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Staging the Sacred: Corporeal Sovereignty, Survivability, and Salient Humor in Contemporary Native North American Drama and Performance, 1972-2022

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies

by

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The dissertation of Alesha J. Claveria is approved.

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ABSTRACT

Staging the Sacred: Corporeal Sovereignty, Survivability, and Salient Humor in Contemporary Native North American Drama and Performance, 1972-2022

by

Alesha J. Claveria

Staging the Sacred examines relationships between and among Native North American concepts of the sacred to consider four perches: multi-vocal salients of humor, ecological protection, intertwinings in sexuality and corporeality, and ministering to community needs. These topics and their relationship to the sacred in Native drama enact crucial and interconnected discourses. The presence of the sacred underscores what Hanay Geiogamah calls survivability to foreground drama as a form given in and of service to the community. The sacred in Native drama opens possibilities for corporeal sovereignty to be asserted, as in Trickster and Two-Spirit sexualities. The sacred in Native drama also undergirds multi-vocal humor as a form of cultural expression that acts as a salient to incise, infiltrate, and destabilize colonial extinction narratives. These discourses are prevalent within Native North American drama and thus assert themselves as indispensable touchstones for engaging with this dramatic tradition. Expounding on the role of the sacred in Native North American theater cultivates an alternative hermeneutic to map the surrogate didacticism of theater's participatory hierarchies by drawing upon multiple Native

American and Indigenous studies scholars, activists, and artists. Instead of treating Native drama as a secular dramatic tradition or in a ceremonial/traditional and secular/contemporary dichotomy, this project proposes a hermeneutic for reading and analyzing the variegated—nuanced—stagings of the sacred: defiant and ritualized. Such readings abrogate and chafe at representation in the static symbolic. Performance studies contribute the theoretical fundament for recognizing and engaging physical incarnations of "absence incarnate." The action of gathering disparate pieces to form a living whole, "bone gathering," animates this process. *Staging the Sacred* engages plays, performances, and essays (1972-2022) from well-known and emerging artist-scholars to illumine the multiple resonances and functions of the sacred in dramatic literature, theatrical stagings, and performative interventions. This archive includes canonical and lesser-known texts by such playwrights as Tomson Highway, Muriel Miguel, Diane Glancy, Drew Hayden Taylor, and a network of playwrights from the Native Voices new works festivals (2017-2021). This activist spectrum also includes performance interventions such as those emanating from the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement. These playwrights and practitioners embed their plays and performative interventions with ritual, ceremony, and didactic resonances that invoke the sacred as a force to strengthen community relationships, aid healing from the continuing traumas of genocide, and reclaim Native North American subjects as agents of history in the present. This approach challenges the colonizing role of the secularization of the arts, culture, and academy by illuminating how sacrality is not separate from Native identity and therefore factors prominently in literary, artistic, religious, feminist, historical, and social expressions of indigeneity.

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Preface

Staging the Sacred came into being a piece at a time at the request of community members who gave the simple but challenging directive: Write about this. I accepted these gifts. The bones for the predecessor to this current project followed the suggested readings of practitioners working in Native North American drama, theory, literature, and religion. Bones gathered, I outlined what I believed was a necessary project: a history of sexual performance depicting North American indigeneity. I still believe this to be a worthwhile project. I knew that outlining such a project and marching from one end to the other, from "in the beginning" to "the end," was tantamount to an act of academic conquest. I struggled with what I knew was the proper course, which I could not articulate within myself. The language to express such thoughts, impulses, and guiding force, was fetal. To talk about certain things is to destroy them.

I also had fears that the guidance I trusted to come would not, in fact, come through for me—that I was unworthy to produce something of accretive value for and with my community, one primary value of Indigenous scholarship. Yet, through the years, voices spoke, giving direction: "Write about this, creating sacred space. We need listeners to sacred space." "Where is the scholarship on how Native people talk to each other? Listen. Write about this." The voices of scholars working in the field of Native sexuality called out in their writings, imploring others to take up and further animate the vital conversations on Native desire, genders, and sexual expression. Finally, the voice inside me offered evidence in the form of scattered memories and a discordant jangle from my first formal experience of being taught at what in that

course parcel passed for a Native drama section. For years, the sting of it nestled like a bur in the hide.

No, the voice cried. *This is wrong*. Like looking at a photo negative of a treasured memory, the colors and the textures were all off, disturbingly inaccurate. Like a child, I wanted to tug sleeves to ask: "What about the jokes? Why aren't we talking about all the jokes? When are we going to talk about the funny stuff?" For all the urgency and sacrality, all the pain and relentless disasters that come from being colonized, a powerful sense of humor also comes. Doesn't everyone know that laughing is the best accompaniment to tears? That we must laugh with and at and despite our pain? We laugh so we can cry so we can laugh again. The voice inside me is stubborn: to teach Native drama and leave out humor is a perversion and an injustice. This deletion is part of the disappearing, and we refuse.

This project was born, evoked, at the call of community voices. Tempered and forged, planted and watered, by community voices. Challenged into being by community voices. Write about this. And by listening, this is what I have done, what I hope Creator will continue allowing me to do. Write about this. To listen. To follow. To ask the questions my community speaks through me and wants me to hear. This includes when to tell and when to honor the confidence of silence.

Such is the unifying force for this project. The engagements were asked for, and more listening and scholarship on each is needed. The four focal topics presented here represent the cardinal directions: 1. The cultural salients of humor in comic/tragic, Native North American stories/histories/fictions/plays/ performative interventions, 2. The creation of sacred space within and for Indigenous ecological protection, 3. The assertion of corporeal sovereignty through Native physical

presence, sexuality, and gender, and 4. The survivability, a desire to serve born of gratitude, that powers Native North American drama. Aliveness and healing for the people permeate all things, flowing outward from the core of Native American religious traditions. Together they represent the six complete directions.[1] These are topics of aliveness. These are what was asked for. This act of scholarship is, to the best of my ability, an act of service.

Write about this. Yes. My soul and listening self say I must.

[1] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 89. In this essay, Meinholtz outlines the "most suggestive" groupings for events in a performance of Indian theatre as four or six events representing the four partial or six complete directions. He states, "These events are offertory to the spirits with whom we share this world."

Introduction

Methodology and a Too-Brief Context of Native North American Theater

> Such loving self-awareness is a hard thing to come by in a world that sees Aboriginal peoples as historical artifacts, degraded vagrants or grieving ghosts. To take joy in our bodies—and those bodies in relation to others—is to strike out against five-hundred-plus years of disregard, disrespect and dismissal.
>
> —Daniel Heath Justice, "Fear of a Changeling Moon"

Shari Huhndorf incisively remarked, "drama remains the most overlooked genre in Native American literatures."[1] In the attention Native drama does receive, omissions persist in ways that reinforce colonial stereotypes to distort the foundational discourses of the Native North American theatrical tradition. My work focuses on how Native American worldviews manifest in Native drama, in which a distinctly Native North American understanding of the sacred factors prominently. The "sacred," as Vine Deloria Jr. recognizes, lives the truth that "the fundamental reality in our physical world is a strange kind of energy that is found within everything—from stars to humans to stones to quantum energy fields. . . . This power or energy . . . is ultimately spiritual and not physical."[2] *Staging the Sacred* examines relationships between and among Native concepts of the sacred to consider four perches: multi-vocal salients of humor; ecological protection; ministering to community needs; and intertwinings in sexuality and corporeality. These topics and their relationship to the sacred enact crucial and interconnected discourses. The presence of the sacred in Native drama underscores what Hanay Geiogamah calls

[1] Däwes, "Performing Memory, Transforming Time," 2.

[2] Deloria, *C.G. Jung and the Sioux Traditions*, 184.

survivability to foreground drama as a form given in and of service to the community. Geiogamah describes, "Out of a social and political crucible, survivability is an abiding and continuing sense of responsibility, of duty, and of thankfulness that we were ever born, that the Creator let us have life."[3] The sacred in Native drama opens possibilities for corporeal sovereignty to be asserted, as in Trickster and Two-Spirit sexualities. The sacred in Native drama also undergirds multi-vocal humor as a form of cultural expression that acts as a salient to incise, infiltrate, and destabilize colonial extinction narratives. These discourses are prevalent within Native North American drama and thus assert themselves as indispensable touchstones for engaging with this dramatic tradition.

This expounding on the role of the sacred in Native North American theater develops an alternative hermeneutic to map the surrogate didacticism of theater's participatory hierarchies by drawing upon multiple Native American and Indigenous studies scholars, activists, and artists. These include LeAnne Howe's tribalographic methodology to navigate contradiction and multiplicity, New Zealand scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonization theory to confront colonialism, and Canadian First Nations scholar Shawn Wilson's concept of research as ceremony. These creators' theories and praxis close relational distances dividing "researcher" and "subject" to transform ways of knowing and the physical universe. My work challenges established arguments that treat Native drama as a secular genre or a ceremonial/traditional and secular/contemporary dichotomy. Instead, I propose a hermeneutic for reading and analyzing the variegated—nuanced—stagings of the

[3] Geiogamah. *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance*, 6.

sacred: defiant and ritualized. This abrogates and chafes at representation in the static symbolic. Performance studies contributes the theoretical fundament for recognizing and engaging physical incarnations of what theater director Michelle Newman identifies as absence incarnate: "wounds, losses, traumas, memories, dreams, imaginings, desires."[4] This is crucial work, recognizing and engaging what is *not there*, because "in the theatre, one regularly works with many of these categories of absence."[5] Poet, psychoanalyst, and [post-]trauma specialist Clarissa Pinkola Estés refers to this process of gathering disparate pieces to form a living whole as "bone gathering."[6] This project gathers a range of plays, performances, and essays (1972-2022) from well-known and emerging artist-scholars to illumine the multiple resonances and functions of the sacred in dramatic literature, theatrical stagings, and performative relational events. This archive includes canonical and lesser-known texts by such playwrights as Tomson Highway, Muriel Miguel, Diane Glancy, Drew Hayden Taylor, and a network of playwrights from the Native Voices New Works Festivals (2017-2021). This activist spectrum also includes performance interventions such as those emanating from the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement. These playwrights and practitioners embed their plays and performative events with ritual, ceremony, and didactic resonances that invoke the sacred as a force to strengthen community relationships, aid healing from continuing traumas of genocide, and reclaim Native North American subjects as agents of history in the

[4] Quoted in Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 127.

[5] Quoted in Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 127.

[6] Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, 24.

present. Sacredness is fundamental to everyday life dramas, which these plays feature. *Staging the Sacred* challenges the colonizing role of the secularization of the arts, culture, and academy by illuminating how sacrality is not separate from Native identity and therefore factors prominently in literary, artistic, religious, feminist, historical, and social expressions of indigeneity.

I must be careful when speaking about the sacred in Native drama. In Indigenous studies, sacred power has specific meanings to diverse cultures, yet this sacral energy is widely recognized as a life force that all matter contains. The term "sacred" also carries a host of contorted and inapplicable Euro-Western connotations and assumptions. Playwright and scholar Diane Glancy warns that Indigenous thoughts are frequently distorted when spoken into colonizer languages, that meaning is lost "translating English into English." These are not mere word problems. The loss of meaning caused by the imposition of Euro-Western lenses is a persistent form of colonialism. My methodological framework ventures to confront these forms of colonialism by drawing on performance and textual archives from a wide range of scholar-practitioners to illuminate, in specific, Native North American terms, the role of the sacred in Native North American theater.

This work consists of an introduction and five chapters. The introduction situates this project and begins the process of building a necessary foundation of shared vocabulary and concepts, which we will revisit and expanded in subsequent chapters. It also provides some brief historical context, which we will revisit and expanded throughout to issue a call to others for future research. In this way, the introduction initiates the intersectional and circular organization of this project.

Each of the five chapters asks to be read as interlocking circles. Each segment contains circles or generative cycles of their own as they reach toward imbrication in relationship. It is through such cycles that existence is renewed and preserved. Therefore, the act of cycling—spiraling—through knowledge is crucial to creating a living analytical framework. In essence, the introduction grounds the project, and this ground is the source from which the five conversations of subsequent chapters grow.

Chapter 1, "Native North American Dramatic Humor: Puppets, Star Trek, and Salients of Culture," interrogates the damage of colonizing terms to Native drama and highlights the salient, multi-vocal work of Native humor. This chapter's focus on humor and its connection to the sacred, often in proximity to sexuality, resists erasure. Native humor unsettles the colonial forces behind this genocidal deletion of Native peoples and their living, contemporary presence. Humor is a defining feature of Native drama and literatures despite—and also because of—the prevalence of colonial resistance and activism addressed in those literatures. The prevalence and culturally specific functions of humor in Native drama highlight how Native humor is salient, designed to infiltrate by carrying culture in ways that precipitate diverse outcomes and responses from diverse observers, who are also participants and witnesses.

Chapter 2, "Multi-vocal Reality: Spending Time in Space with Invisible Cosmologies and Confluences of Conversation," brings the play, *Lying with Badgers* by Jason Grasl into conversation with *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet* by Rosalyn R. LaPier so that, sharing space, they speak together. This chapter demonstrates how culturally and platially

specific, decolonized and indigenized methodologies can add depth and complexity to the literary and dramatic analysis. This section employs a framework whereby works come into respectful—generative—conversation beyond adversarial modes of literary and aesthetic colonialism and the imposition of binaried lenses that demand hierarchical analyses.

Chapter 3, "Speaking and Creating Sacred Space on the Native North American Stage: Ecological Protection and Ceremony in Performance," juxtaposes the case studies of *Fairly Traceable* by Mary Katheryn Nagle, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* by Tomson Highway, and the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement to demonstrate the potential for ceremonial transformation in Native theater and performative resistance to colonialism. These works and acts feature ritual mobilization of the sacred to foreground ecological protection and land reclamation. This chapter builds an understanding of ceremony in Native North American performance by addressing four features of ceremony through interconnecting explorations: the power of speech, the importance of ritual preparation, the ability to grow and adapt, and the function to heal, unify, and restore balance through bringing things into a closer relationship. These explorations demonstrate the potential for ceremonial transformation in Native North American theater and performative interventions through the power of ritual to mobilize sacred power and create sacred space for performative events.

Chapter 4, "To Strike Out: Corporeal Sovereignty and Presence as Resistance to Erasure in Native North American Sexuality on Stage," foregrounds Two-Spirit and Trickster sexuality and gender, often through proximity to humor and the sacred, as

reflections of cultural values, assertion of national and tribal identity, and resistance to ongoing atrocities of colonialism and attendant heteropatriarchal violences. This chapter acknowledges scholarship related to the dark side of sexuality in Native North American drama and performative events and discusses how such drama and analysis function to raise awareness of the prevalent violence, sexual assault, and murder that are the lived reality of far too many Indigenous North American women, girls, and Two-Spirit people. Primarily, however, this chapter seeks to foreground sexuality, often through its proximity to humor, as an affirmation of life.

Chapter 5, "Survivability, Reality, and the Sacred: Theater Makers as Community Servants," places the writings of theater practitioners into conversation to explore the sense of community responsibility and gratitude—survivability—that permeates Native drama pan-tribally and variously signals a theory of art and action as necessarily in the service of the collective. The writings of Native North American theater practitioners Rolland Meinholtz, Hanay Geiogamah, Diane Glancy, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Madeline Sayet, and Theresa J. May are put in conversation with one another. These conversations explore Native North American theater's relationship to time and build and complicate the argument around to what extent Native North American theater is or should be considered sacred theater. The chapter also discusses how Native theater is capable of ministering to the people, facilitating the imagining and inhabiting of what Laura Harjo calls "lush" futures in the now,[7] and—owing to the circular or cyclical nature of time in Native North American theater—even healing damaged histories.

[7] See Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*.

Staging the Sacred performs several critical interventions into performance studies, literary studies, religious studies, feminist studies, and Native American studies. I first propose that no Native drama or performative intervention is devoid of sacred power, a near-omnipresent life force with culturally specific attributes, such as precipitating transformation and renewal as part of the habitas of the community and especially in times of crisis. I thus respectfully contest Native drama scholar Christy Stanlake's assertion that Native American drama is secular in the Euro-Western sense, which divides the sacred, pure, and divine from the secular, impure, and mundane. Instead, I expand on Hanay Geiogamah's division of Native drama into sacred ceremonial and secular contemporary genres. I propose that Native North American performance mobilizes sacred power in various ways to varying transformative ends, with each text or theatrical event situating itself relationally with its community as a conduit for ritual and ceremony, albeit not always apparent to lay audiences. Native North American theater, I argue, is multi-voiced in its ability to appeal to multiple audiences and fundamentally coded with cues recognizable as sacred for Indigenous audiences, readers, and performers who have an awareness of those knowledges.

A critical aspect of all these chapters is the deliberate repetition of certain concepts or lines of inquiry, both between the chapters and sometimes within individual chapters, reflecting the circular or cyclical quality of time and action prevalent within many Native North American worldviews. Discussions of language and word choice also permeate the chapters, even including multiple discussions of the same term. Linguistic conventions in colonizer languages can carry potent

messages of colonial superiority, adding to the challenge of using one language to convey thoughts formulated within the worldview of another.

Finally, this project aims to acknowledge the foundational accuracy of concepts that are frequently warped while passing through Euro-Western lenses. This foundational accuracy pushes against that warping action to recover the inconvenient information that falls away in the warping process. Linda Tuhiwai Smith illustrates one such concept, a "misty-eyed" discourse with which people often regard the idea that Indigenous people are close to their land.[8] She asserts that such a discourse ignores the fact that this closeness to one's environment arises from necessity. To survive somewhere for thousands of years, one must learn how to cultivate and communicate with that place. The nature of that relationship to place can become obscured by sentiment and stereotypes. Similar obscuring can occur in discussing many other aspects of Indigenous North American culture, especially for Native American religious traditions. Part of decolonizing scholarship involves thoughtfully opposing this warping of concepts, which can cause words to be technically correct while connotations or interpretation create inaccurate, incomplete, or skewed impressions.

Convenient Absences: How Sacredness Shapes Healing, Protection, and Humor in Contemporary Native North American Drama

This story is about a sacred world, this one, hidden in plain sight behind a language and worldview of cultivated blindness. This project aims: 1. To provide a living framework for engaging contemporary Native North American performative

[8] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Introduction.

events and, 2. To advance Indigenous research methodologies as the most suitable for analyzing Native performance. Native American religious traditions are the keystone of such methodologies. A grounding in these religions, including the functions of interconnectivity and platiality, is fundamental for exploring several important aspects of contemporary Native North American drama. These aspects include individual and communal healing, sacred landscape protection, sacred communication and literatures, sexual performance depictions of indigeneity, and functions of Native humor. For over 500 years, performances by and about Native North American peoples or utilizing cultural markers of indigeneity have been put in service to Euro-Western agendas. Indigenous resisters have also employed performance to enact transformations and carry messages about life, pain, healing, hope, humor, and sacredness. In tracing how religious traditions shape Native North American peoples' performative events, particularly regarding humor and healing, this project aims to resist erasure, move within and beyond trauma, and trouble dehumanizing simplification.

For contemporary, "postcolonial," indigenous research projects, issues of language and belonging almost necessarily become additional topics. Troubling and near omnipresent concerns for Indigenous researchers include: Can any Indigenous methodology be properly decolonized when the work is written in English, the binary-obsessed, self-serving language of the colonizer?[9] and, For the sake of the project, who will be regarded as a "real" Indian, and who will be excluded?[10] The

[9] For discussions on colonizer language issues, see Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, chap. 1 and chap. 3. See also Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, chap. 1 and chap. 2.

[10] For a discussion on Indigenous North American belonging, see King, *The Inconvenient Indian*, chap. 3.

social construction of race and constant negotiations over who can be considered part of an Indigenous group, including such issues as blood quantum and enfranchisement, can be complicated. Who may straddle, coexist, or be ejected from racial groups? Who can or must move into another group? How is community belonging established, performed, or foregrounded, and when might racial belonging become conditional? How do community members situate themselves relationally in ways that resist reinforcing settler-colonial extinction policies and stereotypes about what it means to be "Native enough?"

Issues of language and belonging inflected by colonization have essentially weaponized language and history against Indigenous North Americans, embedding violence even down to the level of the daily and mundane. The result is invisibility—invisibility in history, our homelands, and the cultural landscape. This widely noted invisibility of Native North American people is perpetuated in no small part by Indigenous communities' outsider relationship to Euro-Western morality, as dispensed through missionization. Here performance studies as a discipline possesses a level of familiarity. Again, as Michelle Newman expresses, "when one is working with the body, with presence, incarnation, one is also working with absence incarnate. With the wounds, losses, traumas, memories, dreams, imaginings, desires, even the other bodies that this body incarnates."[11]

Yet, here arises another issue of language, for to speak of "the body" is a form of violence. It is the act of parsing and dissecting pieces from the whole, of tearing apart living beings to separate physical presence from mental and spiritual presence.

[11] Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 127.

So why, knowing the term is violent, ever discuss the body within Indigenous studies? We do it because despite all this, physical presence is powerful. There are various ways in which people, communities, and institutions “perform" themselves, yet performances that engage actual, present bodies are particularly marked, immediate, and potent. The corporeal presence of the body is difficult if not incapable of being divorced from the complexity of its social, religious, political, and historical presence. Such performances are especially urgent and yet must constantly negotiate their own continued existence in society. Being at once sacred and to the settler-colonial mind temporally anachronistic and platially disjointed, Native North American physical presence mobilizes the power of and within the living, persistent body to transcend and trouble settler-colonial narratives beyond the Judeo-Christian disdain for the body writ large.

With a combination of performance and textual analysis and archival research, I attempt to demonstrate that analyzing Native North American drama and performative using aliveness and decolonized and indigenized methodologies that are both culturally and platially specific is the most efficacious analytical framework. These methodologies also offer the opportunity for non-Indigenous researchers and readers to begin building bridges of understanding to non-Eurocentric paradigms,[12] opening realms of meaning that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Indigenous methodologies have been utilized, although not nearly enough, in analyzing Indigenous community action and activism, plastic arts, history, religion, and literature. Despite increases in the past decade, of the scant scholars analyzing

[12] Deloria, *God Is Red*, 39.

Indigenous performance, those who attempt to approach through a Euro-Western paradigm without vigorous decolonization and indigenization risk perpetuating academic colonialism. Well-meaning work from these binaries lays (the English verb for dead things) outside of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies: the animacy of the sacral that makes Native drama a distinct and field-challenging dramatic tradition. Indigenous methodologies change the cosmology that separates performance from ways of being and offers opportunities for analysis beyond the heteropatriarchal racism so embedded within western-style research. Recent Indigenous scholarship explores this debate, whether Indigenous research benefits from applying western methodologies or whether only Indigenous methodologies are appropriate. Wilson cautions against dictating to others which methodologies they should employ in their research ceremonies, instead respecting the relationships built between researcher and idea. I acknowledge this need for respect. I also recognize colonialism's diverse and rampant influence. Therefore, I feel that decolonizing and indigenizing must be fundamental and ongoing processes within one's research, regardless of field or methodology.

Native North American drama presents—makes present—"Indians" that, by definition, as Thomas King incises, are "Not the Indian You Had in Mind."[13] In my time studying contemporary Native North American drama, I have observed many reasons scholars and theater practitioners may not engage with Native drama, including a lack of interest, understanding, or funding within their home institutions; the prodigious time and personal commitment required to engage the

[13] For commentary on settler-colonial expectations of North American indigeneity and stereotypes, see the short film, King, "I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind."

relevant research methodologies and foster the necessary community relationships; a lack of experience in academic and professional backgrounds; and Euro-Western illiteracy concerning Native North American works, whether willed, dismissive of difficulty, resulting due to ignorance, or arising from complacence. Those who glimpse the difference may respond with fear: they are hesitant to offend by inappropriately engaging material they either explicitly know or implicitly feel to be, in some way, sacred. Settler-colonial institutions tend to avoid gazes that do not connect with colonized views of the audience. My work follows Christy Stanlake's four discourses of Native dramaturgy—platiality, storying, tribalography, and survivance[14]—striving to provide additional framework for engaging with Native North American drama and performative events that emphasizes transformation. The guiding directive emanates from Native North American religious traditions.

The period of primary focus for this project is the contemporary, engaging the era of Native North American drama from 1972 to the present. These influential years of public staging lead to the vital present. History, just over 500 years from the perspective of colonial audiences, parses in rough sequence into five significant eras of Native North American performance: Self-Determined (appearance of Native peoples on the American hemisphere through European contact), Early Invasion (European contact through 1830), Westward Rupture (1830-1890), Gathering Red Power (1890-1968), and Self-Defined (1969-present). These eras represent a new way of dividing the span of North American performance history, even as several eras align with Wilson's chronology of the development of aboriginal research.[15] His

[14] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*.

[15] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 45-52.

Research is Ceremony explores major shifts in prevailing attitudes within and about Indigenous worlds. The periods listed above correspond, albeit roughly, with several Euro-American historical eras. Utilizing an indigenized timeline with eras that center Native experience is necessary to locate—contextualize—the history of our scripted and unscripted performance as decolonized paradigms reveal them. Writing about the Indigenous performance history, Henning Shäfer creates an Indigenous-centered timeline, focusing almost exclusively on the period that I share, the era that announced itself in Canada from 1974 to the accreting present.[16] A brief history of these five major eras provides a sense of movement and moment to ground the subsequent discussion of Native North American religious traditions—how humor and healing come into deep play in the making of contemporary Native North American drama.

My archive consists of Native North American plays: performance materials, recorded performances, writings of theater practitioners, and the voices of scholars. These materials recount experiences with Native North American drama, Native North American literature and art, indigenous community action and experience, and my lived experiences in teaching and mounting readings of Native North American drama. Plays as they emerge through texts, theatrical performances, and live relational events. Performances, scripted and inspired, have conspired with the universe and approximately 13,000 years to locate a profound archive. Noted playwright and author LeAnne Howe observes that a "tribalography" will "pull all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and

[16] Schäfer, "A Short History of Native Canadian Theatre," 19.

multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus."[17] Tribalography is a creative concept that recognizes the "consistent tendency of Native writers to eschew fealty to any particular form or genre."[18] She, with me and others in her wake, recognizes the artificial and permeable nature of boundaries that divide and name genres. The elasticity of the archive is key to the inclusive, holistic worldview of Indigenous methodologies that informs *Staging the Sacred*. While colonial thinking privileges binaried categorizations, Indigenous worldviews are inclusive, emphasizing permeability between perceived borders that divide peoples of all species and the animate-all of relations. Sacred space, ecological protection, survivability, and corporeality are interrelated in a worldview that understands the animacy of stones. The acting/activated dividing line—the curtain—between the corporeal presence and the body/presence as echo, as image or sound or words on the page, is also permeable. There is no fourth wall for Brecht to break. A collection of complex forces come into play at the physical and intellectual intersection of the urgent, present nature of performing bodies. Within the colonial project, Indigenous peoples are not supposed to exist anymore. Slated for genocide yet persisting as living, remembering sites of both personal trauma (prevalent rape, abuse, poverty, and disease) and ongoing intergenerational trauma (boarding schools, missionization, displacement from homelands, and genocide) Indigenous bodies, presences, react with an almost catalytic intensity to the vitality of performance that expresses presence. An archive providing space for such reactions must be prepared to follow performance

[17] Howe, "The Story of America," 42.

[18] Bauerkemper, "Introduction," 4.

depictions of indigeneity where they lead, even through time, space, medium, affect, emotional responses, and the transformative power of stories told and enacted while in community.

One must also engage the parameters of language, ways of experiencing belonging and longing. Indigenous researchers often begin their work explaining language: this a violating site of deep colonization. Although one can think of colonization in vast terms—sprawling empires and foreign governments—colonization permeates into personal spaces. Face-to-face societies are pocked by negating literacies, which affect how people (translated into cruel terms) think about themselves and their communities. The English language advances its own paradigm, which is anathema to Indigenous paradigms. Indigenous languages tend to be more fluid, holistic, egalitarian, and respectful of Indigenous and other cultures, reflecting Indigenous worldviews. Respect for an animate world is vitalized in verb-based languages. One crucial example of this language distortion is the maiming in binary terms: the perspectival artifice that divides "history" and "story." "History" carries authority: this means western history. The term "story" lacks authority: the word is equated with lies and deceit in English. Europeans have history. Natives have stories. Colonization beds in language.

Another example of such a language issue often arises as one of the first questions I experience from non-Native students in an American Indian and Indigenous studies classroom setting. Students often ask which the correct terminology is to use when referring to the People (the first peoples in the American hemisphere): Native American or American Indian. Yet, the topic remains another tangled colonial linguistic knot. Given the geographic scope of the field of Native

North American drama (its history and cross-pollination of talent across countries and geographic boundaries), I expressly strive to use terms that are inclusive of the North American continent (Native North American and Indigenous North American). Other scholars may prefer different phrases (Native American, American Indian, Indigenous) for various reasons, and all such broad terms are at varying levels limiting and excluding. The term Native American benefits from rejecting Columbus's erroneous assumption and asserting the legitimacy of the original inhabitants of this land. Others prefer how the term American Indian foregrounds the experiences of Native populations inside the United States, as the use of "American" has been so firmly claimed by residents of the United States of America. In specific contexts, it can be desirable to foreground Native experiences within the Unites States. Both terms Native American and American Indian tend to exclude global, hemispheric, and continental views of indigeneity, excluding First Nations (Aboriginal Canadian), Indígena/o/x (Indigenous Mexican), and other populations in North America, such as Hawai'i and Alaska Natives. I prefer the term Native, as do most of the people to whom I speak these days when referring to themselves as Native. Original Peoples or another term may gain usage in the future. It is unclear at present what the scope of new terms will be, how they will navigate clarity and ambiguity, and in what ways they will be effective. The term Indigenous is often used to refer to the majority of populations around the world who are the original, long-term inhabitants of their land, most of whom colonialism subjected to its varying horrors. The broadness of this term can be helpful at times, but it also risks being overly general, as with all the terms listed above. Wherever possible, I prefer to either use the name of the tribal Nation of a person, land, work, or audience, or the

preferred term used by that person. Some Native individuals and populations prefer the term "Indian," and though some view this term as anachronistic or culturally insensitive, I would caution against presuming to correct or tell people how to talk about themselves. Using "Indian" can, under specific conditions, represent a refusal to allow terms that have for the Euro-West become uncomfortable reminders of its historical and ongoing racism to be conveniently disappeared from the language, replaced with language that makes it seem like colonialism has conveniently disappeared as well. It has not.

This project is concerned with the contemporary drama and performative events of North America, reflecting the locations of the theatrical centers in which the theater practitioner-scholar-community servants discussed in this project undertake their work and the home communities that have influenced and been impacted by that work. I visualize the "map" of this project as a web with anchor points in Los Angeles, Santa Fe, New York, Toronto, Montana, Oklahoma, Hawai'i, and through more spreading lines of relationship connecting the Southwest, Pacific Northwest, North, and Southeast as well as deeper Souths. As such, I use the terms Native North American or Indigenous North American to represent the continental mass of land and waters. The terms Native American and American Indian are used without prejudice when focusing on Native Nations within the now (relatively recent) United States. The term Indigenous is called upon to convey hemispheric, global, or more generalized connotations. Although there has been work with a meaningful impact that examines shared features across Indigenous cultures globally, *Staging the Sacred* centers cultural and platial specificity. Since Native North American drama has spread from urban and rural cultural centers across a

variety of diverse geographic and cultural regions, my terminology regarding this influential movement recognizes this initiative's inclusion of the North American continent. The term First Nations refers to the Indigenous populations of Canada, although other uses of the descriptor "first," as in First Peoples, are more inclusive and extend beyond nation-state boundaries.

The terms "performance," "depiction," and "relational event" are used interchangeably, with the term "performance" emphasizing the corporeal, recorded corporeal, or intended presence of bodies engaged in meaning-making activities. Live performances, films, and play scripts fall into this category. A "depiction" is a representation through an image, word, or action. Performances fall into this category, and so do artistic works and literary portrayals. The term "relational event" implicates greater inclusivity shared in singing, dancing, drumming, and ceremony. These events have performative aspects, yet they push against the Euro-Western connotation of performance as entertainment, affectation, or produced and reduced commodity. To clarify, to "embody" is the act of being or becoming. To "portray" is the act of becoming identified with through chosen traits. The term "power" refers to sacred power, the exact nature of which is culturally specific. Context makes clear when sacred power is referred to as opposed to mere applications of ability or force. Even before the potential for inaccuracies in English-to-English translation, the word "ceremony" is a challenging concept. Traditional practitioners of Native religious traditions may disapprove of the term being applied to anything other than, by the strictest definition, ceremonies. I, in echo, join Silko's *Ceremony* in speaking for and through her more inclusive view of the term. Ceremonies are living things that must grow and change. Anticipating objections and knowing that power is not

given to be played, *Staging the Sacred* allows for difference in sacral register. Naming a quality of power that is present, my work considers "ceremonial nature," "ceremonial aspects," or even "ceremonial potential" in addition to "ceremony." I use terms such as "performance depictions," as in "performance depictions of Native people," or "performative relational event" when referring to the performances, events, and depictions discussed in this project because such terms highlight the performative nature of materials that may not be performances in the western traditional sense.

Linguistic hegemony and language destruction make issues of language omnipresent for Indigenous researchers. Each chapter of this project defines, discusses, and revisits necessary vocabularies as they become relevant. This method of revisiting information is a feature of Indigenous scholarship that teaches listening. The Euro-West has often labeled such practices as repetitive or disorganized. Indigenous scholarship, like the Indigenous paradigms from which it grows, is more cyclical than linear (linear logic, linear time) or thingifying[19] in rigid grids. Repetition is a fundament of orality and story-based cultures. Repetition lays the groundwork for the expansion and building of concepts, competency generated with each new cycle through the material. Slight variations can heighten the telling or add depth as repletion and repetition with subtle differences builds toward more nuanced understandings. There is a cultural aesthetic, a layering of meaning, to repetition for vital turns in return in Native North American cultures. These returns extend into communications, dance, drama, art, music, and literature. These returns constitute

[19] King, "MLK Talks 'New Phase,'" 14:05.

creative repetitions that overlap, intersect, and refuse to be separated into rigidly distinct forms of expression. Repetition is intrinsic to ritual, which lays the groundwork for ceremony. Hanay Geiogamah foregrounds ritual repetitions one of the drivers of ceremony in the ceremonial genre of Native North American theater.[20]

As a result of these difficulties with the English language, Indigenous researchers have employed a host of remedies. Four of these remedies include addressing an issue with a specific English term and then redefining it to suit the Indigenous researcher's needs, reconfiguring words to make them more inclusive [e.g. mythohistorical or (hi)story/ies], substituting or introducing an Indigenous word to pick up the slack where English fails, or rejecting all colonizer languages and writing in an Indigenous language.[21] For this project, I choose to use primarily English while creatively redeploying the typical binaries to trouble and decolonize the language.[22] To that end, I tend to privilege authoritative English terms in discussing Indigenous matters. Colonization often denies Indigenous peoples access to these authoritative terms, delegitimizing the Indigenous world. I will use phrases like Original Peoples' history, testimony, and religious doctrine where applicable. I will also use terms that trouble automatic Euro-Western authority, like "European understanding of the past" and "Christian mythology." In an effort to decolonize the language of this project more fully, I couple this rejection of inferior linguistic positioning with a rejection of deficit-focused analysis (the framing of characteristics

[20] For a discussion of ritual and ceremony in Native drama, see Geiogamah's *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance.*

[21] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 19.

[22] For further discussion of language colonization, see Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

of a subject or community negatively or a preoccupation with a subject's or community's challenges).[23]

Indigenous researchers also address questions of belonging. Native Nations and settler governments use different standards for determining belonging, which are frequently called into question. Governmental programs of genocide and assimilation have done incalculable damage to Native communities, fragmenting social groups and creating diaspora within homelands. Due to various pressures, many Ancestors needed to bury or downplay their Indigenous North American origins, making contemporary self and community recuperation and healing an arduous process. Blood quantum, tribal affiliation, ethnic identity, and enculturation can all play a hand in determining parameters of belonging.

Taking the concept of belonging further, a performer brings more to the stage than physical presence. Thoughts, attitudes, and histories (personal and public) are carried in the body in ways that communicate to the audience beyond phenotype, making the cultural background of performers worth attention. The performer's worldview and attendant baggage shape the performance.[24] Since performers seldom work in isolation, examining who sets the agenda of a performance depiction is also crucial. The "agenda" is what the depiction attempts to accomplish or communicate. Writers, directors, producers, or any other artist working in an origination or production capacity can have a hand in agenda setting. The identity of these people also impacts performances. Since performance depictions play out the intentions of

[23] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 50.

[24] For discussions on the stories bodies tell, see Mojica's "Stories from the Body," and Scott's "Embodiment as a Healing Process."

agenda setters, the paradigms and cultural backgrounds informing those intentions are significant. One must ask, how do the agenda setters' paradigms (Euro-Western, Indigenous, combined, other) inflect the work?

The performance history in this hemisphere is long, rich, and troubled. Like the looting of libraries and burning of books that preceded the colonial declaration that Native North Americans had no written language, Native performance traditions have suffered violence, including the violence of erasure.[25] It is a common tool of colonization that deliberate destruction is followed swiftly by the denial that the thing destroyed ever existed. Deliberate recuperation offers a path both forward and backward, forward to the gifts of our Ancestors and backward to the place where future generations wait to see what gifts we as their Ancestors will leave for them. To provide brief context, here is a rough sketch of each of the five eras of Native North American performative events mentioned above, the Self-Determined, Early Invasion, Westward Rupture, Gathering Red Power, and Self-Defined eras. Each of these eras deserves extensive scholarly exploration of its own.

The Self-Determined era of Indigenous performance, also called the Pre-Contact era, is marked by a variety of tribal Nation's attitudes and conventions about orality and performance. Nations as far removed geographically as the Aztec, Zuni, Iroquois, and tribes of the Pacific Northwest had specially designed performance structures.[26] Nations had socio-religious protocols for who was allowed to participate

[25] Refers to the pillaging of Central American "archives" and "repositories," the burning of the Mayan codices, and deliberate, systematic destruction and theft of other Self Determined era American texts.

[26] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 92

in particular dances, separating performers by gender or social affiliation.[27] Nations had specific knowledges (such as songs and rites) that were only to be known or only performed by initiates of specific societies, some of which were separated by gender, a categorization that could include non-binary genders.[28] Performative events could, as for the Nations of the Dakota, open a ceremonial space in which lasting social and kinship relationships could be negotiated or redefined, demonstrating the interconnectedness of socialization, instruction, and religion: the relationship between performance and ceremony.[29]

The Early Invasion era includes the span from the first Euro-recognized contact with the Americas through the American Revolution and its aftermath, ending in 1830 with the signing of the Indian Removal Act and subsequent Trails of Tears. Performance depictions of indigeneity in this era were no longer limited to those created by Native North Americans. Encroaching Europeans appropriated North American indigeneity to a variety of ends in their own performances and depictions. This included depictions of the Native body as a site for Euro-American desire via the perceived natural vitality of American-born Europeans, as in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*.[30] Native North American performative events during this era were impacted by contact with European cultures and the accompanying religious restrictions brought by European missionization.

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[27] Ortiz, *The Tewa World*.

[28] Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 30-42.

[29] Deloria, *Waterlily*, 16.

[30] Tyler, *The Contrast*, 36.

During the Westward Rupture era (1830-1890), the tone and application of Euro-American appropriations of indigeneity changed significantly, as did Indigenous performative events. In theatrical works, stage Indians gradually lost their eloquence from the Noble Savage of the Early Invasion era. Popularity rose for Native North Americans depicted as: 1. the vengeful but tragically doomed chief, as in John Augustus Stone's liminal theatrical blockbuster, *Metamora* (1830),[31] and 2. the dangerous and opportunistic pawn of the villain, as in James J. McCloskey's *Across the Continent* (1870).[32] The presence of the stage Indian as a comic buffoon also increased steadily throughout the 19th century as the once-depicted intelligence of staged "Indians" eroded. During this time of mass slaughter and glorified violence, performance depictions of Indigenous physical presence came to be encoded differently as well. Indigenous bodies became obstacles to be overcome and subdued by brave and patriotic Euro-American. The so-called righteous and glorious struggle to "tame" the lands, animals, and peoples between the Mississippi and the Pacific came also to mean sexual taming and extinction. The surge of popularity in Pocahontas plays during the period reflects this sexual taming, showcasing the stereotype's settler-empowering plot. Sexual desire was reserved for white males, and the Indian Princess offered an object for white male urges.[33] Near the end of the Westward Rupture era, Wild West Shows grew in popularity, foreshadowing the mainstream obsession with "Wild West" entertainment. At the same time,

[31] Stone, *Metamora*, 205-227.

[32] McCloskey, *Across the Continent*, 530.

[33] Lyytinen, "The Pocahontas Myth," 80-81.

Indigenous groups struggled to find and hold physical, psychic, cultural, and religious spaces to survive amid forced removals and ethnic cleansing.

The Gathering Red Power era began with the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, which marks the end of what United States history calls the Indian Wars. In the subsequent Gathering Red Power era, the overtly homicidal U.S. government policies that drove Westward Rupture settled into policies of criminal neglect, systematic land theft, emotionally maiming missionary assimilation, and enforced religious suppression. Native North American peoples were driven to the edge of mainstream consciousness. This figure on the cliff of modernity was a romantic figure who was doomed to extinction, if not already extinct.[34] Cowboys and Indians became synonymous with good and evil. The vital Native man of the Early Invasion era had all but disappeared, replaced by a violent animal/man—inarticulate verging on the mute and by turns a sexual threat or sexually impotent. This impotence has invited speculation on similarities between depictions of nativeness in the Gathering Red Power era and the feminizing castration that, according to Edward W. Said, has been perpetrated by the western males' exotic imagination on Eastern masculinity.[35] Although policies of neglect, land theft, assimilation, and suppression continue to characterize colonial governments' Indigenous policies throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the Gathering Red Power era gained its name when it ended with the rise of the Red Power Movement and an accompanying change in common attitudes about civil rights in the late 1950s and 1960s.

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[34] For a discussion of the extinction myth, see King, *The Inconvenient Indian,* chap. 3.

[35] Said, *Orientalism*, 137-138, 206, and 313-316.

The dawn of the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a push for greater self-determination and self-representation by racial and gender groups. With the movement and its defining events came a shift in the locus of control for Native performance depictions. The Native body continued as an exoticized site on which to play out the fantasies of the Euro-Western mind, but those same bodies now stood as a reminder of violence and shame. Native North American voices grew in importance as the source of understanding on all matters Indigenous, even as the New Age movement appropriated Native Americans for repurposed imaginaries as a symbol of freedom and an idealized natural "lifestyle." This "back to nature" movement included idealized sexuality, an appropriation that featured wild, "natural" sexuality without Euro-Western restraints. Indigenous playwrights, actors, authors, and artists pushed back. These activists worked to extract performances of Indian-ness from the romanticized backdrops of the Wild West Show or the Hollywood Western. Native artists relocated Native performances to places relevant to Native people, which could include abstract locations. Hanay Geiogamah, Spiderwoman Theater, Diane Glancy, and others engaged the fluidity of time and focused on topics of importance to Native peoples, often weaving contemporary and traditional/religious issues and styles to foreground current Indigenous concerns. Plays by Drew Hayden Taylor, Yvette Nolan, William S. Yellow Robe Jr., and many of the new works of Native Voices at The Autry featured grounded, realistic performances that located Native peoples in the contemporary American landscape and featured embodied presence that refused erasure. Native Nations asserted themselves as the legitimate experts on their own communities and as modern, present, genocide-refusing people. The ongoing struggle of this Self-

Defined era goes beyond achieving visibility in performance depictions to having authorship of those depictions. By putting flesh on the bones of performance depictions of Indigenous North American people, they joined to fight a western cultural obsession that persists in presenting Native North Americans as historical relics, savages, and ghosts.

Underserved and Misrepresented: Methodologies for Addressing Lacunae and Inaccuracies in Critical Attention for Native North American Drama and Performative Interventions

There are three underserved areas of scholarship this project speaks to: 1. contributing to the body of scholarship on Native North American drama and performative interventions, 2. resisting the secularization of the arts in academia by foregrounding the importance of Native North American religious traditions, and 3. advancing decolonized and indigenized, culturally and platially specific, Indigenous methodologies for analyzing Native cultural production. This project situates itself at the intersection of the fields of performance studies and American Indian and Indigenous studies. This juncture is generative for considering humor, sacred space, ecological protection, corporeality, sexuality, gender, and survivability. There has been a general lack of critical attention to these aspects of indigenous cultural production in performance studies. While the significance of performing indigeneity within Euro-Western cultures has received academic attention, including the work of Philip Deloria[36] and an anthology by Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny,[37] much

[36] Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

[37] Graham and Penny, eds., *Performing Indigeneity*.

more culturally and platially centered scholarship is needed to combat the academic silencing of Indigenous peoples. The effects of this silencing include continuing colonization,[38] exacerbating the practice of casting the contemporary Native presence as anachronistic,[39] allowing the perpetuation of every kind of violence, stealing the personal joy of Native people, and ignoring knowledge production by Native cultures.[40] Engaging an Indigenous framework that is culturally and platially specific in academic discourse and beyond has the potential to further self-determination and to recuperate a presence that announces vitality—performed and lived—staging the failure of theaters of erasure.

