, which replaced Catharsis with facts. Furthermore, it used “texts, documents, and authentic sources selected and ‘edited’ according to the playwright’s sociopolitical thesis” (Pavis, 1998, p. 397).

Tribunal theatre is a unique genre of documentary theatre. It “consists of the meticulous re-enactment of edited transcripts of state-sanctioned inquiries that address perceived miscarriages of justice and flaws in operations and accountability of public institutions” (Megson, 2009, p. 195). After the Nuremberg Trials in 1945, a large number of tribunal plays were performed that questioned the morality of World War II, for example, *The Andersonville’s Trial* (1959) and Weiss’s *The Investigation* (1965) were staged to investigate the violation of basic human rights and genocide at the time of war. In the 1960s, the tribunal theatre gained momentum by promoting propaganda and raising awareness about the Vietnam War. *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970) was one of the tribunals that exposed the realities of what was happening in Vietnam. In 1994, The Tricycle Theatre in the UK hosted Norton Taylor’s *Half a Picture* (1994) which acts as a guide for the other tribunals that followed: it inspects the illegal exportation of machine tools intended to make weapons in Iraq and the government officials who collaborated in the deed (Megson, 2009, p. 195).

### **1.1. Daniel Berrigan**

Daniel Berrigan (1921-2016) is a poet, playwright, antiwar protester, and above all a Roman Catholic priest. He was born in a town near Virginia where a large number of immigrants resided. This diversity paved the way for Berrigan to accept others no matter who he/she is. Berrigan's upbringing had a lot of influence on his later inclinations. Berrigan's ideas about the Vietnam War began to be formed when his younger brother Phillip Berrigan was serving in the army. At first, he was a war enthusiast who encouraged his brother in his fight. In a letter to Phillip Berrigan, he wrote: "Keep the sword bright in use, because the soldier life you lead is in its noblest view-inner and unseen- the fight for the approval of your Captain Christian sinlessness" (Cosacchi & Martin, 2016, p. 17). However, Berrigan regretted his opinions later on after travelling to many countries and slowly being educated about the atrocities committed by the United States in Vietnam and Latin America. Not only did Berrigan change his war views, but he also became one of the most famous priests because of his long history of anti-war resistance.

### **1.2. Plot**

The Trial of The Catonsville Nine (1969) tells the story of the famous trial of nine Catholics who burned draft files with homemade napalm as an act of civil disobedience to denounce the Vietnam War. The nine Catholics are Daniel Berrigan, Philip Berrigan, David Darst, Thomas Lewis, Thomas Melville, Marjorie Melville, Mary Moylan, George Mische, and John Hogan. Daniel Berrigan and Philip Berrigan are Roman Catholic Priests and are considered the leaders of the group. David Darst is the lookout man who is supposed to alert the others if something unusual is going on during the raid. Thomas Lewis is an artist, and he is the one who asked the media to cover the incident. Thomas Melville and his wife Marjorie are Catholic missionaries who used the trial day to talk about Vietnam and Guatemala. Mary Moylan is a nurse, and her role is to talk about the medical effects of napalm on the skin besides her experience in Cuba. Finally, George Mische and John Hogan are effective members of the group who brought the attention of the court to the atrocities committed by the United States in Latin America and other countries. This act of civil disobedience was

intended to be done in the morning so the media could cover the incident and create propaganda. The Catholic Nine ended their act of civil disobedience with a prayer and waited for the police to come. During the trial, the defendants did not deny the crime they had committed, they were proud of what they had done. Each defendant narrated how they transformed from being a nurse, an artist, priest, nun, and student into an anti-war resister. They informed the judge, the prosecution, and the jury of how slowly they became educated about the United States’ interference in the affairs of other countries during their trips to Guatemala, Uganda, Hanoi, and many parts of the world. But the judge kept reminding them that the United States is not on trial. The judge and the defendants spoke different languages. The defendants defended themselves with the language of passion, love, and duty. On the other hand, the judge spoke the language of the law, and that everything is done in an orderly fashion during a trial. At the end of the play, the law took its course, and nine defendants were found guilty on all accounts.