An absence of critical attention that amounts to a failure of curiosity resounds in silence regarding Native North American drama. Interest in ethnic and cultural studies has expanded in recent decades. This rise includes an interest in Native North American art and literature, yet Native North American drama remains underserved. Brigit Däwes points out that despite a substantial body of dramatic material and increasing access to these materials, there have been few books of criticism on the subject.[41]

Staging the Sacred advances the practice of analyzing Indigenous works utilizing Indigenous research methodologies. In the past, when critical attention was given to Indigenous arts and literatures, the works (with rare exceptions) were

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[38] Justice, "Fear of a Changeling Moon," 103.

[39] For discussion on Euro-American discomfort with "anachronistic" Native bodies in contemporary times, see King, *The Inconvenient Indian,* chap. 3.

[40] Highway, "Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages," 35.

[41] Though there have been additional publications in recent years, there were only three on the list Däwes compiled in 2013, not including her own.

analyzed through paradigms that privileged colonial epistemologies and aesthetics. Indigenous researchers such as LeAnne Howe, Monique Mojica, Diane Glancy, Daniel David Moses, and Madeline Sayet have changed this dynamic. It is no accident that most of these agents of critical transformation are playwright-author-scholars who work simultaneously across multiple interrogation styles. Even more can be done to extend such work to correct the historical mismatch between Indigenous subject and Euro-Western methodology. Bringing together a community of voices from the scholars, artists, and practitioners working in the fields of Native North American drama, religious traditions, land and water protection "protests,"[42] performative events, ecologies, history, theory, sexuality, gender, humor, community action, and decolonial theory has been a capacious first step for this research. There is currently little critical work on Native North American creation of sacred space, survivability, physical presence, sexuality, or humor. There is also little critical work on Native drama and even less critical work from the perspective of Indigenous methodologies. Only a small amount of critical work exists on the intersection of these ideas: analyzing the above aspects of Native North American drama, performance, and relational events using culturally and platially specific Indigenous methodologies.

The "present absence" of Native North American drama in scholarly literature echoes a similar present absence Conn notes of Native peoples themselves in American culture and history.[43] Native imagery is appropriated widely. Still, the

[42] How the term "protest" can be misapplied is discussed in chapter two of this project.

[43] Conn, "Native Americans and the History of History," 4.

Native people from whom the imagery has been stolen are seldom seen.[44] Our physical presence is problematic and depicted as anachronistic.[45] This is the trouble caused by anything created by a Native person that seems at all contemporary. It has been theorized that Native physical presence/bodies are particularly troubling to the Euro-American psyche because Indians are supposed to be extinct. Our physical presence is a reminder of the trauma Native bodies have endured (both historically and in the present), and the refusal of those bodies to be easily parsed into pieces, categorized, and quantified. This same physical presence, however, also connotes survival and resistance to continued violence. Yet, the absence of Native peoples goes beyond dominant blindness to survivors of genocide. In unpacking the inability of American Indian literature to engender empathy in western audiences, Vine Deloria Jr. offers one way to examine the lack of critical and cultural attention for Native North American drama. These literatures, claims Deloria, have built their popularity on escapism, invoking historical and communal suffering rather than individual suffering.[46] The Euro-West, however, fetishizes individualism. Thus, it may be worthwhile to unpack escapist imagery and diffused experience to understand better how they could create distance between certain audiences and a performer or work. Paula Gunn Allen, however, offers another reason for this lack of connection with Euro-Western audiences, addressing the stereotype that Native literatures are often "heavy" or "depressing." Genocide attempts to be final, but the genocide exposed is

[44] Alexie, "Sherman Alexie." In a 2018 statement, Alexie admitted that the allegations of several women regarding unwanted sexual behavior and abuse of power on his part were true.

[45] For discussion on Euro-American discomfort with "anachronistic" Native bodies in contemporary times, see King, *The Inconvenient Indian,* chap. 3.

[46] Deloria, *God is Red*, 27.

not entertaining. Allen notes that the significance of the literary work, springing from the culture in which it was created, risks being lost on those not part of that culture. Pointing out the complimentary, gendered aspect of many oral traditions, Allen avers that male traditions primarily highlight change and transitoriness while female traditions highlight continuity. Reading or viewing a contemporary Native North American work with roots in a male tradition, which is "concerned with risk, death, and transformation," may indeed seem "heavy" unless one also understands the role of these forces as constituting "all that helps regulate and control change."[47]

In examining colonial discomfort with the presence—bodies and minds—of the colonized, becoming mired in deficit-focused analysis compounds the problem. Chilisa warns: "This is a pathologizing view that focuses on damage, ignoring the wisdom and hope of the researched."[48] Finding points of connection is more productive, and this strategy reflects the relational nature of Indigenous methodologies.[49]

When tracing the lineage of Native theater to the tradition of storytelling and not to ancient ceremonial performances as some critics have claimed, Schäfer highlights the need for specificity inherent in Indigenous methodologies.[50] Although Indigenous methodologies tend to collapse borders between genres and other categories that western thinking prefers to keep rigidly separated, there are specific lines of connection that must be observed and respected. Schäfer's four acts of First

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[47] Allen, *The Sacred Hoop,* 82.

[48] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 50.

[49] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.

[50] Schäfer, "A Short History of Native Canadian Theatre," 19-20.

Nations Canadian theater history provide a valuable tool for examining trends in Native drama in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Shäfer's Act One, covering the span from time immemorial to 1974, begs for subdivision and more in-depth discussion. Despite the assertion that the erroneous assumption Native North American theater began in the 1970s is problematic and inaccurate, Shäfer's lack of division within Act One reinforces just such assumptions.[51]

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's theoretical interrogation into how research methodologies are not only colonial but also continue to act as colonizing forces within Indigenous communities emphasizes the need to refuse and expose Euro-Western paradigms to clear space for Indigenous paradigms.[52] Her groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies* (located in Maori experience) is a mandatory portal for working in Indigenous theory. Although Wilson makes a case for advancing Indigenous paradigms in their own right over attempting to decolonize western thought,[53] researchers working in colonizer languages, such as English, cannot entirely abandon decolonial theory. Such research risks continuing damage by imposing a powerful colonizing force—the English language—onto Indigenous research. In addition, any aspects of a Euro-Western paradigm to which the researcher subscribes must also be carefully excavated and decolonized to avoid doing harm to the subjects/co-researchers/archive and the research.

Margaret Kovach's concept of story as Indigenous methodology is essential to Indigenous theater studies. Kovach affirms, "In oral tradition, stories can never be

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[51] Schäfer, "A Short History of Native Canadian Theatre."

[52] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

[53] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 13 and 38-39.

decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world."[54] This is true of theatrical performances and performative interventions as well. They cannot be decontextualized from the presence of performers and practitioners. With Shäfer's assertion that Native theatre finds its lineage in the storytelling tradition, connections between the function, meaning, and importance of storytelling (particularly as a teaching tool) must extend to Native drama. In this way, present Indigenous bodies perform acts of what Vizenor calls survivance, bringing together "survival, endurance, and resistance to colonial domination" into an opportunity "for the colonizers and the colonized to learn from each other."[55]

Staging the Sacred requires answering three questions: How will I find what I need? How will I analyze what I find? Why and how are these choices appropriate? In addressing the first question, Indigenous studies and studies of Indigenous religions, medicine, ecologies, sexualities, and humor are still in varying degrees of nascent stages within academia. None of these fields operates how Euro-Western fields operate. Yet, as Indigenous studies recognizes, pieces of the puzzle are scattered widely in critical texts, plays, novels, poems, images, places, and objects—the cultural production of all our relations, human and more-than-human. Relationships must be built and nurtured with people and with the performance, theoretical, and supporting materials used in the research. Relationships have to be built with ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and methodologies—with animals and plants, with places and time—with the ground and the sky and myself and you.

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[54] Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, chap. 5.

[55] As discussed in Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 50. See also Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*.

Research is ceremony, according to Wilson, "a ceremony for improving your relationship with an idea."[56] Ritual precedes ceremony, which connotes repetition, but ceremony must also adapt.[57] Nurturing the relationship between myself and the ceremony that is my research requires me to be changed by the research.[58]

I began my research process by first studying how to research from a respectful and relational Indigenous paradigm: how to gather the materials and respectfully handle, view, and listen to them. This step was crucial before engaging the materials themselves. In essence, I had to ask methodology to provide a formal introduction to performance depictions of indigeneity and Native North American drama. Without this introduction, the archive would not speak to me. Knowledge must be shared. It cannot be stolen. The act of stealing distorts what is taken. It is no longer knowledge; it becomes the abstraction of an extractive method.

As I spent time with methodology, the path of my research process began to clear. I started by gathering bones, collecting what had been scattered, my own ways of understanding and being in the world. My method for gathering and organizing performance depictions of indigeneity included viewing live and recorded performances and reading dramatic texts and contextualizing materials (historic, ethnographic, and literary). Wherever possible, I expounded upon viewings and readings through conversation. Next, I attempted to demonstrate my relational

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[56] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony,* 110. For an additional perspective on the need for ceremonies to adapt, see Silko, *Ceremony*.

[57] Silko, *Ceremony*, 126.

[58] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony,* 61.

axiology to the materials by spending time with them,[59] asking them—the resources—who they are, what they want to teach, and if they have any brother or sister materials that would also like to speak. This listening is where additional materials such as literature, film, and plastic arts entered the conversation. Relationships must come first; this has become clearer and more urgent to me through the years. Building relationships between and with people (human and more-than-human), places, and works will bring about understanding, connection, and movement toward shared futures.

The second question, how I will analyze what I find, speaks directly to the paradigms that have informed my methodology. Several books have been written about Indigenous methodologies and how researchers could or should employ them.[60] What is essential for this project is for you to come along with me on part of my own journey working within Indigenous methodological frameworks, to experience the choices that informed how I framed my methodology. The method for this project possesses many points of similarity to existing methodologies. Similar or parent methodologies include culturally and platially specific Indigenous methodologies, tribalography, "postcolonial" indigenous theory, decolonial theory, Native feminisms, and Borderland-Mestizaje feminism. In framing how I build relationships with Native North American drama, performance, and relational events, Indigenous methodologies (as detailed by Chilisa, Kovach, and Wilson) contribute specificity by centering the importance of ceremony and privileging

[59] For a discussion of relational axiology, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 117-122.

[60] For discussions of Indigenous methodologies, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Kovach, *Indigenous* Methodologies; and Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.

connectedness over dichotomies. Howe's tribalography contributes its foregrounding of Indigenous knowledge transmission via interwoven genres. Tribalography also contributes its ability to entertain the fluidity of time and space, allowing the past and future to be recuperated and healed in the present.[61] Postcolonial theory, including the groundbreaking decolonizing theories of Smith, contribute their recognition that Euro-Western thinking has been imposed on the diverse and specific thinking of non-western peoples and that those Indigenous knowledge systems are worth recuperating, revitalizing, and perpetuating. Indigenous knowledge systems enable the deconstruction of dominant ideologies, exposing the exclusions and absented traces where Native communication often resides. Native feminisms contribute ways of learning, being, and listening that represent a radical break from western heteropatriarchy, including Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's land as pedagogy, Laura Harjo's lush promise, and Mishuana Goeman's creation of Mvskoke space through cultural production, and many others. Borderland-Mestizaje feminism, as advanced by Gloria Anzaldúa, contributes the abilities and ideals of the Borderland-Mestizaje feminist, who:

> interprets history and writes new myths; she tears down category and invites ambiguity, . . . grappling with multiple epistemologies, rejecting binaries. . . . [She] resists symbolic barriers that divide communities, . . . seeks transformation for all whose voices have been silenced and "for those bodies that have been policed, regulated and medicalized."[62]

I reject detrimental, deficit-focused modes of inquiry, as Chilisa advocates. These modes pathologize First Peoples. Instead, I engage in deliberate language

[61] Bauerkemper, "Introduction."

[62] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 270.

deconstruction and reconstruction, as advised by Smith, decolonizing and indigenizing myself and this project through the research process.

Similarities to other methodologies include, within the interpretive paradigm, the recognition of my subjective role as a researcher and my presence in and in relation to the research (also encouraged by Wilson). This includes acknowledging my: 1. Positivist and postpositivist tendencies, 2. Individual over relational biases, and 3. Individual hermeneutic style of reading performances, which includes switching mental lenses to ask how different audiences could read performances. In this last respect, my background growing up with my time divided between the conservative farming town on the Great Plains where my father practiced tribal and colonial law and the liberal tourist mecca in the Rocky Mountains where my mother's family ran an art gallery and worked in tribal mental health has imparted me with an aptitude for reading material from multiple perspectives simultaneously. Additionally, my research methodology embraces the transformative paradigm's optimism, believing that new tools for thinking and writing can empower communities to think about and represent themselves differently.[63] My methodology also employs (post)colonial Indigenous theory's advocacy for desire-based, community-serving research frameworks.[64]

Methodologies such as orientalism and those utilized in Black studies and feminist studies, which have been previously employed in the analysis of Indigenous work, are only cautiously borrowed from or examined for points of entry or departure. Black studies concepts of "other" and "darkness;" orientalist concepts of

[63] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 1-43.

[64] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 50.

the exotic erotic and de-sexualized Eastern masculinity; and feminist concepts of the male gaze, hegemonic depictions of women, questioning of appropriate gender roles, and resistance to heteropatriarchal violences are off particular interest. From an Indigenous research perspective, this can be difficult ground to tread as many of these concepts are rooted in the western tradition or of questionable appropriateness for applying to Indigenous matters. Such borrowing risks doing a disservice to the understanding and advancement of Indigenous methodologies. Since scholars have previously used these theories in examining Indigenous subjects, I will address these in the critical literature as they arise. The specificity of these methodologies, however, must be taken into account. Vital differences risk being washed out, concepts made to seem similar that can and do border-jump between fields. These concepts include diaspora (being taken from a homeland or being relocated within a homeland), commodification (bodies, symbols, and culture), and institutional racism (individual behavior and group sovereignty). Western feminism has been criticized for universalizing the experiences of white, middle-class, female-presenting people and erasing the specificity of non-western feminisms.[65] Problematic patriarchy, gender, and resistance to heteropatriarchal violences are not the same across cultures. The orientalist concept of feminizing Eastern (and perhaps also non-western) masculinity also warrants scrutiny as Native North American masculinity is highly diverse and has served the Euro-Western imagination to a variety of ends across time: as a legitimizing force, as an ideal, as a cautionary tale, as a threat, and as a justification for genocide.

[65] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 261.

For this project, the methodological archive informing the lens through which these works are viewed and analyzed is elastic and expanding, as is the archive of subject materials itself. Books and articles on Indigenous methodologies are included, but so are novels, poetry, film, oral sharing, and other forms of art, philosophy, and religion. Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (truths and ways of knowing) are not confined to books about theory, though recent years have seen a growing body of excellent books on and utilizing Indigenous theory. As one example of how knowledge is not confined to books, Vine Deloria Jr. details the differences between Native and Euro-Western paradigms, stressing the fundamental importance of space and place to Native North American religions.[66] To apply an Indigenous methodology and theory, I must spend time occupying the spaces in which Native cultural production, community building, and activism take place—spaces that are physical, virtual, written, built, and performed. The keys to Indigenous research are space and time.

[66] For a discussion of place-based religions, see Deloria, *God Is Red*.

Chapter 1

Native North American Dramatic Humor: Puppets, Star Trek, and Salients of Culture

> A: An American Indian, Native American, Indígena/o/x person, Native Hawaiian, Alaska Native, and First Nations person all walk into the first chapter of a dissertation.
> B: Then what happens?
> A: Happens? The dissertation happens, I guess.
> B: Yes, but what *else* happens?
> A: Else?
> B: Yes, what *else*?
> A: What do you mean?
> B: Well, what about the punchline?
> A: Punchline? What do you think this is? Some kind of joke?
>
> —Anonymous
>
> Me Funny
>
> —Drew Hayden Taylor, *Me Funny*[1]

Up near the border of now Canada, separated by Glacier National Park to the north and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation to the east, there is a mountainous region known as the Badger-Two Medicine. Flathead National Forest and the Bob Marshall Wilderness complete the borders of this largely roadless expanse of breathtaking Rocky Mountain wilderness. On the side of a frozen mountain of the Badger-Two Medicine, playwright Jason Grasl sets his play, *Lying with Badgers*. Partway up the mountain, inside a shipping container turned temporary wilderness lodge, Grasl's characters wrestle with questions of belonging, the sacred, and tradition as an early-season blizzard of supernatural green snow swirls outside.

[1] The full title is, *Me Funny: A far-reaching exploration of the HUMOUR, wittiness and repartee DOMINANT among the First Nations people of North America, as witnessed, experienced and CREATED DIRECTLY by themselves, and with the INCLUSION of outside but reputable sources necessarily familiar with the INDIGENOUS sense of humour as SEEN from an objective perspective.*

In the back of the Wells Fargo Theater at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles, California, at the February 2020 opening of the Native Voices production of *Lying with Badgers*, I thought of the Montana mountains of my home, the setting of the play. I remembered the bulbous silhouettes of pines laden with thick snow, the slick black of rocks frozen over with a clear sheen of ice, the groan of fresh powder settling under boots, and the sting in my nostrils of air cold enough to kill. I remember the euphoria of the first lungful of icy air, a Power in the life and death that hang intertwined, and I am reborn strong enough to survive there and fragile enough to die if I do not respect the land. I am reborn strong and fragile, just as I should be. I grew up on the other side of Glacier National Park from the Badger-Two Med, in the Flathead Valley and on down to the Flathead Indian Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. This is why I study Native North American drama, this play and others like it. To come home.

On the stage, in the Badger-Two Medicine, the snow glows green, and I know it is cold there. The characters on stage wrap up in winter coats and hats. When the prodigal son, Russell, goes outside with just a baseball cap on, I nod my head. Russell has been away from his home for many years. It is cold. He should be more careful, more respectful of the unpredictable Montana elements. He should wear a winter hat. He knows this. He wears the baseball cap anyway. Just like I have seen on other of Montana's manly men. There's a touch of arrogance in that choice, reasserting his belonging. He knows he can handle the cold. And he knows the difference between cold and dangerously cold: too cold for just a baseball cap.

I, too, have been away from my home for many years.

This chapter is about humor. *Lying with Badgers* is a comedy. Director and co-founder of the Native Voices theater troupe, Randy Reinholtz, reminds the audience of this in his welcome speech at the start of the show. He first acknowledges the traditional keepers of the land and any Elders in the room before saying that the play we are about to see is a comedy, so go ahead and laugh. It is not the first time I have heard such an introduction for a Native Voices production. I once asked Native Voices' Managing Producer Elisa Blandford why, at the start of Native Voices shows, the introducer makes such a point of telling the audience that the play contains funny material. Elisa explained that without the introduction, the audiences genuinely do not know they are allowed to laugh, that it is appropriate to do so. She alluded to a fear of seeming culturally insensitive.

That fear of seeming culturally insensitive, perhaps worrying that laughing at the play will be perceived by others as laughing at the people or their struggles, is just one reason audiences might not laugh at or might entirely miss the humor in Native North American drama. Celia Wren offers another reason as it speaks to Mary Kathryn Nagle's 2018 play, *Sovereignty*. The article begins by quoting a similar introduction: "'There's a lot of humor in the play. Don't be afraid to laugh,' artistic director Molly Smith said to spectators"[2] attending a pre-tech run-through of *Sovereignty*. Wren argues that aspects of the play make the need for an invitation to laugh understandable. These include the play's content: sexual assault, racial slurs, and a drunken brawl; "weighty themes: law, justice, politics, and the inherent rights of the Cherokee Nation;"[3] and the critical mission *Sovereignty* mounts: "an effort to

[2] Wren, "Law of Nations," 28.

[3] Wren, "Law of Nations," 28.

address and correct the culture's habit of ignoring, or at best misrepresenting, the Native American experience."[4]

In addition to these explanations, Wren describes *Sovereignty*'s directive in a way that gestures toward two more reasons audiences may not laugh at Native humor: misrepresentation and disregard. The ramifications of cultural misrepresentation, such as the stereotype of the stoic Indian brave (frozen in time and doomed to extinction), still pervade the mainstream North American psyche.[5] Mirjam Hirch observes that "for much of Canadian history, a stern, unyielding profile of the Indian dominated the popular imagination. Indians, it was believed, never laughed."[6] Somber and tragic, the stoic Indian is a fossil, a black hole for the aliveness, energy, and vitality shared by humor.

Wren's final reason, "disregard," deserves more critical attention than it has received and is perhaps the most crucial. One result of the insidious, colonial disregard to which colonizers have subjected Native North Americans is that a non-Native audience may not know Native humor is even a thing. Disregard is one of the more powerful and benignly cloaked tools perpetuating colonialism and racism today. Disappearing the ugliness of the ongoing colonial legacy is accomplished by disappearing the colonized and their daily, lived realities from the popular consciousness: simply ignoring them. This culturally ingrained forgetting becomes habitual and effortless for settler-colonial populations, creating effective blindness to the present presence of colonized peoples. Within such a blindness, the concept of

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[4] Wren, "Law of Nations," 28.

[5] Hirch, "Subversive Humour," 99.

[6] Hirch, "Subversive Humour," 104.

Native humor cannot be significant or trivial, masterful or sloppy, prevalent or sparse. It cannot be anything. How can it? Native humor does not exist, and, for that matter, neither do Native people who could author such comedy.

That is why this initiating chapter is about humor. No matter what other aspects of Native North American drama and performative interventions we discuss—ecology, sacred space, Tricksters who might not be tricksters, embodied sexualities, survivability, Native American religious traditions, or sacred power—we must not forget that Native North American drama is funny. Not every play is funny. And not all the jokes translate between Indigenous and settler-colonial cultures.[7] Noted storyteller Basil Johnston asserts that "too much of Indian humour rests in the language."[8] While disagreeing with Johnston that "too much" of the humor is untranslatable, Drew Hayden Taylor does "acknowledge that a different level of humour can be appreciated in the applicable indigenous tongue."[9] In this way, actual translation can be a barrier to conveying the presence and essence of Native humor in colonial languages.

To unpack a play like *Lying with Badgers*, we need to re-position ourselves within the Native American traditions and discourses from which the text emerges. Such an approach asks for both a grasp of Native American practices and an active debunking of certain assumptions and transactions that for a long time have shaped performance histories and research methodologies. Before engaging the play, we

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[7] For an in-depth discussion of Euro-Western research paradigms, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Future chapters will also discuss the concept of the Euro-West in greater detail.

[8] Taylor, "Introduction," 1.

[9] Taylor, "Introduction," 1.

must decolonize our gaze. Western-centric definitions of humor, genre, and storytelling tend to occlude and mistranslate Native American voices. Only after contesting these notions and assumptions can we listen deeply and attentively to *Lying with Badgers*.

Mistaken Translations: Cultural Filters and Western Impositions

A lack of translation, or rather filtered translation, is not exclusively a problem to be overcome. Filtered translation can also be by design. Native writers can incorporate subtext that is just for "Indian people," subtext designed to go unnoticed by white readers.[10] Humor in Native North American drama and performance ranges from the blatant and wildly physical to the exquisitely subtle and can include a liberal smattering of cultural inside jokes meant for select groups.

The disappearing of Native humor goes far beyond jokes getting lost in translation. Many crucial aspects of Native drama can be buried, contorted, and lost in Euro-Western academic analysis, including this defining characteristic fundamental to the nature of Native North American theater. Ongoing vectors in *Staging the Sacred* engage what is ignored, misunderstood, and misrepresented to understand why these inaccuracies—misprisions—occur and what can be done to correct the imbalances. The discerning application of principles of aliveness, decolonization, and indigenization resists colonial systems and their ongoing legacy. This legacy includes the literary and dramatic colonization that can occur when Euro-Western lenses are trained on Native drama, literature, and performance. For Indigenous peoples, asserting aliveness confronts the sapping extinction fallacy that

[10] Purdy, "Crossroads," 15.

has labeled them as primitive, anachronistic, and unsuited to modern life. Aliveness also troubles the persistent yet mythical "savage" of the European popular imagination.[11] According to Greek and Roman mythology scholar Elizabeth Vandiver, since at least Ancient Greece, Euro-Western cultures have had a habit of placing their monsters at the edges of their known world, like a cartographer's warning at the edge of an old map.[12] Once European explorers passed beyond the boundaries of the known, whatever or whoever they found in those unknown places, by their cultural logic, had to be monstrous. For Indigenous peoples, who are the majority of the peoples around the globe who inhabit those edges, asserting oneself as a living human being defies and destabilizes the lingering definition of indigeneity as exotic and monstrous. These colonial definitions and worldviews have been violently imposed on Indigenous lands and remain embedded in how colonial systems perpetuate themselves. Decolonial theory unmasks those embedded hegemonic systems. Indigenizing foregrounds Native North American ontologies, epistemologies, and experiences and, as such, becomes a tool to resist colonial erasure and persistent genocidal structures. Aliveness, decolonization, and indigenization are powerful tools for resisting the colonial machine, including violence inflicted by colonial criticism and how it can create alienation from Native North American drama, literature, and performative events. Without these tools, even the fundamental characteristics and defining nature of Native North American drama are far too often distorted.

[11] For a detailed discussion of savagery and the Euro-Western psychological need to know itself as civilized in opposition to a savage other, see Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*.

[12] Vandiver, "Lecture 24: From Ovid to the Stars," 22:59.

One example is the use of the term tragicomic, which scholars and critics have applied to Native North American literature and drama.[13] The use of the word, however, risks creating conflation and misinterpretation. Within its definition and history, the term tragicomedy does not merely refer to stories that are both sad and funny. Tragicomedy as a genre—its roots in Renaissance Italy and its heyday in Golden Age Spain—has a multicultural European genealogy and an entire set of genre conventions unique to itself. Specifically, tragicomedy defied the genre boundaries of both comedy and tragedy that were established dramatic conventions in classical drama. As such, a hallmark of tragicomedy is how it subverts the natural and social order. Before the rise of tragicomedy, tragedies were considered the proper genre for noble characters. As Aristotle famously explained in *Poetics*, from these plays were expected to arise pity and fear. By contrast, plays were considered comedies that tended to focus more on commoners, ended on an uplifting note (such as a wedding), and aroused amusement. Additional conventions separate these two genres at various times and across European cultures, but this definition of tragicomedy reveals its binaried origins.[14] In a tragicomedy, royals and commoners

[13] The term tragicomic has been applied to the works of Lynn Riggs, Hanay Geiogamah, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, and other Native North American playwrights and authors. The term has also been proposed in scholarship as a component of literary analysis and has been applied as a descriptor for types of Native North American literature, drama, and humor.

[14] As the terms tragicomedy and romance have been used interchangeably, it bears briefly touching on the romance genre. As with the term tragicomic, the romance genre has European historical associations, which include a set of defined European genre conventions. Like tragicomedy, these genre conventions and assumptions flatten nuance and create false comparisons (and false divisions) when uncritically applied to Native North American drama. Native drama does not have the same relationship to the European literary and dramatic traditions as works within the European romantic genre. The romance plays by Shakespeare provide one example. Speaking of Shakespeare's romances in his *Introduction to Shakespeare* course in the fall of 2021 at the University of California, Santa Barbara, James Kearney in his recorded, "Tempest lecture 1," notes several salient features of romances and ties these to tragicomedy: "The early modern genre of romance . . . [includes] adventure stories that often involve settings far removed from the ordinary . . . from day-to-day life. Stories that involve improbable incidents. Fantastic happenings. The marvelous. . . . Think knights and quests. Arthurian romances. Chivalric romance. . . . Or think islands and magic. The Odyssey.

could share the stage, turning the world topsy-turvy by allowing the two social classes to be co-players in the dramatic action. In that way and many others, tragicomedies defied their societies' "natural," institutionalized order.

Further subverting tragic and comic genre conventions, a tragicomedy may end tragically and even violently. Yet this tragic ending in a tragicomedy would transform, often through the power of God's divine plan or intervention, into an uplifting event. The death of Jesus Christ or a martyred saint is, in this way, tragicomic. Death comes to represent a victory over evil. The tragic event brings about a comic or happy ending, thus subverting the natural tragedy of death.

Native North American drama is not a deliberate upending of Aristotelian poetics, subverting Greek dramatic conventions, nature, or social class; nor does it grow out of an Italian Renaissance push toward greater realism.[15] Nor did Native North American drama grow to maturity in the way Spanish tragicomedy did, walking the literary knife's edge between supporting the Catholic church and dodging the censors of the Spanish Inquisition. Native North American drama is not an upending, deliberate or otherwise, of its own societies' natural or social order. More often, Native drama functions in a manner close to the opposite of that of tragicomedy, featuring the righting of order to restore balance.

And Shakespeare's romances would do without certain kinds of dramatic realism to tell stories that were closer to legend or myth, and in these plays Shakespeare returned again and again to themes concerning separation and reconciliation . . . exile and return, damnation and redemption, death and renewal. These are also called tragicomedies, and in these plays we often swerve from tragedy to comedy, move from the threat of death to some sort of rebirth or renewal." Though the terms tragicomedy and romance have been used interchangeably, like tragicomedies, belonging to the romance genre comprises much more than merely being a both tragic and humorous work.

[15] Muller, "Pee Jokes, the Italian Renaissance, Commedia Dell'Arte," 03:27.

Additionally, Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake note that, “Native poetics sharply contrast with the European Aristotelian tradition.”[16] North America's dramatic and literary traditions have their own histories, social systems, and religious traditions. To uncritically call Native North American drama tragicomic without decolonizing and indigenizing that concept risks inaccuracy and perpetuating distortion. This is an extension of what Paula Gunn Allen describes as “aesthetic colonization,” a toxic process that occurs when Euro-Western standards and critical traditions are applied to Indigenous art.[17] The term “tragicomic” shackles Native drama to a European tradition, incarcerates Native drama in European terms, and invites damaging conflation between the genre of tragicomedy and Native North American drama. It reenacts colonialism.

Native North American tragic and comedic elements serve their cultures in many ways tragedy and comedy serve other cultures. Ruth A. Dean observes, “Humor is a ubiquitous element in human interactions. It smoothes relationships, enhances communication, and assists with management of emotions."[18] In addition to these ubiquitous human functions of humor, the hundreds of original American Nations and tribes each layer on kaleidoscopes of culturally-centered meaning inherent to their distinct dramatic traditions. What is funny divides and joins people. Getting the joke without having it explained constitutes a bond.

Since indigeneity also means being of a place, Indigenous North American cultures require conversations that locate meaning through a keen awareness of

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[16] Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *Critical Companion*, 12.

[17] Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 3.

[18] Dean, "Native American Humor,” 62.

place. In many ways, the land and its ecosystems are the culture. The artistic, religious, and political significance of locations, objects, people, and more-than-human relatives are tied to many Indigenous cultures' deep awareness of their environment. This awareness is born of their shared experiences living in extended and sustainable relationships with their places for thousands of years. Arising from these extended relationships with place, platiality (a common characteristic of Native North American literature) calls for not the upending of the natural order but for this realm's restoration and renewal.[19] The Indigenous meaning of the term "natural order" does not have the same connotations of reaffirming social hierarchy associated with the tragicomic use of the term.

If Native North American drama is not tragicomic in the western sense, what is it? From an Indigenous perspective, one might ask: why pose that question? It is a typical western impulse to order the world by rigid categories. This method is intrinsically untoward to an Indigenous worldview that thrives on being in relationship. Therefore, perhaps more productive than asking what Native drama is would be to ask what it could be. As Diane Glancy puts it, what language can be stretched or pulled "until it becomes a transparency through which other things can be seen?"[20] Much of Native North American drama has tragic features. Tragedy features weighty issues such as violence, loss, and destruction. Native drama may or may not end in a happy or hopeful manner. Yet, even amid these serious themes,

[19] Platiality is one of Stanlake's four dramatic discourses of Native American dramaturgy. See Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, for a discussion of platial discourse in Native drama.

[20] Glancy, "Writings on the Process," 7.

Native drama does not adhere to western notions of tragedy proper.[21] Despite Native theater practitioners' ability to unflinchingly face tragedy (or perhaps, as many scholars, artists, and community members have noted, because of it), practitioners thickly lace their work with sarcasm, puns, irony, wit, bodily humor, wordplay, poking fun, slapstick, the absurd, and the raucous.

Laughter and Being Alive: Why Comic/Tragedy?

Laughter.

So much laughter it'll make your sides ache. So much laughter you'll feel human. Maybe you'll even *see* human. This humor is sparked on the dramatic tradition's own terms. The indigenous lineage and conventions of Native North American drama and performance, distinct from those of European-born genres, are the two main reasons that Native North American drama is not tragicomic but frequently is comic/tragic. The reordering and reconfiguration of the terms in this way, placing the comic before the tragic, serves several purposes. It resists the conflation of Native comic/tragedies with Euro-Western tragicomedies. The words are familiar enough that English speakers can get some basic sense of their meaning—there will be humor and hardship—but sufficiently unfamiliar to trouble a reader's assumption of understanding. The astute reader and listener will know what is the most difficult to know: that there are things they do not know.[22] This more

[21] See Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, for a discussion of misconceptions surrounding Native American literary genres and their connection to masculine and feminine Native literary traditions.

[22] The term must be different enough to assert its independence from existing categories and resist being conflated with established terms. Asking readers to keep in mind the differences, both significant and subtle, between tragicomedy and, for example, tragic comedy, would likely not prove sustainable.

demanding term collapses the distance between comedy and tragedy to deny binaries and abutments, to propose a holistic unity.

Comic/tragedy foregrounds Native North American drama's comedic aspects, which, due to all the barriers previously detailed, quite honestly needs all the help it can get. At the same time, the slash endeavors to set both terms apart from strictly Aristotelian comedy or tragedy, bringing these opposites together to share the same space while leaving room for each word to negotiate its own definition in relationship with the other. This sign marks intimacy.

Now that we have stretched language in this way, we can see what reveals itself through this linguistic transparency. We have the beginnings of the language we need to discuss how Native North American drama is not tragicomic but is prevalently, though by no means in flattening ubiquity, comic/tragic. With some knowledge of how the term tragicomedy risks doing a disservice to Indigenous North American drama, we can set that term aside and move into exploring comic/tragedy on its own terms. We can even, for a moment, travel forward in time to when the term comic/tragedy will lose its utility and dissolve into another existence. The term was born to assert the literary and dramatic sovereignty of one creative tradition from another, and the instruments of sovereignty, like the theater of vitality, must adapt.

Comic/tragedy is a contemporary, Native North American literary and dramatic genre with its roots and aesthetics in the historical and cultural legacies of North America's first Nations. As one prevalent stereotype of Native North Americans is the anachronistic savage, too primitive to survive in the modern world, before discussing those historical and cultural legacies, it is important to resist that

racist image by stressing that comic/tragedy is a present-day descriptor. Comic/tragedy describes the work of Native North American literary, theater, and performance practitioners from the contemporary Native theater movement, rising as self-identified from the late 1960s through the present.

In addition to being a contemporary descriptor, comic/tragedy as a genre is an outgrowth of and reflects Indigenous worldviews or, to borrow a term from Vandiver, "cast of mind." To introduce the concept of cultural cast of mind, Vandiver ruminates, "In the stories of Greco-Roman antiquity, I think we [referring to mainstream, Euro-American culture] have inherited not just stories but a whole cast of mind . . . an entire worldview that perhaps has more influence on us still than we often realize."[23] Vandiver offers an example, contrasting the Euro-Western cast of mind with those of other cultures:

> In my experience, and in the experience of most people I have talked to, classical myth is congenial in a way that the myths of many other cultures aren't. People who have turned from reading classical myth to reading the myth of, say, Navajo culture or ancient African cultures or many other cultures find that there is a kind of familiarity to classical myth that makes it immediately congenial in a way that the myths of other cultures are not.[24]

In contemplating why this is, Vandiver reasons, "I think that literature [inclusive of movies and TV, which have superseded books in our culture] does much more than merely entertain us. I think it's more important than that. In fact, it interacts with other areas of human endeavor to shape our entire worldview."[25] Vandiver observes that traditional stories a society tells itself about itself—part of Vandiver's definition

[23] Vandiver, "Lecture 24: From Ovid to the Stars," 19:46.

[24] Vandiver, "Lecture 24: From Ovid to the Stars," 18:29.

[25] Vandiver, "Lecture 24: From Ovid to the Stars," 20:24.

of myth[26]— interact with other areas of human endeavor. These stories shape a culture's worldview by placing cultural mythologies at the center of what propagates this worldview or paradigm, consequently giving rise to cast of mind.

I would like to explore an additional example that extends Vandiver's concept of cast of mind while also holding in tension that such categories can be fluid. Later in the same lecture, Vandiver discusses what she calls the myth-making impulse. She states that all societies create myths—asserting that all societies tell themselves stories about themselves encoded with information about that society. She believes that in modern Euro-Western culture, the myth-making impulse has turned toward the stars, toward science fiction as the place in which humanity now places its "monsters at the edges of the known," the new white space on the cartographer's map.[27]

Following Vandiver to the stars, we can take her cast of mind concept one step nerdier because one does not have to read far into Native drama and literature before one runs into futurisms and sci-fi, particularly Star Trek. In an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, Data explains that "all matter in the universe resonates at a quantum level with a unique signature. That signature is constant. It cannot be changed through any known process. It is the basic foundation of existence."[28] When Data discovers that Lieutenant Worf's quantum signature does not match that of the universe, it marks him as originating from another quantum universe. The Enterprise crew (the name of their iconic starship) thus discovers that a quantum

[26] Vandiver, "Lecture 1: Introduction," 08:30.

[27] Vandiver, "Lecture 24: From Ovid to the Stars," 22:58.

[28] Wiemer, "Parallels," 29:13.

fissure has caused a breakdown between parallel realities, and Worf has been shifting between those realities. The quantum fissure eventually sucks hundreds of Enterprise ships from alternate realities into the same universe. The crew must use Worf's quantum signature to locate his indigenous reality and send him back to seal the fissure.[29] In a similar example from another episode, Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge uses the fact that "all matter in space vibrates in a specific radiation band,"[30] to "sour" the energy that a life form feeding on the Enterprise is absorbing from the ship. La Forge changes the power frequency to one that is "completely foreign to the lifeform's natural vibrations,"[31] surmising that the creature will find the energy unpalatable and move on to other feeding sources. These examples highlight how vibration or resonance acts as a marker of belonging. To change the vibration or resonance of energy or matter is to mark it as belonging to a different universe. Cast of mind operates similarly. Vandiver points out that she and those she has spoken to do not resonate with Navajo or African mythologies. She resonates with Euro-Western mythology because that is her cast of mind. In essence, that is the frequency at which she vibrates, marking herself as both a product of and an entity belonging to the Euro-Western universe. But that is not the only universe, not for Vandiver, not for Star Trek, and not in a (post)colonial world. The conventions, aesthetics, and values of Native North American drama and performative interventions arise from and reflect Indigenous casts of mind, vibrate at those

[29] Wiemer, "Parallels."

[30] Kolbe, "Galaxy's Child," 39:22.

[31] Kolbe, "Galaxy's Child," 39:37.

frequencies, and resonate with others who vibrate on similar frequencies: the frequencies of Indigenous universes.

Talking About the Past: Historical Context and Contemporary Repercussions

Keeping our eyes on the contemporary—on the theater practitioners working on stages and in spaces across the North American continent today to create Native drama and performative interventions—let us now turn to the histories and development of those Indigenous casts of mind. As Rachel Adams and Mishuana Goeman point out,[32] maps are highly influential in conceptualizing, defining, and creating space. North America's first Nations of 500 years ago were diverse political bodies with various governing systems and complex international policies, including trade relationships that spanned the continent and diverse concepts of borders and homeland. This political complexity is mapped across the hemisphere—transformed by ecosystems, languages, and relationships (political alliances and hostilities). Some Nations contained robust urban centers and high multilingual concentrations while others coursed through vast tracts of rural grazing and generative rotations of agricultural land. There were cities and towns known as centers of trade, education, and the cultivation or creation of particular goods. Some remnants of national and international currencies and accounting systems still survive. There were also diverse performative traditions such as oral storytelling/history-telling, song (vocal and instrumental), dance, and ceremonies. In "Coyote Transforming," founding

[32] For a discussion of the power of mapping spaces, see Adams, *Continental Divides* and Goeman, *Mark My Words*.

contemporary Native North American theater figure Rolland Meinholtz, brings readers along on his journey to learn about a selection of these performative traditions and ancient theatrical structures, some of which still stand.[33]

In attempting to grasp the immense diversity of this continent, North America's linguistic tradition offers one salient comparison. Europe is currently home to 44 countries and 120 European languages. The vast majority of these belong to one linguistic "genetic group," Indo-European. By contrast, according to Indigenous North American languages expert Marianne Mithun, while there is no count of how many languages existed north of Mexico before European contact, and probably many languages disappeared before linguistic recordkeeping began, there are records of around 275 known, distinct Native languages belonging to approximately 55 linguistic, genetic groups. Including Mexico, the total number of North American languages reaches nearly 350. Mithun underscores this diversity by stating that these hundreds of languages belonging to dozens of genetic groups are "very, very different" from each other, comprising immense linguistic diversity.[34]

Linguistic diversity supplies some measure, a metric, of cultural diversity. Each language represents at least one cultural group of speakers: one empire, Nation, region, collection of related groups of people, or singular group. Language both carries and reflects culture. As such, in evocative essence, each language is a culture. Some spawn multiple cultures. The story of the complexity of the first Nations of this continent, as told through the medium of language diversity, staggers the imagination. The medium of population figures estimates that over one in ten of

[33] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming."

[34] Mithun, "The Language Paints Pictures," 18:45.

the human beings alive on the planet in 1491 lived in the Western Hemisphere proper (the hemisphere contained between the Earth's two largest oceans). That translates to approximately 11% of the world's people living on just under 30% of the world's land.[35] The Indigenous historical legacy is a composite of the living cultures and histories of hundreds of political entities spanning from the Arctic Circle to Antarctica and from ocean to shining ocean. This hemisphere's cultural, linguistic, political, and historical diversity is further complicated and enriched by each Nation's religious cosmology. The religious traditions of Indigenous North American peoples are multifarious, divergent, and convergent.

To complicate this legacy further, it bears repeating that scholars note Indigenous worldviews' tendency toward holistic and egalitarian paradigms.[36] Ordering the world by relationship rather than into categories can produce complex webs of knowledge rather than distinct fields of knowledge such as science, history, medicine, politics, and religion. One piece of information can function in all these ways at once. As such, the Indigenous legacy in this hemisphere faces significant challenges to being reliably or adequately understood through Euro-Western paradigms and knowledge systems. Attempting to do so can amount to comparing apples to orange helicopters. More insidiously, such practices have caused and continue to cause resonant harm to Indigenous peoples.[37] Part of decolonialism is the recognition, the naming, of such harmful practices. Part of indigenizing is the

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[35] Koch, Brierley, Maslin, and Lewis, "European colonization of the Americas."

[36] For a discussion on holistic and egalitarian features of Indigenous paradigms, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*.

[37] For a discussion on the harm caused to Indigenous peoples by the imposition of Euro-Western knowledge systems, see Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

cultivation and application of Indigenous practices to foster good outcomes for the People.

With so many different Nations' traditions contributing to the lineage of Native North American drama, making a definitive list of genre conventions risks being general and reductive. That said, scholars have noted similarities or prevailing commonalities between and among many Indigenous groups.[38] Living in a sustainable relationship with one's environment for thousands of years has the potential to replicate values across cultures, even when those environments and cultures—places—vary greatly. Yet, one must not assume that values like maintenance or kinship will mean the same thing or have the same importance to any two peoples. In addition, although colonialism went through many iterations, the experience of being colonized has also replicated many experiences for Indigenous peoples separated by space and time. Casting the colonial center or homeland as the epitome of civilization and the Nations to be colonized as primitive and savage—to be either civilized or destroyed—was a fatal feature cum plot of the colonial narrative. How "savage" was defined was likewise created in the colonial center and then exported to the Indigenous globe.[39] A shared need to sustainably survive for thousands of years in a place; a shared exchange of knowledges and goods; and a shared struggle against ongoing genocide unite the peoples of Native North America albeit to varying degrees. As such, Native North American literature displays some commonalities. Notably, seemingly similar features may function

[38] For a discussion on certain similarities or prevalences among Indigenous wordviews, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, and Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.

[39] For a discussion on the development of the Euro-Western colonial concepts of savage and civilized, see Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*.

entirely differently from one culture to another. There is no single set of symbols or codes. For western culture, as Vandiver points out, snakes symbolize evil within the Christian, Euro-American worldview. In the biblical creation story, a snake tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. Yet, in classical mythology, dead heroes could appear as snakes to worshipers at that hero's shrine. Snakes in Greek culture often were positive symbols.[40] Symbolic meaning cannot be transposed from one culture to another, not from Euro-Western to Indigenous cultures or between Indigenous cultures.

Even within a culture, one cannot assume the presence of symbolic meaning. Playwright Drew Hayden Taylor discusses this as a monitory prospect as he faces literary interpretations of his own work. Taylor shares how one piece of scholarship about his plays incorrectly interpreted the presence of a regular crow as a deity: Nanabush in crow form. Taylor warns against the impulse in literary analysis that would have scholars assuming every crow is Nanabush, underscoring his point by free-styling Freud's assertion that "sometimes a cigar is just a good smoke."[41] The diversity of symbol systems and the potential for misinterpreting symbols further complicates the identification of conventions for this archive that draws from diverse literary and cultural traditions.

In the assertion that Native North American drama has its roots in diverse Native North American performative traditions and must be read as belonging to those traditions, it is impossible to ignore the influence of Euro-Western theater, film, literature, or advertisement on Native theater. Euro-Western cultural

[40] Vandiver, "Lecture 3: Why is Myth?" 21:49.

[41] Taylor, "There's a Trickster."

influences have been an imposing force on this continent for hundreds of years. Native theater is scripted primarily in English, following the formatting conventions for western plays. Performances in the main take place on western-style stages and include costuming, lights, props, and directors. Native theater is recognizably "theater" in the Euro-Western sense. Separating these very real influences of the Euro-West from its own ego on the subject—from it casting itself as the civilized center from which flows all culture, innovation, correct values, and progress—becomes another challenge, another area in need of critique and conscious, unforced decolonization.

Western civilization credits itself with the invention of theater via Greek performative traditions. It is a great origin story. During a Greek religious ritual involving a chorus, one man, Thespis, stepped out from the chorus to stand alone. With this simple act, the Greek theatrical tradition was born. All those following in Thespis's footsteps are called "thespians" in his honor. Despite how great the story is and how well it reflects the Euro-Western story value of heroic individualism, the Greeks did not invent the relational activity of people stepping out in front of others for some communicative, symbolic, or ceremonial purpose. Other cultures across the globe participated in similar relational events. Yet, when colonialism intervenes, the histories of those performative traditions must overcome multifarious forms of colonial silencing to be told. Colonialism and genocide included deliberate cultural eradication by forbidding and outlawing Indigenous practices, introducing colonizer languages, and enforcing assimilative conventions. The Religious Crimes Code of 1883 criminalized dancing, ceremonies, and other religious practices as imprisonable acts until 1978. Such forbidding and outlawing also heavily impacted

literary and performative activities such as drama. Life is transformation: surviving genocide leaves scars.

In addition to introducing western literary and performance forms, another mark of genocidal convention is the dominance of European-style performance structures, designed to facilitate recognizable performance modes that conform. Colonialism has literally set the stage. Indigeneity is permitted to perform itself at the behest of these Euro-Western conventions. Dylan Robinson exposes this colonial distortion of the "experience of Indigenous participation in classical and new music."[42] Of inclusionary music performance, Robinson observes:

> "They may demonstrate a sharing of space—a visual and kinetic intermingling of bodies on stage, an acoustic blending of musics, or a mixed use of languages—but this integration often remains premised on finding a way to 'fit' Indigenous musicians into Western paradigms of performance. In such performance, the fundamental tenets of Western musical genres and form remain intact, thereby reinforcing settler structural logic: the structure of the aesthetic might be enriched by *other* sights and sounds without unsettling the worldview it supports. In so doing, inclusionary performances often make space for and accommodate Indigenous cultural expression while enervating Indigenous political and cultural impact."[43]

Similar issues arise for Native drama. Native characters or plays may be "fit" into plays or seasons that are striving toward greater inclusion or multiculturalism. Native designs, imagery, or "legends" of questionable or non-existent veracity may add depth and color to Euro-Western drama. Even Native plays and theatre troupes producing their own work often do so in connection to, with support from, or within theatrical spaces controlled by Euro-Western organizations or designed to western specifications. Performance spaces are highly culturally inflected places that frame

[42] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 8.

[43] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 8-9.

performances and dictate how people encounter one another, and even how they encounter themselves, within the context of any given performance. As Robinson asserts, "the fundamental tenets of Western [performance] . . . remain intact, . . . reinforcing settler structural logic."[44] These are not ubiquitous conditions that subsume Native drama but are a collection of forces that operate to varying degrees among, through, and adjacent to Indigenous artistic forms. The work of Native artists, scholars, and practitioners toward greater sovereignty and self-determination—the work of decolonizing and indigenizing—are generative forces in serious play within Native artistic contexts.

Regardless of the forces impacting Native art, Native art is still Native art. Again, this is often as much because of these forces as despite them. As with many aspects of contemporary Native North American life—Native drama as well—the decolonizing and indigenizing work of anticolonialism is a process, not a singular state or task. Colonialism and its systems perpetuate themselves. So too must the work of decolonizing and indigenizing be taken up repeatedly and anew: in setting one's frame of mind to do good work, in choosing one's language, in connecting with community, in creating stories, in opening and reopening paths toward expanding relationality. Each motion gestures toward accretive transformation. There is no single, colonized, Native theater. There is no tainted or distorted version of a pure, traditional Native performative tradition that existed in 1491. Acknowledging the ongoing racist systems that continue to impact Indigenous lives is different from giving authorial credit to European colonial powers for inspiring or fathering Native

[44] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 8.

drama. For over 450 years,[45] the European dramatic tradition and the Indigenous American dramatic tradition have shared proximity in the American hemisphere. That proximity shaped the dramatic, literary, and artistic traditions. Genocide has been perpetrated by one society on the other, which has also shaped those traditions. Euro-Western style theaters are often utilized for Native performances, due in no small part to the cost of constructing a performance space, which inflects those performances. Euro-Western and Indigenous American traditions have been shaped in other ways as well: by colonists borrowing characters, images, and concepts from Native peoples to assert their own difference from European-born Europeans; by the Euro-Western style education still being imposed on Native peoples; by Native peoples employing Euro-Western drama and literature to speak back to colonial powers; and in a host of various cultural exchanges.[46]

Deep History as the Foundations of Religious Traditions

Let us return now to the past. Let's talk about a garden. This garden existed somewhere in the Middle East about 6,000 years ago. Judeo-Christian mythology preaches that a man and a woman did something inexcusable in that garden (nothing particularly entertaining that we might enjoy hearing about). They learned good from evil, learned to be ashamed of themselves and their bodies, and were expelled into a world of hardship, curses, and punishment. Since that moment of expulsion, Adam and Eve never again enjoyed the same relationship with or access

[45] Wilmeth and Curley, "Timeline: Beginnings to 1870," 22.

[46] Although there have been mutual points and nodes of influence between Native North American and colonial dramatic traditions, the vast majority filtered through radically asymmetrical power dynamics, it is not the work of this project to do a deep dive into European colonial influence. I leave to others the work of adding to that body of scholarship.

to their god that they once had. Man must toil. Woman must labor. Thus, the world of that society and how it functions are explained and codified. At least 10,000 years ago, perhaps very much further back depending on your worldview, famed First Nations playwright Tomson Highway tells us that there was another garden: the part of the map we now call America. One key difference between that garden and the one in the Middle East is that there was no divine expulsion from this other garden. Highway contends:

> There is no such story of eviction from any garden in the mythology of the Indian people of North America—one definition of the term 'mythology' being 'the sacred stories of a people'—and it therefore follows that . . . we are still inside [the garden].[47]

The broader ramifications for a civilization cast out of paradise into a world of sin, shame, and death versus a civilization that has not will precipitate vast differences in worldview and religious practice. Such religious differences can inflect every social system in strikingly different ways.[48] What this means for our discussion of drama is two things: 1. Comic/tragedy may, in many ways, still be in the garden and, 2. Depending on culture, there may be little to no separation between when the gods/god walked with us in the garden and today. Though comic/tragedy never left the garden, missionization has imposed "sin" as a feature of colonialism. Indigenous cultures have had and continue to have standards of proper behavior. Still, those standards are diverse, individual to each culture, and have complex and often violent contentions with western morality. Also, if the gods/god still walk with us, there is

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[47] Highway, "Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages," 38.

[48] Some of these religious differences will be discussed more in chapter four. For a discussion on how fundamental differences can have broad impacts across societies, such as the central importance of place and time to Native North American and Euro-Western religions, see Deloria, *God is Red*.

no separation between an “age of miracles” and a scientifically explainable, mundane age. In line with that legacy, Christianity acknowledges a distinction between a time of walking in the garden with God to a time of toiling for food and progeny. There is a further distinction between the time of prophets, during which miracles and visits from divine beings were more commonplace and grandiose, as opposed to the exceedingly rare and relatively subtle divine interventions of today. If there is no such division for many Indigenous religious traditions, then divine power can be free to function as it always has. Dramatic, literary, and artistic manifestations of divine power are then distinct from magical realism, reflecting a worldview in which sacred power can be mobilized for transformation. This capacity for transformation could be partly attributed to a lack of division in time/history and partly due to a lack of division between what the Euro-West would call the sacred and the secular. In many Native North American religious traditions, sacred power is possessed to varying degrees by all of creation. Within such a cosmology, no part of the universe is devoid of sacred power, energy, or life force. Yet, some locations, objects, or circumstances may still be more sacred, possessing greater Power. Grant Bulltail, elder pipe lighter, describes this concept: "We feel that there are places that are located on the earth that have special power that when the Creator created the earth he went along and created things. And when you carry a cup of water, no matter how careful you are you’re going to spill some.”[49] Depending on the specific religious tradition, there are also circumstances in which sacred power can be gathered, mobilized, or accessed to effect an outcome or transformation.

[49] Keller, “Indigenous Studies and ‘the Sacred,’” 88.

An additional feature of Native North American drama, and comic/tragedy specifically, is that the work grows from Indigenous paradigms, which maintain different relationships to time and space and tend to be more holistic and egalitarian. Categories are permeable and cloud-like rather than rigid, allowing for the recognition of the vast interconnectivity of life. Language, culture, and thought are thereby capable of entertaining a complexity that defies binary or hierarchical organization.

A strong sense of community responsibility is present in Native drama, including responsibilities surrounding the preparatory processes and lasting impacts of dramatic or performative relational interactions.[50] This impulse is what Hanay Geiogamah calls survivability. One aspect of community responsibility is the responsibility to situate oneself—as a scholar, researcher, theater practitioner, and human being—in relationship to various personal, kinship, platial, and academic communities. This responsibility stands in stark contrast and even defies the still-current scholarly standard of objective research in traditional academic disciplines. I have been told in Euro-Western academia that it should not matter who you are for what you study.[51] Such a stance fails to account for how one's relationality impacts one's academic work. Some fields still espouse the virtues of objective study, lest the researcher impacts the outcome of their project. Others have begun to notice and acknowledge ways in which objectivity, both as it is idealized and as it has been

[50] This will be discussed further in chapter four.

[51] I have chosen not to attribute this quote. In community spaces, I have shared and listened to others share challenges they have faced with racism, and often the perpetrators are not named. Such sharing is for support and to illustrate the nature of what must be addressed, not to call out individuals who, well-meaning or not, are operating from and perpetuating colonialist ideologies.

implemented, fails to broach its own vaunted objectivity. The myriad biases in research questions and testing procedures, the inequalities caused by the researchers' status, the colonial stage set by the processes, and the fundamental assumptions held by colonial institutions and academic fields are revealing that objectivity up to the standard of the Euro-Western ideal is not only impossible but also undesirable, as Indigenous studies maintains. Eber Hampton calls objectivity in research "a goddamn lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people."[52] Indigenous studies does not require researchers/partners to attempt the exercise in futility that is objective research. Instead, the standard of the field requires that one's position be highly contextualized, connected, and transparent within the research or project. Unlike objectivity, accountability is possible. Indigenous casts of mind favoring accountability function in Native North American drama and performative relationality.

Finally, the comic/tragedy genre operates by Indigenous story principles, including storytelling, oral tradition, storying, and tribalography.[53] Native North American drama is the story.[54] Story is important to discussions of Native drama because, as playwright, critic, and author LeAnne Howe writes of her work, "I am consciously using the terms story, fiction, history, and play interchangeably because I am from a culture that views these things as an integrated whole rather than

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[52] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 100.

[53] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 109.

[54] For additional discussion on features of Native drama, see Stanlake's four dramaturgical discourses as discussed in *Native American Drama*.

individual parts."[55] Howe's insight illustrates how the holistic tendencies function within her specific culture. By Howe's definition, to discuss Native drama is to discuss Native story. Indigenous scholars such as Thomas King, LeAnne Howe, Diane Glancy, Leslie Marmon Silko, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and others have explored the nature and functions of Native stories. Stories have transformative power and sacred potential, serve educational and governing purposes, carry history, communicate social and moral imperatives, have healing properties, and create and renew everything from kinship relationships to the fabric of the universe. Stories do many, many things. As Howe writes, "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes."[56]

To summarize, comic/tragedy is a genre of Native North American theater and performative events comprised of contemporary works in which comedy and tragedy move together, often in quick succession or as "one swift impulse."[57] Both comedy and tragedy are of central significance to the action of the work. Comic/tragic works belong to the Native North American performative tradition. As such, the conventions, aesthetics, and values of comic/tragedy—as with Native drama in general—arise from and reflect Indigenous worldviews or "casts of mind," which tend to be holistic, relational, and egalitarian with cloud-like rather than rigid categories that are capable of entertaining complexity that defies binary or hierarchical organization. The works possess culturally specific symbol systems, relationships to space, and relationships to time—often circular or cyclical.

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[55] Howe, "Tribalography," 18.

[56] Howe, "Tribalography," 18.

[57] Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 2.

Comic/tragedy is in many ways "still in the garden" (has never been expelled from paradise into a world of sin and atonement) in which divine power is capable of functioning as it always has (little separation between an age of miracles, so to speak, and a mundane age). These works have, however, been impacted by colonialism and missionization in various culturally specific ways, frequently and fervently resisting those systems. Imbued with an abiding sense of community responsibility and operating by Indigenous story principles, comic/tragedy—like Native drama—both responds to and shapes its universe. This discussion of Native North American comic/tragedy characteristics is offered to sketch some of the salient features of the genre without foreclosing elasticity and permeability.[58] Finally, to reiterate, comic/tragedy makes liberal use of Native humor, with all the attendant challenges and complications of laughing in the face of, despite, because of, within, over, under, around, through, and against colonialism.

When Mountains are Medicine: Cultural Salients of Humor

Native humor faces and pushes against colonial efforts to invisibilize it, general settler-colonial disregard, and misrepresentation and stereotypes of Native peoples. Native humor can be lost in translation, literally and by design. And even when the humor is not lost, it must often transcend the rest of a play's serious content, weighty themes, crucial mission, and mixed or Euro-Western audience fear of seeming culturally insensitive to land those big belly laughs. Why these expectations must be transcended, why the tragic and the comic cannot simply walk

[58] This is not an exhaustive list of the characteristics of the Native North American dramatic tradition. Nor could it or should it be. The growth and transformation of a genre like comic/tragedy, and much more of an entire cultural tradition like Native North American drama, is fundamental to its continued contemporaneity and vitality.

hand in hand, is largely due to the imposition of western aesthetic conventions onto Native drama. It is essential to recognize the distinct history, complexity, and functions of American literary traditions, to recognize that Native dramatic works belong to their own diverse traditions and have their own genre conventions that must be broached through culturally and platially specific methodologies. Although Euro-Western and American drama have existed in close proximity, resulting in transfer, influence, and appropriation, Native playwrights and theater practitioners often decolonize and indigenize their work. This process utilizes Native aesthetics, dramatic conventions, worldviews, casts of mind, and source material from one's lived experiences and cultural traditions—venturing this while existing through and resisting from within the ongoing colonial project. Existence in the face of genocide is in itself an act of resistance. Likewise, persistence is resistance. In creating these dramatic works, Native spaces are created and intimated. As Laura Harjo states of Mvskoke poets, artists, dancers, musicians, and singers, wherever a cultural "practitioner performs knowledge production; . . . they are producing Mvskoke space."[59] Such spaces have transformative and healing potential.[60]

As we discuss what humor reveals in the works of playwrights like Jason Grasl, we must remember that these plays are funny. Native humor survives, exists, and resists. It is a coping mechanism. It asserts belonging and carries coded messages meant for intimate converse. Humor—getting it— smooths relationships, enhances communication, and assists with the management of emotions.[61] Humor

[59] Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars*, 87.

[60] The creation of sacred space in Native drama will be discussed further in chapter three.

[61] Dean, "Native American Humor," 62.

shared asserts aliveness and vitality. And, far from the least of these, Native humor strives to make people laugh. Yet, Native humor does much more as well. We are now ready to explore the *more* of Native humor.

Let us return to *Lying with Badgers* and the Badger-Two Medicine. In a converted shipping container turned temporary wilderness lodge halfway up a sacred mountain in the Badger-Two Medicine, two long-separated brothers, Asher and Russell, are brought together by the death of their father after fifteen years. Both were trained in traditional Blackfeet knowledges and practices by their father, a Blackfeet Ni-namp-skan, also referred to in the play as a medicine man, and the leader of the tribe's religious Horn Society. Their father has requested that his sons bury him in the traditional Blackfeet manner, although the practice is long out of use. He has also requested that outsiders witness the ceremony. The father made this unusual and potentially sacrilegious request for two reasons: to show the world how the Badger-Two Medicine is crucial to Blackfeet religious traditions and to demonstrate that the sacred ways and lands of the Blackfeet are worth protecting from the ongoing extraction efforts by oil companies. The older brother, Russell, has abandoned his family, tribe, and training for a life as a Hollywood survival coordinator, leaving his younger brother, Asher, to take up the responsibility of succeeding their father as a Ni-namp-skan. Yet Russell is bothered by Asher's changes to the tribe's religious practices. Asher has set up a wilderness lodge for outsiders on sacred land, an area where permanent structures are prohibited. The purpose of the lodge is to let outsiders view ceremonies and to teach them Blackfeet knowledge and skills. Asher is convinced that his actions violate neither the letter nor the spirit of Blackfeet religious traditions. He is confident that these changes are

what their father wanted, that the Horn Society supports his actions, and that the sharing of Blackfeet lifeways is essential to the continuation of Blackfeet culture and protection of sacred land.

Lying With Badgers is based in part on the ongoing efforts of the Blackfeet to protect their sacred sites in Montana from oil company extraction. As such, the themes of religion, ecology, protocol, respect, death, and grief—all precipitant and weighty—take on additional urgency. These are pressing, real-world concerns for the Blackfeet Nation. Concomitant with the gravity of the themes, as the play opens, we learn that Asher has stored his father's body in the wilderness lodge's deep freeze. The men lose their father's body during the burial and cannot get it back until a bear comes to help them. A dead fox's artery is nicked during butchering and, as blood squirts everywhere, the spirit of the dead fox screams, "Oh the humanity!"[62] The animal spirits tease, taunt, and complain to the humans when something is not done to their liking. Although human characters contribute physical humor and innuendo, most of the play's humor originates from the animal spirit characters. Elder brother Russell plays the harassed, "straight man," as it is called in vaudeville, to their antics. The presence, nature, and functions of comedy in *Lying with Badgers* each have something to reveal about the Indigenous worldview expressed by the play and about the transformative potential of Native North American drama.

After of the performance of *Lying with Badgers*, playwright Jason Grasl and Director and Producing Artistic Director Randy Reinholz, took audience questions on various aspects of the performance, the play's themes, and the intricacies of

[62] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 27.

staging Native theater. In response to one question, Reinholtz shared insight on Native comedy. The humor, he shared, reveals the culture. What then does the humor in *Lying with Badgers* reveal about the culture of the play, the wider world in which it operates, and the nature of transformation? In *Lying with Badgers*, humor reveals culture, as Reinholtz avers. The humor of the play is connected to kinship and belonging: this humor is often sexual and reveals throughout the play that the sacred can also be hysterical. First and foremost, the play's humor is an assertion of aliveness. Within a colonial system built on destruction and genocide, being alive—asserting aliveness, continuation, and even joy—is as radical as performative presence can be, particularly in a play where even the dead complain: "Oh, Humans."

Funny, Sexy, Sacred: The Radical Humor of *Lying with Badgers*

ASHER
Center room is mine and Maggie's. You can have the one on either side.

CRYSTAL
Behind the curtain? How come I don't get a door like your room?

ASHER
It's a sliding door and you'll be fine in your room.

MAGGIE
(innuendo)
These dividers are surprisingly sound proof.[63]

Although chapter three discusses the intersection of humor and sexuality at greater length, sexuality and sacrality comprise primary sources of humor in *Lying with Badgers*. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to discuss the humor of the play without discussing the prevalent sacred and sexual themes. A telling moment of the

[63] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 8.

connection between sacrality and sexual humor comes in how Grasl describes three of his supernatural characters, Fox, Badger #1, and Badger #2. Each character description calls them "a puppeted animal spirit."[64] These characters are presented by the world of the play as supernatural creatures in how they interact with human characters, control aspects of their environment, and work to restore spiritual balance. When Grasl describes the first of his sacred characters, "Fox," as "nurturing, but sarcastic,"[65] he effectively ties sacrality and humor as concomitant features within the play. Grasl introduces another crucial feature of the play in his description of the second animal spirit character, Badger #1, who Grasl calls "sensual and saucy."[66] This character, a far more present and active figure than Fox, serves a spiritual function within the action of the play (creating or changing weather and altering the appearance of the physical world) but also acclaimed "saucy" and "sensual" comedic functions. In describing the third animal spirit, Badger #2, Grasl writes, "Twin of Badger #1."[67] Whether Grasl intends the character to merely mirror Badger #1 in appearance while serving a different dramatic function, such as a straight man, or whether Grasl intends Badger #2 also to be Badger #1's twin in sensuality and sauciness, he does not specify. Regardless, the description of Badger #2 underscores the features of the first two animal spirits (nurturing, sarcastic, sensual, and saucy) if in no other way than that Badger #2's description does not

[64] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, ii.

[65] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, ii.

[66] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, ii.

[67] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, ii.

detract from the stated features of the first two, especially underscoring those of Badger #1 as a twin to sensuality and sauciness.

In the Native Voices 2020 production, the three smallest animal spirits, Fox, Badger #1, and Badger #2, were portrayed as puppets carried by actors who spoke each animal's lines. The design of the animal spirit puppets skewed toward the cartoonish rather than the realistic, with exaggerated features to highlight the comedic role of these characters. The first time the puppets enter, Grasl's stage directions for the design of the puppets and the scene highlight the coming together of supernatural/sacred and comedic elements:

> Overall appearance should be both amusing and scary at the same time. Think Corpse Bride or Coraline meets Animaniacs. The tableau should look and also feel a lot like Mystery Science Theatre 3000.[68]

Indeed, in Mystery Science Theater 3000-style, when Badger #1 and Badger #2 appear in the first scene during Russell's Ni-namp-skan training, they approach with their backs to the audience. They watch and comment in cartoony voices as if they were irreverent audience members during Russell's lesson and his subsequent cultural/spiritual transgression. The audience, however, sees the puppets lit only in silhouette. This scene is weighty, showcasing spiritual gravity and grueling training to such an extent that Russell later refers to aspects of the Ni-namp-skan training as abuse. Meanwhile, the animal spirits provide levity, context, and purpose to the scene through their humorous personalities and comments. From the play's very first scene, humor and the sacred coexist, interact, and inflect one another.

[68] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 1.

Beyond the animal spirits' descriptions and stage personalities, Grasl also manifests the animal spirits' character traits in the text and performance of the play in tangible, practical ways. Before the audience is introduced to Fox as an animal spirit character, we see Russell carry Fox's realistic, physical carcass on stage. Yet, Fox's supernatural status is alluded to by his behavior immediately preceding his death, which Russell recounts for Asher:

ASHER
That was quick. You were only gone, what hour, hour and a half?

RUSSELL
In this storm you'd think it would take longer: after-dusk, fifteen-twenty feet visibility. But I could see tons of tracks, fresh ones. I even thought there were some animals tracking me. That's how I caught this one.

ASHER
This fox was stalking you.

RUSSELL
Trap wasn't set more than five minutes. Probably watched me set it, then it's like he simply walked into…and then…*(trails off)*

ASHER
What?

RUSSELL
…the snow. It doesn't look weird?

ASHER
What?

RUSSELL
Doesn't look green to you?

ASHER
No *(opens the door to prove it)*. Pure white.[69]

Unlike the Badgers, who make a partially obscured appearance in the play's opening scene, the audience does not see Fox until Russell carries the realistic and

[69] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 23.

often obscured fox carcass on stage. The puppet version of Fox in animal spirit form, which only Russell can see, appears shortly thereafter. Russell's refusal to answer a question as to why he abandoned Ni-namp-skan training prompts Fox's entrance:

TARA
So why didn't you stay and follow in your dad's footsteps?

RUSSELL
Stay focused on [skinning] that fox.

Ethereal sound. A Fox puppet appears. Operated but voiced distinctly differently, by the actor playing Father.

FOX
Stay focused on her question.

Russell does a double take.[70]

In the scene, Asher teaches animal skinning to Tara Torres, a movie star researching an acting role as a guest of the Blackfeet Spiritual and Educational Lodge. Meanwhile, Fox looks on and comments to Russell on Tara's progress butchering his body, stating, "I really don't want to be a waste of 'me-meat'. How about you pay attention to her? She's bound to make a mistake.?"[71] Fox also attempts to cajole Russell to come clean to his brother about the real reason he left the Blackfeet community fifteen years prior, with comments such as, "Why did you run away!! Jeez!"[72] and "Ahem. You were saying?"[73] In addition to speaking to Russell, Fox also appears to have the power to influence human behavior. Among the human characters who cannot see or hear Fox, his very presence seems to pull their

[70] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 26.

[71] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 27.

[72] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 27. Also note, jeez is a euphemism for the profanity, Jesus.

[73] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 27.

conversation again and again to the topic of Russell's abrupt departure. Three times Fox and Tara speak simultaneously for comedic effect, yet it seems that Fox is also influencing her. In the first instance, they both react to a mistake Tara makes during butchering:

> As Tara asks this, she cuts too deep and blood spurts out and splatters on her. The fox reacts.
>
> TARA
> Oh God. It's getting all over.
>
> FOX
> Oh God. It's getting all over. *
>
> FOX
> What'd I tell ya? Oh the humanity![74]

In the second instance, Fox tries yet again to convince Russell to reveal to Asher and Tara the full nature of his transgression, his secret reason for leaving.

> FOX
> Told ya…Now, I would just…
>
> FOX
> REALLY LOVE IT IF YOU WOULD TELL EVERYONE YOUR STORY!!!
>
> TARA
> I really want to hear your story.
>
> ASHER
> You wanna go wash [the fox blood] off first?
>
> TARA
> No. I'm good. Russell?
>
> Beat.
>
> FOX
> Get on with it!!![75]

In the third instance, both Fox and Tara prod Russell to explain an aspect of Blackfeet religious tradition.

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[74] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 27.

[75] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 28.

RUSSELL
Whatever…*Ahkoyinnimaan*, the pipe, isn't here, is it?

ASHER
No, it's packed away in my room. I said bear already, remember?

FOX
Hmm?

TARA
What? *

ASHER
You gonna explain it?

RUSSELL
Why don't you? You're the leader now, right?[76]

Tara and Fox's shared interest in Russell's mention of the sacred pipe and the word bear underscores their unity and Tara's function in the scene as Fox's puppet. She unknowingly cajoles Russell in the visible realm, where Russell must respond to her, even while Fox cajoles Russell from the invisible realm, giving Russell's mind no haven to retreat from his past. Later in the scene, when Tara asks a question about Blackfeet religious traditions that directly relates to Russell's reason for leaving, Fox's influence over her is further underscored as Fox denies influencing that particular comment:

ASHER
--That's why you ran away, right? The bear thing?

RUSSELL
Huh?

ASHER
With the pipe…

RUSSELL
Yeah. That.

[76] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 29.

TARA
What's the bear thing with the pipe?

Russell looks to the Fox.

FOX
I swear. I'm not making her ask.[77]

Fox is a humorous character—sarcastic, as his character description states. Yet, Fox is also nurturing. Fox's goal, after all, is not merely to harass Russell but to guide him toward an admission of his actions, allowing him to rectify the spiritual imbalance he caused fifteen years prior when he broke the agreement between humans and bears by killing and eating a hibernating bear. The animal spirits recognize that restoring the balance will benefit Russell in addition to the other humans of the play and all the entities of the visible and invisible realms. Fox shows his nurturing side when he underscores an olive branch Asher offers Russell:

ASHER
Russ, you don't have to run away from this anymore. We accept you.

FOX
[to Russell]
He's got a point.[78]

From the moment Fox appears on stage, he has a purpose. Fox's character traits work together toward that purpose, the animal spirits' ultimate goal of restoring the balance that Russell upset through his actions and subsequent departure. Fox is a formidable animal spirit, seemingly influencing Tara Torres and leaving no doubt as to what Russell must face to restore the spiritual balance. Fox's primary motivation throughout the scene is to get Russell to be honest about what

[77] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 28-29.

[78] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 29.

happened after he said bear in front of the sacred pipe and was sent alone to the frozen mountains to atone for his transgression. Fox encourages Russell, saying, "There you go,"[79] when Russell finally begins to tell the story. Fox's comedic antics throughout this scene, his main scene in the play, work toward a spiritual function. Fox uses humor to thoroughly unsettle Russell as a component of his spiritual journey. Russell maintains throughout the play that he has atoned for his error without ever admitting his second transgression, killing and eating a hibernating bear. During a later scene with the Badgers, Russell exclaims, "No. I'm frustrated, because I atoned for saying, you know, 'bear'. So I don't know what you two are even doing here!?"[80] He denies, even to himself at times, the full gravity of his transgression. Yet, he recognizes immediately and without explanation that the reason for the Badgers' appearance must be connected to Fox's appearance: his atonement for a violation of Blackfeet religious principles and lifeways.

The Badgers do not appear directly to Russell until nearly three-quarters of the way through the play, but they directly and indirectly influence the humas throughout. In the first scene, Russell's father directs him to atone for his initial transgression with a flesh sacrifice, a period of fasting alone in the winter wilderness. Russell's father then makes supplication to Creator for Russell's protection.

FATHER

Leave this place and go to our sacred grounds. Do not come down until you have atoned for your mistake. It is, *Aatsimapi*, a sacred creature, and we must treat it with *liko'to'tamapiwa*, reverence.

TEENAGE MALE
(looking away/scared)

Please father, no. I'm so sorry.

[79] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 32.

[80] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 73.

FATHER
Learn to act like a *Ni-namp-skan* and look your fear in the eye.

The Teenager exits.

FATHER
Creator. Help my son. He lacks focus and discipline.
(beat)
Please, watch over him. Give him the vision he needs, protect him on his flesh sacrifice—

BADGER #1
--That's our cue—[81]

The Badgers will not appear to Russell until much later, but Russell's father's supplication for aid and protection motivates the power of the Badgers to keep Russell safe, help him gain the necessary spiritual insight, and correct the imbalance. The Badgers are witnesses to the scene before this supplication, and the supplication, as Badger #1 states, gives them their cue to act. This cue, the father's call for his son's aid and protection, motivates the animal spirits. Their purpose as supernatural beings is to ensure Russell completes his atonement and that the balance of life is restored. The Badgers state their mission and intentions in the following scene when a teenage Russell, covered in blood and holding a knife, emerges from a snowy mountain cave.

TEENAGE MALE
How can I tell dad...
Beat.

TEENAGE MALE
I can't.

Badgers #1 & #2 appear.
The teenage male runs off.

[81] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 2-3.

BADGER #1

Wait! No!

BADGER #2

We should go after him.

BADGER #1

And do what?

BADGER #2

There's an imbalance! We need him. (coughs) We need him here!

BADGER #1

Let's go after him.

BADGER #2

Ok. I'm sure we'll figure out something on the way.

> A green glow grows. The shadows of animals (fox, badger, wolf) appear. An ethereal sound accompanies. Snow falls harder.[82]

In this scene, the Badgers outline one critical theme of the play, that the sacred grounds of the Blackfeet are essential to the cultural and spiritual wellbeing of the Blackfeet people and all life. When Badger #2 coughs, the animal spirit implies that the Badgers' health as members and representatives of the natural and supernatural worlds is tied to correcting the imbalance Russell has caused. To fix the imbalance, Russell must be physically present on the sacred grounds. As Badger #2 states, "We need him here!" This necessity of sacred land for Blackfeet religious traditions and lifeways is indeed why Asher constructs the Blackfeet Spiritual and Educational Lodge, to educate Blackfeet people and outsiders alike on Blackfeet ways to strengthen the tribe's cultural connections, generate tourist and investment revenue, and build a coalition of allies to protect the sacred Badger-Two Medicine

[82] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 4.

mountain range. Despite their antics, the Badgers are dogged and intentional in bringing Russell back to the Badger-Two Medicine to atone and, as his father states, "Learn to act like a *Ni-namp-skan* and look your fear in the eye."[83]

The Nature of Spirit Animals

Through the efforts of Fox and the Badgers, the play demonstrates that although the animal spirits may be formidable supernatural figures with various powers and abilities, they are not omnipotent. The world of the play operates by principles that govern the capabilities of the animal spirits, dictating what they are and are not capable of in each of their pre-death and post-death incarnations. Notably, Fox appears and speaks directly to Russell after Fox's physical incarnation is hunted and killed for human consumption. The Badgers seem bound by similar supernatural constraints as Fox. At first, they cannot speak directly to Russell, as demonstrated in a scene before their deaths when Badger #1 says, "Russell Potts, why don't you hear what we have to say?"[84] The Badgers, however, seem to have powers exceeding Fox's. Even before their deaths, the Badgers can exercise power over the natural elements:

BADGER #1
Russell's finally made his way back home after all this time.

BADGER #2
We need to figure out a way to keep him here.

BADGER #1
How about snow?

BADGER #2
Great idea!

[83] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 3.

[84] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 56.

Badger #2 gestures.
Snow starts falling.

BADGER #1
Excellent! And we need to get his attention, to fix all this.

BADGER #2
Let's make it green.

BADGER #1
Yes! So smart.

Badger #1 waves his arms. The snow now seems to be green.

BADGER #1
It's gonna feel so good to get this taken care of.

The Badgers high-five.[85]

Lying with Badgers gradually unravels the nature of the animal spirits. Before the Badgers' physical deaths, a scene in which they express anger at the duplicity of Crystal, an oil company spy, reveals the Badgers' status as not precisely physical animals. Crystal attempts to bribe Russell to use his influence as the elder son to undermine Asher's authority. She pushes Russell to convince the Blackfeet to agree to the oil company's generous compensation packages in exchange for the right to drill on the sacred Badger-Two Medicine. Upon hearing this, the Badgers want to hurt Crystal for plotting to harm the tribe and exploit the Badger-Two Med. Yet, their powers, though expansive, are limited:

BADGER #2
We should tear her apart with our teeth!

BADGER #1
If only they were real.[86]

[85] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 12-13.

[86] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 65.

While the Badgers' teeth might not be "real" in this scene, the Badgers do have, or at least are able to take on, physical form. As the dire nature of the situation becomes clear—that Russell might be considering Crystal's offer—the Badgers realize they will have to take action to increase their influence over Russell. As Asher and Russell leave to hunt for an animal for dinner, the Badgers make a decision:

BADGER #1
You thinkin what I'm thinkin?

BADGER #2
We get in the same way Foxy and the boss [Bear animal spirit] did? You go with the *Nii-naimsskaiksi*, I'll follow Russ.

BADGER #1
We've got a plan!

BADGER #2
Need to make sure Russ doesn't agree to Crystal's plan.

BADGER #1
I think we've got this.

BADGER #2
Yeah, I think this is where we rally!

BADGER #1
Remember, it only hurts for a second.

BADGER #2
Easy for you to say. Your guy has the gun.

BADGER #1
Who knows what Russell's gonna do to me?[87]

Like Fox, after death, the Badgers can appear and speak to Russell. Also, like Fox, they are invisible to other humans. However, Russell's reactions to the animal spirits are visible to the other humans, and he worries they will notice his strange

[87] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 67.

behavior. Although the Badgers are invisible to others, their influence over the humans goes beyond the power Fox demonstrates:

RUSSELL
Stop talking to me. They're all going to see.

BADGER #1
Hey, look me in the eye young man. They can't see us. They aren't even movin.

BADGER #2
Did you freeze them?

BADGER #1
More or less.

BADGER #2
Nice touch. I always forget how creative you can be.[88]

In analyzing the traits of the animal spirits as they are unraveled within the play's cosmology, the concept of the animal spirit must not be conflated with western-style ghosts. The Badgers, in particular, are present and active throughout the play, although they do not physically die until near the play's climax. The Badgers comically demonstrate their knowledge of religious traditions and comment on the actions of the human characters. They can change the weather to cause heavy snow much earlier in the season than expected. They turn the snow green, but for Russell's and the audience's eyes only. The Badgers undertake these actions before Russell and Asher kill them. The Badgers then decide to die so they can speak directly with Russell, as did Fox. Bear and Dog also talk to Russell, though, unlike the Badgers and Fox, the act of consuming Bear was against Bear's will. Dog (formerly Asher's huskie, Ripley) does not die by explicit choice and not for human consumption. Rather, Ripley dies in an accident while pulling a sled in service to

[88] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 73.

humans. Death marks a transition for animal spirits from having limited abilities—or perhaps from being, for lack of a better word, "normal" animals as in the case of Ripley—to having the power to communicate directly to Russell to guide his journey toward restoring spiritual balance.

Sacredness and humor intersect throughout the play. The most spiritually or supernaturally active characters suggest a pattern: these figures are frequently also the most humorous. The scene in which Russell recounts his capture of Fox to Asher articulates this connection. As an audience member in the Wells Fargo Theater, I remember the moment on stage during the Native Voices production when the goofy yet earnest younger brother, Asher, opens the lodge door to show Russell the snow was not green, as Russell claimed, but clean and white. Actor Enrico Nassi's movement profile for the character of Asher at times showed traces of comic exaggeration that hinted at a Jerry Lewis-style physical comedy. Asher (Nassi) does not simply open the lodge door. He whisks open the stage left door, inviting a vivid blaze of acid green light to bathe his side of the stage. "Pure white," he declares, to Russell's astonishment and audience giggles. The humor at this moment derives partly from Asher's clownish contrast, exaggerated confidence in movement and verbal declaration when the snow is so obviously not white. Perhaps, one might wonder, does the snow only appear green and the voices of animal spirits only become audible to those who, like Russell, are being called toward spiritual transformation and restoring balance? In seeing green and hearing voices, are we, the audience, perhaps being included both in Russell's point of view and in the potential for transformation? Additional humor in this scene derives from the contrast between Asher's role as a Ni-namp-skan, a religious leader, and his

obliviousness to the supernatural events his older brother is trying to call to his attention. Asher is the leader of the Blackfeet's religious Horn Society. Yet, Asher is scripted and performed by Nassi as funny, kind, resourceful, plain-spoken, easily flustered around women, and too eager to please. Asher is a thoroughly human holy person.

Asher's character traits contrast sharply with the religious figures I was accustomed to, having been raised in several Christian churches. These pastors were carefully measured, authoritative orators from whom I have heard hundreds of sermonic orations. Asher's fitness to serve as the leader of the Horn Society is openly called into question by characters in the play. Some mention or hint that Asher might not have the total support of the Horn Society, signaling that they might be willing to shift alliances, perhaps to Russell. Asher's silly, youthful manner serves to undercut his authority in the plot. Yet, in the end, Asher performs his father's death ritual with heartbreaking emotion. Asher (Nassi) stands downstage center. His face is tight with the passion and power of the words he sings, seeming to grow from his already considerable height—in previous scenes portrayed as a youthful lankiness—to attention-commanding proportions. There is nothing small, unseasoned, or uncertain about this Asher. His humility in service, heart for his people, and expertise as a Ni-namp-skan are realized in the impact of his role in the final scene. Here, in full stature, he lays the groundwork through ceremony for his elder brother's final words to their father. Asher's humor throughout the play resolves as the brothers come together to complete their father's traditional Blackfeet burial.

Asher is a connecting figure in *Lying with Badgers*. He connects past to present, connecting Russell to the past he has tried to leave behind and the home to

which, moving forward, Russell is again welcomed. Asher connects traditional tribal practices to the present threat of sacred landscape destruction. Asher also connects the sacred to the hilarious. He is at once the most religiously educated and qualified while being the funniest human character in the play. His unintentional antics are second only to the intentional high jinks of puppet animal spirits. In Asher, *Lying with Badgers* deftly communicates one of its themes: an overturning of the Euro-Western prohibition against spirituality and nonsense traveling together. Humor and supernatural power do not merely share the stage. They are linked so that humor becomes a tool of supernatural power and, as such, a crucial aspect of the path guiding the human characters toward transformation. Trickster deities have their say later in this project.

The cosmology the play presents was honed in consultation with the theater practitioners of Native Voices, who are experienced at mounting Native dramatic productions utilizing cultural sensitivity and community consultation. Reinholtz commented on the play's careful treatment of sacred themes and objects during the post-show question and answer session. Speaking of the treatment of the sacred pipe in front of which Russell in the opening scene commits his initial transgression of saying the word bear, Reinholtz pointed out to audiences that at no point in the performance was the audience shown the sacred pipe. The decision to keep the sacred pipe off stage or covered when on stage speaks to the protocol and respect Native Voices and *Lying with Badgers* endeavor to uphold. The decision not to show the sacred pipe on stage goes beyond respect and, in fact, suggests a relationship between the cosmology of the play and the cosmologies of the theater practitioners. Although Native Voices theater practitioners come from various heritages, there is a

care for the treatment of sacred themes and objects, *care* for the good of the community. This commitment includes detailed consultation that exceeds adhering to general principles of respect for culture. In *Lying with Badgers*, the cosmology the play presents, the meticulous care taken to present that cosmology, and the service to the community that such care represents arises from a communal effort. Theater practitioners and their sought-out consultants bring multiple, Native and Native-centered perspectives into the theatrical space. Staging *Lying with Badgers* is a multi-vocal creation, with truths illuminated by the complex chorus of participating voices.

Chapter 2

Multi-vocal Reality: Spending Time in Space with Invisible Cosmologies and Confluences of Conversation

Lying with Badgers presents a web of relationships, themes, and religious traditions. To go deeper, we need more allies. We need more voices. Bringing the play into conversation with Blackfeet scholarship, in this case, *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet* by Rosalyn R. LaPier, illumines multiple resonances in both texts, creating a space for what Christi Stanlake calls multi-vocal authenticity. The multi-vocal aspect of Native drama, Stanlake notes, is "creating a story by bringing together of multiple perspectives, simultaneously."[1] Multi-vocality recognizes knowledge as belonging to and coming from the multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting perspectives of the community,[2] not a single individual's experience or objective "truth." This communal truth creates space in the dramatic narrative for community voices to contribute authenticity to the community's understanding of an event. Within this shared building of community experience, complexity and contradiction can be held within a single, living, co-constructed reality. A multifaceted reality, but reality nonetheless. This chapter engages the tools that culturally and platially specific methodologies contribute to the analysis of dramatic works and performative events. Beyond the text, beyond the sets and stage, something else is taking place. A calling together of power. A more-ness to the reality of the story that resists Euro-Western definition or quantification. In *Invisible Reality*, LaPier discusses a quality of something *else*, a

[1] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 129.