## **2. Methodology**

Since time immemorial, the concept of otherness has been debated between the world’s greatest minds such as Aristotle, Plato, and Hegel. Each philosopher viewed the concept from his point of view. While their perspectives may differ in some respects, they explored the nature of the self, its relationship with the other, and the consequences of this relationship on human interactions. Socrates, a well-known philosopher from ancient Greece, is well known for his slogan “Know yourself”. This phrase summarizes his philosophy which focuses on the study of the self. He believed that examining one’s thoughts and actions could lead to a deeper understanding of human nature and help people be a better version of themselves. Again, most of Plato’s work focuses on the study of the self as the purist form of knowledge. His philosophical ideas encourage self-reflection and meditation to attain wisdom. On the other hand, Aristotle took a different approach. He believes that the self is the result of interactions with others. He began to instruct people to learn from others as it is the best form of self-awareness. His famous book *Nicomachean Ethics* says, “We can contemplate our neighbours better than ourselves and

their actions better than our own” (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999, p. 185). According to this understanding, a person can reach his full capabilities by engaging with others. Hegel agreed with Aristotle’s ideas and created a paradigm shift in the study of the self and the other. He asserts that a person could never know himself without looking at another. In the introduction of his book *Philosophy of the Mind*, he states:

The Knowledge of the mind is the highest and the hardest, just because it is the most ‘concrete’ of sciences. The significance of the absolute commandment, ‘Know whether we look at it in itself or under the historical circumstances of its first utterance- is not to promote mere self-knowledge in respect of the particular capacities, character, propensities, and foibles to the single self. (2017, p. 377)

Here, Hegel reaches a very insightful understanding of the self and the other. He asserts that only by dealing with others, a man can know his strengths and weaknesses, his abilities, and his likes and dislikes.

In addition to Greek Philosophers, Edward Said, a Palestinian-American scholar, discussed the concept of otherness in his famous book *Orientalism*. He argues that Western societies have created an image of the East as the exotic, uncivilized other. It is this understanding that justifies the West’s conquests of many Eastern countries with the claim of civilizing them. He says:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (1979, p. 3)

Said’s analysis of the self and the other in *Orientalism* emphasizes how the idea of otherness can be used for dominance and oppression.

Recently the concept of otherness has been discussed in Mary Canales’s article *Othering: Toward Understanding of Difference*. Mary Canales introduced othering as two processes: Exclusionary and Inclusionary. Exclusionary othering is the antithesis of Inclusionary othering. They represent a human’s ability to accept others, whether he/she is different. The two processes “operate at multiple levels, within individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole” (Canales, 2000, p. 16). So “the self can be I, my family, my neighbourhood, my culture, my ethnic group, my religious group, my country, or humanity. Similarly, the other can be a

spouse, an adjacent community, a neighbouring state, or another civilization” (Canales, 2000, p. 8). Exclusionary Othering is considered a radical form of otherness because it supports rejecting or distancing the other. These negative behaviours are often the result of a lack of knowledge, misunderstanding, and reliance on stereotypical representations. Hence, the ‘other’ is viewed as a threat and this perpetuates the idea of oppressing and dehumanizing the other. Mary Canales states, that “the consequences for persons who experience this form of Othering are often alienation, marginalization, decreased opportunities, internalized oppression, and exclusion” (Canales, 2000, p. 19). On the other hand, Inclusionary othering offers a more positive view of the concept of the other. It encourages people to unite through true knowledge, understanding, and role-taking. When people stop looking at what is different as less human and learn to value and understand ‘the other’, Inclusionary Otherness can occur. As Canales states, when people “are able to take the role of the other, however, that Other is defined, and begin to see the world from the other’s perspective, their own actions can be directed according to perceived individual and group attributes, rather than prejudice and stereotypes” (Canales, 2000, p. 25).

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1. Exclusionary othering and politics**

The Vietnam War started for many reasons, but one of the most prominent reasons was the fear of communism. To put it another way, the fear of the other is what instigated and gave justification to the United States to send its troops to Vietnam. The United States had a very strong anti-communist sentiment at the time. Anyone who spoke or agreed with communist ideas was considered a traitor. Hence, the United States and many governments used the idea of the fear of the other for their political gains. In John A. Powel and Stephen Menendian’s interesting article *The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging*, they state that:

Many autocratic and authoritarian leaders stoke nationalism or resentment or fears of the “other” to prop up or reinforce their own support. Such demagoguery involves more than just appeals to latent fear or prejudice in the population. Demagogues actively inculcate and organize that fear into apolitical force. (2016, p. 21)

The United States government succeeded in portraying the Vietnamese as the other in many ways. To begin with, they used stereotypical representations of the Vietnamese as uncivilized people who are different from Americans. Moreover, the people in Vietnam were dehumanized in the American media. They were ridiculed and called derogatory names such as “gooks” which made them look inferior in the eyes of the public rather than individuals who have families, hopes, and dreams. In addition to that, the Orientalist perspective is deeply rooted in the Western mentality which promotes the idea of the West’s moral and cultural superiority and results in othering people from Eastern countries. These misconceptions and negative representations fueled the sense of animosity toward the Vietnamese people and reinforced the “us” versus “them” mentality. Furthermore, it helped in gaining the acceptance of the Americans to their government’s decision. As a result of these actions, the United States waged one of the most horrible wars in Vietnam and used excessive power and chemical substances such as napalm in their attacks. The Vietnamese were not the only people who faced Exclusionary Othering. According to the testimony of the nine defendants, black people suffered deeply from exclusion in the American society. Mary Canales states, “Exclusionary Othering is often influenced by the visibility of one’s otherness: skin colour, accent, language, physical abilities, gender, or age” (2000, p. 23). In the case of black people, it is their skin colour that reveals how different they are and makes them vulnerable. During the trial of the nine Catholics, many remarks were made that further explain the situation of black people in the United States. Philip Berrigan says, “I entered the Society of Saint Joseph/for training toward priesthood/I lived with black seminarians/I learned from them in a graphic way/what it means to be black in this country” (Berrigan, 1970, p.23). It is worth noting that black people did not only suffer from exclusion from the American government only, but they also were bullied and killed by Americans. As Mary Moylan states, “In Washington/ a black youth was shot by a white policeman/A verdict of justifiable homicide was handed down” (Berrigan, 1970, p. 64). This example illustrates how black people’s lives were of no importance and that a black man could get no justice in the United States courts. In addition to that, black people who served in the Vietnam War were used

as cannon fodder and experienced different treatment from other soldiers. Fed up with their country’s crimes against humanity, the nine Catholics decided to take a stand. They violated the law and destroyed the United States property which is responsible for drafting men to the war. Their deliberate act of civil disobedience challenged societal norms and government policies and was viewed by a large section of people as traitors or fanatics. In addition to that, they were otherized by other Catholics and bishops. As Philip Berrigan says, “Anyone who spoke against Vietnam was apt to lose his coattails/I lost mine/ I was transferred to Baltimore by my superiors” (Berrigan, 1970, p. 25). Silenced and otherized by their superiors, the nine defendants were enraged. Furthermore, the American media portrayed the action and the following trial as an unpatriotic action and viewed the nine Catholics as zealots. This image urged a large segment of the American society to look down on them. As Berrigan says, “The students who travelled to Baltimore by the hundreds in October put us down sharply a few months later: our style, our nonviolence, our religion” (Berrigan, 1970, p. ix). Thus, the Catholic Nine were otherized as a way to discredit their message and to stop others from being influenced by them.

### **3.2. Exclusionary othering and gender**

In the 1960s, traditional gender roles and expectations were still prevalent in society. Women were expected to follow certain norms where women stayed at home and men went to war. They were not supposed to be associated with politics, activism, or civil disobedience. Hence, Mary Moylan and Marjorie Melville’s involvement in civil disobedience and the following trial challenged gender expectations and contributed to their otherization.

According to Oliver Schreiner’s *Women and Labor* women detest the outrages that take place in wars and always advocate peace, “[O]n this point, and on this point almost alone, the knowledge of woman, is superior to that of man, she knows the history of human flesh, she knows its cost he does not” (1911, p. 173). In this vein, Mary Moylan and Marjorie Melville are two courageous women who took it upon themselves to take a step towards ending the war and its horrors. Mary Moylan worked in Uganda as a nurse. She trained women in hospitals, and she taught little children.



When she wanted to aid people more, her contract was immediately broken. Instead of returning to her country, she stayed in Uganda to help ameliorate the people's conditions. She returned home to become the head of the "Women Volunteers Association" so that she could participate in resistance. Marjorie Melville works as a Catholic nun. When she was in Guatemala, she saw how people were living in miserable conditions. She tried to help and ask her superiors to help improve their conditions, but she was met with opposition. Instead of being intimidated by these actions, the opposite occurred. She stood her ground, helped the people, and had a very strong role like the group's men. When she found out that her way was not effective in putting an end to the war, she joined the other defendants in their raid on Catonsville. She risked her life and faced a long sentence in jail for a cause she believed in. She said, "I did not want to bring hurt upon myself but there comes a moment/when you decide/that some things should not be/then you have to act (Berrigan, 1970, p. 58).

Although women played a key role during the raid on Catonsville, they were faced with exclusion and marginalization. The media celebrated the brothers Daniel Berrigan and Phillip Berrigan and were called "media darlings" (Mollin, 2004, p. 49). No one praised or even cared that those women had a pivotal role in this incident. Civil disobedience was considered a masculine act, which is why the media attached it to men. It is remarked that male activists "defended their dominance, especially in the anti-war movement, by stating that it was their lives that were at risk and therefore their prerogative to dictate tactics" (Jeffreys-Jones, 2001, p. 153). Attached by the idea that war resisters were protecting young men from being drafted to war, men felt that they should receive more attention. After all, men were performing their traditional gender roles. During the trial, Berrigan stated that he went to Catonsville as part of becoming a man like his brother (Berrigan, 1970, p. 92). Devastated by the lack of attention and praise, women felt enraged. In an article titled "*To Mary Moylan, Another Causality of War,*" Rosemary explains what Moylan felt, as she wrote "She was angered by the lack of equal regard for others, especially women like herself, who had taken the same risks but who remained in the shadows. She blamed not only the media but also the two priest heroes (Ruether, 1995).