[2] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 129.

more-ness that can exist within Native North American literatures and stories. A more-ness, LaPier explains, exists within the Blackfeet cosmology as well. To illustrate this concept, LaPier shares a story of the dissonance she experienced reading George Bird Grinnell's *Blackfoot Lodge Tails: The Story of a Prairie People*:

> This was my first experience with reading something about the Blackfeet that did not *feel* quite right. Grinnell's stories were the same stories I had heard before. However, something seemed to be missing from Grinnell's stories. . . . It seemed to me that what Grinnell described was to a certain extent only the visible world and not the invisible one—the one I grew up hearing about and that my grandparents understood intimately.[3]

LaPier calls this invisible world the "invisible reality" of the Blackfeet. She explains that for the Blackfeet, the "invisible reality" is in some ways even more real than the visible world. Bringing Grasl's *Lying with Badgers* into conversation with LaPier's *Invisible Reality* allows these texts to "converse," to speak together. These voices add depth, complexity, and cultural specificity to this influx of supernatural animals and the supernatural world, the "invisible reality." These voices add depth, complexity, and cultural specificity to the ability of the Badger animal spirits to control the weather.[4] These voices add depth and complexity to the sibling controversy throughout the play, as the Hollywood brother, Russell Potts/Spotter, questions the cultural appropriateness of Asher Potts's Blackfeet Spiritual and Educational Lodge and its pedagogy of purpose. Within the concept of multi-vocal authenticity, there is a recognition that the authentic does not belong to a single point of view or individual. Authenticity is created when multiple voices contribute to the story, even if those voices contradict one another. Bringing together Grasl and LaPier's works is

[3] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxiv.

[4] The words for animals are intentionally capitalized throughout this chapter when referring to animal spirits and as an act of reverential capitalization.

not about one text exposing the truth of the other or about one text imposing authority over another. As Wilson states about research paradigms, "It is not my intention to judge any one paradigm as better or worse than another."[5] To honor the spiritual, creative, and intellectual undertakings by Grasl and LaPier in their creation of these works, my work puts them in play. Listening to both of their voices improves my relationship with both works. We converse. This listening, respecting, and honoring extends to the voices that informed and shaped LaPier and Grasl's projects. These voices include, in LaPier's case, her relatives, teachers, and co-researchers among her home community of Blackfeet people in Montana. In Grasl's case, these voices include the theater and cultural professionals of and in cooperation with Native Voices who offered feedback on script drafts and in performance during the play's two staged readings with Native Voices (2016 & 2017) and its full production (2020). I am honored to be in audience to the wisdom of these communities of experts.

When contextualizing the multi-vocality Grasl and LaPier's works bring to one another, it is essential to note that while they share several themes and features—most notably featuring Blackfeet religious traditions, cosmologies, and lifeways—these works are not twins. For example, the period of Blackfeet life that primarily interests each author in these works is markedly different, although related and similar. Regarding her temporal focus, LaPier asserts, "This book is my interpretation of Blackfeet life and their understanding of the natural world in the nineteenth and early twentieth century."[6] That period, as LaPier explains, was a time

[5] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 35.

[6] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvii.

of transition for the Blackfeet. Previously, the Blackfeet were a Nation of the Great Plains. With the coming of the twentieth century, colonial invasions had pushed the Blackfeet to the western edge of their traditional homelands, the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. LaPier notes how at that time the people who had grown up in traditional Blackfeet territory were called old-timers or buffalo Indians. This last refers to one of the Blackfeet's primary food sources prior to the twentieth century.

Grasl's *Lying with Badgers* is, by contrast, a contemporary story. The characters are living, resisting, and persisting within the current realities and struggles of the Blackfeet Nation. Grasl's characters are people of today. A hundred years of generations, life, and cultural change separate the primary temporal foci in LaPier and Grasl's works. This observation bears stating because the people of these works are thereby separated by 100 years of settler-colonial extinction narratives, stereotype generation, exploitative popular media, and displacing genocide. Conflating the early reservation days of LaPier's work with the contemporary struggles of Grasl's work to make assumptions about people living in either temporality risks perpetuating colonial stereotypes and erasures. However, drawing an impenetrable timeline with the contemporary Blackfeet on one side and "old-timers" on another is also damaging and inaccurate. Despite religious persecution that included outlawing Native North American peoples' religious practices for nearly 100 years, peoples have devoted substantial, intentional labor to maintaining, recovering, revitalizing, and transforming their religious traditions. Additionally, 100 years is, in many ways, not so very long ago. LaPier locates the turn of the twentieth century as her primary temporal focus but draws a powerful relational connection across temporal boundaries when she recounts how she came to hear many of the

stories in her book. Much of her information, she shares, was told to her by her grandmother, Annie Rattler/Mad Plume, granddaughter of Not Real Beaver Woman (or Mary Spotted Bear).[7] Several stories that instruct on and reflect the Blackfeet cosmology involved the supernatural experiences of Annie Rattler/Mad Plume's grandfather, Spotted Bear. In this way, the time of the old-timers—the time of the buffalo Indians—rises close to the surface in the texture of the book. Quite close. Only a grandmother's grandfather away. Accounting for the differences and similarities in time between these two texts is crucial to hearing the multi-vocality both contribute to an understanding of Blackfeet cosmology that engages the nature of time within many Indigenous paradigms. While the Euro-West tends to experience time as linear and unidirectional, Indigenous cultures often have circular or cyclical relationships to time. Time in Indigenous worlds does not need to maintain rigid boundaries parsing the past, present, and future. Permeability is possible, even likely.

Finally, both the early reservation days LaPier discusses and Grasl's moment of contemporary Blackfeet life mark times of spiritual and economic transition. Both works interrogate the practice of selling knowledge to tourists to ensure the survival and cultural continuity of the People. The multi-vocality of these texts holds all these distinctions between convergences of time without loss, generalization, flattening, or conflation. Since place remains constant, the complexities and specificities of time increase in importance when considering how these works interact with and inflect each other. This point bears repeating because conflation and generalization,

[7] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xiii.

especially across time, remain concerns in American Indian and Indigenous studies broadly. LaPier discusses this concern and situates her work and its academic contributions:

> Contemporary scholars use the published and unpublished writings of these early recorders of Blackfeet history as their primary source for information on all things Blackfoot. I have done the same in this book. Contemporary scholars (often inaccurately) extrapolate from these stories to represent the history and culture of *all* Blackfoot peoples, in *all* places, at *all* times throughout history. I sometimes do this as well."[8]

Worldview, Lifeways, and Interpretations

I often endeavor to pluralize my language to recognize the vast diversity of Indigenous lifeways and to open space to consider multiplicity. In this chapter, however, I may write about aspects of Blackfeet lifeways in the singular as I engage cultural and platial specificity in this discussion of one Nation's paradigm. While, as LaPier points out, there are four Nations of Blackfeet and Blackfoot peoples (one in the United States and three in Canada), my discussion here concerns the Blackfeet Nation residing on the southern side of that border. This use of the singular is not to suggest that all Blackfeet people ever wholly agreed on all details of their cosmology, neither through time nor within a single time. *Lying with Badgers*, in fact, gestures toward the existence of differences in interpretations of Blackfeet religious traditions. In the scene below, the Potts brothers discuss this contention. The playwright has struck through several lines of text (marked by italics), yet Grasl left the lines included in the script:

> ASHER
> It's what we believe. In fact, with the bears, we made a deal.

[8] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 102-103.

TARA

You made a deal?

ASHER

Yep. In exchange for them not coming into our villages and killing our people, we won't kill them either.

RUSSELL

That's not exactly it.

ASHER

It's up for interpretation.

RUSSELL

We learned from the same man.

TARA

So what is the deal then?

Russell walks over to Asher.

RUSSELL

We're not supposed to kill a hibernating bear.[9]

As the struck-through lines imply, the presence of living and active diversity and interpretation within a cosmology does not necessarily denote an entirely different branch of that cosmology. Since both Grasl and LaPier stress aspects of tradition and continuity, even while mentioning the possibility of interpretation, the Blackfeet cosmology emerges through the play as a single, living, adapting, multi-vocal aspect of Blackfeet lifeways. The term "lifeways" in the plural acknowledges that both Grasl and LaPier's works focus on liminal moments in Blackfeet life—times at which a heavy variety of forces and choices weigh on how the people live and practice Blackfeet religious traditions and culture. The Blackfeet have certainly

[9] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 30.

adapted aspects of their lifeways through time due to necessity and to best take advantage of their then-present circumstances.

In bringing these texts together to share space and speak with each other and with us, the texts may contextualize, overlap, and illuminate each other, but they also conflict, complicate, and contradict. Not coincidentally, many Indigenous worldviews hold spaces for contradiction and multi-vocality without the need to resolve or negate one point of view in favor of another.

LaPier's discussion of the nature of the Blackfeet cosmology multi-vocally contributes depth, complexity, and specificity to understanding Blackfeet religious traditions and lifeways. *Invisible Reality* focuses primarily on the turn of the twentieth century, a time of transition for the Blackfeet from a widely-ranging prairie people to one pushed to the western edge of their former territory against the Rocky Mountains in Western Montana. The turn of the twentieth century was a time of burgeoning activity for tourists and travelers. Some of them were, in LaPier's words, early recorders of Blackfeet life.[10] A popular belief about North American Indigenous peoples during the Westward rupture and early reservation periods was that Native North Americans were becoming extinct. Many peoples—the Blackfeet included—were facing genocidal settler-colonialism, and their lifeways, spatially restricted, were changing in radical ways. Travelers, ethno-scholars, and anthro-tourists rushed to "preserve" what they could of what they viewed as soon-to-be-extinct Native cultures before the peoples vanished. The Blackfeet were particularly situated culturally (as a plains people who wore the feathered headdress fitting the costumed

[10] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxiii.

"Indian" stereotypes), geographically (just to the east of the tourist attraction, Glacier National Park), technologically (with a major national railroad traversing their territory), and economically (with a Blackfeet economic precedent of selling knowledge and objects and with a desperate need of food and funds). Removal from traditional sources of sustenance exacerbated the deprivation caused by well-documented United States government corruption. As such, sizable quantities of anthropological, ethnographic, and travel-related information exist about the Blackfeet during the early reservation period. In *Invisible Reality*, LaPier briefly discusses the lives of several of the main recorders of early Blackfeet life, including James Willard Schultz, Walter McClintock, George Bird Grinnell, Clark Wissler, David Duvall, and John C. Ewers. Her work analyzes each recorder's history, motivations, and relationships to the Blackfeet and various United States organizations. LaPier utilizes these rich resources from the early recorders of Blackfeet life and her contemporary relationships within the Blackfeet community as two primary sources of knowledge. Her writings on the Blackfeet reveal several vital concepts that directly and by interconnection relate to elements presented in *Lying with Badgers*. These include the nature of reality, the genres of Blackfeet literature (types and functions of stories), the organization of the universe, the traits of supernatural animals, and the means of obtaining supernatural alliances.

The Real and the Visible: Living Beyond the Seen

As stated in the introduction, spaces and time are crucial to *Staging the Sacred*. To have some grasp of a people's cosmology, worldview, and paradigm, it is necessary to spend time to inhabit spaces physical and more-than-physical, building

relationships with a Nation's way of being—to abide with that reality. We will spend time in space with the Blackfeet worldview as LaPier presents it, allowing LaPier to unravel that way of being slowly and in detail so that we can feel the textures of both Grasl and LaPier's projects together, one in each hand.

LaPier's research stresses one point above all others on to the nature of reality, that the Blackfeet cosmology recognizes the existence of an invisible dimension. She asserts, "the Blackfeet believed that the invisible dimension *was* the real world and that the visible dimension was a partial expression of this world."[11] Also, different emphasis and importance were placed on the visible and invisible realms. LaPier continues, "The Blackfeet believed that the visible dimension was only a small part of their total reality, 'the tip of the iceberg,' to use a modern-day metaphor. Most of their reality lay within the invisible dimension, unseen but known."[12] The statement that the invisible dimension was unseen but known emphasizes the Blackfeet's knowledge of, connection to, and agency within the invisible realm. LaPier stresses the importance of the invisible dimension, stating that, "for the Blackfeet the unseen was just as real or even at times more real than what they saw in everyday life . . . . It defined their existence."[13] This invisible reality was common knowledge and was a salient feature of Blackfeet society. LaPier describes how her people "told the recorders of Blackfeet life that the 'invisible' realm was not only real to them but omnipresent. It structured not only their views

[11] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 25.

[12] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 25.

[13] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 43.

of the universe but much of their social behavior. It permeated their daily lives."[14] One of these early recorders of Blackfeet life was Father Emile Legal, whose writings LaPier refers to when discussing the centrality of the invisible reality to the Blackfeet paradigm. "Father Legal recognized this from his first interactions with the Blackfeet," LaPier asserts. "He observed that the Blackfeet believed in an invisible dimension that took on 'a completely distinct reality.'"[15]

This view of reality among the Blackfeet was not limited to the early reservation days. LaPier draws a generational connection when she reveals:

> "Old-timers" like my grandmother saw a distinction between the 'real' world that was full of supernatural beings, animals, rocks, trees, and other elements and the one of our daily existence. The old-time Blackfeet lived in a multilayered reality where the extraordinary experiences of the Blackfeet with the supernatural were interwoven with the natural.[16]

The Blackfeet maintain information on the history and nature of the invisible dimension in a genre of Blackfeet literature/knowledge LaPier refers to as "real stories." LaPier mentions that other Blackfeet genres of literature/knowledge exist as well. In the early reservation days, LaPier notes that several early recorders of Blackfeet life recognized that the Blackfeet stories they collected belonged to identifiable categories, including mythology, "historical, military, adventurous, ceremonial, and other forms of narrative," depending on the story's main subjects, nature, and function.[17] LaPier centers the importance of real stories in asserting that

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[14] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 43.

[15] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 34.

[16] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 24-25.

[17] Clark Wissler and David Duvall, quoted in LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xix. See also *Invisible Reality* Chapter 2, page 25 for the four categories of "real stories."

"the vast majority of stories collected by the early recorders of Blackfeet life were what my grandmother would call 'real stories.'"[18] LaPier defines real stories as "stories that told of the relationship between the Blackfeet and the supernatural."[19] If, as LaPier intimates of the Blackfeet cosmology, the invisible dimension was as real if not more so than the visible dimension, then the choice to call the literature/knowledge about the invisible dimension "real stories" logically follows. Real stories contain real knowledge about the real reality—the invisible reality. LaPier offers several examples of real stories. One such story details a human's escape from a supernatural eagle. LaPier then recounts, "At the end of this story my grandmother would exclaim, 'That was really true about those old-time Indians, a real story. You can write it down.'"[20] LaPier goes on to explain, "'Real stories' to her [grandmother] were about the supernatural. I began to realize that when I asked her to tell a story; to her that meant 'a real story,' a story about the supernatural and not just one of daily life.[21]

The genre of the real story also functioned as a form of history within Blackfeet society. LaPier notes this feature, stating, "'real stories,' or stories of supernatural relationships, formed the basis of Blackfeet history—their distinct version of history—which included both the seen and unseen."[22] LaPier's observation highlights the historical nature and function of the real story genre.

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[18] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 25.

[19] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 25.

[20] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 24.

[21] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 24.

[22] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 26.

In addition to defining real stories as a genre, LaPier provides a detailed account of the invisible reality of the Blackfeet, further clarifying the Blackfeet relationship to aspects of the invisible dimension. She chronicles the various visible and invisible realms, relative supernatural power, and inhabitants of each alongside key stories and Blackfeet practices. LaPier lists the three worlds that constituted the Blackfeet universe: "The Blackfeet believed there existed three separate yet interconnected worlds, which they called the Above world, the Below world, and the Water world."[23] She explains that each world was composed of two realms and that "within these three worlds were both visible and invisible elements, or the natural and supernatural realms of existence."[24] LaPier defines the relationship of the three worlds to one another, "The Blackfeet believed that these three dimensions were parallel dimensions, existing side by side and separate. But they were also interconnected and permeable."[25] LaPier credits this knowledge with contributing to Blackfeet survival: "In addition to [the Blackfeet's] practical knowledge, came a deeper understanding of the way the universe worked. It is from within this system that the Blackfeet developed their ability to endure hardship and persevere in the visible realm."[26]

LaPier sketches vivid pictures of each of the three worlds of the Blackfeet cosmology, including the supernatural power, locations, and inhabitants of each.

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[23] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xl.

[24] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xl.

[25] LaPier, Invisible Reality, 26.

[26] LaPier, Invisible Reality, xl.

Here, she parses several features of the Blackfeet universe that speak multi-vocally with *Lying with Badgers*:

> The Blackfeet understood that within the earth, the water, and the sky reside a great variety of natural and supernatural beings. Within the Blackfeet universe lived not only the Niitsitapi, the original people, but also the Ksahkomitapi, or earth beings, the Soyiitapi, or underwater beings, and the Spomitapi, or sky beings. . . . There are also animals such as eagles or geese who lived here on earth but were considered part of the Above dimension. There were of course restrictions for humans against eating animals from the Above realm. The Water world consisted of the Soyiitapi, or underwater beings. Similar to those in the Above world, the beings who lived in the Water world also had their own villages, homes, animals, and plants. Supernatural beings such as the underwater bison, underwater bears, underwater dogs, and underwater horses also lived in villages among their own people within the Water world. . . . There were also underwater monsters, as well as animals such as beavers, otters, fish, and turtles who lived here on earth but were considered part of the Water dimension. There were of course restrictions for humans against eating animals from the Water realm. The Below world consisted of the Niitsitapi, the original people or humans. Similar to the Above world and Water world, the Below world consisted of humans who lived in villages and homes with animals and plants. . . . There were no all good or all evil supernaturals. Their personalities represent all the variations found within humankind.. . . . If one were to look at these three worlds in the Blackfeet universe and assume a hierarchy, the Above world would contain beings, deities, and forces with the most supernatural power, the Water world would be a close second, and the Below world would contain the least amount of supernatural power.[27]

In the above passage, LaPier highlights the great variety of natural and supernatural beings within the three worlds or dimensions. Each of the three worlds contains its own peoples, villages, plants, animals, supernatural beings, and supernatural power. None of the worlds is entirely cut off from the others. The boundaries are permeable, with some beings and forces of one realm also existing within another (such as eagles and geese) and beings who transcend these worlds given the right circumstances and supernatural power or aid. The concept of

[27] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 26-28.

permeability between the natural and the supernatural, particularly regarding animals, is addressed multiple times in *Lying with Badgers*. Also, LaPier notes restrictions against eating animals from either the Above world or the Water world. This observation offers another moment of multi-vocal connection with Russell's transgression. Although not involving a creature from the Above or Water worlds, Russell's transgressive act does involve forbidden animal killing and consumption. *Lying with Badgers* refers to the bear as a sacred creature that must be treated with reverence,[28] and a hibernating bear is already in a different state of being.

LaPier also mentions several categories of supernatural animals in her description of the three worlds, noting that there are supernatural animals and natural animals within the dimension of the Below world, or the human world. In *Lying with Badgers*, we see animals in the human world that seem to be natural—or more natural and physical—and those who seem to be almost entirely supernatural. Finally, LaPier asserts that supernatural beings do impact human existence and may do so in ways humans are capable of influencing for their own aid through supernatural alliances. *Lying with Badgers* opens with a human supplication of supernatural assistance. Throughout the play, supernatural characters drive the plot in ways that directly in indirectly influence human behavior and the natural world.

Landscapes and Space: Locating *Invisible Reality* and *Lying with Badgers*

Landscapes and locating in space play crucial roles in both *Lying with Badgers* and *Invisible Reality*. The motivating force behind Asher's actions in the

[28] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 2.

play—his reason for constructing the lodge, hand-picking the guests, and performing a traditional death ritual for his father—is his desire to protect a sacred Blackfeet landscape, the Badger-Two Medicine, from fossil fuel extraction and destruction. The sense of location within that world, of being removed to an icy mountain and the visceral urgency of meeting every need to sustain life (food, water, warmth) permeates the atmosphere. Meanwhile, throughout *Invisible Reality*, LaPier repeatedly locates natural and supernatural beings and activities, situating them within the geographical space of Blackfeet territory. In discussing her grandmother's stories, LaPier recalls:

> When she talked about picking berries along the Badger-Two Medicine she would often talk about the supernatural horses that lived in the small mountain lakes. These horses lived underwater and they swam underwater between lakes. Some of these horses she said swam from the small lakes on the east side of the mountains underwater and under the mountains to the west side and Flathead Lake.[29]

Such geographical placement is common and crucial to mapping Indigenous epistemologies. A defining characteristic of Indigenous paradigms is an interwoven, often inextricable relationship between place, culture, and religious traditions.

When I turn to my internal geography, an unspeakable quality comes alive within me—a wholeness and a longing that pulls like the needle of a compass—seeing the mountains, valleys, lakes, and forests of Northwestern Montana stretch out in my mind. I remember the knowing in my chest when I was in the icy, glacial waters of Flathead Lake, a feeling that there—treading water and looking over my shoulder—I was not alone. It was the feeling that the lake, as I have been told, does go down forever. Flathead is a deep lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi.

[29] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 23.

Cold. Fed with ancient mountain water. Water connecting water beneath the land. I knew there were large creatures in the lake, the species of which in my childhood remained a matter of some speculation. Monsters: LaPier uses that word, too.[30] Perhaps many more "monsters" than I could have guessed. Maybe an entire Water world of beings I had grown up feeling and hearing mentioned as mystery and legend but were well known to those acquainted with the invisible reality. The Above world had its representatives in that place where land met ancient water. I watched bald eagles soaring, nesting in pines and on the tops of telephone poles. Massive Vs of geese announced their seasonal flights north and south in honking call and response.

The taste of honeysuckle.

The dusty bulk of a bison in a wallow.

The smell of burning sweetgrass.

This is why I study contemporary Native North American drama. To come home. To inhabit such spaces for so much more than a lifetime, to inhabit thousands of years, and not speak of the invisible reality around us—to not have such a reality manifest within one's cosmology, religion, lifeways—*that* is what feels unnatural. Unnatural and inconceivable.

LaPier presents another layer to her discussion of Blackfeet cosmology when she revisits her grandmother's stories. Real stories, stories of the supernatural as LaPier defines them, may connect in more relational ways than western concepts such as mytho-history proffer. LaPier's grandmother's real stories were family

[30] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 28.

history and could include "her family's interactions with the supernatural."[31] LaPier relates one story that demonstrates a close familial connection to supernatural events and orders animals within the Blackfeet cosmology—natural and supernatural animals—and reveals some defining characteristics. Her grandmother's story recalls:

> Once . . . Spotted Bear was near a creek, and he stopped to water his horse. He saw a beaver and her children. But he recognized immediately that these were unlike normal animal beavers; they were supernatural beavers. The mother beaver was standing on her hind legs like a human on the bank of the creek and singing a song. Her children were doing the same, and they were dancing in the sand. Spotted Bear watched them for a while until the mother beaver saw him. Suddenly the beaver threw her children into the water, and they swam away."[32]

This story LaPier's grandmother tells of her own grandfather's experiences with the supernatural demonstrates the physical and temporal proximity of the supernatural within the Blackfeet paradigm. LaPier underscores this point: "This type of interaction happened on an occasional basis in the past."[33] The story also reveals one characteristic of supernatural animals. Here, the supernatural beaver must have borne some resemblance to what LaPier calls normal animal beavers: Spotted Bear recognized the supernatural creatures as beavers. However, we cannot assume that the two types of creatures were identical. LaPier makes a point of stating that Spotted Bear recognized immediately that the animals were not ordinary. This recognition could have been entirely due to the animals' human-like behavior, all standing on their hind legs, the mother singing a song and the children singing and dancing. When the mother beaver saw Spotted Bear, she again behaved most unlike

[31] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 23.

[32] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 23-24.

[33] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 24.

a familiar animal beaver, throwing her children into the water before they all swam away. The Blackfeet viewed interactions like those described in the story as neither common nor exceedingly rare. Supernatural encounters were occasional, distinct enough to be marked and remembered but entirely within the realm of possibility.

The presence and characteristics of the supernatural animals as LaPier offers them contribute opportunities for multi-vocal connection to the animal spirits in *Lying with Badgers*. So, too, does LaPier's observation that interactions with the supernatural were a regular part of life, remarkable but normal for the Blackfeet. Though the animal spirits in *Lying with Badgers* exercise supernatural power, their presence within the Blackfeet worldview does not constitute a *deus ex machina*— a convention of ancient Greek drama in which a god is flown over the final scene of a play to expeditiously resolve complex dramatic action through divine intervention. The animal spirits and their powers are invisible yet real within their world, a part of it and not above it. Both *Lying with Badgers* and *Invisible Reality* demonstrate relationships among animals, humans, and the supernatural as intrinsic to the Blackfeet worldview in culturally specific ways.

Mobilizing Allies: Supernatural Power and the Blackfeet

One of the most critical aspects of supernatural power in the Blackfeet cosmology, as LaPier presents it, is the Blackfeet's ability to create supernatural alliances that enable them to access power for their own purposes. Speaking again about the three worlds of the Blackfeet cosmology and their ordered degrees of supernatural power, LaPier observes:

> "Within this hierarchy human beings did not have any supernatural power of and by themselves. Instead they needed to seek out supernatural power from

> those beings who had it. The Blackfeet believed that humans had to create alliances with the supernatural to live life to the fullest. The Blackfeet told the early recorders of Blackfeet life about these relationships and how it was rare for a Blackfeet *not* to have an alliance with a supernatural entity. An essential part of being Blackfeet was having a relationship with the supernatural world."[34]

LaPier is emphatic that supernatural alliances were common and crucial to Blackfeet lifeways. This aspect of Blackfeet religious traditions offers a powerful example of the potential for inaccuracies when one generalizes about Native North American peoples and cultures. One generalization about Native North America is that Native peoples have cultivated practices for thousands of years that allowed them to live in harmony with the land. While this is undoubtedly true to varying degrees of many Native North American cultures, this does not appear to be strictly the case for the Blackfeet. LaPier draws attention to this culturally specific distinction: "The stories [old-timers] told the early recorders of Blackfeet life reveal a fundamental philosophy of Blackfeet existence. . . . The Blackfeet did not believe they had to adapt to nature; they made nature adapt to them."[35] LaPier's presentation of this fundament of Blackfeet philosophy begs for examination alongside the stereotype of Native peoples being at one with the land—a seamless integration of humanity with the natural world—so much so that at times the people become a feature of the landscape. Viewing Native peoples as features of the wild landscape has permeated colonial examinations and categorization of Native peoples for centuries. The practice has resulted in the relegation of exhibitions of Native peoples' material culture and our Ancestors' bones to natural history museums, as though

[34] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 28.

[35] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvii.

Native peoples had more in common with animals and plants than with "civilized," Euro-Western peoples. This stereotype is exacerbated by the fact that creating sustainable societies within one's homeland capable of enduring thousands of years necessitates collaborations, cooperation, and careful stewardship with a familiar ecosystem that includes more-than-human relatives. A lack of detailed culturally and platially specific understanding of such relationships bolsters the child of nature stereotype. The Blackfeet's relationship with their lands that LaPier presents deepens, complicates, and challenges such stereotypes. The "old-timer" Blackfeet were masters of their environment and not subjects within it. As such, the passive, stoic, laconic, child of nature archetype is confronted by a people who have historically demonstrated agency over their fate. A people of action. A people with powerful connections—with access to supernatural power.

Interrogating the Blackfeet relationship to nature and the supernatural situates another multi-vocal connection between *Invisible Reality* and *Lying with Badgers*. In both works, supernatural power over nature impacts the course of peoples' lives. When LaPier affirms that the Blackfeet "made nature adapt to them," what does she mean? "The Blackfeet believed," LaPier explains, "They could alter, change, and control nature to suit their needs, and they did this with the assistance of supernatural allies."[36] Again, LaPier stresses the importance of supernatural allies, leaving little doubt about their centrality to the Blackfeet cosmology:

> The Blackfeet had a distinct view of the universe that included having well-established relationships with the supernatural. They created alliances with the supernatural and accessed supernatural power for a variety of purposes.

[36] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvii.

> The supernatural provided a place for friendships, kinship, and even sanctuary."[37]

LaPier asserts that "the most important belief that the Blackfeet recorded with ethnographers was that they had an ancient relationship with nature, that nature gave them various gifts to live their lives, and that with supernatural help they could influence nature to accommodate their wants and desires."[38]

The Blackfeet could alter the natural world utilizing supernatural power, yet they had no supernatural power of their own. Calling upon one's supernatural allies to use their power was what made such alterations of natural forces possible. A human had to attain an alliance to exercise supernatural power. Such alliances, though crucial to living a fulfilled life, were not imparted merely by virtue of being a Blackfeet person. LaPier details the three ways Blackfeet told the early ethnographers in which one can:

> Acquire supernatural power or supernatural allies. The first was for a supernatural entity to seek out an individual, speak to that person, and transfer some of its supernatural power to him or her, thereby creating an alliance. . . . The second way to acquire an alliance was for a human to go out and search for supernatural assistance, through a dream. . . . The third and easiest way to create an alliance with the supernatural was to 'purchase' supernatural power from another human who had already acquired it through any of the three methods. With this last way a human could 'purchase' all or part of the supernatural power, and the human (the 'seller') would transfer knowledge and ability to the 'buyer.'[39]

Of these three ways of obtaining a supernatural alliance, LaPier notes that the third method was "probably the most common."[40]

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[37] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 43.

[38] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xli.

[39] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 29.

[40] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 29.

Once acquired, supernatural alliances could have a myriad of practical applications. LaPier relates an example in another of her grandmother's stories and shares her own reaction:

> In this particular story about Spotted Bear versus the Crow my grandmother mentioned almost as an afterthought that Spotted Bear used his personal 'medicine power' and changed the direction of the wind. 'Whoa, wait one minute,' I thought. 'He changed the direction of the wind! How did he do that?' At that moment I realized that my grandmother and Spotted Bear's relationship to the natural world— and their concept of reality— was dramatically different from the one that the recorders of Blackfeet life often wrote about in their books. Until that moment it had not occurred to me that what I had learned and heard about the Blackfeet from my family was truly different than what had been written about the Blackfeet.[41]

The story of Spotted Bear versus the Crow is particularly relevant to *Lying with Badgers*. In the play, the Badgers use their power to change the weather, demonstrating an ability to alter the natural world quite at home within the Blackfeet cosmology. The Badgers ponder how to correct the imbalance caused by a now stubborn and in-denial Russell. The animal spirits are not features of the landscape but agents taking action within and over it. They undertake a variety of efforts that exert their agency, including architecting—scripting—the manner of their deaths.

Invisible Reality and *Lying with Badgers* connect and inflect. The two works offer generative points of connection around the topics of "*more*-ness," Blackfeet lives in times of transition, temporal permeability and connectedness, living and active cultural diversity, the nature of reality, genres of Blackfeet literature, the organization of the universe, traits of supernatural animals, locating in place, supernatural alliances, and Blackfeet agency. With these points of connection in mind, we can explore how these works speak to each other, creating multi-vocal

[41] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxv.

harmonies and dissonances that illumine both texts. These illuminations include multi-vocal connections on the topics of animal veneration and consumption, supernatural power pertaining to the weather, the buying and selling of knowledges and power, and contemporary Native identity.

Relationships with Allies, Treaties between Nations, and Animal Consumption in Blackfeet Ecology

The role of animal veneration—reverence—and animal consumption offer reoccurring motifs that intersect within the play's catalyst—Russell's transgression of eating a hibernating bear and his subsequent refusals to admit the violation. The animal spirits of *Lying with Badgers* are not merely objects of human reverence and consumption but are co-players in the drama of restoring balance and sustaining life. As stated above, Fox and the Badgers undertake actions exerting their agency, including scripting the manner of their deaths. Death serves a vital function in the play and demonstrates key aspects of Blackfeet ecology, featuring animal agency and human consumption. Three animals offer their physical bodies for human consumption, Fox, Badger #1, and Badger #2. They assert their agency in choosing the manner of their death, deliberately offering their physical bodies to feed the humans by stepping into a trap and standing still to be shot with a hunting rifle. They also assert their agency in choosing the timing and reason for their deaths. Fox and the Badgers all decide to die so that they can speak directly to Russell—so he can physically see and hear them to influence him at crucial moments.

LaPier discusses conversations between humans and animals, as well, highlighting a transition in the early reservation days for those types of relationships,

as for many other aspects of Blackfeet life. LaPier quotes the North Peigan, or Blackfoot, religious leader Brings Down the Sun, who "recognized the changing times at the turn of the last century when he observed, 'At one time animals and men were able to understand each other. We still talk to the animals just as we do to people, but they now seldom reply, except in dreams.'"[42] Dreams are one of the three ways of obtaining supernatural alliances and a crucial source of supernatural power. *Lying with Badgers* creates a contemporary space where animals and humans can converse, introduce conflict, negotiate, and ultimately restore balance.

Animal veneration and consumption drive the action of the play. The three smallest animals choose to die and allow humans to consume their bodies so that they can influence Russell, but a fourth animal is also killed and consumed. The hibernating grizzly bear that teenage Russell kills in its cave during Russell's flesh sacrifice serves as the plot catalyst. This animal did not consent to be consumed and was protected in that place at that time by a treaty—as a 2017 staged reading version of the play at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego called the agreement between humans and bears. The rule governing Russell's initial transgression—saying the word bear in front of the sacred pipe—was meant to commemorate that treaty, a treaty he subsequently violated. That violation precipitated Russell's fifteen-year self-banishment from the Blackfeet and created the imbalance the animal spirits in the play must work to correct. The recognition that the sacrality and agency of our animal relatives do not necessarily preclude their sacrifice or consumption—and may even be a crucial component to that sacrality and agency—is integral to some

[42] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 138.

Indigenous cultures. Such cultures can reconcile sacrality, agency, and consumption, often through the co-creation of respectful agreements and mutually beneficial relationships. Creating and sustaining these relationships, in which humans and more-than-humans give of themselves to secure positive outcomes, is a continuous process and a cornerstone of enough Indigenous ecologies to justify this as a fundament. For Indigenous belief systems that recognize the sacred power, sovereignty, and agency of land, animals, and objects, negotiations between these stakeholder groups must occur. Recognizing the animacy of our more-than-human relatives also necessitates a recognition that they too have expended time and resources into the continuity of life and thus have preferred outcomes and the ability to assert their positions. They, too, have stakes. In these negotiations, consequences for all relations must be considered, permissions asked, and restitutions made. As such, many sides with stakes in a negotiation can advocate for their needs and offer to fulfill the needs of others. Help is sought, agreements struck, treaties made, remembrances observed, and obligations carried out—sometimes in perpetuity. Examining the agency of more-than-human relatives reveals much about the belief systems that inform Native North American ecologies.

Indigenous stories serve many functions: these shared narratives are crucial to understanding how particular cultures position themselves relationally within their environment. Indigenous stories tend to be generative and contextual. They possess the potential, often the sacral potential, to do work that negotiates continued existence. These stories are not only carriers of cultural information about Indigenous ecologies and the potential of these ecologies to restore balance and mitigate climate disaster. In their way, Indigenous stories are Indigenous ecologies.

An animal's desires can become rhetorical leverage and an assertion of human sovereignty, as in Tomson Highway's *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. The desire of a cow to graze where she pleases is both advocated for and frustrated alongside human rights to gather and fish on traditional lands. These rights are being gradually and maddeningly stripped away throughout the play. *The Council* by William S. Yellow Robe Jr. demonstrates the permeability of the border between human and animal: all the actors in the play are referred to as "beings," with each actor portraying a collection of human and animal characters. In *The Council*, a council of animals exercises their agency over human affairs by rhetorically advocating for what they believe to be the proper fate of frail humanity. Likewise, *Lying with Badgers* opens windows of culturally specific understanding of Blackfeet beliefs through which one can see that the coexistence of animal veneration and consumption works toward sacral goals of being in balance. Discussions of animal agency and consumption in *Lying with Badgers* flow organically and, while respecting tradition, examine animals' agency within the narrative, plotting their consumption in ways rooted in the contemporary. Modern in knowledge, death by gun is preferred and envied. Relationships between humans and their more-than-human relatives within the context of survival, ceremony, and protection are interwoven in ways that open space for negotiations in which all characters can exert influence on all others, and all have an investment in the outcome.

While Russell and Asher are on the mountain in the Badger-Two Medicine, they must hunt daily to provide food for themselves and their guests. Even while they are hunted, the animals teach about sacred principles in often irreverent tones, blending gravity and levity in a fashion common to Native North American

literatures. The animals even joke about their decisions to offer themselves for consumption and lament the mistreatment of their offered bodies when in the 2017 staged reading version of the play at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, Asher gets angry and throws the head of Fox across the room during butchering.

While the Badgers are the most present and active of the animal spirits, the Bear spirit, who is connected to the brothers' father in ways the play does not fully explain, is of central importance to the narrative. The Badgers refer to the Bear spirit as "boss," and in the play's climax, the decision not to kill a rampaging bear produces a spiritual transformation for the characters. Russell finally admits that he left home not for failing to atone for saying bear in front of the sacred pipe but for breaking the treaty between bears and humans the gesture of respect and remembrance—not saying bear in front of the sacred pipe—was meant to commemorate, the sacral agreement in which the Blackfeet agreed to never kill and consume a hibernating bear in exchange for bears not hunting humans in Blackfeet towns. This treaty between bears and humans is, as treaties are, an agreement between Nations that outlines the rights and responsibilities of each party. Such agreements thereby recognize the agency of bears to enter compacts with other groups and their right to designate a time and place (during hibernation in their dens) in which they deny access to their bodies for human consumption.

The restrictions LaPier mentions governing human consumption of animals are not, in her work, tied directly to an agreement but seem more to pertain to the inherent status of restricted animals. The status of eagles and geese as those who reside on the earth but are considered part of the Above world places them outside of the beings available for human consumption. The status of beavers, otters, fish, and

turtles as those who reside on the earth but are considered part of the Water dimension places them outside the beings available for human consumption. While not mentioned by LaPier, restrictions against eating bears are discussed in *Lying with Badgers* by Asher and Russell. Yet, it is their father, the tribe's spiritual leader, who outlines the status of bears as he sends Russell off to atone for his transgression. "It [the bear] is, *Aatsimapi*," the father character reminds Russell, "a sacred creature, and we must treat it with *liko'to'tamapiwa*, reverence."[43] While the veneration of more-than-humans, such as animals, does not necessarily preclude their consumption within Indigenous cultures, it does seem that abstaining from killing and/or consuming particular creatures, especially under designated—ritually determined—circumstances, does play a significant role in the Blackfeet cosmology.

Lying with Badgers weaves a picture of Blackfeet sacrality as integrated, not segregated. Here, the land, animals, and people are all necessary to complete the medicinal, regenerative actions on which all types of beings rely to sustain their individual lives and "life" in the collective and universal sense. For the animals in the play, offering themselves for human consumption is at once wholly voluntary, an act of fulfilling an agreement or request, and an act of renewal. Despite being peppered with humor, or (again) perhaps because of it, *Lying with Badgers* makes the sacrality of animal agency in consumption a central concern. The animals engage in rhetorical communication and take agency to protect themselves, the land, and the renewal of their species through deliberate actions, including giving up their bodies for consumption. Within the circumstances—ecologies—created by the land,

[43] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 2.

animals, and other humans present, the human characters engage in negotiations among themselves and (especially in the case of Russell) with their more-than-human relatives. The human and more-than-human characters are all subject to the circumstances created by the land and by each other. They are subject individually, as beings with distinct objectives who view and experience these circumstances and ecologies differently. They are also subject collectively, as members of their respective species and as beings interconnected within the continuity of life.

How's the Weather?

In addition to restrictions on the consumption of certain more-than-human beings, Grasl and LaPier's works intersect in how they discuss the weather. Few topics are more mundane than discussing the weather, a euphemism in English for superficial and safe small talk. Yet, in *Lying with Badgers* and *Invisible Reality*, the weather and the forces associated with it display more-than-human agency. The Badgers' power to control the weather, causing a snowstorm and altering the snow's appearance, demonstrates what LaPier describes as a salient aspect of the Blackfeet cosmology. Regarding weather, LaPier quotes historian Theodore Binnema, who:

> described the northern Great Plains as a place that had a 'fierce climate of violent contrasts.' The summers could be exceptionally hot and dry, and the winters fluctuated from arctic freezes to the occasional reprieve of a chinook. Binnema summarized that 'the nearly ceaseless wind [made] the climate of the northwestern plains what it is, subjecting the region to the most sudden weather changes on the globe.'[44]

Yes. As one born on the Great Plains of Montana and raised there off and on for half of my childhood, making my home for the other half of my formative years

[44] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 84.

among the mountains of Western Montana, I am viscerally acquainted with the scope, power, and variety of Montana weather. I remember walking home at the tail end of the usual brutal Eastern Montana winter. I took off my coat, reveling in the brief spell of warmth, the welcomed Chinook, that hinted at the oncoming spring. This temperature, whatever it is, I told myself, is perfect weather—just a light chill in the otherwise temperate air. I glanced at the digital clock on the bank building behind me, flashing the time and temperature. Zero degrees Fahrenheit, the clock said, thirty-two degrees below freezing. That was what, at that juncture, passed for warm weather. When I was older, I discovered that my birthplace lies along the same line of longitude and shares weather systems with Fargo, North Dakota, the coldest place in the lower 48 states. As LaPier affirms, summers could be blisteringly hot and dry, accompanied by thunderstorms, hail, and tornados. Watch out for the green clouds, my grandpa told me. Green. Take shelter underground or in a windowless room. The weather exercised powerful and sometimes terrifying power over my life.

My experience with Montana weather was not strictly the case for the Blackfeet people. The weather was certainly a concern for them. LaPier acknowledges that "in their complex universe and worldview using their age-old environmental knowledge would not solve all the problems that arose. . . . Their biggest issue was what to do when 'nature' did not behave the way they wanted."[45] Even so, LaPier points out that "the 'sudden weather changes' of the plains did not appear to have affected the Blackfeet the way that it seems they should have. That is probably because the Blackfeet believed that the weather was not a 'natural'

[45] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 67.

phenomenon but 'supernatural.'"[46] To concur, these unnamable, unexpected forces felt that way to me. This Blackfeet belief regarding the supernatural nature of the weather, coupled with the people's relationships to the supernatural worlds of their cosmology, produced an entirely different relationship to weather than the one I learned to experience growing up in these same ecosystems. LaPier explains:

> The Blackfeet viewed different kinds of meteorological conditions as stemming from different supernatural entities. Because of this the Blackfeet did not believe that they needed to adapt to or endure the weather. They believed they could transform or change the weather and other elements of their environment when they pleased with the help of supernatural power.[47]

LaPier extends her commentary on this relationship, adding, "The Blackfeet did not view weather as a benign presence but as something that they should try to both change and control, or they would live at its mercy."[48]

At the weather's "mercy" was how I lived in Montana. Respectful and prepared, we were aware that the weather was unpredictable, potentially deadly, and (except for often inadequate or fallible protective gear) entirely outside human control. A saying from my then comes to mind: "Welcome to Montana. Don't like the weather? Wait five minutes." What a stark contrast to the Blackfeet relationship to weather as LaPier shares it. So central to daily life was the Blackfeet's sense of agency that "the Blackfeet believed that it was foolish to attempt to go on raids, travel, or hunt without some small ability to change the weather."[49] Where I come from,

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[46] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 84.

[47] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 84.

[48] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 85.

[49] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 91. I certainly concur with LaPier that it is foolish to put oneself at the mercy of Montana weather without ample preparation, including bringing along someone who knows what they are doing.

respect for the weather is how one survives. But the old-timer Blackfeet did much more than survive. They made rich lives for themselves in a vast territory that was arid, frigid, and blistering by turns. They accomplished this in no small part by utilizing their supernatural connections.

By choice, changing the weather was limited to requisite occasions: "The Blackfeet used these powers only when necessary and not on a daily basis. But with their power the Blackfeet learned that they did not need to suffer. They could change nature whenever they needed to with the help of a supernatural ally."[50] While controlling nature was not an everyday activity, it was also not uncommon. Neither were stories about how the Blackfeet employed these powers. "All my life," LaPier reflects:

> I had heard different kinds of stories from my grandparents of how the Blackfeet altered nature, from stopping the wind from blowing, to controlling animal behavior, to creating a snowstorm so powerful it could freeze a person in midstep. Historians . . . often told of how the natural world shaped Blackfeet behavior, suggesting that the migration of the bison led the Blackfeet to follow the herds. However, my grandparents told stories of how the Blackfeet shaped the natural world. They made the bison come to them.[51]

Controlling nature is not a passing theme in LaPier's work. The connection of Blackfeet religious traditions to supernatural knowledge and special allies for controlling nature is a central focus. LaPier explains:

> I began this book by recounting my own 'Aha' moment when I realized that the old-time Indians did not believe that they live 'in harmony and balance' with nature the way we portray them today. Instead they believed that they could 'change and control' nature. What a powerful worldview! This book is an effort to tell a part of this story of the Blackfeet religious belief system and their understanding of the natural world.[52]

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[50] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 81.

[51] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvi.

[52] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 137.