Similarly, women who participated in the Vietnam War and risked their lives received no attention. Women were not forced to travel to Vietnam, they volunteered to do so. In Carol Lynn Mithers’ article named *Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam*, she said, “About ten thousand women served with the U.S. military in Vietnam. The vast majority were nurses, low ranking officers, but there were also enlisted women working as communications, intelligence and language specialists, air traffic controllers and aerial reconnaissance photographers” (1986, p. 79).

These women faced the fear of living in a very dangerous war zone just like the men. They performed their duties bravely and without hesitation because of their love for their country. When women returned to their country, they did not receive any attention. Their stories were not considered important in the history of war. As a result, brave women and their stories were not published or made into films like men. Very little was written on those women who participated in the Vietnam War such as *Forever Sad the Hearts* by veteran nurse Patricia Walsh and *Home Before Morning* by Lynda van Deventer. Carol Lynn Mithers stated:

Isolated from each other, reluctant to identify themselves as veterans, in part, because the public image of a military woman was that of a lesbian, a whore, or a loser looking for a husband, the women tried to go on with their lives and waited for the war to go away. (1986, p. 81)

On the other hand, men who returned from war were received with respect and praise, they were proud to be known as war veterans. Going to war for men was a normal part of their gender role, but when a man was not brave, he was accused of being a woman.

### **3.3. Inclusionary othering and religion**

Unlike Exclusionary othering, Inclusionary othering strives to connect the self and the other. This connection could be achieved when differences are understood and looked at objectively. For inclusion to take place, the self must have true knowledge about the other and understand that being different does not necessarily have a negative connotation. In *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, the act of civil disobedience the nine Catholics committed stemmed from their ability to imagine what life was for the Vietnamese during the war. This process is called role-playing, and it is essential for inclusionary othering to take place. As Canales stated, “The

initial step toward inclusionary engagement involves taking the role of the other. This strategy begins the process of understanding the life of the other from the Other's perspective (2000, p. 28-29).

Religion is considered one of the basic motives behind the defendants' rebellion against the government. Thomas Lewis stated, "In Christianity, we are taught that all men are a human family" (Berrigan, 1970, p. 40). According to this understanding, the nine defendants could not stand by idly and watch their fellow brothers and sisters lose their lives in an unjust war. At first, they tried to resist their government peacefully by organizing peaceful protests, reconciliation meals, and meeting with superiors and bishops. Unfortunately, bishops' only role was to bless the military and place their approval upon their military adventuring (Berrigan, 1970, p. 85). As a result, the nine defendants felt that they were responsible in the eyes of God for what was happening in Vietnam. Berrigan stated, "I have throughout my life/ tried to be concrete/about the existence of God/who is not an abstraction/but is someone before me/for Whom I am responsible" (Berrigan, 1970, p. 83). Bearing this huge amount of responsibility, the nine devout Catholics resolved to a more dangerous form of resistance documented in Christianity. Thomas Lewis said:

I then moved to civil disobedience. This is a legitimate form of social protest. It is well documented in Christianity. Civil disobedience was practiced by the early Christians. The spirit of the New Testament deals with a man's response to other men and with a law that overrides all laws. The one law is the primary law of love and justice toward other men. As a Christian, I am obligated to the primary law of brotherhood. (Berrigan, 1970, p. 43)

Hence, the nine defendants chose an undertaking fraught with perils as a result of their religious teachings. In committing this act of civil disobedience, they were trying to become closer to God. The consequence of their act was serving a sentence in jail which they were willing to do because this is the cost of being a Christian according to Daniel Berrigan (Berrigan, 1970, p. 84).

#### **4. Conclusion**

*The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* is considered a stellar example of how tribunal theatre can be used as a political propaganda tool in the process of

ongoing resistance. Berrigan succeeded in fusing religion, politics, and nationalism into an inspirational piece of theatre. Moreover, the study detects different forms of Exclusionary othering practiced by the United States. To illustrate, the American government otherized the Vietnamese using different methods to justify their war on them, black people were dehumanized and marginalized because of their skin colour, and the nine defendants suffered from exclusion as a result of defying political policies and societal norms. Furthermore, women faced exclusionary othering as war resisters and as war enthusiasts. Religion found a solution to Exclusionary othering through the positive image of religion that connects rather than discriminates.

For further studies, gender bias in resistance opens a venue for a discussion about the role of women in subsequent wars and many forms of resistance and how eclipsed they were.

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