As LaPier stresses, these are not uncommon, obscure, or distantly removed beliefs (to remind, they are only a grandmother's grandfather away). LaPier writes about a supernatural entity called Wind Maker to demonstrate how wind was no accident for the Blackfeet but an expression of deliberate agency. She is precise in her evidence. In the Blackfeet language, one does not say that the wind was, "blowing from the west"[53] but that "the wind was blowing toward the east. [Since the Blackfeet] believed that the Wind Maker created the wind and that it was being directed somewhere on purpose."[54]

LaPier underscores the importance of the stories and their connection to Blackfeet lifeways: "The Blackfeet did not believe they had to adapt to nature; they made nature adapt to them. How do we know this? Because they told us in their stories."[55] LaPier's research process is based on recollection, hearing the power of the stories. "As I thought about my grandmother's stories I began to recognize common threads that I had not truly noticed before—that the Blackfeet believed that they could change and control the natural world. And this belief gave them a certain level of confidence and authority."[56] Indeed, LaPier stresses the effect of this confidence and authority on Blackfeet life:

> The Blackfeet were able to attain much of what they needed based on their knowledge of the natural environment. But in difficult circumstances, or to make life easier, they could call upon supernatural allies to provide them with control over aspects of the natural world such as weather or animal behavior.

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[53] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 85.

[54] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 85.

[55] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvii.

[56] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxvi.

> They needed to temporarily change nature to ensure the communities survived or to increase their wealth.[57]

This culturally specific, though not necessarily culturally unique, relationship to weather brings layers of meaning to the weather and to the actions of supernatural creatures in *Lying with Badgers*. With LaPier's information on the Blackfeet cosmology, aspects of the play, including changing and controlling the weather, supernatural animal behavior, and utilizing supernatural intervention, take on a new depth of meaning. Causing snow and making it appear green, especially to influence behavior to ensure survival, is not merely something the Badgers do to advance the plot of *Lying with Badgers*. Supernaturally influencing the weather to ensure survival is, in fact, a very Blackfeet thing to do. Some ability to influence the weather, as LaPier states, was a common and necessary cultural skill. The presence of talking to supernatural animals or animal spirits is not exceptional, nor is it some pan-Indian literary device—not a fantastic fictional addition or element of magic realism. According to the Blackfeet cosmology, the invisible reality is the fundamental reality, more real at times than the visible world inhabited by the human characters. Even the father's supplication for Russell's protection that mobilizes the Badgers in play's opening scene takes on new multi-vocal meaning when thought of not generally as a supplication but as a calling upon of supernatural allies with roots in the Blackfeet religious tradition. It bears repeating (pun intended) that engaging these works multi-vocally is by no means meant to suggest that *Lying with Badgers* is some "perfect" rendering of Blackfeet religious traditions in practice or that the play "should" be "read through the lens" of *Invisible Reality*. The works can simply speak

[57] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 78.

with each other yet should not be made to speak over one another. One can listen to both on their own terms. Or, more productively, appreciate their resonant conversation.

The Blackfeet Knowledge Economy

In addition to animal consumption with its attendant restrictions and Blackfeet norms regarding controlling the weather, LaPier's story-based scholarship contributes an additional area for multi-vocal connection with *Lying with Badgers*, this one speaking to the play's primary source of conflict and controversy. Asher, as the leader of the religious Horn Society, has erected a Blackfeet Spiritual and Educational Lodge on the Badger-Two Medicine to allow tourists to pay for a wilderness and spiritual experience while learning about Blackfeet religious traditions and lifeways. Asher sees the lodge and its programming as beneficial to his Nation, including helping to generate funding to fight the tribe's ongoing legal battles against oil companies who would drill on and destroy their sacred land. The lodge would also raise awareness about Blackfeet knowledges and the essential role of Badger-Two Medicine in their religious and cultural lives. Yet, Asher's decision is controversial, as Russell, who seems in many ways to be the more traditionally minded of the two brothers, points out. Permanent structures are not permitted on the sacred mountain. As Russell questions Asher about the lodge's construction, Asher assures Russell that a crew can disassemble the lodge in about one day, so it does not constitute a permanent structure. "Do you see any plumbing? Electrical?" Asher asks Russell in response to his skepticism. He adds, "I'm doing what we've

always done. The teepee just looks a little different now." [58] Russell is not alone in criticizing Asher's decisions, including the decision to sell Blackfeet knowledge. "Tribal Council's okay with this?" Russell asks, to which Asher, in scripted hesitation, admits, "They're . . . still getting used to it."[59] Oil company spy and antagonist Crystal Farthing reveals that more than just the tribal council may have issues with Asher's plans, adding that perhaps even the Horn Society is critical: "The Horn Society members told me that if you'd [Russell] be willing to discredit Asher, it would be enough to convince the remaining holdouts."[60] These "holdouts" are resisting the oil company's plan to pay off tribal leadership in exchange for oil extraction rights. Yet, Asher is emphatic that the changes he proposes are not by his will alone: they originated from he and Russell's stern and rigidly traditional father. The lodge's famous guest, movie star Tara Torres, shows that Asher's plan has promise when she commits to advocating on behalf of the Badger-Two Medicine: "I'm gonna shine a light on your tribe's cause and show that big oil can't just keep tying this up in the system. We're talking social media blasts, political rallies, everything. … I can be your mouthpiece." [61] Even the oil company spy, Crystal, appears to undergo a spiritual transformation at the end of the play. After attempting to shoot a supposedly rampaging grizzly, she says, "(in shock) It was chasing…walked up…dragging your dad's body…why is the snow glowing?"[62] The ability of other characters of the play to

[58] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 38.

[59] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 38.

[60] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 65.

[61] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 81.

[62] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 100.

see the green-glowing snow when, up until that moment, only Russell could see it, demonstrates that some form of spiritual transformation has taken place. This transformation may be an opening in the awareness of the characters (internal transformation) or an inclusion of those characters into the spiritual processes taking place (external transformation). This transformation, inclusive of non-Blackfeet characters, colors the fact that Asher's plan, while controversial, has merit.

In Native drama, common dramatic themes include, 1. Is it better to violate one's beliefs and sell out to colonial powers or to be stolen from? and, 2. Is it better to sell out in one way to preserve something else? In Native Voices's 2019 world premiere of *Pure Native*, the characters wrestle with a similar issue. Will the Mohawk and Tuscarora characters allow a beverage company to build a water bottling plant on their Upstate New York Haudenosaunee reservation land and deplete their sacred River? None of the main characters want the River harmed, and most agree that a water bottling plant poses a substantial risk, if not inevitable harm, from defilement, literal and spiritual. Allowing a bottling plant would violate their role as stewards of the land and water. Yet, the argument in favor of making such an undesirable business arrangement is that if the tribe says no to the beverage company, the company will most likely purchase land upstream. Such a purchase would leave the tribe with a depleted—violated—River but with no jobs for tribal citizens running the factory, no oversight of the bottling operation, and no economic compensation. At first glance, it may seem that Asher and the Blackfeet face a similar dilemma in *Lying with Badgers*. Do they violate their religious beliefs and sell their knowledge to outsiders to pay for the legal battles that will allow them to protect their sacred mountains? Such dramatic dilemmas in Native North American drama

often appear to present a choice between upholding the old ways or embracing new ways, the Native versus the capitalist/colonial, or even as decisions between what is best for the individual versus what is best for the tribe or Nation. The individual vs. community interest dilemma is embedded within the dilemmas of old tribal ways vs. new tribal ways or Native vs. capitalist/colonial. Such dramas tend to be community-focused, with western paradigms—incursions—often extolling the virtues of individualism. Within this context, Russell represents the traditionalist perspective, believing that what is sacred to one's culture should not be commodified within the colonialist capitalist market—even in the name of the greater good. Asher, therefore, appears to represent the new way, in favor of adapting to the changing times and compromising to ensure the preservation of one's culture and sacred places. Yet, is that a more or less accurate account of the central tension driving *Lying with Badgers*? In addressing this moment of multi-vocality, LaPier's work has significant, culturally specific points to contribute.

In a subsection of LaPier's preface for *Invisible Reality* entitled, "Exploiting Grandma!," LaPier lists the five ways in which she acquired information for her book on the past lifeways and history of her familial Blackfeet community. These five methods are acquiring knowledge from stories LaPier heard throughout her life, from stories and history she heard working with Blackfeet elders at the Piegan Institute, from her continuing conversations with Elders, from research utilizing the unpublished and published stories collected by the early recorders of Blackfeet life at the turn of the last century, and from participating in "transferring."[63] This last way,

[63] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xvi.

"transferring," is a process in which people pay others, including one's own relatives, to gain access to knowledge, "much like paying to attend a university."[64] LaPier goes on to explain in detail the Blackfeet cultural context for "transferring" knowledge:

> The Blackfeet think of knowledge (both sacred and profane) as an investment, which can and should be bought and sold. Part of the historic Blackfeet economy was based on this exchange. The historian William Farr has described "transferring" or the buying and selling of religious knowledge as a "sacred economy."[65]

After describing the function of this historical and traditional system within Blackfeet society and its use during her own time—locating the practice both within the past and the present culture of the Blackfeet—LaPier discusses how she applied the cultural practice in gathering knowledge. Finally, she addresses potential concerns (Euro-Western and Indigenous) that one might level against such practices. "So am I 'using' or 'exploiting' grandma? Revealing her 'sacred knowledge?'" LaPier asks. "The answer is no," she states definitively and then adds, "And by buying this book you have just paid me to share my knowledge with you. And thus the Blackfeet knowledge economy continues."[66] According to LaPier, the commodification of knowledge—even religious knowledge, power, and sacred objects—is now and has been historically a common Blackfeet practice. The practice continues, as LaPier notes, in her contemporary experiences paying her family and tribal members for their knowledge.

The commodification of knowledge in this way may not be unique to the Blackfeet, but information about such an economic system certainly has the potential

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[64] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xvi.

[65] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xvi.

[66] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xvi.

to defy stereotypes and generalizations about how Native peoples view, handle, maintain, and disseminate their knowledges, including sacred knowledge. Again, it is worth noting that diversity is abundant in North America, with nearly 350 known and distinct indigenous languages representing hundreds of unique cultures. As such, assumptions and generalizations will be inaccurate. A reading of *Lying with Badgers* that does not consider Blackfeet lifeways such as those LaPier details risks losing the cultural specificity of the dramatic dilemmas faced by the Blackfeet characters in *Lying with Badgers* with the concerns currently faced by the Blackfeet people, not to mention other Nations who share resource extraction threats but experience those threats within other worldviews and circumstances. Works of Native drama, such as *Lying with Badgers* and *Pure Native*, often draw on culturally and platially specific concerns currently and historically faced by Native Nations across the continent as the people continue their resistance to colonial erasure and genocide. The culturally and platially specific context LaPier describes provides tools for resisting conflation. The Blackfeet knowledge economy, as LaPier details, is one example of cultural difference. In her discussion, LaPier notes in an assortment of ways that selling sacred knowledge was crucial to Blackfeet lifeways since at least the time of the "buffalo Indians," the period that directly preceded significant settler-colonial incursion. The supposed vanishing of Indigenous peoples fascinated early recorders of Blackfeet life. They were enthralled to the point of fetishizing and fossilizing those lifeways as those of the "real" or "authentic" Indian. LaPier draws a picture of continuity in Blackfeet lifeways, that the knowledge economy was a consistent cultural feature, even if the purchasers, goods, and circumstances driving

such trades changed in response to dire circumstances imposed by the settler-colonial state.

For generations, Blackfeet lifeways have included a robust knowledge economy, the buying and selling of valuable information. LaPier cites multiple sources, both contemporaneous with the time of her work and in the past, to affirm that this selling included religious or sacred knowledge. Buying sacred knowledge was, according to LaPier, "probably the most common way to create an alliance with the supernatural."[67] She details how one substantial source, *Ceremonial Bundles of the Black-foot Indians*, included "more than two hundred pages of Duvall's field notes . . . explaining in great detail how the Blackfeet 'bought' and 'sold' supernatural power"[68]

The knowledge economy, which frequently included selling knowledge to non-Blackfeet people, has notable historical precedents. LaPier demonstrates this in stories shared about the religious persecution, cultural expression, and deprivation of the Blackfeet's early reservation days. "The O'kan," LaPier writes, "was the Blackfeet's annual summer gathering that was both secular and religious."[69] Recall, at that time the Religious Crimes Code of 1883 had criminalized dancing, ceremonies, and other religious practices. By the early 1900s, the Blackfeet's outlawed annual regional celebration, the O'kan or late summer Medicine Lodge ceremony, was moved earlier in the year to coincide with United States 4th of July festivities, thus enabling the Blackfeet to preserve some form of the celebration. The

[67] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 29.

[68] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 29.

[69] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 3.

O'kan was further justified and masked—costumed—as a mere performance to delight tourists. LaPier tells the story of one O'kan during the early reservation days that attracted numerous tourists, hobbyists, and researchers to the Blackfeet reservation and yet still drew criticism:

> In the summer of 1910 the Blackfeet were fortunate to be able to relive the old days and sell their stories, songs, and portraits to this odd variety of people converging on the reservation. [Yet, Father J. B. Carroll] viewed the O'kan as more than a tourist attraction. He saw its pernicious potential. He complained that the federal government did not stop the Blackfeet from "publicly parading their devilish idolatry and superstition for the admiration and amusement of a large audience of white people."[70]

LaPier contextualizes and even supports Father J. B. Carroll's statement: "Looking back from the twenty- first century, one may view Carroll's commentary as ethnocentric or even racist, but his observations of Blackfeet life were essentially correct."[71] LaPier asserts the accuracy of Carroll's observations:

> Carroll had seen the O'kan practiced many times, and he knew that it served multiple purposes. In many ways the O'kan was like the Passion Play the Catholics performed. It was the reenactment of several stories that tell the larger history of the O'kan itself. These stories described the relationships and kinships between humans and supernatural deities. The Blackfeet told the ethnologist Clark Wissler, though, that the purpose for individual Blackfeet was 'blessing the people.'[72]

The account of the 1910 Blackfeet O'kan is a story of religious persecution and desperation. Due to genocidal policies, government corruption, and lies, economic conditions in the early reservation days were brutal. LaPier's story of the 1910 O'kan is also a story of resistance and resilience: "Blackfeet religion was persistent."[73] By

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[70] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 5.

[71] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 5.

[72] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 22.

[73] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 6.

framing the 1910 O'kan through Father J. B. Carroll's criticism of it, LaPier exposes a familiar narrative—an outlawed Indigenous religious ceremony moved to coincide with and masquerade as a settler-colonial holiday to preserve some aspect of religious practice—in an insightful and evenhanded way. She does not merely cite Carroll's criticism as evidence of settler-colonial persecution and ignorance. LaPier asserts how Carroll's criticisms reveal his rich understanding, if also total rejection, of the Blackfeet worldview and lifeways. As LaPier sees: "Ultimately Carroll tried to express that the O'kan did something else as well: it told a story of the past, when the Blackfeet with the help of the supernatural had control of their own destiny."[74]

LaPier's discussion of the Blackfeet knowledge economy is nuanced as she addresses "the role of outside recorders of Blackfeet life who came from the 1880s to 1910s and again in the 1940s."[75] Perspective is vital: "The story of recorders of Blackfeet life coming to a reservation is almost always told as a one-sided story, with the recorders of Blackfeet life being 'takers' of local knowledge."[76] LaPier challenges that version of the story as lacking cultural nuance and silencing the voices of the Blackfeet people of the past. Instead, she asserts the agency of a people with deeply held religious beliefs that they had control of their destiny and the words of a people with a historical precedent of a robust knowledge economy. LaPier asserts, "To a certain extent this story [of cultural extractivism] is different with the Blackfeet. The

[74] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 6.

[75] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xli.

[76] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xli.

Blackfeet wanted their history told, and they actively worked with ethnographers and sold them their stories, songs, and objects."[77]

This final point of multi-vocal connection discussed here between LaPier and Grasl's works demonstrates the need for cultural specificity and the nuanced readings possible when a multiplicity of voices is entertained—listened to—at once. One could read *Lying with Badgers* as the story of an elder brother, Russell, who represents the traditional view that what is sacred to one's culture should not be commodified within the capitalist market, even in the name of a greater good. One could then read the younger brother, Asher, as a character who represents the necessity of adapting to modern times and compromising in some ways to preserve Blackfeet cultures and sacred places. Yet, when I listen to these authors and, through their work, the choruses of voices that have informed it, I'm reminded that there is much more to this story and the characters of Russell and Asher than the above summary indicates. Thinking about these works together draws my focus differently, reminding me that Asher has assumed the spiritual leadership position as a Ni-namp-skan in Blackfeet society. Presumably before his father's death, Asher's training in Blackfeet religious traditions was completed, or at least much further along than Russell's Ni-namp-skan training, which he abandoned as a teenager.

For many years, Russell has lived in Los Angeles—living as what many refer to as an urban Indian. Vast political and identity complexities exist within Indigenous positionality, including the settler-colonial invalidation of not being a "real" Indian if one lives in an urban setting. This invalidation is compounded by internal struggles

[77] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xli.

with feeling not "Native enough" for living or choosing to live away from one's reservation or home community. The function of the policy of removal was assimilation. The theme of identity is a strong undercurrent within *Lying with Badgers,* evidenced in Russell's choice to change his last name from Potts to Spotter when he left the reservation. The play never explains why Russell does this. What exactly is Russell rejecting or embracing in himself when he chooses to be Spotter and suspend being Potts? What is he highlighting or hiding about how he presents himself to the off-reservation world? These questions of naming as an external manifestation of identity throw Russell's actions into more significant relief and give rise to additional questions surrounding his actions in the play. Paved over, urban centers are still the traditional territory of some Nation. The fact that urban lands are still Native land adds further complexity to the label of "urban Indian." Russell is also a former Navy SEAL and a survival consultant for a television reality show. This begs the question as to what extent Russell is also, in his own way, selling Blackfeet traditional knowledge under the guise of survival training. At the same time, being a former SEAL, Russell no doubt received training from the military for surviving in extreme situations. Perhaps it is that knowledge he is selling to Hollywood. Likely it is a layered combination of the two. The play does not make clear precisely what knowledge Russell sells in his role as a Hollywood survival expert and semi-famous-in-his-own-right badass. Still, the play makes clear that both Russell and Asher share knowledges and are adept at both using and teaching those knowledges. Tara makes this connection:

TARA
Well, I don't know jack about anything, but isn't the idea that by teaching others, your traditions will be carried on?

Russell nods.

TARA
Wait, I got something here…aren't you still honoring your father by teaching people how to sustain themselves in the wilderness?

RUSSELL
It's practical and simple ways to live off the land.

TARA
But people are still learning…so in a way, you're doing the same thing your brother is.[78]

A more acute focus on Asher and Russell's backgrounds invites questions about what feelings motivate and complicate Russell's instinct to insulate his tribe's traditions from outside dissemination. Is he perhaps reacting to guilt over breaking a sacred agreement, failing to atone, and abandoning his people? Is his reaction inflected by identity issues, feeling like he has betrayed or abandoned his culture or allowed himself to be white-washed, perhaps even enacting self-recrimination that spawns a reactionary response to "preserve" Blackfeet ways and his traditional home as he remembers it? As someone from Montanan who later moved to Los Angeles, I can attest to sometimes striking differences in social conventions that seemed so foreign when I first came to California and now seem natural. Russell's time in L.A. must have left a mark. How could it not, eating organic kale and avocados but walking on pavement stained deep gray with decades of unknowable toxic layers? Though manifesting in different ways, I have observed similar disconnects in western communities in Los Angeles and Montana: a lack of awareness that health

[78] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 80.

and wellness are relational, encompassing what goes into us and all that surrounds us—food and environment.

Additionally, Russell expresses doubts and issues with Ni-namp-skan training. From the opening moment, the play highlights the physical suffering involved. Such suffering is discussed multiple times, including Russell questioning and speaking out against the training. Referring to their Ni-namp-skan training at their father's hands, Asher says to Russell, "Sometimes he'd say he never had to punish you as hard as he punished me." Russell responds, "So you admit there was abuse?" Asher quickly denies, "It wasn't abuse. Mental and emotional strain maybe, but--"[79] Russell takes his concern over he and his brother's upbringing further when Asher is out of the room. Russell asks Asher's girlfriend, Maggie, if Asher is good to her, implying that perhaps Asher replicates the domestic violence with Maggie that he received at the hands of their father in the name of Ni-namp-skan training. Maggie attacks Russell's query: "You trying to find something wrong with [Asher]?"[80] Russell seems to genuinely wonder how his brother's upbringing has impacted his ability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Russell's own relationship to his past and the people in it is complex and troubled, impacting his worldview and actions throughout the play.

Spending time with these characters' lives and social contexts is not about reversing the argument, casting Asher as the traditional brother and Russell as the adulterated or unauthentic brother. This exploration is instead about letting these characters speak from the fullness of their character as Grasl has written them. This

[79] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 40.

[80] Grasl, *Lying with Badgers*, 51.

time spent is an effort to hold the fullness of complexity and "contradiction" without accepting shorthand, abbreviation, or generalized recourse to binaries.

For all that complexity, the play does position Russell as the brother with more traditional views. Russell is not a stereotype—the person who left and changed and now wants everyone back home to change, too—but he returns as a complex, contemporary, and often troubled figure. Similarly, while Asher champions the positive benefits of change for protecting Blackfeet lifeways—blending the old with the new, as he stresses several times—he advocates these changes through highly traditional methods. Asher adheres to Blackfeet traditional precepts, brings back out-of-use ceremonies, and asserts the traditional scope and usefulness of the Blackfeet knowledge economy. This younger brother does so from a position of social authority and connectedness to his traditional community and homeland.

Lying with Badgers leaves space to understand these human and more-than-human characters in complex and overlapping ways. *Invisible Realities* brings context and specificity, brings community voices to the theater of reading. Grasl and LaPier speak with depth and richness about what it means to be a Blackfeet person across space and time. Together, these works connect multi-vocally, contributing to the knowledge of what it means to be Blackfeet but not without raising questions and contradictions. Questions and contradiction are perhaps not what Euro-Western scholarship prefers to be staged at the end of its research. Questions are for the beginning. Answers are for the end. Following a knowledge cycle, we merely went further. Our destination made it back around to questions again. Perhaps next time, we can stop sooner, just before we get to the meaty questions, so that everything makes good, clean—unbadgered—sense.

Or, perhaps, we'll end on a different note entirely. Maybe, in the end, we'll let the animals have the closing word. LaPier ends *Invisible Reality* with this story:

> One night as I was finishing this book I had a dream. In the dream a grizzly bear came to my camp. (I live up in the mountains during the summers.) I was in my sleeping bag in my tent, but I was not alarmed. I just thought I would wait. However, after looking around, the bear poked its head under the tent covering. It greeted me forehead to forehead, nose to nose. I could feel its large head next to mine, as well as the heat and moisture from its breathing. It took a deep breath and slowly breathed in my breath. And then it left. The next morning I felt as if I had done strenuous exercise— I felt out of breath. I decided to make strong coffee and sit for a moment. After this (being a modern Blackfeet), I contacted my family and friends and told them of the dream. . . . As I sat there drinking my coffee, my breathing did not completely return to normal. I thought, WWOTD, or what would the old-timers do? My grandmother had told me that in the old days the way that women purified themselves was to bathe in a river or lake, then smudge with the incense of certain plants, and then paint their faces with earth minerals. I thought I should do as the old people would have done. I set up kindling for a fire and put my incense next to it. I then went down to the lake, which was completely still in the cool early morning. I walked into the water. As I turned around to look back at the shore, I saw a grizzly bear about twenty yards up the shore walking toward me. I waited as it continued to walk closer. I thought it was going to walk by me. But then in a moment it was gone. I listened and looked to see if it was climbing the hill or walking the other direction, but somehow it had completely disappeared. Brings Down the Sun's observation may have been true. Maybe our ability as humans to talk to animals has changed. But clearly *their* efforts to continue to communicate with us have not changed even into the twenty-first century. Once after my grandmother told a story of Spotted Bear and his relationship with the natural and supernatural world, she said to me something that I will repeat again: "That was really true . . . a real story. You can write it down."[81]

[81] LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 138-139.

Chapter 3

Speaking and Creating Sacred Space on the Native North American Stage: Ecological Protection and Ceremony in Performance

On April 22, 2017, I had the opportunity to speak at the Mountains and Sacred Landscapes International Conference in New York City. I remember wondering if observers would find it an odd juxtaposition, coming to the heart of this modern metropolis to speak about something ancient like sacred Native landscapes. Yet, New York City was the birthplace of the contemporary Native American theater movement. In 1972, the American Indian Theater Ensemble staged Robert Shorty and Geraldine Keams's *Na Haaz Zan* and Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian* under the auspices of La MaMa Experimental Theatre.[1] New York City was also the birthplace of Spiderwoman Theater, the longest continuously running Native American theater company.[2] New York City has been home to Native peoples since the People were first created for that land. At that very moment, thousands of urban Indians called the island of Manhattan home. There was nothing anachronistic or displaced about the when and where of contemporary New York City for a discussion of sacred land. For me, it made perfect sense.

This chapter discusses how Native North American theater practitioners defend sacred landscapes. I contend that Native drama and performative interventions can create sacred theatrical and performance spaces in defense of sacred landscapes through ritual and ceremony. This performance-based environmentalism is profoundly rooted in Native American religious traditions.

[1] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 8.

[2] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 10.

These traditions are our source from which to draw power to transform participants and impact the material world. In *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, playwright Tomson Highway details the preparation of the theatrical space visually and editorially in the ritual creating of sacred space within secular, Euro-Western theatrical spaces. Highway thereby, in tribalographic[3] fullness, invokes a story of protection and redemption designed to ceremonially transform a past of lost access to sacred and sustaining earth, opening from deprivation into a ceremony of healing, recuperation, and restoration through presence: embodied resistance. Mary Kathryn Nagle's play, *Fairly Traceable,* documents tribal struggles in Louisiana and Oklahoma to protect sacred homelands from the major oil companies, creating through the fusion of education, survival, and resistance that Gerald Vizenor terms survivance. Ceremonial defense of the sacred was central to the events surrounding the Standing Rock Sioux's No Dakota Access Pipeline movement in South Dakota, where prayer for sacred water garnered worldwide attention.

A Brief Glossary

In preparation for discussing how these three examples of Native North American drama and performative intervention work to protect sacred land, core terms must be decolonized, indigenized, and brought into fullness with aliveness to build a foundation of shared language. As Indigenous studies scholars attest, the challenge of communicating across any two fields is heightened and complicated when speaking across Indigenous and western fields. Playwright Diane Glancy calls

[3] For a discussion of Howe's tribalography, including the utility of the methodology and scholarly explorations of tribalography in practice, see *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 26, no. 2.

this work "translating English into English,"[4] and notes that "for native thought to be expressed in English, it has a long tunnel with quirks to pass through, so that when it arrives it is shaped differently than when it began."[5] This contortion of the meaning of "native thought" as it moves into English expression heightens the urgency of decolonizing conversations about words. Clarifying terminology and concepts is a component of indigenizing space for "native thought."[6] Some terms also need clarification when speaking across the fields of theater studies and religious studies.

Euro-Western: Used by Indigenous studies scholars to refer to the historical legacy and continuation of a systemic framework with which colonizer-oppressors marginalize certain groups. These widespread cultural practices and attitudes allow oppression and marginalization to continue. The Indigenous and the Euro-Western do not constitute a dichotomy but a tension. Various forms of colonialism via western civilization have imposed themselves onto the majority of the globe as extractive and ruling forces. Therefore, decolonizing (which accounts for Euro-Western influence) must accompany indigenizing, especially on to matters of language translation.

Decolonize: The process of seeking out, unmasking, and defusing the hegemonic assumptions, practices, and attitudes perpetuated by and embedded within the Euro-West.[7]

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[4] Glancy, "Writings on the Process," 7.

[5] Glancy, "Writings on the Process," 7.

[6] See Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, for breakdowns of Indigenous paradigms, ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and methodologies and how they differ from Euro-Western paradigms.

[7] See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, for a discussion of decolonization.

Indigenize: The process of foregrounding Indigenous methodologies, aesthetics, and lifeways, including ontologies and epistemologies (or truths and ways of knowing, as they are often referred to in Indigenous studies).

Story: "I am consciously using the terms story, fiction, history, and play, interchangeably because I am from a culture that views these things as an integrated whole rather than individual parts."[8] This viewing of the world through integrated wholes, instead of the sets of binaries common to English and other Euro-Western colonizer languages, is a frequent feature of Indigenous paradigms. Indigenous languages have also been noted for their tendency to be holistic and egalitarian.[9]

Sacred: The sacred and the secular are distinct and mutually exclusive within the Euro-West. Anything that is not sacred is secular. A church is typically a sacred location. Protestant religions critique Catholic liturgy for being too theatrical: idols are worshiped, dead languages invoked, and men wear elaborate costumes. A barn is a secular location, made more separate for housing animal others. Indigenous thought regarding the sacred is nuanced, complex, and inclusive. Within the practice of viewing the world through integrated wholes, the distinct division between the sacred and secular tends not to exist, with many Indigenous cultures viewing the entirety of existence as sacred to an extent, with varying sacrality in certain places, at certain times (seasons or times of day), or under certain circumstances.

Time: There is a noticeable cyclical quality to much Native North American scholarship. Far from being redundant, this cycling or circling intention is crucial.

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[8] Howe, "Tribalography," 118.

[9] For a discussion of holistic and egalitarian features of Indigenous paradigms, see Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*.

Cycling or circling through material reflects and honors Indigenous relationships to time. Euro-Western concepts of linear, mechanized-by-the-industrial[10] time are often represented as a line in a sequence called progress that has endpoints and consequences, including an individualized focus on death. Indigenous civilizations may experience time as shaped more similarly to the constellated universe, the center dancing in the form of a circle or a spiral.[11] Moving over the same or similar topics, revisiting concepts to engage listeners, is powerful. Akin to the repetition of a hymn or chant, repeating heightens what is shared, a quality essential to ritual in progression to ceremony.[12] Each turn as a return layers understanding that a reader, listener, actor, or audience has been successively lathed to receive. The preparation of the reader or listener rounds through the circular to distinguish itself from single-pass, linear communication.

Performance: This term brings discomfort, particularly when it involves entertaining permeability between the rigid Euro-Western categories of sacred and secular. Sacred and secular performances alike take place on raised stages and can incorporate interspersed songs, call and response audience participation, curation of lighting, staged decorations, and costumes for the audiences as well as those at the pulpit and in the choir loft. Performance is a word that simultaneously connotes entertainment, frivolity, duplicity, excellence, and action. One can perform a baptism, but to call a baptism a performance brings discomfort.

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[10] See Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," for a discussion of how measures of time have shaped Euro-Western relationships to time.

[11] For additional discussion of spirals, see Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars*.

[12] For a discussion of the importance of repetition in Native American ceremony and ceremonial drama, see Geiogamah, *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance.*

Theater and Performance Studies: Embraces, and in multiple registers owns, the concept of performance in titular claiming. These fields engage how a "performance" is staged, how performances function within cultures, and how life, culture, and interaction are woven with and communicated as performance. This scope includes how the self is performed, how the corporeal presence of bodies performs, how social systems perform, and even how absence—blind spots and erasures—are performed. Remember, theater director Michelle Newman asserts that "when one is working with the body, with presence, incarnation, one is also working with absence incarnate. With the wounds, losses, traumas, memories, dreams, imaginings, desires, even the other bodies that this body incarnates."[13] The western connotations of the term "perform" as an impersonation of life, a simulacrum if not an opposite to reality, trivial entertainment, or an enacted lie has resulted in various forms of anti-theatrical prejudice for centuries. Yet, performance studies challenges these connotations. To "perform" also means to do or to be effective in daily enactments of life. Performance scholarship is capable of discussing the performative nature of a church service or political speech without implying duplicity or a lack of genuine or even faithful intentions on the part of the speaker and participants. To examine performance is, in essence, to examine how stories/histories are constructed and shared.

My background in American Indian and Indigenous studies also comes to bear in discussions of religious performance. The belief in shared animacy and animal intelligences provides an alternate view of the sacral. All of existence

[13] Quoted in Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 127.

holistically possesses sacrality rather than the sacred existing solely in divinely sanctioned vessels that make themselves known in opposition to sin requiring sacrificial sanctification for atonement. Performance does not mean fake or fraudulent, nor is it distinctly secular. Performance performs: this is an active move. In this project, the terms performance depiction and performative intervention are often paired or used interchangeably with the term performance to broaden the field of vision regarding what is being discussed and to resist western connotations.

Decolonizing and indigenizing language is one component of being able to speak about Native North American drama. Another is building a shared awareness of the forces that have shaped this dramatic tradition. With the above terminology, we can now discuss the sociohistorical contexts that have shaped Native North American drama and its role as activist theater. The work is now to decolonize and indigenize time, what is often called history, to bring our understanding of those forces into full, living context.

Activist Contexts of Native Drama

Months before the Mountains and Sacred Landscapes conference, Inés Talamantez, founder of the academic field of Native American Religious Traditions, and I sat at a coffee shop discussing the conference topic, mountains and sacred landscapes: what they are, where they are, what they mean, and what they do. Professor Talamantez shared with me what she envisioned as the throughline of our conference panel. She asserted that through ritual and ceremony, sacred landscapes and sacred space could be created. We would discuss the creation of sacred places. At her direction, my work engaged the creation of sacred theatrical space in defense of

sacred landscapes. The practitioner-protectors of contemporary Native North American theater and performance have used and are still using the transformative potential of Native drama and performative interventions for ceremony. These ceremonies center on the protection and restoration of sacred landscapes. Such places are coming under increasing acts of extractive violation, threatened by radical alteration (development), endangerment (damaging activity in the vicinity), denial of access (due to governmental or outside party interference), and loss (through damage caused by climate change).

Brigit Däwes notes a general lack of academic and popular attention to Native theater. As mentioned, her work introduces the observation of Shari Huhndorf that "drama remains the most overlooked genre in Native American literatures."[14] Absent a comprehensive history of Native drama: "the history of Native theatre is either the shortest or the longest theatrical tradition within the realm of Canada."[15] Shäfer's assertion extends to the entire hemisphere. As Däwes affirms, "Indigenous drama and performance constitute—along with storytelling—the oldest literary genre in the Americas."[16] In "Coyote Transforming," Rolland Meinholtz excavates a performance lineage stretching back hundreds to thousands of years in the western hemisphere. Story does not just accompany language: story necessities language.

Since the contemporary Native theater tradition emerged amid the sociopolitical volatility of the Red Power Movement and the Indians of All Tribes (IAT) and American Indian Movement (AIM) occupations in the late 1960s and early

[14] Däwes, "Performing Memory, Transforming Time," 2.

[15] Schäfer, "A Short History of Native Canadian Theatre," 19.

[16] Däwes, "Performing Memory, Transforming Time," 1.

1970s, Native theater has been by design a theater of survivance, survivability, and activism. To be whole, this dramatic movement requires the respect that resides in the sacral. Meinholtz parses the move from "audience" to community in "mutual involvement:"

> Whereas Bertolt Brecht's theatre seeks to inform and mobilize, George Bernard Shaw's theatre to get people to think, Noel Coward's to entertain, Anton Chekhov's to empathize, Indian theatre wishes to spiritually and emotionally transform its audience. This is achieved through mutual involvement in a ceremony.[17]

To underline by repeating, this "mutual involvement" is "in a ceremony."

Virginie Magnat, who interviewed director, performer, and playwright, Floyd Favel, records his visions for Canadian First Nations theater:

> The relationship between theatre and tradition he [Flavel] envisions is rooted in a conception of performance which he links to spirituality: "theatre comes from across the Big Water and our traditions originate here. . . . Where these two mediums connect is at a spiritual level. In the moment of performance, higher self is activated, and it is at this higher plane that theatre and tradition are connected and related."[18]

This deliberate spiritual cultivation in early contemporary Native theater must be understood against the historical backdrop of Native communities' religious oppression and the history of distortion lodged in stage Indians in the performative context of the North American continent. This is a history of violence featuring Euro-Western agendas through damaging racist presentations. The 1884 Religious Crimes Code—passed by the United States Congress to outlaw the practice of Native American religious traditions on reservations—ushered in close to a century during which Native American religions were outlawed—prosecutable—in the United States

[17] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 89.

[18] Magnat, "Can Research Become Ceremony?" 35.

of America. In 1890, a religious practice known as the Ghost Dance culminated in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which calvary soldiers slaughtered Lakota in the act of practicing their religion.

Revisiting the five eras of Native North American drama, recall that these slaughters of 1890 signaled the close of the Westward Rupture era of United States history and, with the 20th century, brought changes in governmental Indian policies.[19] Direct warfare morphed into criminal neglect and violent recriminations that masqueraded as progress in the form of forced assimilation. This nadir characterized the Gathering Red Power era of Native American history (1890-1968). During this time, the entertaining killings of the Wild West continued to fascinate the colonial mind and cultural economies. Indigenous imagery and corporeality persisted in popular entertainment, such as Wild West shows, circuses, fairs, exhibitions, vaudeville, burlesque, museums, traveling medicine shows, and tourist venues.[20] Princess White Deer, a Wild West show-turned-vaudevillian performer, built her notable career on this fascination and was celebrated for her beauty at home and abroad. Within the spectacle of indigeneity, Princess White Deer maintained and profited on a public identity as a Mohegan person in an era when many Native North American peoples were confined to reservations and faced cultural and bodily starvation enforced by ubiquitous and brutal racism.

Westerns on radio, film, television, and literature enjoyed unflagging supremacy in popular entertainment throughout the Gathering Red Power era.

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[19] For a discussion of how "the frontier and the ties to established centres were formative in" North American settler societies' development, see Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis and later "metropolitan school" thought, described by Owram, "Frontier Thesis."

[20] Wilmer, "Introduction," 4

Whether portrayed or used merely as a plot device to create the sense of a looming and dangerous presence,[21] staged Indians in these entertainments were as central to the Western formula as the colonial hero: the cowboy. These depictions, outside the control of Indigenous people, reduced Indians (being performed by dark-skinned Mediterranean peoples and others) to monosyllabic-grunting, war-whooping, scalp-brandishing bad guys. The fiction was popularized that American Indian people had gone extinct. And, in a way, they had. Not only was their presence shackled to a bygone era, but some Indigenous people disappeared their Indianness, endeavoring to hide or downplay their background and even "pass" as white as a means of survival. Still, others had their Indianness disappeared for them by a dominant culture that refused to acknowledge a contemporary American Indian presence. The Native heritage of playwright Lynn Riggs, author of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, source material for the popular musical *Oklahoma!*,[22] and famed actor and humorist Will Rogers are two examples.[23] Neither Riggs nor Rodgers hid their Native heritage, sometimes even making special note of it. Yet, because their roles as public figures did not hinge on their Indigenous identities, the media and popular culture of their time effectively ignored that aspect of their familial and cultural background. The careers of Princess White Deer (how she maintained a public identity as Mohegan) and Riggs and Rogers (for both of whom an Indigenous public identity was denied by being ignored) offer insight into Native North American survival and resistance in the face of cultural theft and a glut of genocide-celebrating entertainment.

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[21] Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 7-10.

[22] Hammerstein, *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!*

[23] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 5-7.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, social and artistic upheaval catalyzed what has since been located as the Native American Renaissance.[24] Native peoples struggled against cultural obscurity and dominant Euro-Western depictions. The literary achievements of N. Scott Momaday and the political activism of the IAT and AIM standoffs at Alcatraz (1969-1971), the Washington D.C. BIA Office (1972), and Wounded Knee (1973) raised the profile of Indigenous Americans as artistic, resistant, and resilient people. Living people. In the following years, Native practitioners founded theater troupes that included the American Indian Theatre Ensemble (later Native American Theatre Ensemble), Red Earth Performing Arts Company, Spiderwoman Theater, and others.[25] With these initiatives came an explosion of Indigenous drama, opening new perspectives on performance depictions of Native North American peoples.

In the 21st century, Native theater practitioners and performers are taking up roles as activists, educators, and healers with renewed vitality. This work asserts itself in creating sacred spaces and defending sacred places and the environment, which are at risk. The historical Euro-Western practice of casting Indigenous peoples as features of the landscape—exemplified in the practice of relegating displays of Native people to natural history museums and the persistent performance archetype of the Native "child of nature"—has perpetuated in the western imagination an ongoing association between Native peoples and nature. For hundreds of years, according to Karen Martin, "Aboriginal people, if recognized at all, were viewed as

[24] For a discussion of the Native American Renaissance, see Velie and Lee, *The Native American Renaissance*.

[25] For a discussion of North American theater companies, Heath, "The Development of Native American Theatre Companies."

part of the flora and fauna, their lands as resources awaiting European exploitation."[26] Roy Harvey Pearce explains why, as strangers in unfamiliar environments, colonizers needed to foreground the Indigenous/nature connection to locate their own self-definition: "Aware to the point of self-consciousness of their specifically civilized heritage, they found in America not only an uncivilized environment, but uncivilized men—natural men, as it was said, living in a natural world."[27] As such, he reasons Native Americans became valuable foils for pioneers: "Until 1890 American Indians played a critically important role in American domestic affairs, symbolizing the vast wilderness and frontier that Americans wished to tame."[28]

This Euro-Western need to define itself (the white man of civilization) against an other (the red man of nature) does not control the actual, deep significance of the natural world to the platial religious traditions of the original peoples of North America. Vine Deloria Jr. parses this parallel:

> The fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movements of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light. When one group is concerned with the philosophical problem of space and the other with the philosophical problem of time, then the statements of either group do not make much sense when transferred from one context to the other without the proper consideration of what is taking place.[29]

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[26] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 47-48.

[27] Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 3.

[28] Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 4.

[29] Deloria, *God Is Red*, 62-63.

Differences between temporal and spatial religions precipitate divergences in attitude and practice. These differences include practices that nurture belonging, proper methods for respect, and designated venues for appropriate religious instruction. At the center, these approaches reflect attitudes about individual versus communal responsibility and mediate how one interacts with—respects as animate or dead—the beings of the natural world. A time-based religion views history as progress. Therefore, change is good regardless of environmental impact. A place-based religion views the Earth as good—starkly contrasting with much of sin-centered Christianity. Stewardship, caring for place, is so central a focus to many Native North American cultures that Stanlake chose platiality as one of four core discourses for her proposed Native American dramaturgy.[30]

The Euro-Western association between Native peoples and nature, in cooperation with widespread Native American religious traditions of respect and reciprocity with one's environment, has provided Native North American theater practitioners the power to challenge stereotypes while raising awareness of threats to sacred landscapes. These threats—radical alteration, endangerment, denial of access, and loss—offer robust templates for activist theaters of protection. Tomson Highway's *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Fairly Traceable*, and the No Dakota Access Pipeline ceremonial protection performances (both by and in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux) demonstrate a range of ways in which performative interventions are utilized in living time to topically and dynamically respond in defense of sacred landscapes. Such interventions enact

[30] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 29.

Howe's tribalographic approach to heal the past, mobilize the present, and protect—assure—the future through the creation of sacred spaces by ritual and embodied enactments.

Beyond contemporary Native theater's crucial work to raise awareness of the dangers facing sacred landscapes and offer new models for being in relationship with sacred place, Native theater works through ritual to create sacred spaces within the realm of theater performance and performative relationality. This creation of sacred space means transforming places defined as secular by settler-colonial cultures. Creating sacred spaces for and through performance facilitates healing from trauma, loss, dislocation, and missionization while also creating—staging—space for the ceremonial defense of sacred landscapes. In this way, contemporary Native North American theater and performance move beyond the parameters of education and resistance to become acts of mobilization, enacting spiritual and material change through the conscious use of ritual, ceremony, and sacred space.

Ritual and Ceremony, Stories and Transformation: *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*

The sociohistorical forces that have shaped Native drama have imbued it with dynamic activist roots and a powerful connection to Native North American worldviews and religious traditions. This connection manifests in Native drama in vital and potent ways. For example, when Howe writes about the creative power of stories, she is not speaking in an abstract or figurative sense. Illuminating the nature of story, Howe asks:

> What is the power of native stories? Did they create our people, our tribes, ourselves? Are our stories 'a living theater' that connects everything to

> everything, as we say they do? . . . Native stories have the power to create conflict, pain, discord, but ultimately understanding and enlightenment - a sacred third act.[31]

Howe fuses the concept of Native stories to a state of aliveness—a living theater of creation. Quoting anthropologist Stephen Tyler, Howe reminds "'discourse is the maker of the world, not its mirror. . . . The world is what we say it is and what we speak of is the world,' and I would assert," Howe adds, "how we act or perform."[32] "Native stories are power," she declares. "They create people. They author tribes."[33] Howe is not alone in her assertion of the sacred generative power of Native stories/fictions/histories/plays and, I would add, performances. Djanet Sears, Maria Campbell, Margo Kane, and others have also commented on how Native theater and storytelling are capable of possessing sacred, affective power.[34] Stanlake, discussing the topic at length, cites Craig Womack's insight that "native artistry is not pure aesthetics. . . . Indian writers are trying to *invoke* as much as *evoke*. The idea . . . is that language, spoken in the appropriate ritual context, will cause change in the physical universe."[35]

This sacred and transformative potential of Native theater exists by design. Discussing the development of contemporary Native North American theater in the 1960s, Meinholtz explains one dramatic feature related to sacred power: "Our theatre would use masks to represent unusual or mystical characters; persons who

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[31] Howe, "Tribalography," 117.

[32] Howe, "Tribalography," 121.

[33] Howe, "Tribalography," 118.

[34] Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 123.

[35] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 118.

have genuine spiritual power. The mask is one of the chief opportunities for literal and physical transformation in our theatre."[36] In his introduction to *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays*, Geiogamah observes, "the new Indian theater . . . is a theater movement that presents a wide spectrum of subject matter, comedy, tragedy, sophistication, wit, and ceremonial and ritual forms."[37] The potential for sacred power in Native North American theater and the ability of that power to create and transform is no accident. Through ceremony, sacred power is mobilized, and through ritual, the traditionally secular western theatrical space is transformed into a sacred space where ceremonies of healing and protection are generated—formed and performed.

In Tomson Highway's first note for his play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout,* the playwright gives the following direction:

> The language spoken by the women in this play, it must be stressed, is not English. . . . In this play, they speak Shuswap, a tongue that works according to principles, and impulses, different entirely from those that underlie, that "motor," the English language. For instance, because the principle that "motors" the Shuswap language is, in essence, a "laughing deity" (i.e. the Trickster), it is hysterical, comic to the point where its "spill-over" into horrifying tragedy is a thing quite normal, utterly organic. That is to say, as in most languages of Native North America (that I know of anyway), the "laughinggod" becomes a "cryinggod" becomes a "laughinggod," all in one swift impulse.[38]

The note stands alone on the page.

The script of the play is primarily in English, meant to be performed primarily in English, yet Highway specifies that the language used by the actors not be

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[36] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 88-89.

[37] Geiogamah "Introduction," 1.

[38] Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 2.

"motored" the way the English language is fundamentally propelled. To be correctly staged, the English used in this play must be motored by the force that drives the Shuswap language: motored by a god. The deity, Highway stresses, is the Trickster. How does an actor follow such a note? How do directors and dramaturges prepare to guide performers in this task of "re-motoring" the language they speak as the play requires? How is the presence of this Trickster god to be manifested to the audience? Dedicated practitioners of Native North American theater must spend time pondering these questions and others to stage *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. This time and energy spent pondering and listening—feeling and building relationships—opens what has the potential to become a ritual transformation, initiating the process and laying the groundwork for ceremony.

Wilson stresses the importance of laying the groundwork for ceremony in presenting this definition:

> A ceremony, according to Minnecunju Elder Lionel Kinunwa, is not just the period at the end of the sentence. It is the required process and preparation that happens long before the event. It is, in Atkinson's translation, *dadirri*, the many ways and forms and levels of listening. It is, in Martin's terminology, Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing. It is the knowledge and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected. It is the voice from our ancestors that tells us when it is right and when it is not.[39]

Ritual preparation is key to ceremony. Clues about what separates ritual preparation from merely detailed or lengthy preparation can be listened for and gleaned. Highway specifies the involvement of a deity in order to "re-motor" a colonizer language, an onerous task. Not only is English constructed and used differently from Shuswap, the language the characters of the play are actually

[39] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 60-61.

speaking, but colonizer languages are shaped by their long history of service to the hegemonic systems of colonization, missionization, and genocide. Decolonizing such a language is a leviathan of an undertaking, but to re-motor the language entirely would, in all likelihood, require divine intervention. This intervention is precisely what Highway gestures toward in his note. The directive echoes the permission to laugh that often accompanies humorous Native theatrical productions but is much more explicatory: didactic and demanding.

Wilson's definition of ceremony offers another clue. He discusses the need for multiple levels of listening, the knowledge (or perhaps faith) that all things are related and connected. I say faith not because faith is less solid than knowledge, because to some cultures, it can be. Nor do I use the term to suggest similarities between Native American religious traditions and settler-colonial faith systems. Faith, like the "real stories" of the Blackfeet invisible reality, grounds the less visible fact that all things are related and connected. Animate being is a fundament for most Native North American religious traditions. Not all religions share this point of view on the interconnectedness of existence. For the multiple Christian faiths in which I was raised, the human body was inherently or naturally a base and sinful thing, as was the rest of the physical, the fallen world. Sin was a stain to be cut out and excised from oneself, or the risk and destination were damnation. Religious traditions espousing interconnectedness, unlike Christianity, maintain that to split oneself from one's nature—to divide the totality of the self or to divide the individual self from the relational, connected, and collective community self—is illogical.

Wilson's most vital insight about the difference between hard work and ritual preparation is in his final line: he advises heeding the guidance of Ancestors.

Highway and Wilson's offerings resist being parsed into pieces to extract their meaning. Relationality, being in relationship, teaches that knowledge without context is meaningless. I aim to highlight—without the destruction of dissection or vivisection—the portions of the texts that hint at something *else* going on; portions that imply a level of intention to the preparation that might not be apparent on the surface. This level of intention is not explicitly stated, except perhaps to those intimately familiar with Indigenous North American cultures and practices. This opacity, intentional or not, makes sense. When connections sing through, they are intimate and strike deep. Explicit statements of religious beliefs have been and continue to be dangerous to cultures whose religious practices were criminalized by the U.S. government until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and often face lingering religious intolerance into the present. I therefore additionally aim to highlight how the works of a scripted play, live performance, performative intervention, and writings of a scholar who announces, "research is ceremony," gesture toward the potential in ritual preparation. Ritual preparation precedes ceremony. Meanwhile, what Highway hopes to accomplish with this ceremonial transformation, what he sets into motion, becomes apparent as his play unfolds.

Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout (2004) was written by prominent First Nations playwright Tomson Highway, author of award-winning plays *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). This play was "commissioned by the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society and Western Canada Theatre in honor of the 1910 Laurier Memorial, [which is] a document from the tribal Chiefs of the Thompson River Valley in British Columbia to the Prime Minister

of Canada."[40] This historic communique, the Laurier Memorial, detailed multiple land use and access issues. In Highway's play memorializing the document, four women struggle to prepare a feast for a visiting dignitary as their sacred land and water rights dissolve around them, leaving the land barren. The women hope to organize a grand meal for the "Great Big Kahoona of Canada" in preparation for seeking resolution from him of their grievances over the loss of access and destruction of their land. Yet, the restrictions have made it impossible to get the food they need to prepare the feast. All the while, Ernestine Shuswap is preparing to cook a huge trout she has been promised but which has not yet been caught. In the madness of futile preparation and internal conflict over the half-white child carried by the youngest character in the play, Delilah Rose Johnson, Delilah Rose commits suicide. In the final scene:

> The four women (including DELILAH ROSE JOHNSON) slowly spread DELILAH ROSE'S tablecloth/wedding veil/river across the downstage area. . . . Truly an odd, and very disturbing, combination of funeral and banquet. . . . Finally, ERNESTINE (still under the above speech/"voice of the river") comes on with her trout on a platter, a great big trout, biggest one you've ever seen. Like a priestess in a ritual, she descends, slowly passes it to ISABEL, who slowly passes it to ANNABELLE, who slowly passes it to the ghost of the very dead DELILAH ROSE JOHNSON, who very slowly comes to place it on the "banquet table" smack at centre-stage down. . . . Meanwhile, the other three women whisper/titter/sob their way up the aisle(s) and out the theatre, as though they were tittering/whispering their way out of a sacred space, a church for example, a church with a coffin sitting open with a corpse inside it.[41]

Highway extends the sacred imagery of the final scene and indicts Christianity in the suffering it causes when he directs Prime Minister Laurier to become Christ and the chiefs of the local tribes to become apostles at The Last Supper, which the

[40] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 28.

[41] Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 77-78.

ghost of Delilah Rose Johnson will serve: herself the container for a fatal mixing of embodied cultures.

If, as Howe ventures in her critical conversation with Taylor, how we speak and perform is the maker—the creator—of the world, and if, as Howe says, "Native stories are power," then to perform a story/history/fiction/play in the manner Highway outlines is potentially to invoke a generative force capable of, as Howe says, "creating people and authoring tribes." Given that Indigenous cultures have different relationships to what settler cultures perceive as boundaries dividing genres (such as history and fiction) and positions in time (such as the past, present, and future), then the generative force invoked by such a performance acts across the simultaneity of story and time. In the case of Highway's *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout,* this reordering of history through the tribalographic and ceremonial power of Native stories asserts and renews the sovereignty of Native rights, specifically rights to hunt, fish, gather, and perform cultural practices on ancestral lands.

Fairly Traceable

While Highway's *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* tribalographically reorders history through the ceremonial power of Native stories to assert and renew the sovereignty of Native Nations, Mary Kathryn Nagle's play, *Fairly Traceable*, tribalographically reorders the future to assert the sovereignty of lands to merely exist and the rights of Native peoples—regardless of identity status—to fight for the continued presence of those lands. *Fairly Traceable* premiered in March 2017 at The Autry Museum of Western Heritage. The play was one of three selected for a staged reading at the Native Voices Theater Company's 2016 Festival of New Plays before

being developed into a full production at the Wells Fargo Theater in Los Angeles in 2017. Nagle sets *Fairly Traceable* amid loss and heartbreak in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a superstorm fueled by global warming and exacerbated by faulty infrastructure. In the play, a Ponca environmental law professor recounts his journey toward becoming an environmental lawyer amid his family of global warming deniers. His choices to defend and then confront the major oil companies for their role in global warming and extreme weather nearly destroy his relationship with his family and his friendship with a Chitimacha woman, a law school classmate.

Fairly Traceable centers environmental survivance and offers an insider's view into the obstacles facing environmental lawyers in the wake of Supreme Court Justice Scalia's application of the "fairly traceable" standard in the case, *Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife*. Nagle's play also exposes the continued victimization caused by the Federal government's withholding of tribal recognition, leaving many tribes without status: access to resources and legalized claims to the lands their ancestors have inhabited for thousands of years. Scalia's decision, quoted in the play, makes it nearly impossible for any person or entity to sue for environmental damage because rarely can the actions of any single individual or group be deemed—traced—as the sole and direct cause of damages. Since damage to the environment is seldom "fairly traceable" (the claim of fairness is here a *double entendre*), even major polluters cannot be held accountable if others contributed, even to a small degree. Corporations are legal persons when it suits their interests. Otherwise, they hide behind the non-corporeal, their non-individual non-embodiment.

In addition to educating viewers and readers, *Fairly Traceable* models resistance and resists. Characters resist the erasure of their identities even while

losing their homeland to rising sea levels. The lead characters resist the unfair rulings of courts whose hands, psyches, and pens are tied by a legacy—precedents of bias and bigotry (English common law nationally and the Napoleonic code locally). Nagle's characters resist easy categorization when the many dimensions of what it means to be an Indian are questioned: federal recognition, "full blood" status, born and raised on one's tribal reservation, and maintaining tribal language and religious practices.

Finally*, Fairly* Traceable demonstrates—performs—survival. The play's main action is presented as a story told by the older professor about his younger self to a classroom of law students (the audience). As the professor talks about the past, he reveals the terrifying, post-apocalyptic state of the contemporary world of the play. Rising oceans have swallowed much of the coast of North America. Superstorms several miles wide are common. New Orleans can only be reached with scuba gear. Yet, the professor relates these traumas matter-of-factly, calling attention to the remarkable resilience of the Native characters of the play. The theme is underscored throughout the narrative as characters repeatedly remember an ancestor who survived the Trail of Tears. They recall their grandfather, retelling his story as a way of renewing their strength in the face of a new genocide, the total destruction of land due to global warming. Survival, resistance, and the will to educate permeate *Fairly Traceable,* making it a prime example of performing survivance. The style of *Fairly Traceable* is much more rooted in realism than *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, as evidenced by *Fairly Traceable*'s realistic and much more elaborate set. In comparison, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* is flanked by four Styrofoam cubes and a dangling cowboy hat. Yet, despite *Fairly Traceable*'s representational nature,

the potential for ceremonial transformation still exists, and this destination joins the two plays.

In crucial tandem and necessary converse, Wilson clarifies the nature of ceremony by detailing how ceremonial transformation is possible. He shares a vision that came to him while sleeping on the sacred Bear Butte in South Dakota, guiding readers through a visualization in which points of light construct the entirety of the physical and more-than-physical world. These points are themselves connected by infinitesimal threads of light. These threads are relationships, forming a web of interconnectivity to give form to the world around us.[42] It is within this fabric of the universe that ceremony acts. Ceremony affects change by "strengthening those connections."[43] Wilson makes his case for research processes as ceremony reasoning:

> By reducing the space between things, we are strengthening the relationship that they share. And this bringing things together so that they share the same space is what ceremony is about. This is why research itself is a sacred ceremony within an Indigenous research paradigm, as it is all about building relationships and bridging this sacred space."[44]

Wilson, quoting a conversation with another researcher, asserts, "'there is no distinction made between relationships that are made with other people and those made with our environment. Both are equally sacred.'"[45] Through ritual connection, these strengthened relationships create sacred space for a ceremony that defends, renews, and heals sacred landscapes.[46] So, how does *Fairly Traceable* mobilize

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[42] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 76.

[43] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 89.

[44] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 87.

[45] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 87.

[46] Another traditional aspect of ceremony is that it culminates in renewal, in a rebirth and rebalancing of universal order. Continuity is ultimately assured by successful completion of the ceremony. For

sacred power toward transformation and the closing of relational distances? How is ritual used to create sacred space? Here Meinholtz offers direction. In discussing features that distinguish Indigenous American drama, he writes that there is an "awareness that offstage space is often just as important as onstage space. Preparation and Arrival are quite important in Indian theatre. They are intrinsic to Ceremony."[47] The preparation of *Fairly Traceable* includes many iterations of the text and performance—a Native Voices playwright workshop, a staged reading, and months later, a full production: extensive attention was paid to the offstage space of the work. I have watched *Fairly Traceable* performed by two casts on multiple occasions. In viewing the performance, I was mutually involved in any transformations the play might accomplish. Theresa J. May underscores the importance of mutual involvement in staging of another Native play, *Burning Vision*: "We would discover that no amount of text analysis could clarify the meanings of this play; only live performance could reveal its inner workings."[48]

Relating the impact of *Fairly Traceable* on me as an audience member-participant, its transformative power can perhaps best be illustrated by its unexpected therapeutic effect on a childhood trauma. For most of my life, I have had a severe aversion to anything related to the legal profession. Lying in bed as a child, I would listen to my father, a county attorney and a justice for several tribal courts, vomit violently in the morning before heading to court. Growing up, he told me he

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additional discussion of rebirth and rebalancing in the Indigenous world, see Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América* and Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*.

[47] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 93.

[48] May, "Kneading Marie Clements' Burning Vision," 5.

expected me to become a lawyer like him. The opening scenes of *Fairly Traceable* were for me returning to a broken home. Yet, by the end of the play and ever since, I have felt oddly and profoundly different. I cannot say *Fairly Traceable* has turned me into the lawyer my father always expected me to be. Still, it has certainly awoken in me a spirit of activism for environmental and social justice, and somehow, much to my astonishment, massaged away a childhood knot of visceral disdain for all things judicial. A distance was closed, an order restored, a relationship rebalanced. As *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates, it is through the renewal of healthy relationships—within ourselves, among individuals and groups, and among human and more-than-human relatives—that we observe the power of ceremony.

Prayer for Sacred Water

While *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* and *Fairly Traceable* are both dramatic works, North American performative interventions in defense of sacred land and water also transpire beyond theatrical confines, in spaces in need of ceremonies of protection. The No Dakota Access Pipeline movement was called "prayer" for sacred water by the water protector-activists. Revisiting the definition of ceremony adds nuance to the observable ceremonial action within this performative intervention—prayer to close distance, restore order, and rebalance relationships.

In keeping with this project's methodology, here again, we revisit the definition of ceremony. Four passes, four circles, one for each of the four directions. Each time a circle is compassed, we close the distance between ourselves and our relationship to the preparation and action of ceremony. In her seminal novel, *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko writes about ceremony not as a static formula but as

a dynamic force for healing and protection. Through the voice of her healer character, Betonie, Silko reveals:

> She taught me this above all else: things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more.[49]

Ceremonies can preserve access to Power, Ancestors, and sacred ancestral lands, but ceremonies can, do, and must respond to the needs of the people. Ceremonies must shift and grow. We see the shifting, growing, and responding nature of ceremony demonstrated in the ceremonial interventions for Standing Rock. Thousands gathered at Canon Ball, North Dakota, to build prayer camps and block the Dakota Access Pipeline threatening to contaminate the Missouri River. Many refused to leave these camps despite militarized police brutality, eviction, and extreme blizzard conditions. The media repeatedly called these actions the Standing Rock protests and referred to the campers and others worldwide who demonstrated in solidarity as protestors. As they corrected the media, the water protectors were not protesting but engaging in a peaceful, prayerful ceremony to protect sacred water. To outsiders looking in, why did the prayer camps appear to have so much in common with protests, such as the Civil Rights protests in which colonial enforcers also used fire hoses and attack dogs? The fusion is due in no small part to Euro-Western dichotomies. These are the oppositional placement of the concepts of the authentic and the adulterated, the traditional and the new, the tainted and the pure. Informed

[49] Silko, *Ceremony*, 126.

by the understanding that Indigenous thought in the vital main does not recognize this absolutism framed in binary and, by definition, oppositional mode of thinking, this media-driven misprision can be understood. In its stead, with an appreciation for the dynamic and responsive power of ceremony, the prayerful and ceremonial interventions of the Standing Rock "protests" become indigenized in context and appreciated as sacred acts.

March 10, 2017, was a wet day in Washington, D.C., as hundreds of Native and First Nations peoples and allies gathered for a march and rally to culminate a week of action in the nation's capital. The group moved through the city, chanting, singing, and dancing in support of Indigenous rights and solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux. The message was clear: Respect Indigenous sovereignty. Stop the oil pipelines. This event was only the most recent in a series of protective ceremonies for sacred water, in which performance has been a recurring and inseparable aspect.

Marchers moved from a gathering at the Trump Hotel down Pennsylvania Avenue to Lafayette Square, "within shouting distance of the White House."[50] Drums provided a near-constant backdrop to the gathering in front of the hotel. Songs and dances punctuated the chanting as dozens of organizations and tribes displayed their identifying banners and Nations' flags. Yakama National Tribal Council Chair JoDe Goudy opened his address at the Lafayette Square rally with a sentiment that echoed throughout the proceedings: "Only in peace and only in prayer, grounded by faith and guided by ceremony, will we overcome. . . . Creator, give me strength."[51]

[50] "Sights and Sounds of Native Nations Rise March," 00:28.

[51] "Native Nations Rise March and Rally," 16:43.

Singers took the stage to sing songs of protection in their Native languages and play sacred drums. Three hip-hop artists shared raps and songs, accompanied by prerecorded soundtracks, with lyrics that described ceremonial resistance: "tobacco in the fire, send my prayers to the wind,"[52] and invoked prayer, power, unity, and love. Background dancer-drummers in full regalia covered their faces with hot pink air filtering masks. Speakers and performers asserted the importance of prayer, of the necessity of ceremony for their shared goal of protecting the Earth, our Mother, from further pipeline and fossil fuel destruction. The rally was a ceremony to strengthen and give voice to Indigenous people, close the relational distance between water protectors, unify the people, and enhance the bonds and cohesion within the community. Such healing has been a vital purpose of ceremony throughout its history in this hemisphere. Ceremonial intervention on behalf of the water protectors was particularly needed at the time due to then-recent divisions arising from the closing of the Cannon Ball camps by the tribal government. The community needed the unifying power and healing of which ceremony is capable. It is a shifting, growing ceremony perhaps, as inclusive of the siq beat as the sacred drum, the spit rhyme as the song of protection, yet it is unmistakably ceremony in intent and purpose all the same. To quote Eagle Woman, whose words guided the Lafayette Square rally to its conclusion: "We are going to close the night in a really good way. The way we start. The way we finish. The cyclical nature of everything we do. We are going to close it out with a prayer and with a ceremony."[53] We do this because we close the way we open, with gratitude and with prayer.

[52] "Native Nations Rise March and Rally," 01:53:57.

[53] "Native Nations Rise March and Rally," 02:11:46.

Chapter 4

To Strike Out: Corporeal Sovereignty and Presence as Resistance to Erasure in Native North American Sexuality on Stage

In 2006 and 2008, Drew Hayden Taylor, one of Canada's leading playwrights, edited two collections of essays by noted scholars and artists. The first was entitled *Me Funny*.[1] The second was a sequel of sorts, *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality*. These books addressed two of the most persistent misconceptions about the Indigenous peoples of North America, that Native peoples are stoic and laconic, not silly or sexual. The stereotype that Indigenous people are stoic and laconic, almost fossilized, robs the people of their aliveness, their capacity for the spontaneous vivacity represented by humor and sexuality. When the Euro-West encountered Indigenous sexuality, it was contextualized as Indigenous peoples were, in terms of the "savage."[2] If western society was civilized, and western sexuality, therefore, was contained and morally upright, then following binaried logic, Indigenous sexuality must represent more animalistic sexuality: "natural," unrestrained, and violent. The stereotypes that Native North Americans are not funny or sexy work hand in hand to create an ideological web that traps the people in archaic archetypes to deny nuance and humanity. Together, these stereotypes reinforce settler-colonial worldviews that cast colonized peoples as subhuman.

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[1] The full title is, *Me Funny: A far-reaching exploration of the HUMOUR, wittiness and repartee DOMINANT among the First Nations people of North America, as witnessed, experienced and CREATED DIRECTLY by themselves, and with the INCLUSION of outside but reputable sources necessarily familiar with the INDIGENOUS sense of humour as SEEN from an objective perspective.*

[2] For discussion on civilized, Euro-Western identities' need to define themselves in opposition to a savage counterpart, see Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization.*

Drew Hayden Taylor's books resist the stoic, depleted Indian stereotype. Yet, although humor and sexuality permeate Native literature, a deficit of scholarly analysis addresses these defining features. When writing about sexuality as it manifests in contemporary Native stories/fictions/histories/plays/performances, writing separate chapters on humor and sex verges on estranging intimate bedfellows. They travel together: the trio of laughter, sex, and tears in Native North American literature are close company, sometimes yielding center stage to each other, sometimes playing in pairs, sometimes speaking at once in one jangling, paradoxical harmony of choral intimacies. It is a challenge to write about one feature without recourse to the others. This chapter focuses on sexuality in Native North American drama, how it asserts vitality and contemporary presence and how culturally and platially specific methodologies illumine depths of performative potential that initiate or open paths to the sacred transformative. With survivance and humor, Native North American drama invokes Indigenous relationships to sex, sexuality, and gender. Performance depictions of Native sexuality then become a form of resistance to ongoing heteropatriarchal colonial violences, an assertion of community values, a reflection of Native worldviews, and an arena to play out sociocultural struggles.

Sex.

What in life more effectively brings humans to gut-shaking laughter and, close kin, to soul-rending tears?

Native Corporeality and Sexuality: A Dangerous Conversation

Staging the Sacred engages absent discourses: multi-vocal, salient humor that undergirds culture in defiance of colonial extinction narratives; theatrical creation of sacred space; corporeal sovereignty as asserted through Trickster and Two-Spirit sexualities; and an impulse of survivability foregrounding the good of the community. Of all the absent discourses this project engages, none has more potential to harm than the topic of Native sexuality and genders. Here is why. None of these discourses is abstract or figurative. They are literal, active, and alive and, as such, must be engaged through vitality. Encounters with vitality call for an adaptive methodological framework that respects the impact of staging the lived realities of our Peoples. Carelessness with Native North American sexuality has the potential to precipitate damaging effects for Native communities. Studies have found that Native women suffer sexual violence at rates as high as 56% to 94%.[3] The wide divergence here acknowledges geographic differences, that such crimes are under-reported in the contemporary U.S. culture of victim shaming and blaming, and that the legal system often egregiously fails to protect the most vulnerable. Due to jurisdictional complications, Native women often lack legal recourse against their non-Native attackers; one source revealed 96% of victims reported being the recipients of violence at the hands of non-Native perpetrators.[4] Native women on reservations are a targeted group because of laws that protect white predators from prosecution. It

[3] The 56.1% figure reported here: NCAI Policy Research Center, "Research Policy Update," 1. A long-misplaced 2010 survey of Seattle area American Indians and Alaska Natives reported sexual assault rates at 94%, cited here: Davila, Vianna. "Nearly every Native American woman in Seattle surveyed."

[4] Statistics on non-Native attackers: NCAI Policy Research Center, "Research Policy Update," 2. Report on U.S. legal failures to protect Indigenous women from sexual violence: Amnesty International, *Maze of injustice*.

bears repeating that the over 1,200 unsolved murders and kidnappings of Indigenous women and girls in Canada alone have been called a haunting national disgrace and a national shame.[5] Across the continent are thousands more missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people. Missionization and forced assimilation continue to leave spiritual, cultural, and physical scars that are passed down from the parents of the last generation to the children and grandchildren of this one. The traumatic and dangerous Indian boarding schools, in operation from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, have been revealed by official reports and former student testimony as environments of rampant sexual abuse. The recent exposures of unmarked graves tell their story of deplorable levels of student mortality. Between 2021 and 2022, over a thousand graves, the vast majority containing children, were discovered on the grounds of residential schools across Canada. This "dark side of sex"[6] is an ongoing colonial legacy with which Indigenous communities must contend. These are persistent realities of violent sexual colonization, of being conquered and violated repeatedly. As such, colonized discussions of Native sex and sexuality risk upholding the systems and attitudes that have allowed this fatal form of racism to persist. The objectified bodies of colonized peoples are narrative prey, feeding settler-colonial assumptions and stereotypes. These are dangerous conversations that risk re-traumatizing victims of these forms of violence. Everyone knows someone who wears the red shawl. Acknowledging the legitimacy and gravity of these shared experiences provides recognition of the

[5] See Lukacs, "Disappearing Aboriginal Women Are Canada's Secret Shame;" Paquin, "Unsolved Murders of Indigenous Women Reflect Canada's History of Silence;" and "The Halluci Nation - Burn Your Village To The Ground (Neon Nativez Remix)."

[6] So termed by Tungilik, "The Dark Side of Sex," 50-58.

struggle of survivors of personal and intergenerational sexual trauma. The ongoing, labor-intensive work of decolonizing how we speak about these hurts and approach intimate bodily violations will hone our ability to proceed with care.

Another concern when discussing depictions of sexual performances in contemporary Native North American theater is once again translating English to English[7] to excavate issues created by shaming and blaming, woman-hating cultures and the cruel language they inflict. My life as a praxis-based scholar involves troubling mean-spirited discourses and damaging assumptions. My omnipresent task is to find ways to beg, borrow, and even trick a colonizing language into carrying Indigenous thoughts and theories. The late Vine Deloria Jr. reminds us that in the past, "there was not a single bridge over which the exchange of ideas and sentiments could take place"[8] between what he knew were two lands of thought with different relationships to time, land, and female and Two-Spirit bodies. Howe accomplishes an act of English-to-English translation by explaining that the terms stories, plays, histories, and fictions are interchangeable. Howe comes from a culture that views those iterations as the same.[9] This is where the circular or cyclical nature of Native North American scholarship again asserts itself, bringing back knowledges to renew and deepen our relationship with less fractured economies of domination. Here is a story to expand on our definition of "performance."

While working on the planning committee for a graduate student-organized symposium, I shared with my fellow planners how I felt our conference topic and call

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[7] Glancy, "Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater," 7.

[8] Deloria, *God is Red,* 39.

[9] Howe, "Tribalography," 118.

for papers could be more inclusive for Native and Indigenous scholars on campus. The other planners expressed their support. After that meeting, I briefly announced the upcoming symposium's call for papers to members of the University of California, Santa Barbara's American Indian and Indigenous Collective.

"Why did you include the word performance in the conference title?" asked Margaret McMurtrey, founding member of the Elders' Council of the Central Coast and past Board Chair of the American Indian Health and Services, Corporation of Santa Barbara.[10] Her question and the ensuing discussion highlight a core scholarly tension of linguistic hegemony. For Indigenous communities, singing, dancing, chanting, and playing instruments (considered a unified whole in many Native North American cultures) and orality are often not performances in the western sense. Such performative events are not primarily secular mediums created for audience consumption with distractive entertainment as their destination. These activities in Native North American traditions are either recognized as religious or maintain strong connections to inclusive and holistic religions. Indigenous cultures may categorize knowledge by purpose and who is permitted to access it. Still, there is usually little division between relational events as education, religious traditions, social instruction, history, entertainment, the arts, and the sciences (medicine, ecology, geography, geology, and others). A single lesson will contain vital information in multiple areas at once. Individuals engaging in the Indigenous activities of singing, dancing, chanting, and playing instruments may not call themselves performers—and might find the concept offensive—instead, with more

[10] Margaret McMurtrey, In-Class Discussion, American Indian and Indigenous Studies seminar taught by Inés Talamantez, November 8, 2018, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

affinity and accuracy, considering themselves practitioners who are sharing. Calling a ceremony a performance risks demeaning connotations: minimization, disrespect, or dismissal. Although performance studies works to defy and unsettle such preconceptions, linguistic connotations can strike across and even within fields of academic inquiry, in particular those that are on speaking terms with popular culture. The west's troubled relationship with its own performance history parades ghosts that link performance to frivolity, disingenuousness, harlotry, deceit, and other questionable moralities. At times in its history, these negative associations and anti-theatrical prejudices have precipitated theater closings, outlawing of types of performance, and classifying actors as unsavory characters. The binary nature of colonizer languages and the Euro-Western convention of separating by category instill a need to isolate fact from fiction and history from story. Within linguistic contrast—the curtain between performance and reality persists. When I was a child, my cousins who cried loudly over a minor injury were admonished by adults with the teasing censure, "Look at those tears. What an actor!" If a television show or movie upset me, I was comforted with the platitude, "It's not real. It's a movie. It's all fake."

Despite the historical and linguistic challenges with which performance—and indeed most if not all the arts have had to contend—the western dramatic tradition has been home to brilliant and celebrated literary figures. Performance studies has contributed new approaches to understanding human interactions in public and private spheres. These performances extend into every arena of life, well beyond theaters of stage or screen. To quote William Davies King, performance studies "vigorously works to escape the limiting associations of theatrical performance, and instead to find culturally appropriate significance/vocabulary in the things it

studies."[11] Performance studies scholars have produced volumes of theories that have analyzed social conversations about conventions, including gender, sexuality, race, class, resistance, and forms of politicized power. Indeed, a collaboration between Richard Schechner, a theater director, and Victor Turner, an anthropologist, represents one formative moment in the field of performance studies.[12] In this collaboration, the study of culture and the study of theater comingle in the study of theater as culture—of performance as art and as presentations of cultural values—contributing new ways of working in and understanding both fields.[13] This has, in fact, frequently characterized performance studies throughout its development. Where performance studies goes, it often picks up a traveling partner in the form of another field of study, sharing concepts and tools in ways that dissolve the border between distinct fields and create spaces of exchange. These impacts across multiple fields are demonstrated in the case of Judith Butler. Butler posited that gender roles are not biologically fixed and are instead based on behavior. Gender is socially constructed and performative. Their work has contributed substantially to gender studies and performance studies and in the additional fields of feminist studies, literature studies, film and media studies, and others.[14] In *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, McKenzie links organizational, technical, and cultural

[11] William Davies King, University of California, Santa Barbara, January 2019, editing comment to author.

[12] For further discussion, see Schechner and Turner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* and Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*.

[13] For a critique on the racist foundations of many Euro-Western academic fields, including anthropology, see Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

[14] For further discussion of performative gender and Butler's other scholarly contributions, see Butler, *Gender Trouble* and Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

performance to propose that in the 20th and 21st centuries the virtue of performance and attendant pressure to perform has supplanted the 18th and 19th centuries virtue of discipline and attendant pressure to be disciplined as mainstream culture's hallmark of excellence. Philosopher J. L. Austin's speech acts theory observes that "to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something, and even by saying something we do something,"[15] With an emphasis on Latin American performance and transnationalism, Diana Taylor reveals that performing bodies are archives of cultural memory, that what we perform in word and action marks our bodies as sites of remembering and social identity creation.[16] Despite performance studies' relative youth as a field, its contributions across academia are expansive. Due in part to its highly interdisciplinary nature, performance studies is also a difficult field to pin down.

As an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersection of Indigenous studies, religious studies, and performance studies, I am aware that my area of research into sacral power is foreign to this capacious embrace. Translating the English word, performance, to a holistic Indigenous conception—to Indigenize performance, as McMurtrey reminds us—is to court precarity. Yet, given the central importance of singing, dancing, drumming, chanting, storying, orality, and creating drama to Native North American religious traditions and cultural continuity, decolonizing the language of performance, performative interventions, and performative aspects of ceremonial events is urgent and necessary.

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[15] Austin, *How To Do Things With Words,* 94.

[16] See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

The topics of sex, sexuality, and gender suffer similar linguistic hegemony. Despite efforts from feminist scholars to change the tonalities of prevailing conversations, work must be done to shift language in ways that stand outside conversations that trade in the banter of misogyny-driven assumptions and distort attitudes about sex, sexualities, gender, and performance. Sexual expression is all too often shunted into deficit-focused modes of analysis. Such analysis encourages researchers to cast types of behaviors, such as sexual labor (or the more "politically laden concept"[17] of sex work), as problems requiring solutions or eradication.

This project uses the term "performance depictions of Indigenous sexuality" when referring to the sexual performances and depictions to highlight the performative nature of materials that may not be recognizable as performances in the traditional dramatic sense. Also, performance depictions of Indigenous sexuality should not be confused with Indigenous peoples performing sexuality or performances of Indigenous sexuality. The terms "Indigenous sexual performance" and "performed Indigenous sexuality" leave room for confusion. The former implies that Indigenous people have set the agenda of portrayal or that Indigenous bodies are involved in the performance. In many cases, neither one may be true. The latter may imply some claim to authenticity to the Indigenous sexuality being foregrounded—realized—in the performance, which continues the damaging colonial tendency to label Indigenous peoples as "authentic" or "inauthentic." Questioning whether the performed Indigenous sexuality represents living Indigenous people or

[17] Boris, Gilmore, and Parreñas, "Sexual Labors," 131.

is portraying Indigenous sexuality for some symbolic or stereotypical meaning must be assessed regarding each event.

When discussing arousal, sexuality, or gender in Native North American theater, even using the standard performance studies term "bodies" is controversial. The term "Native body," or a focus on the "body," is problematic for Indigenous scholarship: such terms impose divisions that separate the physical presence of a person from their intellectual and spiritual presence. The word also repeats the colonial practice of treating Native people as inconvenient bodies, lacking the intellectual and spiritual capabilities of those to whom "civilization" grants the rights and privileges of being viewed as persons. The term facilitates continued fetishization by pushing the minds and hearts of Native people to the background by reducing Peoples to bodies on the way to disappearing us entirely. The immanent potential for harm contained in a word like "body" for people who have fought so hard for partial recognition as human explains the need to indigenize research methodologies in all fields, including approaches to Native North American drama. The potential for harm is palpable. The need for respect and bring-more-than-you-take action in research is essential protocol. Hegemony provides lenses, excuses, and escape hatches that allow Indigenous methodologies to be ignored and misinterpretations to conquer. It goes against what colonialism teaches to listen, to understand. Listening and understanding require colonial powers to abdicate the position of claimed dominance, the superiority on which conquistador ideologies are founded. This listening is an act colonial powers are often unwilling or unable to perform. Although I have tried to account for concerns over the word "body" and its potential to cause harm, I still use the word, or when possible, the power-generating

word “presence,” to refer to the immediacy of physical presence or the sacredness of the embodied physical form. There is no division between and among the unity of spiritual, corporeal, and intellectual presence. When used here, “body” signifies a compound entity: mind/body/spirit. This interconnection is the indivisible totality of presence of self.

While participating at the Mescalero Apache girls’ puberty ceremony one year, as she has done many years, my guiding spirit, Inés Talamantez, developer of the field of Native American religious traditions, heard a comment from one of the initiate’s little brothers. Upon witnessing the ceremony and learning its teachings, the young boy said, "I never knew my sister’s body was sacred. I won't hit you anymore. I never knew my body was sacred. I won't hit you anymore.”[18] Understanding and internalizing the sacrality of one’s body is a catalyst for transformative change in thinking about oneself—oneself in relation to the Earth, our Mother, and oneself in relation to our more-than-human relatives. Knowing oneself as sacred, recognizing the sacrality of others, reorients the world. This knowing inflects one’s relationship to nature, to one’s community, to the Ancestors. For communities who view the body as a location of sacred power, participating in war or experiencing dislocation, substance abuse, denial of traditional foodways, and forced alteration of one’s physical appearance, as required by residential schooling, all have consequences. Abuse, rape, and murder—which are perpetrated more often on women of color, Native American, First Nations, and Indígena/x women and Two-Spirit people—compound traumas in shared hurts that are nuanced in cultural

[18] Inés Talamantez, Introduction to Native American Religious Traditions lecture, Fall 2017, University of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

inflection. Recovering from these traumas necessitates culturally inflected healing practices, which often occur in tandem with some type of performance or enactment that incorporate performative elements.

The physical presence of the Native person, our corporeal immediacy in performance, is power. From the perspective of Indigenous theory, such as an Apache or Cree methodology, sacred bodies are powerful. As these bodies engage in activities that make meaning, they precipitate change in the physical universe through the action of ritual and ceremony. Native people, actually present Native people, disrupt national narratives of the heroic conquistador or railroad-building rise and instead trouble "civilized" violence. By failing to be primitive and savage, we upset the fallacy that progress over time is inevitable. It is not. If one wishes to study Native dramatic texts without perpetuating harm to the people and their communities, studies must be approached and carried out in consultation. This study and consultation must be, as many Native North American scholars and leaders participate, "in a good way." Potential for harm, imminent physical harm, necessitates caution. The project of colonialism on this continent included the conquest, taming, and erasure of Indigenous peoples sexually as well as culturally. For nearly half a millennia, performance depictions of Native peoples, or merely some fantasies of nativeness, have been put in service to western agendas, shoring up Euro-American identities in their need to define themselves against a savage "other."[19] This staged Indian justified land theft and legitimized swash-buckling pseudo identities while mobilizing and unifying invading populations to normalize

[19] See Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization.*

colonial—genocidal—ends.[20] In the footnotes to national narratives of glory and conquest, these staged fictions titillate with exoticized sexuality to entertain, entertain, entertain. Today settler culture uses Native North American peoples and their traditional and sacred garb and imagery to symbolize a wild, untamed, and available-to-hunters sexuality. This scenario invites domination and overexposure. Costumes worn by revelers, such as Halloween costumes and music festival feathers and beads, stand as glaring examples of performances. This performing of careless, offensive, or even deliberately hostile sexual availability calls up and reinforces stereotypes that legitimize and drive deliberate sexual violence.

Finally, in conversing with Native North American sexuality in contemporary Native drama, we must remember Howe's assertion that "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes."[21] In *Ceremony,* Silko illustrates the power of Native stories, how one such story is responsible for creating the settlers that arrived in droves on these shores, "swarming like larva out of a crushed ant hill."[22] We must be careful with words, with what our words can bring into being. Our Elders teach us that we must ensure we story good things into existence.

Scholarship on Indigenous sex, sexuality, and gender in drama has been minimal in what is already an underrepresented area. What exists, in the main, addresses the negative sexual climate that my work has discussed. This lack of attention to Native sexuality and its effect on Native communities has been addressed by writers including Norman Vorano, Deborah Miranda, Drew Hayden

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[20] Deloria, *God is Red*, 4.

[21] Howe, "Tribalography," 118.

[22] Silko, *Ceremony*, 132-138.

Taylor, Daniel Heath Justice, Tomson Highway,[23] and others.[24] These scholars and artists also note power and positive potential in stories of Native sex and sexuality. They call for more scholarship on healthy, life-affirming sexuality—on wisdom and hope.[25] Sexual performance depictions of indigeneity provide a substantial body of staged and unstaged stories from which to draw. The trio of sexuality, laughter, and tears travels together. Together they have served crucial purposes on this continent for the entirety of its human and, in relationship, more-than-human history.

A Brief History of Sexual Performance Depictions in North America

Drama, performance, and orality on this continent (in the holistic, Indigenous sense capable of viewing as an integrated whole that which, in colonizing languages, requires multiple words) consists of five historical eras. This history becomes visible through divisions marked by major social and political forces—marked by incursions that shaped the lives of Indigenous peoples. These eras in temporal march include Self-Determined (pre-European invasion), Early Invasion (1492-1830), Westward Rupture (1830-1890), Gathering Red Power (1890-1968), and Self-Defined (1969-the present). This section surveys these nodal points in Indigenous and Euro-Western drama and literatures to foreground the central tropes of embodiment, Native and colonialist, and the complex interplays between and among cultures.

The Self-Determined era began when the first peoples appeared in the American hemisphere. The period continued until the commencement of the

[23] Taylor, *Me Sexy*.

[24] Savage, "Savage Love: Cowboys-in-Injuns."

[25] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 50.

invasion of the Americas by Europe. As European incursion was not a uniform process, the precise end of the Self-Determined era differs from Nation to Nation. For some, this devastation came as late as the 1800s. Europeans systematically altered or destroyed much of the history and practices of the first Americans over the 500 years of American/European contact. The history and practices surrounding sex, sexuality, and gender that persisted through genocide provide contextualizing information that opens opportunities to connect with pre-invasion attitudes about sex and performance depictions of sexuality. Yet, one must not treat these stories as the pure, unadulterated, or fossilized history of a people's beliefs. Additionally, stories being living things, they grow and change. Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of culture, and stories are used:

> for a multitude of purposes. Stories can work as cultural indexes for appropriate or inappropriate behavior. They can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or to enlighten. So much depends on who is telling the story and who is listening and the specific circumstances of the exchange.[26]

Stories about sex, sexuality, and gender provide pieces of information that tell as much about the individual storytellers and listeners as their respective cultural backgrounds. What can be learned is tied to how these stories speak to the people today and what these stories, or versions of them, spoke to people in other times. It bears repeating here that cultures change, shift, and grow, and even within a single moment, not all cultures agree within themselves. There are always variations, interpretations, and contested points. Stories about sex, sexuality, and gender, however, through persisting culture and cultural recuperation, can inform contemporary Native peoples' attitudes toward sex. Elements include gender and

[26] Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 4.

social norms that the various tribes observed about who may know or perform certain songs, dances, or stories. The Self-Determined era of Native North American sexuality inflected such practices as Inuit turn-off-the-lamp games, Hopi erotic tales and their sexually expressive ceremonial clowns, and the Two-Spirit traditions of tribes of the Southeast, the Pueblos, and many others.[27] Sexual performance depictions during this period served multiple functions, including carrying tribal sexual and gender information, cultural values, and integral components of a Nation's history. One example is the Inuit account of sister and brother, Seqineq and Aningaaq, when a sex game gone awry explains both the origin and movements of the sun and the moon.[28]

One night while playing "turn-off-the-lamp" games with the others in their village, Seqineq used soot to mark the body of one of her lovers in the dark. She marked this lover because she noticed that he made a special point of finding her night after night. When the lamp was lit again, she saw her brother, Aningaaq, covered in soot. "She took a knife, cut off one of her breasts, dipped it in the lamp oil and lit it. With her breast as a torch she ran out of the house. She had such force in her movements that she levitated and became the sun."[29] Aningaaq followed her. In his pursuit, he became the moon and, with his torch, created the stars. He still

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[27] For additional such stories, see Ballinger, "Coyote, He/She Was Going There," which lists and discusses a variety of such stories from many national traditions, including, to name a few, the Tewa, Yurok, Crow, Nez Perce, Winnebago, Cayuga, Chinook, and Blackfoot traditions. *Me Sexy* also contains reference to such stories in the essays, Kleist, "Pre-Christian Inuit Sexuality," Taylor, "Fear of a Changeling Moon," and Vorano, "Inuit Men, Erotic Art." Additionally, Deer Woman stories from tribes including the Ponca, Omaha, Cherokee, and others contain stories illustrating Deer Woman's connections as ranging from fertility to functioning as a dangerous entity who revenges wrongs against women and children.

[28] Kleist, "Pre-Christian Inuit Sexuality," 16.

[29] Kleist, "Pre-Christian Inuit Sexuality," 16.

follows his sister through the sky. In this story of origin and cosmology, information serves a dual function that instructs on appropriate sexual behavior. The sister's breast becomes the sun, reorienting colonizer masculinist binaries and their gendering of skyward bodies.

The Yellow Woman accounts of the Keres of Laguna and Acoma Pueblos serve similar purposes in designating origins and instructing on gender. The name of this figure foregrounds her essential woman-ness as "Kochinnenako, Yellow Woman, . . . in some sense a name that means Woman-Woman because among the Keres, yellow is the color for women (as pink and red are among Anglo-European Americans)."[30] In these origin and history accounts, Yellow Woman is often unusual, alienated from her people or possessing some characteristic not shared by the typical women of the tribe. A synthesis takes place in juxtaposing her name and function as a role model of essential woman-ness alongside her atypical gender characteristics. Through her unusual characteristics, she brings about happy outcomes for her people in her role as Yellow Woman. Yellow Woman teaches, among many other lessons, that sometimes to be the ideal of femininity, one must break the rules of what it means to be feminine within one's society.[31] The perfect woman, Yellow Woman teaches, is one who sometimes breaks the rules.

The 16th-19th centuries marked a break from Indigenous-determined sexual performance depictions. This break spread across North America with the imposition of Euro-Western moralities by missionaries (foregrounding female evil) and the inflicting of European explorer/settler violence (their long-practiced

[30] Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 226.

[31] Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 227.

traditions of conquest by rape). The Early Invasion Era stretched from the time of the first European invasions of earlier Americans until 1830. In that year, the signing of the Indian Removal Act marked an explosion of southern and western Euro-American expansion that forced Native North American displacement. Performance depictions of Indigenous sexuality from this Early Invasion era were split for the first time into Eurocentric and Tribal-centric depictions. This period marks the first formalized interaction between Indigenous North American and European paradigms, introducing European-style drama, culture, morality, and exploitation.

As mentioned previously, burgeoning Euro-American theater, in its prideful attempts to distinguish itself from the European theater, made liberal use of Native North American characters.[32] Two notable Eurocentric performance archetypes common in this era were, initially the child of nature and, nearer the close of that era, the Indian princess. Some critics have posited these archetypes as the male and female versions of the same character. Stage Indians of this period were typically well-spoken and vigorous, attributes imbued through their communion with the natural world. For both archetypes, their sexuality was realized—staged—intersecting with white sexuality and restrictive foreign mores. The child of nature was upheld as the subject of attraction for colonial women in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), "the first wholly successful American play performed by professional actors."[33] In scene two, the principle female love interest, Maria, sits disconsolately with her books, reading a poem:

> Remember the arrows he shot from his bow;
> Remember your chiefs by his hatchet laid low:

[32] Moody, *Dramas from the American Theater,* 397.

[33] Moody, *Dramas from the American Theater,* 27.

> Why so slow? — do you wait till I shrink from the pain?
> No — The son of Alknomook will never complain.[34]

When Maria finishes reading the poem, she reflects:

> There is something in this song which ever calls forth my affections. The manly virtue of courage, . . . [which] displays something so noble, so exalted, that in despite of the prejudices of education I cannot but admire it, even in a savage. . . . The only safe asylum a woman of delicacy can find is in the arms of a man of honour. How naturally, then, should we love the brave and the generous"[35]

Misogyny provides a tantalizing forbidden stage on which to negotiate settler foreignness, identity, and belonging. Not surprisingly, child of nature archetypes ultimately served to reinforce white dominance over dark children. By their proximity, the child of nature imbued virility and legitimacy—masculinist adulthood—to Euro-American whiteness. The ultimate romantic and reproductive triumph of Euro-American men in these plots firmly asserts the Euro-American male as the acceptable and glorified object of white female and Indian female desire. In *The Contrast*, Maria's socially appropriate match is Captain Manly, an American-born, colonial man. Throughout the play, Manly is exalted by various characters as the ideal of rugged American manhood. He comes by his exalted position in contrast to the effeminate, European character, Dimple, and, through Maria's initial attraction, by proximity to "the son of Alknomook." Her chosen man is "manly" through his relationship with the Native American virtues of bravery and stoicism.

The theme of Euro-American sex appeal borrowing vitality through proximity to Native American "child of nature" or "noble savage" archetypes to triumph over effeminized European sex appeal persisted in dramatic literature. Based on a

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[34] Tyler, *The Contrast*, 36.

[35] Tyler, *The Contrast*, 36-37.

historical figure, Pocahontas and Indian princess types scripted to be like her performed their staged desire for white, Euro-American masculinity. This white male fantasy figured prominently in a multitude of plays that enjoyed decades of popularity from the late Early Invasion era well into the Westward Rupture era. So prevalent was the Indian princess character that by 1855 John Brougham wrote a popular play mocking the ample genre, *Po-ca-hon-tas, or The Gentle Savage*.[36] At the climax of his Pocahontas story, the Indian princess stops her father, the king, as he raises a club to brain Captain John Smith. She professes her love and, in punning humor, offers dessert:

POCAHONTAS
Husband! for thee I *scream!*

SMITH
Lemon or *Vanilla?*

POCAHONTAS
Oh! *Fly* with me, and quit those vile dominions!

SMITH
How *can* I fly, beloved, with these pinions?[37]

Smith and Mynheer Rolff, a heavily accented Dutchman, settle their dispute for Pocahontas's hand in marriage over a game of cards. When Smith wins, Pocahontas exclaims with delight at the outcome, "Papa, you've heard?" The king replies, "It likes me not, but I must keep my word. . . . Our son-in-law, three cheers, and make them tell!"[38] Smith's American style of speech, using, for example, "Virginny" to speak of Virginia, stands in contrast to Rolff's thick European accent.

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[36] Moody, *Dramas from the American Theater,* 397.

[37] Brougham, *Po-ca-hon-tas,* 419.

[38] Brougham, *Po-ca-hon-tas,* 420.

The difference in speech marks Smith's victory in winning Pocahontas's hand and affection as a victory of Euro-American sex appeal over European efforts at appealing. Once again, in a Eurocentric performance depiction of Indigenous sexuality, the Euro-American male borrows sexual vitality and legitimacy through comparison and proximity to the potent child of nature. At the same time, the ultimate success of the Euro-American hero and the female characters' longing for socially acceptable objects of desire—white men—provided the requisite reassurance of white male sexual superiority.

During Westward Rupture (1830-1890), Indigenous bodies were no longer legitimizing forces bringing, models of masculinity to colonizing Europeans. Instead, such bodies became impediments to the acquisitive rush of westward settlement. The year 1830 saw the signing of the heinous Indian Removal Act and the opening of the trend-setting play, John Augustus Stone's *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*. During the attempted eradication that followed removals, the archetype of the doomed chief and later the inhuman savage rose to prominence in performance depictions of Indigenous people. The Indian princess continued in popularity, and her narrative of welcomed conjunction played out in the violence of contact. While in the Early Invasion era, settler-colonial drama's Native characters displayed courage and eloquence, as documented in *A Dialogue Between an Englishman and an Indian* (1779), the speech and mental faculties of stage Indians in Westward Rupture drama began a steady, precipitous decline.

Metamora stood for decades as a liminal example in how audiences related to the play and the titular character's speaking and mental faculties. American theater star, Edwin Forrest, had commissioned *Metamora* in a contest specifying a tragedy

"of which the hero, or principal character, shall be an aboriginal of this country."[39] In choosing such a principal character and delineating the desired genre of tragedy, Forrest endeavored to craft for himself a role uniquely suited to showcasing his famously vigorous acting style and cementing his position as a truly American actor, the first American star of the stage.

Metamora was a rousing and exceptionally long-lived success, shaping burgeoning Euro-American nationalism. Some audiences identified with the American Indian hero, seeing themselves as struggling and formerly repressed by the British government. This reaction harkened back to the legitimizing role of Early Invasion stage Indians. Other audiences reacted furiously at what they saw as an indictment of the new Jacksonian Indian policies, policies that both drove and enabled Westward Rupture's settler incursions and resulted in multiple Trails of Tears.[40] Metamora's speech was more broken than that of the Indian in *A Dialogue Between an Englishman and an Indian* (1779) but was still quite poetic. He was strong, fierce, heroic, and a fertile family man. Yet, Metamora ultimately resigned himself to his inevitable doom, tragically giving way to the forward march of progress—many Trails of Tears in the service of land speculation, capitalism, continued slavery,[41] and greed. Noble in death and being "The Last," reflected and validated settler opinion that situated white men as the "rightful" inheritors of North America. The "failing" Indigenous peoples had been removed, if not erased, and

[39] Rebhorn, "Edwin Forrest's Redding Up," 480.

[40] Rebhorn, "Edwin Forrest's Redding Up," 474.

[41] African Americans were enslaved by certain Native North American tribes, slave ownership being a colonial legacy given to tribes.

forced together in contiguous reservations in Indian Territory, which would become Oklahoma in its 1907 acquisition of statehood.

Later in the 19th century, Chief's speech in McCluskey's *Across the Continent: Scenes from New York Life and The Pacific Railroad* (1870)[42] had none of the flowery eloquence of Metamora. Chief's sexual expression, far from Metamora's role as a noble family man, was that of an opportunist and a threat to white women. A projection of Euro-males' millennia of violence against women as the spoils of war and battles, Chief is the archetypal savage. He is unbridled nature despoiling white purity. Such dramatic presentations roused and justified Westward Rupture policies of displacement and brutality toward Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, Native people fought and struggled for their continued existence, physically and culturally. Toward the end of this era, Wild West Shows began to offer Native North Americans a venue to preserve aspects of their culture, albeit significantly altered and for the entertainment of largely Euro-American crowds.

The Westward Rupture era drew to a close with the first Wounded Knee Massacre (1890). Throughout the Gathering Red Power era that followed (1890-1968), frontier entertainment that had grown in popularity from the 1830s solidified into Westward Rupture nostalgia entertainment, or "Westerns," which enjoyed wide popularity in all media for over 100 years. These media notably included live performances, dime novels, radio programs, and Western films. One reason for the widespread popularity of Westerns was the role the concept of the frontier played in national myth-making throughout the Westward Rupture and Gathering Red Power

[42] McCloskey, *Across the Continent*, 506-533.

eras. Discussing the media's role in national identity building, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick explains:

> Modern mass media, including cinema, have played a major part in the production of national symbols. As these symbols become part of each individual through the media, they effectively break down the separation between public and private, local and national. This produces a nationalist discourse, a primary function of which is to develop a national mythology of historical origin. In America, it is the myth of How the West Was Won. . . . The West made a perfect crucible for the development of a mythology intrinsically American. The "frontier" provided a challenge against which Euro-Americans, particularly white males could pit themselves. The natural environment supplied its own challenges, but it was the cultural frontier that established the identity of the American West and the settlers and cowboys who pushed that frontier ever westward.[43]

Western films, the most persistent and widely circulated of the media, drew inspiration—and stereotypes about Native peoples—from the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Montgomery Bird, Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, and the Indian-fighter adventures of the dime novels. These films entertained and miseducated the continent, and later the world, about Indigenous American peoples. Kilpatrick discusses how this occurred:

> Most audiences of the turn of the century did not have the historical or personal experience to question the reality of the screen images; seeing for oneself had always before been the litmus test for reality. Immigrants, the poor, and rural dwellers were going to the movies for escape and to experience places and situations that were far beyond their economic, social, or cultural grasp; they were going to learn about the world. Moving pictures were persuasive. . . . The audiences of the first films might have believed they were seeing the "real" American Indian, but what they were actually witnessing was the first of the new tribe of Hollywood Indians.[44]

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[43] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 18-19.

[44] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 34-35.

The development and influences of mass media images of Native North American peoples through the Early Invasion, Westward Rupture, and Gathering Red Power eras are worth noting because, as Kilpatrick draws the line of continuity:

> The film images of American Indians presented in those early years, images based on literature, dime novels, and wild west shows, helped shape the way America thought about Indians then, and the stereotypes crystalized on the early screens are those with which we still live.[45]

The inventions of Cooper, Bird, Cody, and those they inspired persist as settler-colonial national identity—as a creation mythology.

While Westerns enjoyed popularity throughout the 20th century, Indigenous American peoples endured deprivation, cruelty, religious persecution by law, and legislated land theft at the hands of settler-colonial governments. Eradication efforts incorporated cultural extermination in addition to physical erasure. The implementation of the traumatizing and high mortality-rate Indian boarding school systems culminated in the formal assimilation policies established in mid-century. In resistance to cultural eradication, Indigenous American peoples went to great lengths to preserve, and later in that era to recuperate, knowledge about their lifeways and religious traditions. Shared performative events—such as singing, dancing, chanting, playing instruments, storytelling, orality, and dramatic performance—were community-affirming acts of resistance. These efforts to preserve and recuperate cultures, languages, histories, and traditions throughout the Gathering Red Power Era laid the foundation for the subsequent seeding and bloom of artistic and literary productivity. The Native American Renaissance[46] in 1969

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[45] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 35.

[46] To further explore the Native American Renaissance, see Velie and Lee, *The Native American Renaissance*.

marked the beginning of the Self-Defined era from that moment up to the vibrant, expanding, and transforming present.

Resistance, Sovereignty, and Humor: Sexuality in Contemporary Native North American Drama

The early 1970s saw the birth of contemporary Native theater in the now United States and Canada. Unlike Wild West shows, which catered to Euro-Western tastes and imaginaries, the mission of contemporary Native theater was from the outset to create art by and for Native Peoples: "The Now People." Artists and practitioners recognized that a certain percentage of their audience (like the earlier lag in book literacies that long favored settler-elites) would be Euro-Western spectators.[47] By necessity, these artists and practitioners of Native drama have navigated how their work communicates to diverse audiences, with priority given to respect for and consultation with their communities.

Sexual performance depictions crafted by Native practitioners in this—our "now"—era have been reflections of the sexualities found in Indigenous oral traditions (as creation and "trickster" traditions), expressions of contemporary Indigenous American sexualities and lived realities, extensions of socio-political struggles, and expressions of bodily insecurities amid the climate of ongoing threat. Founding Spiderwoman Theater member Muriel Miguel's *Hot 'N' Soft* (1992) and *Hot 'N' Soft II* (1993), and Hanay Geiogamah's *Coon Cons Coyot*e (1973) feature tricksters who liberally showcase the sexually comedic aspect of that figure. Sexual

[47] For a discussion of Native North American theater practitioners' goals and intentions, see chapter five.

Indigenous men in the plays of Drew Hayden Taylor and William S. Yellow Robe Jr. and the literature of Alexie frequently display comic forms of sexual ineptitude and lack of agency as they blunder in and out of sexual scenes and staged opportunities. By contrast, in the plays of Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica, Yvette Nolan, and Marie Humber Clements, toxic sexual settler-colonial and Indigenous men often act as oppressive extensions of colonial power, enacting traumatizing dominance in sexual ways over women, girl, and female-presenting characters.

In addition to serving as reflections, expressions, and extensions, contemporary Native sexual performance depictions assert the contemporary presence and sovereignty of Native North American people, resist colonialism and its legacy, and act/serve as a power for healing for individuals and communities. In several Native Voices at the Autry New Plays festivals' plays, presented at the Wells Fargo Theater in Los Angeles, characters assert their living, contemporary presence and sovereignty in sexual and reproductive terms, often accompanied by humor and tears. Such plays include Nagle's *Fairly Traceable*, Dillon Chitto's *Bingo Hall*, and several short plays of the November 11, 2018, Short Play Festival, *Food!* These plays include *A Christmas in Ochopee* by Montana Cypress, in which a young man "brings his unannounced vegan fiancée home to the Everglades for a Christmas dinner that features family secrets and a surprise dish."[48] In *Weight Loss Challenge* by Claude Jackson Jr., women "working at a Native American cultural center discover what binds them together rather than what tears them apart."[49] In *Chile Lover* by James Lujan, a man "finds himself the middle-man in a Pueblo Red Chile Stew cook-off

[48] "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the 8th Annual Short Play Festival: *FOOD!*"

[49] "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the 8th Annual Short Play Festival: *FOOD!*."

[between his new girlfriend and] an old flame."[50] In these plays, characters confront questions about sexual relationships that are often complicated and contextualized in terms of the struggle between community survival or traditions and the ongoing colonial project. This hinge swings forward with momentum in *Fairly Traceable*, *Bingo Hall*, and *Chile Lover*. In the March 2018 production of *Bingo Hall*, for example, "college acceptance letters kick-start an identity crisis" for teenager Edward, who wonders, "who will [he] be if he leaves home?"[51] Questions of belonging and cultural responsibility are heightened by "romantic rejection, family antics, and community pressures,"[52] all of which the play presents as interconnected identity struggles within Edward's coming-of-age experience. Other plays, such as Vera Manuel's *The Strength of Indian Women*, Shirley Cheechoo's *A Path with No Moccasins*, and Daystar/Rosalie Jones's *No Home but the Heart,* work to accomplish healing through the confrontation of trauma, often sexual, and its legacy. *The Strength of Indian Women* follows elders as they reveal their traumatizing residential school experiences while preparing to celebrate a teen girl's coming of age. In *A Path with No Moccasins*, nine-year-old Shirley recounts her brutal, current life at a residential school from the room where school officials are keeping her locked up for trying to escape. *No Home but the Heart* gathers a family of women's recollections spanning 100 years, including epidemic, childbirth, identity concerns, and healing. These are all plays/performances of remembering and re-membering, assembling a wounded past into a present and future that promote healing.

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[50] "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the 8th Annual Short Play Festival: *FOOD!"*

[51] "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the World Premiere of *Bingo Hall*."

[52] "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the World Premiere of *Bingo Hall*."

Sexuality in Native North American drama serves additional roles, which foreground survivance, humor, and varieties of Indigenous relationships to sex and sexuality. Native North American drama employs sexuality as a form of resistance to ongoing heteropatriarchal, colonial violences by asserting culturally specific community values and reflecting generative Native worldviews while opening space in which to play out sociocultural struggles. Mary Katherine Nagle's *Fairly Traceable* utilizes sexuality to all these ends. The heart of the play is a romantic relationship between Randy, who is Ponca, and Erin, who is Chitimacha, both of whom are law students at Tulane Law School in New Orleans just before Hurricane Katrina. After two massive hurricanes in Louisiana that destroy first New Orleans and then Erin's ancestral home, they struggle to have a normal evening together studying for a law exam. Here, Randy changes the subject:

RANDY
Do you want to have kids? . . . Not like now, but, you know. . . .

ERIN
I refuse to bring a child into a world I know is going to be destroyed.

RANDY
That's pretty dark.

ERIN
I'm a lawyer working on climate change.[53]

Erin and Randy's relationship is damaged when they find themselves on opposite sides while litigating a climate change lawsuit. Erin represents people who have lost their homes to global warming-fueled superstorms like Katrina. Randy, who due in part to familial pressure decides that he does not want to be a

[53] Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 49.

stereotypical "environmentalist" Indian, defends oil companies. He wins. When a massive tornado hits Randy's hometown of Joplin, Oklahoma, killing his little sister, he realizes that fighting climate change is more critical than his concerns over racial identity and his fears of becoming an Earth-loving Native stereotype. Randy approaches Erin, who now wants nothing to do with him, for her help filing a massive lawsuit on behalf of the families who lost loved ones in the tornado.

RANDY
I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't deserve that. And you deserve to hate me. For the rest of your life. But I hope, no I pray, that you will let me work with you to fight this.

ERIN
Remember when you asked me if I wanted kids?

RANDY
Look, I just say things, you know, sometimes without thinking and-

ERIN
Climate change isn't the reason I can't have kids. It's the reason I have to.

RANDY
OK.

ERIN
If I, as a Chitimacha woman, if I decide to not have kids, well, I'm just helping the United States government finish what it couldn't quite complete a hundred years ago. I'll have the complaint to you by Friday morning.[54]

Ultimately, Erin affirms her defiance of colonial extermination policies by agreeing to put aside her anger toward Randy to write up the arguments for his lawsuit. The play focuses on many of the legal issues surrounding global warming, detailing the struggles climate change lawyers face in arguing these complex cases. Still, in this scene, Erin asserts that reproduction is as much an act of resistance as

[54] Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 122.

litigation. The play also uses reproduction to explore racial identity and choice when Mark, Randy's Euro-American father, tells Randy about a conversation with his own father before getting married. Mark's father took him aside and warned him that if he married and had children with an Indian woman, his children would be Indian. He asked Mark if he wanted that for his children—to be Indian. Here *Fairly Traceable* confronts issues of blood quantum and settler-colonial definitions of racial identity, where to be half Native American is to be Native American. The cultural context of Mark's children is that they are Indian, even though Mark is a white man. "You're an Indian," Mark asserts to Randy. "You can't change that. But you don't have to be an environmentalist."[55] From Mark's perspective, blood does not dictate politics. Nagle's *Fairly Traceable* challenges and complicates Mark's assertion as the plot progresses, once again using the grounds of reproduction.

After Erin's climate change lawsuit on behalf of her people fails due to the opposition by Randy and his law firm, Erin's mother, Suzanne, speaks to the other lawyer on her case, Professor Houck, about whether to file an appeal. Houck encourages Suzanne to proceed with the appeal because he is hopeful justice will prevail in a higher court. Suzanne is skeptical:

> SUZANNE
> We don't need your 'environmental law' to tell us our homes are worth saving. We've known that since we came into existence. Under our law, we recognize the Earth as our Mother because we come from her. She gives us life. And as Native women, we give life. The future generations of our Nations come from our bodies. So we, Native women, we're the environment. We're inseparable. Without us, our Nations cease to exist.[56]

[55] Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 60.

[56] Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 95.

Reproduction is a form of resistance that asserts legal and platial sovereignty. Suzanne asserts that her existence as a Native woman, and the act of giving birth to future Nations, inexorably connects her to the environment, making the concept of environmentalism redundant. She adds, "But your *law,* this American law that you respect, it was created to destroy us. It's been doing that, for hundreds of years. And you think now your law will suddenly save us?"[57] Erin's mother finds the logic of attempting to use environmental law to assert platial sovereignty for her people ridiculous. Her logic understands that the Euro-American legal system was a central tool of North American genocide and today continues to deny Native peoples a multitude of fundamental human rights. The act of reproduction has already asserted Suzanne's palatial sovereignty. Her daughter, Erin, is: she is more than an exhibit for the defense. In this way, blood does not merely dictate politics. Blood, wombs, and reproductive potential are fundamentally political.

Although also confronting many similar issues of sovereignty, identity, and belonging, *The Blues Quartet* series of plays by Drew Hayden Taylor, *Bingo Hall* by Dillon Chitto, and *Sneaky* by William S. Yellow Robe Jr., incorporate a comedic sexual buffoonery that is not unlike the clownish sexual antics of "trickster" figures. One common trope of sexual buffoonery is the Native man who finds his amorous pursuits thwarted when he discovers he's been making sexual advances on someone who is comically inappropriate, as in Yellow Robe's *Sneaky*. In this play, brothers Eldon Rose, Frank Rose, and Kermit Rose steal their mother's body from a funeral home to give her a traditional burial. When the youngest brother, Kermit, gets

[57] Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 95.

blackout drunk, the other brothers leave him briefly with their mother's body. While they are away, Kermit wakes up, notices the woman beside him wrapped in a blanket, and tries to initiate a sexual encounter. Just then, his brothers return.

KERMIT
Oh, baby. Ohhh . . . baby, baby, sweet baby cakes . . .

He caresses his mother's shoulder.

ELDON
What the hell is he doing? I thought he was passed out.

FRANK
How the hell do I know.

KERMIT
Yeah. Ohhh . . . baby . . .

He uses his other hand to caress his mother.

ELDON
Oh shit! Runs over and kicks Kermit away.

KERMIT
Ow! Fuck!

ELDON
Frank, did you see what he was doing?

FRANK
Yeah. Kinda hard to miss it, El.

KERMIT
I wasn't doing anything wrong. Fuck. I was doing it with love.[58]

"Fuck. I was doing it with love" circles to close, reads itself. This mistake in the dark, an unknown relative, an uninterested person, or even Kermit's own dead mother's corpse can all provide comic fodder for the sexual buffoon. In such plays, women must often take the lead to compensate for the buffoon's inadequacies by

[58] Yellow Robe, *Sneaky*, 150-151.

initiating successful sexual encounters. Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Buz'Gem Blues*[59] showcases several examples of male sexual ineptitude or passivity, most notably in the case of Professor Thomas Savage, the Caucasian researcher. In the play, Professor Savage presents his paper, "The Courting, Love, and Sexual Habits of Contemporary First Nations People as Perceived by Western Society, Vol.1." The character and his research invite criticism on the clinical, sterilized way the Euro-West has historically approached both Indigenous peoples and sexuality. As *The Buz'Gem Blues* progresses, Professor Savage performs his research in an awkward, stilted fashion until he is given a first-hand crash course in his subject matter by a Native woman, Marianne Kakina. During the professor's interviews with Marianne and her mother, Martha, the women wrest control of the conversation away from him several times and ultimately leave the conversation on their terms: Martha tells the professor that if he wishes to complete the interview, he must speak to her after an upcoming social event.[60] The result of attending this social event is that all the women of the play can then assert their sexual agency at once, including Marianne's march over Professor Savage. The event ends prematurely as the characters leave in couples. Later, Professor Savage completes the final report to his colleagues while eating chunks of Spam straight from the can:

> PROFESSOR THOMAS SAVAGE
> As a result [of my work], we now know less about them than when the project began, I'm sorry to say. I did, however, find out that Ojibway women like being tickled. . . . Nevertheless, it is my sincere and honest recommendation that I be allowed to continue in my important research, and that I be allowed to delve deeper, ever so much deeper, into the complex and mysterious world of the Erotic Aboriginal, and I will dedicate myself to the unravelling of this

[59] Taylor, *The Buz'Gem Blues*.

[60] Taylor, *The Buz'Gem Blues*, 69.

cryptic and unseen sub-culture. Or die trying. And now if you'll excuse me, I've got a date.[61]

No longer the stilted professional, by the play's end, Professor Savage is transformed—one might say "civilized" or made human—by his research. Taylor utilizes sexual relationships throughout his story as tools for exploring Native identity, belonging, and colonial stereotypes. His characters in *The Buz'Gem Blues* include a young Native man, The "Warrior Who Never Sleeps."

MARTHA
Young man, I've been meaning to ask you, is that a Mountie jacket you're wearing?

WARRIOR WHO NEVER SLEEPS
You noticed. I wear it as a symbol to show our oppressors that I am not frightened of them. It is to show my contempt for my enemies and to demonstrate my bravery. It is my form of counting coup. I took it from a drycleaner's when he wasn't looking. It's part of what makes me the Warrior Who Never Sleeps.

MARTHA
Your mother must be so proud.

Another character, "Summer," is a 1/64th Native young woman who has learned Ojibway, knows all about Native history, and is dating a Native man:

SUMMER
Do you want children?

AMOS
I have five already, remember?

SUMMER
I know. Three are older than me. And four of them don't like me either. I meant, do you want children with me?

AMOS
I'm sixty-one years old. You'd end up diapering the both of us.

[61] Taylor, *The Buz'Gem Blues*, 115.

SUMMER

I'm beginning to wonder if I am meant to follow this path.

AMOS

Which path?

SUMMER

My path with you. A search for my aboriginal knowledge. To find my place in the community.

Summer's sexual and reproductive relationship with a Native man is one way she attempts to assert her identity as a mixed Indigenous person and secure her place in the aboriginal community. Later in the play, Summer and The Warrior Who Never Sleeps, who finally admit their real names are Agnes and Ted, run off together to an aboriginal Star Trek convention.[62] Through Taylor's use of incisive humor and robust sexuality, these characters transcend the stereotypes Taylor initially presents them to be and become real if somewhat heightened in affect people, playing out complicated and often painful questions of legacy, identity, and belonging. Sexual humor cuts through with dead-pan levity and what across translation is sometimes called "grace."

The benefits of self-definition in sexual performance depictions of Indigenous peoples include, as many in this growing field of art and study concur, expanded forms of survivance, resistance to continued colonization, Indigenous self-expression, and healing. As Howe's tribalography teaches: recuperation, reclamation, and revitalization of the past, present, and future are possible. Reclaiming performance depictions of Indigenous sexuality for self-determined purposes is a significant vector of opportunity for restoring respect and vitality.

[62] Taylor, *The Buz'Gem Blues*, 109.

"Today," Jolene Richard affirms in 1995, "sovereignty is taking shape in visual thought as indigenous artists negotiate cultural spaces."[63] Continued Indigenous self-advocacy, indigenizing and expanding academic contributions, and trends in political correctness have the potential to put the power of depicting Indigenous bodies—Indigenous presence—securely in the hands of Indigenous people. This power gives Indigenous activists firm ground to challenge and dismantle derogatory and harmful depictions. Sexual performance depictions constructed and defined within Native paradigms are powerful vessels for carrying Native thinking and priorities. Sexual performance is a tool of resistance and reclamation, of humor and healing. Staging these nuanced forms of difference that answer missionaries' evils can assert the humanity of Indigenous people. This assertion means expanding, complicating, and liberating conversations and perceptions about what it is to be a Native North American person.

Current Conversations: The Dark Side of Sex and Healing in Scholarship on Native Literatures

On the Day of the Dead, 2018, members of the University of California, Santa Barbara, American Indian Student Alliance decorated an altar for display in the university's Student Resource Building with a sign that read, "We will remember the missing, murdered, and stolen women." The epidemic of violence against Native women remains a pressing concern to Native activists and community members. Plays including Vera Manuel's *The Strength of Indian Women*, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's S*tory of Susanna (A Play)*, Marie Humber Clements's *The Unnatural*

[63] Dowell, "Performance and 'Trickster Aesthetics,'" 212.

and Accidental Women, Yvette Nolan's *Blade*, the plays of Tomson Highway's unfinished *Rez Septology*, and other dramatic works by Native playwrights consider molestation, rape, sexual coercion, and murder of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and children. What scholarly work exists on Native North American sexuality in drama often discusses theater that deals with this dark, violent, and cruel sex. In his essay, "The Hearts of Its Women: Rape, (Residential Schools), and Re-Membering," scholar/practitioner Ric Knowles explores the intersection of rape (including rape as a tool of colonial domination), resistance, feminism, residential school trauma (often sexual), and "embodied, performative First Nations cultural memory."[64] Knowles asserts that non-Native and Native male playwrights tend to "represent rape and sexual violence . . . as emblematic,"[65] noting how "penetration and rape are well-established metaphors for imperialism."[66] By contrast, the plays he explores in this essay reveal that First Nations women playwrights represent rape and sexual violence "as individual and community dismemberment . . . [as] agents of ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide."[67] The plays themselves in activist concert, as Knowles concludes, "represent an act of embodied cultural remembering as the providence of First Nations women . . . to serve as agents of anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance and healing."[68] As he contributes to the body of work on "dark side of sex" drama, Knowles notes its prevalence as a dramatic topic. Quoting Drew

[64] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 136.

[65] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 136-7.

[66] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 140.

[67] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 137.

[68] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 137.

Hayden Taylor, Knowles observes that "'perhaps [the] most pervasive' feature of First Nations Theater is 'a female character who suffer[s] some form of sexual or physical abuse.'"[69] For Native drama, dramatizing the daily, lived realities of sexual assault is about much more than confronting a legacy of sexual violence. Knowles notes how the drama can also represent re-membering embodied culture.

In Shelley Scott's essay, "Embodiment as a Healing Process: Native American Women and Performance," Scott explores the "heightened importance"[70] of autobiographical dramas by Aboriginal women, including Shirley Cheechoo's *A Path with No Moccasins*, Rosalie Jones's *No Home but the Heart*, Monique Mojica's *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, and others. Scott goes beyond Knowles's assertion that the drama he discusses represents re-membering and healing as she builds a case for the therapeutic nature of the autobiographical drama she discusses. These works are therapeutic for both performer and spectator in what Scott calls a "public ceremony of sorts."[71] This hope for healing, as presented here, builds on Scott's work to assert that Native North American theater has the sacred, ceremonial potential to utilize ritual in performance. This assertion recognizes the power of the staged sacral—sacred power—to precipitate the healing of violations and revitalize in shared community for the benefit of the People and peoples.

Existing within and in opposition to this climate of ongoing sexual violence, the physical presence of sacred bodies is an act of resistance. Presence is resistance. To exist as a Native person is to exist in defiance of common knowledge, in defiance

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[69] Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women," 136.

[70] Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 123.

[71] Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," 125.

of the belief that all the real Indians were shot by cowboys a hundred and thirty years ago. When an Indian shows up, it is political. Some people do not have the luxury of existing apolitically. This is the work of bodies of resistance. To live a right life is to resist.[72] The sacred, transformative power of Native presence is renewed, strengthened, and accessed through ritual and ceremony. Mobilizing sacred bodies/minds/hearts/spirits in ritual performance has ceremonial potential. This power is potential and potent. There is a thread that connects Native plays/stories/fictions/histories/performances to ceremonially transformation, and this thread is intentional. Not accidental or incidental. In the Native sense, it is also rhetorical—meant for a purpose, mobilized with intention, and intended to be effective.

The scant scholarly literature aside, it is necessary to affirm that Native North American sex, sexuality, and gender in drama do not exclusively deal with the dark side of sex. Humorous sexual situations and positive depictions of life-affirming sexuality pervade contemporary Native theater.

In the Garden: Two-Spirits and the "Trickster"

Native North American sexualities in all their myriad cultures can vary sharply in more than positions from those proscribed by the missionary handbook.[73] These sexual differences and differences in sexualities go on to inflect Native North American art and performance. Native North American cultures manifest social and cultural spaces for non-cisgender community members: this happens when logic is

[72] From a personal conversation with Inés Talamantez, founder of the field of Native American Religious Traditions. Discussing the Pollen Path, or right way of living, Talamantez related a teaching from one of her religious mentors that the Pollen Path is a path of resistance.

[73] Taylor, *Me Sexy*.

holistic and not distorted into binaries. Native peoples enjoy the widely noted and storied presence of sexually complex supernatural beings. Known by various names among tribal Nations and generally dismissive of binaries, these beings are often referred to as the Trickster. Exploring culturally specific contexts presents opportunities for Glancy-inspired English-to-English translation. Indigenizing foregrounds varieties of Indigenous meaning, decolonizing moral impositions in performances where non-cisgender individuals or "trickster" figures appear.

Why do human sexuality and its social and cultural influence differ so distinctly between the predominantly Christian West and Native North American Nations? The fundamental differences that manifest in paradigms noted by Vine Deloria Jr.[74] go beyond the platial or temporal focus of the religion or religious tradition. Christianity's rejection of the body as sinful and in need of sanctification[75] extends to bodily functions (sex included) while expanding to control and even deny physical senses and sensations. For Christianity, what an individual sees, hears, tastes, smells, and enjoys are potentially (or fundamentally) corrupted and corrupting. As each stimulus belongs to the natural and physical world—therefore the sinful world—and interacts with the sinful body, it invites religious scrutiny. This scrutiny manifests in hierarchized dictates from Christian sects about what its adherents can or cannot eat, watch, listen to, wear, eat, and think. Beyond these local dictates and the general rejection of the sinful physical realm, Judeo-Christianity possesses many behaviors its holy book, the Torah (extended as the Bible), terms

[74] For discussion on place-based and temporal based religions and worldviews, see Deloria, *God is Red*.

[75] Rom 7:21-8:18 (ERV).

"terrible sins," or otherwise highly undesirable actions, depending on translations. It is one such pronouncement that labels male/male sexual relations unacceptable.[76] This pronouncement creates a scriptural pretext on which to base social and cultural exclusions for all those who are non-cisgendered. The Judeo-Christian concept of sin originates within this paradigm, with its creation story in which the first woman, Eve, ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and then shared the fruit with Adam, the first man. For the sin of eating the apple (fig or orange), God banished them from the Garden of Eden.[77] Although subject to different theological interpretations, the existence of "sin" and its consequences permeate the many incarnations of Christianity. As noted, Highway offers in contrast:

> There is no such story of eviction from any garden in the mythology of the Indian people of North America—one definition of the term 'mythology' being 'the sacred stories of a people'—and it therefore follows that . . . we are still inside [the garden].[78]

Highway discusses the implications of this lack of mythological eviction on the Cree language in his essay, "Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages." Eviction, edicts, and scripture—all closely tied to the concept of sin—carry profound implications for how colonials view and respond to sexuality, especially in performance contexts. These are stagings/events where acts are meant to be seen, heard, and experienced by the senses of spectators. Indigenous implications inflect how the cultures of North America view, respond to, and create sexual performance contexts informed by specific Nation's worldviews.

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[76] Lv 18:22 (ERV).

[77] Gn 2:4-25 (ERV) and Gn 3:1-24 (ERV).

[78] Highway, "Why Cree is the Sexiest," 38.

Indigenous sexual and gender traditions, arising from these distinct religious and historical contexts, have offered alternative views on non-heteronormative sexuality and social spaces that have proven supportive of LGBTQAI+ communities.[79] This includes the Native concept of the Two-Spirit person, who is said to possess both the spirits of a woman and a man. Two-Spirit has become a term of choice for many Indigenous LGBTQAI+ people since a 1990 "gathering of Native Queer/Two-Spirit people in Winnipeg."[80] Other tribes, such as the Navajo, had traditional terms that recognized separate gender categories for men and women who performed the social roles typically assigned to a gender other than the gender of their biological sex.[81] These men/women and women/men could constitute third and fourth genders in their societies, and it was not uncommon for such people to occupy elevated social positions. Many Nations recognized Two-Spirits and third/fourth gender individuals as possessing power (healing, wisdom, mediation, preparing the dead for their journeys between worlds, and other ritual challenges to be traversed). These community members frequently enjoyed financial prosperity due to their ability to engage in traditionally "male" and "female" forms of industry. The existence and social contexts of such individuals in Native Nations, both traditionally and today, are important to Native North American drama and performative interventions because they shape an inclusive for characters and the ideas their bodies carry in Native drama. Many playwrights, performers, artists,

[79] For discussion on Indigenous American sexuality, see: Driskill, "Stolen from Our Bodies," and Roscoe, *Changing Ones*.

[80] Driskill, "Stolen from Our Bodies," 52.

[81] Nibley, *Two Spirits*.

writers, and scholars are self-identified LGBTQAI+, Two-Spirit, and third or fourth gender individuals, including Tomson Highway, Muriel Miguel, Joy Harjo, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Daniel David Moses, to name a few. Long-term and well-known contributors to Native North American theater, Highway and Miguel, explore sexuality and gender in their dramatic contributions. Not surprisingly, both use the sexually complex "trickster" figures in their work. These figures make frequent appearances in Native North American literatures, due in no small part to the fluidity of their social functions, sexualities, and genders. Yet, English to English translation is again necessary to examine the role of these supernatural beings and the implications of foreigners' translations of the term trickster.

Welcome to a place of origins: Out of the blackness, a howl rises, mournful and far away. The long, even note breaks into a coyote's high, yipping sob. Dim light falls from above like the moon answering the call of a night creature. A figure sits, its body obscured in places by shadow, its face turned up to the moon. Howling. The sound grows in urgency. The light grows. The yips come faster. The audience breaks into laughter as Coyote howls and sobs, sobs and howls. In full light, Coyote sits regally in a suit of red and pink stripes at a table draped in luxurious cloth of pink, gold, and black. Floral curtains and a chest of drawers with a gilded mirror testify to Coyote's taste for the feminine, the finer things in life. She eyes the audience like a skeptical queen and will not speak. Then her lip juts in a pout. She tries to hold back tears, but her mouth drops wide in a howling sob. Muriel Miguel, the Coyote, slumps to the tabletop, grasping and waving. "She's gone. She's gone. She's gone!" She pounds the table, grabs the sides as if she means to upend the whole thing, and

howls again. “She left me. She left me. She’s left me!” Peals of audience laughter rise as Coyote’s grief crescendos. “She took our futon and our vegetable steamer and our yogurt maker and left me!”[82]

In 1992 and 1993, founding Spiderwoman Theater member Muriel Miguel performed her one-woman, lesbian erotica/trickster shows *Hot ’N’ Soft* and *Hot ’N’ Soft II* at The American Indian Community House in New York City. In 1986 and 1989, Tomson Highway’s first two plays in his unfinished *Rez Septology*, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, premiered, garnering critical acclaim, awards, sellout shows, and controversy. In these four dramatic pieces, the traditional connection between non-heteronormative Indigenous sexuality, gender, and sacred power manifests through association with the supernatural figure commonly known as the Trickster. This association makes sense as two prominent features of the Trickster are their sexual appetite and their ability to move back and forth between genders. As Miguel explains, “Tricksters can really go over the edge. They can slide into genders. And that’s what’s so wonderful about them.”[83] Through the power of her storytelling, Miguel invites the people into an encounter with Coyote, a cross-dressing female trickster. Coyote functions partly to reestablish balance with an excess of literary translations casting tricksters as males. “When you read about tricksters,” Miguel says, “they’re usually male. . . . It’s not true!”[84] In *Hot ’N’ Soft I & II,* Coyote’s appearance is a form of resistance, in this case, resistance against mistranslation.

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[82] Miguel, “Hot ‘N’ Soft,” 00:1:00.

[83] Miguel, “Hot ‘N’ Soft,” 00:18:12.

[84] Miguel, “Hot ‘N’ Soft,” 00:17:59.

Another figure known as a trickster is the entity Nanabush. Nanabush makes appearances as a recurring character in the plays of Tomson Highway, arriving in many forms (human, animal, and unseen force), as in this scene from *The Rez Sisters:*

> *In a split-second, all freeze. Lights out in store interior. Lights on on Zhaboonigan, who has run out in fright during the riot, outside the store. Nanabush, still in his guise as the seagull, makes a grab at Zhaboonigan. Zhaboonigan begins talking to the bird.*
>
> ZHABOONIGAN
> Are you gentle? I was not little. Maybe. Same size as now. Long ago it must be? You think I'm funny? Shhh. I know who you are. There, there. Boys. White boys. Two. Ever nice white wings, you. I was walking down the road to the store. They ask me if I want ride in car. Oh, I was happy I said, "Yup." Took me far away. Ever nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here. *Pointing to her crotch, underneath her dress.* Many, many times. Remember. Don't fly away. Don't go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a. Screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold. And then. Remember. Zhaboonigan. Everybody calls me Zhaboonigan. Why? It means needle. Zhaboonigan. Going-through-thing. Needle Peterson. Going-through-thing Peterson. That's me. It was the screwdriver. Nice. Nice. Nicky Ricky Ben Mark. *As she counts, with each name, feathers on the bird's wing*. Ever nice. Nice white birdie you.
>
> *During this last speech, Nanabush goes through agonizing contortions. Then lights change instantly back to the interior of the store. The six women spring back into action.*[85]

Highway cast his "trickster" figure, Nanabush, as a male deity in the all-women cast of *The Rez Sisters*. In that play, the Nanabush actor plays the Seagull, the Nighthawk, and the Bingo Master, an act of multi-character casting that, within the context of Native North American drama, strategically highlights Nanabush's ability to shapeshift among various animal and human forms. Highway then incorporates Nanabush's ability to change gender (or the figure's multi-gendered

[85] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 47-8.

characteristic) when he casts Nanabush as female with the all-male cast of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Throughout the play, Nanabush shapeshifts into the spirits of three women, Gazelle Nataways, Patsy Pegahmagahbow, and Black Lady Halked. In one "bizarre" vision, this she-trickster is elevated and illuminated on an upper level while the rest of the stage is dark. In this scene, Nanabush simultaneously represents the adult character Dickie Bird Halked's pregnant mother and the Madonna, drinking a beer as she prays with her rosary. Lights come up on a lower level, where Dickie prays to Nanabush/his mother/the Madonna on his knees. This presentation—blending the real and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane—speaks volumes about the nature of Nanabush, capable of embodying multiple forms at once and defying social conventions in ways that defy counting.

The nature of Native North American "trickster" figures encompasses much more than physical transformation, defying social conventions, and possessing sacred power. Certainly, Trickster is much more than the definition of the word in English as "one who tricks,"[86] whether by fraud, skilled illusion, or cunning. Bollinger discusses several characteristics that differentiate Euro-American and other Indigenous tricksters from the figures of the Native North American "trickster tradition." He notes that among these characteristics, "most importantly, we can see in the Native American trickster an openness to life's multiplicity and paradoxes largely missing in the modern Euro-American moral tradition."[87] Although Highway

[86] Merriam-Webster's online entry defines a trickster as, "one who tricks: such as, a**:** a dishonest person who defrauds others by trickery, b**:** a person (such as a stage magician) skilled in the use of tricks and illusion, c**:** a cunning or deceptive character appearing in various forms in the folklore of many cultures."

[87] Bollinger, "*Ambigere*," 21.

refers to Nanabush as a trickster—and in the opening of *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* refers to the trickster as a god—he goes on to elaborate that the nature of this god is "comic to the point where its 'spill-over' into horrifying tragedy is a thing quite normal, utterly organic. . . . the 'laughinggod' becomes a 'cryinggod' becomes a 'laughinggod,' all in one swift impulse."[88] Comedy becomes tragedy becomes comedy, manifesting through the sacred power of Nanabush and the embedded cultural impulse of the Shuswap language, adding additional complication to this already complex figure.[89] Through ritual and ceremonial preparation, the Trickster is capable of manifesting in language. He/she/they transform again to re-motor words spoken in English by actors on a stage, bringing about what Geiogamah calls an event of ceremonial theater. Yet the Trickster's greatest trick may be that he/she/they are perhaps not a trickster at all.

On November 28, 2018, Linda Hogan gave a poetry reading followed by a group discussion attended by Elders and students at Cherríe Moraga's Las Maestras Center. In response to a question from an audience member about literary trickster figures like Coyote, Hogan shared that in her Nation's tradition, such figures were portrayed as rabbits. These figures, she continued, served as a precursor to Disney's [drawn from Joel Chandler Harris's] Br'er Rabbit.[90] Inés Talamantez, the founder of the field of Native American religious traditions, then shared that there was no word for trickster in any of the Indigenous languages she knew or was aware of. Her

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[88] Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 2.

[89] See chapter three for a discussion of Highway's gesture toward linguistic divine intervention to remotor the English language so that it is capable of running on the Trickster impulses that motor the Shuswap language.

[90] The origin of Br'er Rabbit has also been attributed to a trickster rabbit in certain African traditions.

observation implied that perhaps "trickster" was not the most accurate way to translate the Indigenous words for these beings. Clearly myriad "trickster" figures exist in histories and religious traditions spanning North America and the globe. However, if Indigenous American peoples did not call these figures "tricksters," then the term begs for an indigenized translation. Such a translation would include an examination of the original languages, names, functions, characteristics, and histories of each of these figures within their specific cultural contexts.

Perhaps then Nanabush is not the "Loki"[91] of the Ojibway religious tradition, as the term "trickster" suggests. Highway draws quite a different parallel from the Greek pantheon, describing "a goddess of love, of physical pleasure, of sexual delight, of death by orgasm—a deity named Aphrodite."[92] Highway explains, "Aboriginal mythology has its own goddess/god that stands for the exact same thing. The Trickster is the central figure in the collective North American Aboriginal dream world, i.e., in North American Aboriginal mythology, i.e., in the 'sacred book' of our people."[93] Highway's deft use of language translates English from the less authoritative English term "dream world" into the more authoritative term "sacred book." He captures colonizer language in the Indigenous meaning of "dream world:" this world's importance, authority, centrality, and sacrality to Native North American peoples. When mentioning Aphrodite, Highway states without equivocation that, "the Trickster . . . goddess/god . . . stands for the exact same thing," not merely that the two deities share slight similarities. Highway draws a

[91] Merriam-Webster, "Loki."

[92] Highway, "Why Cree is the Sexiest," 39.

[93] Highway, "Why Cree is the Sexiest," 39.

strong connection between the two. Such a strong connection is necessary because western translations of the terms Aphrodite and Trickster do not match. The words mean very different things, but, according to Highway, they should not be so far removed from each other. As such, Aphrodite is likely not the first Greek god or goddess one might associate with being a trickster. For those familiar with classical mythology, Dionysus, the god of wine and religious frenzy, may come to mind. The Greek pantheon, however, does have its own trickster god. It is not Dionysus, nor is it a god that shares many traits with the western concept of tricksters. The Greek trickster god is Hermes, winged messenger of the gods—god of commerce, boundaries, and exchange. Hermes "tricks" those with whom he trades so that he comes out the better in the bargain. Yet, Highway does not make a comparison to either Dionysus or Hermes. Highway chooses Aphrodite, drawing a powerful connection between the two. And, while Highway compares the Trickster to Aphrodite, he immediately points out that the Trickster is "the central figure" in the collective dream world/sacred book. Centering the Trickster invites readers to flirt with another comparison—between the Trickster and Zeus, or even the Judeo-Christian God. To further the later comparison, the Judeo-Christian God and trickster figures of North America have both been depicted as responsible for a great flood mentioned in Native North American histories and Judeo-Christian mythology.

Why label such a central, powerful, and multifaceted deity a mere trickster? It may simply be another English-to-English translation mistake. By definition, the word "trickster" lacks the breadth to encompass meanings such as the central God figure or goddess/god of love and sexual delight. The label "trickster," as it is applied to supernatural beings in the Native North American tradition, is perhaps a product

of colonized domestication. During various colonial activities over the past 500 years, the Euro-West has encountered what are for its logic inexplicable figures. Colonialism has interpreted those figures, desired to categorize them, and set the carceral parameters of each category. The English label "trickster" was applied to the least manageable, least controllable of the untranslatable. Once settler logic sorted figures into this category, settler logic could then move them into or out of the category as they sufficiently fit or defied colonial parameters. Smith discuss such fundamental problems housed in encounters born of colonial activities. This deep-seated bias has embedded methodologies that drove—and in most universities still drive—scientific and academic explorations of "other" peoples and "othered" cultures.[94] Decolonizing our current understanding and relationship to these diverse entities now called "tricksters" confronts embedded ideologies that distort interpretations. Indigenizing our approach to such figures reorients them in crucial ways within our religious traditions, histories, and stories.

Another explanation for the limitations of the trickster label can be found in the modern Euro-American moral tradition's lack of openness to life's multiplicity and paradoxes.[95] The Trickster's association with sexuality and bodily functions is already distasteful to Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. When offered with Indigenous sexuality in all its complexities, it is particularly distasteful to missionized minds. As such, the Euro-West chose to ignore the totality of this deity's nature and their functions for Native North American societies, obscuring both this entity's sexuality

[94] See the introduction and first chapter of Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* and Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.

[95] Bollinger, *Ambigere*, 21.

and sacral power. This obscuring and belittling deny the deep association between sex and sacral power by ridiculing the divine manifestation of a being who personifies both traits. A powerful God that is a woman or man (yet also both, neither, and more), highly sexual, has a great sense of humor, can manifest in human and animal forms, and paradoxically functions as both hero/heroine and villain/villainess (God and Devil in one) is capable of conjuring in the Judeo-Christian mind a litany of the most dreaded sins. An incomplete list ventures sex for pleasure rather than procreation, sex out of holy wedlock, gay and lesbian sex, endorsement or even welcoming of sin, a mockery of the Judeo-Christian God's holy laws, leading the righteous astray, bestiality, mental impurity, deception, witchcraft, and all thought or actions that disturb or unsettle the divine social order. How such a being escaped the label of Satan himself attests to their flexibility and the difficulty of defining Hell as a home. Despite the lack of richness, depth, and complexity of meaning in the word "trickster," perhaps it is not so bad a moniker after all, given the bleak alternative and the impoverished imaginary of binaried evil.

To study this figure/these figures, we need to engage them by name and know their stories within their cultural contexts. Native North American traditions favor different animals for their "trickster" figures, with some cultures possessing a multitude of animal "tricksters." Miguel explains, "So, there are all kinds [of tricksters]. There's rabbits, and there's ravens, and there's eagles, and there's hawks, and they're all tricksters."[96] Who is Nanabush of the Ojibway? "Oh, yes," someone from another religious tradition may say, "We have a figure like that, but they are

[96] Miguel, "Hot 'N' Soft," 00:17:41.

often a rabbit and go by the name . . .” It is in sharing these specific stories that understanding and connections form. These connections enhance context, which Wilson advocates in his knowledge of research, which “is ceremony.” There are generative impacts in clarity/multiplicity and cohesion/multi-vocal authenticity.

In *Hot ‘N’ Soft,* Miguel reveals the complexity of her Trickster to the audience by echoing Highway’s goddess of love parallel, making her audience laugh as she reminds them that a trickster is not without her tricks. The set is draped in red and floral-patterned curtains, ostentatious as a child’s homemade Valentine. Miguel drapes one of the curtains over a wooden screen to create a cave and climbs inside, her face hidden from view by the fabric, as she begins the story of a time long, long ago when she “got caught.” Miguel disappears behind the curtains, shaking them and thrashing as she cries out, telling the story of a lover like a goddess who was full of tricks. Finally, Miguel returns to the cave, her face again hidden by a shining swath of red velvet fabric. “You!” she moans, reaching behind her to grasp the wooden screen with a trembling hand, “You are my Venus! You are my Venus . . . flytrap!”[97] The audience bursts into laughter. Miguel emerges from the cave, now wearing layers of fabric like her set, and performs a boisterously suggestive lap dance with an empty chair to the sweet strains of “Venus” by Bananarama, an irreverent juxtaposition of Venus's allure to the dangerous snap of a carnivorous, sticky, and vaginal-shaped indigenous plant. There is no mistaking the bold gyrations, the unashamed joy, the voluminous cleavage, the open lewdness, the growling howls, the barrage of humor. This is Trickster dancing.

[97] Miguel, “Hot ‘N’ Soft,” 00:45:23.

Trickster transforming.

Whatever the name or specific traits attributed by various cultures of origin, this central Native North American being(s) of love/sex/tricks/change/humor epitomizes within its various selves the so-often concomitant nature of sex, laughter, and tears.

Chapter 5

Survivability, Reality, and the Sacred: Theater Makers as Community Servants

In earlier chapters, we discussed several features of Native drama that were inflected in culturally distinct and overlapping ways, including the impulse of survivability in Native drama and how Native drama can mobilizing sacred, transformative power. We will now expand and refine our discussion of those topics, further considering sacred power in Native drama, the connection of Native American religious traditions to the Native North American dramatic tradition, and the role that survivability plays in driving Native drama. In "Coyote Transforming: Visions of Native American Theater," Rolland Meinholtz discusses his role in the birth of the contemporary Native North American theater movement through his work at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, from 1964 to 1970. His opening declares:

> The institute's overarching educational principle during the sixties was that the traditional culture of the young high schoolers coming to us was their greatest strength. Many of them, if not most, had lost touch with that culture. The genocide of the Native peoples of America had been cultural as well as physical and was still ongoing. . . . If our students were truly to be themselves, to become people of strength, they needed to be reintroduced to the centuries of artistic achievement that was the gift from their ancestors. They needed to know it, understand it, deal with it, struggle with it, hopefully integrate it, and lastly, build upon it. To create not really a "new," but more accurately, a "now" response; a thoroughly contemporary American Indian Art, informed by the past, living and reflecting the present. Art to feed the souls of living Indian people. The Now People.[1]

[1] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 77.

Meinholtz introduces the foundation of contemporary Native North American theater and indicates the fundamental impulses that drive this movement. These pulses serve as the basis for what sets Native North American theater apart from other theatrical forms. Through the decolonized lens and lived experience within Indigenous epistemologies of Native North American theater practitioners, the audience is cultivated and the people foregrounded within the survivability and service at the core of Native theater. Hanay Geiogamah coined the term survivability, which he defines as a compound emotion of profound responsibility and gratitude arising from hardship: "Out of a social and political crucible, survivability is an abiding and continuing sense of responsibility, of duty, and of thankfulness that we were ever born, that the Creator let us have life."[2] In unpacking Meinholtz's statement, and the contributions of other prominent Native North American theater practitioners who write on the process of creating both the field of Native North American theater and individual performances, much can be learned from the ways the people communicate with each other within a theatrical context. Repeatedly, these practitioners look to the past and their communities to inform their understanding of their art. A culturally and platially specific analysis of Native North American theater must speak with, in, and through community.[3]

Since its rise during the politically tumultuous time of the Red Power Movement and Native American Renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the contemporary Native North American theater tradition has been one of activism and

[2] Geiogamah, *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance*, 6.

[3] Platiality, or a profound belonging to or focus on place or landscape, is one of the four dramaturgical discourses discussed in Stanlake, *Native American Drama*.

sacredness. These attributes require movement, require action and reaction. The role of rhetoric in activist theater is central since the events within the confines of the performance space are the beginning. The aspirational motion is the change produced in the minds and bodies of theater practitioners and the audience and how that change affects their behavior and, perhaps by extension, social systems. This animacy in motion (activism is movement, asserting presence over absence) is also characteristic of Native North American theater. A myriad of features, from the subtle to the profound, set Native theater apart from western forms of activist theater. Yet, contemporary Native theater shares attributes with Euro-Western theatrical styling, which can conflate performances rooted in strikingly different worldviews in ways that minimize or even erase fundamental differences. Theresa J. May faced issues in staging Marie Humber Clements's *Burning Vision*: "The play's logic is not postmodern (as the designer worried), but indigenous—and to produce it is to admit that it has something to teach us not only about what we think and feel, but also about how."[4] Language issues compound the tendency for conflation: key distinctions become flattened when like terms are used to describe what at their core are profoundly unlike features. There are distinctions marked in performances crafted from Indigenous worldviews, and this is especially evident when hearing the expressive and impactful communication of Native North American theater. For practitioners of Native North American activist theater, a primary concern in shaping messages revolves around asking how the work will serve Native North American theater's central audience: Native communities. Rhetoric in the Native

[4] May, "Kneading Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*," 7.

theatrical sense—both effective communication and the changes the performance will bring about—at its core presents (makes present) a rhetoric of giving and of ministration—of service. In offering the people stories with the potential to mobilize sacred, transformative power, Native North American theater can become a force for healing—healing the people, healing the future, and (as explained by Howe's tribalographic methodology) healing the past.[5] This calling up of the past creates an opportunity to recuperate, confront, interrogate, reclaim, and ultimately heal these damaged histories. Such theater can remove, a piece at a time, these histories' negating power to perpetuate injury on the People.

In examining the survivability that "motors," that moves, Native North American theater, language is crucial.[6] Playwright Diane Glancy clarifies one aspect of the problem by asking, "How do you touch upon native thought structure with a language and space that work against it? For native thought to be expressed in English, it has a long tunnel with quirks to pass through, so that when it arrives it is shaped differently than when it began."[7] This is one way in which colonizer languages resist being put in service to the peoples and cultures they were used to colonize and continue to wound and oppress. An integral part of colonization was the suppression of cultures, language being a primary vessel in which culture is carried and exchanged. Is it any wonder that a colonizer language like English would balk at

[5] For a discussion of Howe's tribalography, including the utility of the methodology and scholarly explorations of tribalography in practice, see *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 26, no. 2.

[6] Tomson Highway uses the term "motor" in a production note for one of his plays to describe the principle that underlies the language of the play, which he ascribes to a deity, the Trickster. See Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*.

[7] Glancy, *Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater*, 7.

conveying Indigenous thought? Would be riddled with inadequacies for such a task? Like trying to carry water in a colander, colonizer languages were designed to establish, uphold, and perpetuate the superiority of the colonizing force—to dominate—to keep the rocks and intentionally lose the water. Writing in English, how does one now convey water? Indigenous scholars across the globe struggle with issues of language, employing a variety of techniques to enable Indigenous theory to be shared. Some "advocate for writing in indigenous languages as part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggle."[8] To attempt to convey meaning in this space, I will relate a story.

Once, while I was giving a presentation on the role of ritual in the process of creating sacred space, an audience member replied to me, saying, isn't that why "we all" get into theater, for the ritual of it?[9] My heart sank. I had been talking about a specific, invocative, preparatory component of Native American religious traditions. From a Euro-Western perspective, one may use the term "ritual" with a secular connotation to emphasize the importance of a routine, but such a connotation is not embedded in my cultural values, nor is it consistent with how I used the term at that moment. This audience member understood my words, but my words failed to carry my intended meaning as our cultural values were not aligned. The content was lost in translation from Indigenous to Euro-Western paradigms, "translating English into English."[10] Two parties can communicate in the same language, understanding one

[8] Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 19.

[9] This exchange occurred during the question-and-answer period for the *Spectacular Indians: Land-Based Performance and Indigenous Repair* panel at the 2017 annual Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference, *Spectacle: balancing education, theory and praxis*.

[10] Glancy, *Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater*, 7.

another's words, but fail to decode one another's meaning. Such translation issues are one of the several language challenges with which American Indian and Indigenous studies regularly contend.

Another issue of translation arises with the use of the word theater and the genre's history in this hemisphere. Across the Indigenous cultures of the world, and even within a given Indigenous culture, theater may not be a distinct literary or performance genre in the Euro-Western sense. Howe opens a window into understanding Native North American theater as a dramatic tradition on its own terms by interchangeably using the words "story," "fiction," "history," and "play."[11] Native North American theater is all these things and, being undivided, this theater is more—a sacred and transformational more. To discuss the story/fiction/history/play is more holistic and has a distinct advantage over the term "play." There is a disencumbering by defying conflation with the Euro-Western play and all the mental shorthand that colonial theaters bring to the term. Euro-Western theater traces its history to the dramatic inventions of the ancient Greeks and, for reasons of hierarchy, "refuses to acknowledge the existence of Native American theater prior to European contact."[12] This phenomenon can be seen in *The Cambridge History of American Theater*, as Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby mark European contact as the birth of American theater. They assert, "In fact, American theater has a history going back to the first encounter of Europeans with what, to them, was a new continent and, in the form of Native American rituals and ceremonies, a

[11] Howe, "Tribalography,"117–25.

[12] López and Benali, "Native American Theater," 98.

prehistory."[13] Wilmeth and Bigsby see Native Americans as providing an encounter with the anachronistic and exotic that the European imagination would use in part to create a new dramatic tradition, the Euro-American theater. The existence and contributions of ancient Native North American theatrical traditions are not recognized.[14] Neither are these traditions acknowledged as distinct dramatic traditions in their own right. By denying the distinct origins of the dramatic inventions of the ancient Native North Americans, a myriad of fundamental differences in conventions, aesthetics, language, and priorities of contemporary Native theater are frequently subjected to judgment by Euro-Western standards, misunderstanding, and dismissal. By contrast, scholars of Native theater tend to agree that Native drama on this continent can trace its roots to the precontact performative oral traditions of tribes and Nations. Many of these thinkers argue for a direct line of continuity between contemporary Native drama and the ceremonies and religious practices found in Native religious traditions. By definition, this lineage is more contested.[15] What is generally agreed upon is: 1. More than any other Native North American literary genre, Native North American theater is an outgrowth and reflection of traditional cultural practices (oral and/or religious traditions); 2. Contemporary Native North American theater underwent significant development amid the politically tumultuous Red Power Movement and Native American

[13] Wilmeth and Bigsby, *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, xiii.

[14] See Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," for a discussion of ancient Native North American performative traditions.

[15] For discussions of the history and lineage of Native North American theater, see Däwes, "Performing Memory, Transforming Time," and Schäfer, "A Short History of Native Canadian Theatre."

Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s and, I would argue, is in many ways still a descendent of that era; and 3. Contemporary Native North American theater was no accident. Its form, content, intentions, and audiences have been carefully and rhetorically selected and cultivated by Native North American theater practitioners acting on behalf of and cooperating with their communities. Several of these named founders of contemporary Native theater have remained active contributors in the theater arts for long periods of time, refining their contributions and the shape of Native theater over the decades of their careers, forty to fifty years in the cases of Spiderwoman Theater and Hanay Geiogamah, and twenty-eight years in the case of Native Voices, later Native Voices at the Autry. These contributions included, and continues to include, thinking profoundly and proactively about audiences and participatory communities.

This chapter has three objectives. First, to touch on several pieces of contemporary Native North American drama that seek to change minds, hearts, actions, and social systems—activist theater—to discuss what sets Native drama apart from the concept of activist drama in general. Second, to deeply engage the question of whether or not contemporary Native North American drama in general and the comic/tragedy genre, in particular, are sacred performance. Finally, by examining Meinholtz's above statement alongside the writings of other theater practitioners, this chapter delves into the foundational *moreness* to the activism in Native North American drama and its connection to the sacred, to Native North American religious traditions. This foundational impulse is survivability, a profound and religious gratitude for one's existence from whence arises a radical sense of responsibility, emerging, as Geiogamah observes, from the social and political

crucible. The communication and action of Native North American drama, effective and generative, are founded on service—on the good of the people and all our relations.

Theater, Action, and Survival

As the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s civil rights era of the United States drew to a close, two crucial movements for Native North Americans gained momentum. The first was a wave of attention for Native North American artistic and literary achievements following N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *House Made of Dawn*. This attention stimulated Native artistic creation, and the ensuing years have been called the Native American Renaissance.[16] The second movement was one of political action, which resulted in three major standoffs with the U.S. government: Alcatraz (1969–1971), Washington DC Bureau of Indian Affairs Office (1972), and Wounded Knee (1973). Amid these two movements, the American Indian Theater Ensemble (AITE, later NATE) performed Robert Shorty and Geraldine Keams's *Na Haaz Zan* and Geiogamah's *The Body Indian* in 1972 at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in New York City. The performance represented the fruition of decades of groundwork laid by performers and practitioners across the continent and marked the beginning of contemporary Native North American theater in the United States.[17] The political and artistic climate shaped the emerging era of Native North American theater both in form and content. In addition to drawing performance materials from traditional literatures, contemporary theatrical

[16] López and Benali, "Native American Theater," 99–100.

[17] Däwes, "Performing Memory, Transforming Time," 1–2.

works were, and continue to be, urgent extensions of sociopolitical resistance in the face of missionization, ongoing colonialism, language and culture destruction and theft, missing and murdered Indigenous women, residential school trauma, and genocide. Cultivated in such soil, growing from the efforts of resistant, resilient people subjected to these circumstances, it is little wonder that Native North American theater has been fervently activist.

Activist theater primarily seeks to produce a change in the mind and actions of the audience members. This change is the "active" in "activism," from whence effective communication rises. What sets Native theatrical communication apart from other activist theaters is not that it seeks to bring about change in the minds and actions of the participants. Native North American theater does this in abundance. At the end of Yvette Nolan's play, *Blade*, as Angela applies her last stroke of makeup and sits transformed into a prostitute on the car seat where a serial killer murdered her, the audience is invited to feel bitter. As she puts on the face, the watchers see how unfair it is for society and the media to ascribe responsibility to victims of violence, a theater of guilt that casts victims as being at fault. Casting a serial killer's victims posthumously as sex workers, the media soothes society with the assurance that all murdered women are sex-commodities who must have brought the violence on themselves.[18] In her plays, Nolan confronts issues of systemic support for violence against women, such as in the media reports surrounding the December 1989 Montreal massacre (L'École Polytechnique massacre). The media downplayed that the massacre was gender-motivated, that

[18] Nolan, *Blade*, 14-15.

women students were singled out and targeted because the killer believed that they were feminists who were taking educational opportunities away from men.[19] Nolan's work also highlights the over 1,200 unsolved murders and/or kidnappings of Indigenous women and girls, which has been called a haunting national disgrace and Canada's national shame.[20] Through the voice of the mother character in *Blad*e, Nolan cuts to the truth, "I'm beginning to think that maybe if the police had been looking for a man who was killing women, instead of a man who was killing whores, maybe he'd have been stopped a lot sooner."[21] Howe's *The Mascot Opera: A Minuet* confronts audiences with a nuanced, complex, and explosive argument against American Indian sports mascots, one that resists simplification or dismissal. At the end of the play, a character, Native American Girl, uses a copy of Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* as a gun to shoot two other characters, Indian Sports Mascot and Noble Savage (both damaging stereotypes). Native American Girl quotes Deloria: "The problems of Indians have always been ideological rather than social, political, or economic. . . . It is vitally important that Indian people pick the intellectual arena as the one in which to wage war."[22] Audiences of Howe and Roxy Gordon's *Indian Radio Days: An Evolving Bingo Experience* are moved to participate in the show, to remove money from their wallets

[19] The incident involved a school shooting in which the gunman separated female and male students before killing the women, claiming they were feminists and that feminism had ruined his life. For an article on the massacre and its subsequent impact in Canada, see Bindel, "The Montreal Massacre."

[20] See Lukacs, "Disappearing Aboriginal Women Are Canada's Secret Shame;" Paquin, "Unsolved Murders of Indigenous Women Reflect Canada's History of Silence;" and "The Halluci Nation - Burn Your Village To The Ground (Neon Nativez Remix)."

[21] Nolan, *Blade*, 15.

[22] Howe, *The Mascot Opera*, 15.

to buy bags of dirt and to boo and hiss when a character on stage mentions the Bering Strait Theory of how the Americas were first peopled. “Mister, what’s wrong with you?” says Indian Woman. “We are THE PEOPLE. We have always been here.”[23] These plays confront the issues of victim blaming, cultural appropriation, land ownership, and the superiority of settler-colonial narratives. They demonstrate the movement of activist theater, moving the audience first to action of the mind and perhaps later of behavior (*Blade* and *The Mascot Opera*) or first to action of behavior and perhaps later of mind (*Indian Radio Days*). Yet, Native North American theater's work goes beyond activism in the common Euro-Western sense. Through the mobilization of sacred power, Native North American drama and performative interventions are capable of effecting change beyond the minds and actions of an audience, creating the sort of spiritual and material transformation Wilson discusses in *Research Is Ceremony*.[24]

This ability to mobilize sacred power to produce additional forms of change and transformation influences the communications of Native drama in pivotal ways. These include for whom the messages are crafted, how the messages are crafted, and the desired outcome of these messages. Often, mindful preparation begins long before even the conception of the dramatic project. Activist messages are rhetorical communications crafted to change minds and influence actions. Native North American theater affects an additional, material level of change of which ceremony is capable.

[23] Howe and Gordon, *Indian Radio Days*, 6.

[24] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.

Whether or not Native North American theater as it is known today has close ties to pre- and early invasion religious traditions—ceremonies and rituals—Indigenous scholars have noted the ceremonial nature and ceremonial aspects currently present in Native North American theater. Founding theater figure Meinholtz's parsing and placing of this indigenizing movement warrants revisiting:

> Whereas Bertolt Brecht's theatre seeks to inform and mobilize, George Bernard Shaw's theatre to get people to think, Noel Coward's to entertain, Anton Chekhov's to empathize, Indian theatre wishes to spiritually and emotionally transform its audience. This is achieved through mutual involvement in a ceremony.[25]

Scott and Knowles observe the active role of Native North American drama as a tool of healing from sexual trauma through the use of heightened language, ritual, re-membering, and embodiment, stopping just short of calling these performances ceremonial.[26] Another founding Native theater figure, Lloyd Kiva New, "conceived [that] contemporary Native drama from the outset would be fashioned from ceremonial practices. As an extension of tribal ritual."[27]

Alongside these assertions, Stanlake makes a case for Native American drama as secular theater: "The term *secular* denotes that Native American plays are not tied to any specific Native American religion."[28] While her assertion can appear to conflict with the above scholars, Stanlake clarifies the specificity of her point: "the

[25] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 89.

[26] See Scott, "Embodiment as a Healing Process," and Knowles, "The Hearts of Its Women."

[27] Valentino, "Theater Renaissance," 297.

[28] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 17.

plays are not scripted religious ceremonies, . . . nor do they convey sacred details that belong to private, religious observances of Native peoples."[29]

Here once again, translation occludes a holistic understanding of a concept. The sacrality of existence for many Indigenous groups means, depending on the specific cultural worldview, there may be no context in which people, places, more-than-human relatives, and things are devoid of sacrality or completely lacking in sacred power. Stanlake emphasizes the care Native North American theater practitioners take in not disseminating sacred, restricted knowledges. Disrespect would cause harm: consultation is the fundament of being in relationship with the communities being served. Restricting particular knowledges to assigned groups or societies within cultures can be and has been misinterpreted. There is nothing exotic or uncommon about restricting knowledges. Institutions and groups frequently label information as confidential or on a need-to-know basis. Depending on cultural norms, parents and social systems the world over decide when and how knowledges are shared with offspring. Endeavoring to ensure the knowledge shared during a theatrical performance is appropriate means specific sacred or taboo knowledge is not disseminated to the detriment of the people. This care does not strip Native North American performances of the sacred power or ceremonial potential they possess. These plays cannot be rendered or reduced to the secular as defined in the western sense. While settler-colonial languages rely on binaries and hierarchies to order knowledge about the world, Indigenous languages tend toward the holistic and egalitarian. To repeat, it would be unusual for the concepts of sacred and secular to

[29] Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 17.

be absolute, oppositional, and exclusive. These concepts are permeable and complex: they coexist without the rancor added by stains of sin. Native North American drama and performative interventions enter as a semisacred—not a sacrosanct or satan-defined—theatrical tradition in this more holistic compass embraced by Indigenous paradigms. Rather than police the sacred or secular nature of Native North American theater, it is more productive to ask about how sacred power defines palpable differences within a Native North American performative event.

Geiogamah divides Native North American theater into two genres, modern or contemporary theater and traditional or ceremonial theater. "Contemporary productions, such as the play *Body Indian*," Geiogamah outlines, "would follow more closely the forms of traditional western theater and would deal with Indian life today and might use any of the elements of the traditional to underscore or heighten a desired effect."[30] Modern characteristics include having a clear storyline and dealing with the contemporary lives and issues of Indian people. Ceremonial theater "incorporates music, a special kind of text, dance, costumes, masks, stories, and characters in myths and legends, integrating them into a ceremonial form."[31] Connecting ceremonial theater productions to what Allen calls ceremonial literature, Geiogamah cites Allen's assertion that ceremonial literature has sacred power. Using his own play, *49*, Geiogamah details how conscientious theater practitioners can navigate the process of creating ceremonial theater in a good way. While asserting that ceremonial productions utilize ceremonial forms in ritual enactments that work toward the purposeful and communal outcome of integration—the purpose of

[30] Geiogamah, *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance*, 3.

[31] Geiogamah, *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance*, 3.

ceremony[32]—Geiogamah's proposed genres do not answer the bad faith question of whether Native theater is sacred, with one genre being sacred and the other secular. If all of existence possesses sacred power, then the question becomes, to what degree does this performative event mobilize sacred power toward ceremonial goals of transformation? Geiogamah describes the ceremonial theater genre by foregrounding his own experience and praxis of working in the genre. At the same time, Sidoní López and Hanane Benali advise caution regarding Geiogamah's division of Native North American theater into contemporary and ceremonial genres:

> Whereas this latter categorization certainly reflects the religious or ceremonial character of Native American performance, it might be an obstacle to the production of indigenous plays as it may bar outsiders from producing such material for fear of infringing on certain rules. This has also hampered the development of Native American theater down through history and it certainly explains the counter-productive effect of reserving emerging Native American drama for indigenous companies and audiences; this measure both stimulated and restricted the wider dissemination of the dramatic output.[33]

Lopez and Benali's statement emphasizes the importance of examining Stanlake's argument alongside the contested lineage of Native North American theater and the development of contemporary Native theater as practiced and analyzed by New, Meinholtz, Geiogamah, and others. Regardless of the possible negative consequences of highlighting the religious aspects or roots of Native North American drama, historically and in the present, certainly some if not all of Native theater has religious significance and the potential to give rise to ceremonial transformations. This drama communicates with audiences, intimating in ways

[32] Geiogamah, *Ceremony, Spirituality, and Ritual in Native American Performance*, 5.

[33] López and Benali, "Native American Theater," 106.

capable of changing minds and actions. Yet, this dramatic tradition's ceremonial potential and mobilizing of sacred power can also precipitate asserting identity, healing disease, and transforming spaces—both performance spaces and as participants broach the world at large. These experiences of intimate art can alter the course of the future, and, according to Howe's tribalographic methodology, these staged stories have the power to affect the past.[34]

Wilson asserts that the purpose of a ceremony is to improve relationships. These relationships, he explains, create relational intersections within which and through which the nature of reality is constructed. This is power: ceremony creates reality. Ceremonies improve relationships.[35] Relationships (re)construct reality. Native North American dramatic performance must focus on understanding existing relationships and move toward fostering the good of the community, built from a foundation of survivability. Gratitude held in responsibility contours the form of communication being chosen and enacted through ritual. As Meinholtz delineates, such attentiveness effects change in the spiritual and emotional worlds of audiences and theater practitioners alike.

About the Audience

In asking, who is the audience for Native North American theater, the question quickly becomes both simple and complicated. The short answer is the People. "The People" is at once a specific yet inclusive term. The various names of Native North American Nations often come from some variation of their languages' word for

[34] Bauerkemper, "Introduction," 4.

[35] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 75-77.

"person," "the people," or "the real people." Native North American theater also focuses on the people. Geiogamah states that IATE (later NATE) came together "with the express purpose of creating and performing stage works by Indian artists for Indian people. Acceptance by non-Indian audiences was not a primary consideration, although it was not discouraged."[36] Geiogamah advises:

> In judging an Indian play, readers and viewers should keep in mind that the most important function of the Indian dramatist is to communicate with his own people. The major questions are: Does the play speak effectively to Indians? Can Indians understand what is happening on stage? If there is a message, is it communicated clearly and effectively in Indian terms? Are the characters and dialogue culturally authentic?[37]

It makes sense, then, that "after two seasons in New York and a European tour, company members [of IATE] felt the need to take their enterprise into Indian country."[38] The group's impulse to take their work to the people reflects Meinholtz's vision of nearly a decade earlier. He hoped that contemporary Native American theater would be "art to feed the souls of living Indian people. The Now People."[39]

The term "the people" may also refer to the immediate audience of a performance while at the same time spiraling outward in ever-widening circles to engage the community, the Nations of the people involved, other Nations connected directly or indirectly to the performance, other populations, future generations, and the Ancestors. This expansive view of theater and its implications is echoed in an email to Meinholtz from collaborator Monica Charles:

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[36] Geiogamah, "The New American Indian Theater," 161.

[37] Geiogamah, "The New American Indian Theater," 163.

[38] Geiogamah, "The New American Indian Theater," 161.

[39] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 77.

> In real Indian life the Spiritual and mundane mix. . . . The Spirit world and our world coexist in the same time and space. I think that is what Indian theatre should show. We are Tribal people.[40] That is unique in this country. We are a part of a whole. . . . Everything we do affects the whole.[41]

When Charles speaks of being a Tribal people, she highlights an intense social connectedness, so much so that "everything we do affects the whole." With the proliferation of individualism in Euro-American identarian focus, recognizing connection, acknowledging the far-reaching impact of one's actions on others, and acting for the collective good are often deprioritized. Charles's comment contains multiple layers of connection: connection to one's behavior and the outcomes it generates, connection to one's Nation, connection in space and time, and connections among Spirit worlds and our world. This layered nature of connection is common to Indigenous worldviews and, as such, is a frequent and integral aspect of Native theories and philosophies. Being a Tribal people in an Indigenous sense is not just to be connected, as is all of reality. Being in relationship is to be mindful of, responsible to, and a steward through those connections.

Consideration of Euro-Western and mixed audiences also factors into the extensive planning and preparation that accompanies the creation of Native drama and performative interventions. As Diane Glancy writes, "I hope my audience is native people and also those of European descent. I am interested in the left-out

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[40] "Tribal" here refers to the tribal peoples' connection with each other and a keen awareness of and dedication to upholding community responsibilities. It does not refer to the word "tribalism" as currently used in the mainstream political discourse of the United States to indicate an insular nature, small-mindedness, separatist thinking, self-reinforcing ideologies, polarized thinking, and hostility to outsiders.

[41] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 92.

voices of history. I hope my work is for those who want the full history of our country and our world."[42] Explaining her desired effect on her audiences, Glancy affirms:

> I want the audience feeling sympathy for the characters . . . even though they are from a different culture. I want the audience to be moved, to be excited about the thoughts and the dramatic events presented. I want to give acknowledgment to the spirits along the road, and acknowledgment to the land.[43]

Another author acknowledges that non-Native people make up a substantial portion of his readership, but adds,

> Yeah, I load my books with stuff, just load 'em up. I call them "Indian trapdoors." You know, Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them. . . . So that's the kind of thing I'm imagining. Poems that work in all sorts of ways, but I really want the subtext for Indians.[44]

Extensive research, community interaction, cultural consideration, and connecting to one's Elders and Ancestors are all forms of audience involvement and cultivation. [45] When the performance comes together in a good way, the effect is transformative for the central audience—Indigenous North American people—and also for the ever-widening sphere of "audience," widening through time and, though platially specificity, transcending spatial gaps. Meinholtz shares his experience watching a Native dramatic performance and recounts, "The spare setting, the drumming, the chanting and singing, the dancing, its episodic nature, and its wry point of view all proudly proclaimed this was Indian theatre. Coyote dancing! Coyote transforming! Indian theatre, making us weep with joy."[46]

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[42] Glancy, *Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater*, 16.

[43] Glancy, *Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater*, 16.

[44] Purdy, "Crossroads," 15.

[45] In the context of Native American religious traditions, the words Ancestor and Elder are capitalized.

[46] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 94.

Survivability and Service

Since Native drama arises from Indigenous rather than settler-colonial paradigms, the role of survivability in Native North American theater must be contextualized to avoid obscuring meaning, flattening nuance, and losing the power of the message. The specific nature of the power for transformation in Native North American drama, the forces that motivate and mobilize performative sharing—the objectives that give that mobilized power its trajectory—are the fundament of a non-western worldview. The question driving the theatrical communication of Native theater is not, "What performance do we create?" or, "How can we get the desired outcome from our audience?" but rather, "How can we cultivate a good outcome for the people? How best to serve?" The perspective embedded in these questions reflects their respective approaches to theatrical acts. The first approach is desire based. Theater practitioners from this perspective identify the desired result for their performance, asking questions like, "Why this play at this time for this audience?"[47] They then craft the performance to elicit the desired outcome. Desire as a motivating force can be unhinged and arbitrary. The second, an Indigenous approach, is "good" based. "Good" is a much more concrete term than desire, yet the goal is more complex and inclusive. Desires do not require evidence or justification. Good has a much higher burden of proof. Good must be demonstrated. Otherwise, how does one know it is good? This standard creates the critical need for a preproduction step devoted to community respect and respecting community. Research requires questions: Will this performance be a good thing? How? For whom? Does this

[47] This was a frequent discussion question asked of the Directing Emphasis students in the following course: Risa Brainin, Techniques in Directing (University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California, Winter 2018).

performance have the potential to hurt? Does it leave individuals or groups vulnerable? What does this performance say about the community? Other communities? And, yes, about Indigenous people in general? Who wants this performance and why? How will this performance elevate the people? Finally, whom does this performance serve? These questions are answered through patience and listening. Knowledge comes from seeking connection and guidance from community leaders, fellow theater practitioners, Elders, Ancestors, and others who have a stake in the performance—who will be impacted, have invested, and have an interest in its repercussions. In the end, the performance belongs to the community. If it is good, this offering will contribute to the balance of the community—perhaps harmoniously, perhaps not without challenge.

This perspective moves into another fundamental difference between the first and second approaches to theatrical communication: the focus on any audience's predictive response. While practitioners of the first approach desire the effects of their message to spread and continue beyond the confines of the performance and into other arenas, Native North American theater knows that it is never confined to the performance space and time. The common belief for many Native North American religious traditions that sacred power is possessed to some extent by all of existence means that the power of the performance is not bound by physical geography or temporal duration. To seek a desired outcome from an audience, or even a good outcome for an audience, identifies a limited and potentially detrimental objective. Seeking a good outcome for the people, an outcome that opens self-determined possibilities, removes the constraints of time and space, thereby reflecting and reinforcing Indigenous worldviews in theatrical practice.

Presenting a rhetoric of giving instead of seeking a rhetoric of return is rooted in cultural aesthetics and spiritual and religious traditions. Meinholtz details culturally and religiously specific performance conventions in "the Shalako Ceremonies at Zuni pueblo, or the Deer Ceremony."[48] Jill Sweet explains the cultural aesthetics of restraint and unity demonstrated in Tewa dance.[49] Aesthetics and traditions vary considerably among North America's nearly three hundred and fifty distinct Indigenous languages. The word "language" here does not refer to dialects. Sometimes constrained, unified performances that are repetitive are more valuable, appropriate, and pleasing than performances crafted for maximum variety and jarring spectacle. Depending on cultural aesthetics, Indigenous cultures may dismiss the later type of performance as showing off or seeking to elevate oneself above others, thereby disrespecting the community.

The necessity of approaching theatrical communication from traditional respect protocols is a hallmark of Native values that repeatedly arises in the work of Native theater practitioners. To return to the beginning, Meinholtz demonstrates his consideration for the history that has shaped contemporary colonized reality, including the resilient strengths and focal needs of his students:

> The genocide of the Native peoples of America had been cultural as well as physical and was still ongoing. . . . If our students were truly to be themselves, to become people of strength, they needed to be reintroduced to the centuries of artistic achievement that was the gift from their ancestors.[50]

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[48] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 84-86 and 89.

[49] Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 12–17.

[50] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 77.

Extending the connection between artistic practice and kinship, Meinholtz envisions how these students might fulfill essential social and kinship responsibilities through the work they undertake at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Giving back to their communities in the present, they build a legacy for future generations by working in their youth toward becoming responsible Elders and Ancestors. This giving back fulfills unfulfilled and unfinished pasts for those who genocide interrupted in their gifts by collectively creating "art to feed the souls of living Indian people. The Now People."[51] Geiogamah foregrounds the vital place of Native North American theater in the cultural and historical landscape of Native North American peoples. This "feeding of souls" is the essential service—a force for good, strengthening platial, temporal, and cultural positioning. These enactments strengthen identity for the participatory all. "The American Indian theater," Geiogamah urges, "has before it the challenge of helping Indian people to better know who they are and how their lives are being affected by all the changes occurring at the end of the twentieth century."[52] Playwright Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl highlights the attentiveness, care, and culturally specific awareness this demands of theater practitioners. She cautions, "I think you have to be careful," especially when discussing matters of certain cultural sensitivity, such as when dramatizing the chiefly class in Hawaiian culture. [53] Ignorance is no defense when it comes to offending audiences, transgressing social taboos, misusing sacred knowledges, or assuming and imposing what a practitioner believes the people need without the

[51] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 77.

[52] Geiogamah, "Introduction," 5.

[53] Kneubuhl, "Interview with Victoria Kneubuhl," 07:59.

guidance of the community. If Native North American theater practitioners are to craft their performances to ensure the good of the people, the practice of respect takes time, listening, and connection—the necessary beginning of ritual preparation.

In Indigenous scholarship, specificity of place and people create an informed cultural framework from which knowledge can be shared, experienced within, and learned from relationship. Although conventions and limitations of theater-making create complications, practitioners choose the complexity that foregrounds cultural specificity. Material for performances has been drawn and adapted from Indigenous oral traditions, such as the Navajo/Diné creation tradition depicted in Robert Shorty and Geraldine Keams's *Na Haaz Zan* and from trickster traditions in Geiogamah's *Coon Cons Coyote*[54] and Muriel Miguel's *Hot 'N' Soft I & II*.[55] Native North American theater must speak to diverse Native audiences, urban and rural, peoples from hundreds of cultural traditions developed through over ten millennia. In this sense, Native theater is at once both pan-Indian and rhetorically, ritually specific. Specific and "pan." This theater of presence refuses genocide: cultural (as defined by the United Nations) and physical (the long reach of this sharing of an embodied, animate world). Theater-maker Madeline Sayet gives voice to the service-minded thought processes that undergird her theatrical preparations and the generative impact this has on the nature and action of her theatrical productions:

> When I think about Native theater, I always think about, you know, telling a story through your community in that moment that they need in the way that best serves them. And I think when you really focus on that, there's just so many more possibilities because it's not about . . . there being a separation between the audience and the speaker. . . . It's about just figuring out the best

[54] Geiogamah, "Coon Cons Coyote."

[55] Miguel, *Hot 'N' Soft*, and Miguel, *Hot 'N' Soft II*.

> way to share stories in a way that can heal community together, and that has infinite possibilities.[56]

With mindful preparation, theatrical communication powerfully rooted in service opens possibilities and creates presence for healing the people, changing the past, and inhabiting imagined Native futurities. This mindfulness is the difference between being aware of the stars and navigating by them. We may all see the stars, but some of us have a pull inside that causes us to follow them.

Conclusion: Healing Damaged Histories

What does it mean to stage the past when one is working within a paradigm in which, as Craig Womack reminds us, "Indian writers are trying to *invoke* as much as *evoke*"?[57] To invoke the past, Ancestors, and deities is rhetorically powerful and meaningful yet also materially significant. Such actions change the physical world. Working within a paradigm in which time is not linear, the past itself is malleable—prepared—for such change. For peoples—the People—to be healed. Histories are stories in sequence: theater offered in a good way can engage the recuperating of the past in transformative, ceremonial ways that reorder, rewrite, and right those histories/stories/fictions. By ministering to the past, we rhetorically perform stories as an act of ministration for the people, which has the capacity to become medicinal.

Speaking to the reconfiguring of the linear, the literary and dramatic call and response of the above passage called forth the following response from a reader:

> This is key here. People are not alone. By sharing trauma, we are not alone. By being in story together, we become a community with a story, storied into the incantation of "authoring tribes" (Howe). These stories are not just the realism of despair—"traps of actuality"—but a naming and an exit into the

[56] Reed, "Art Works Podcast: Madeline Sayet," 00:08.

[57] Womack, *Red on Red*, 16.

> embrace of a circle that does not just repeat. We know that repetition with a difference heals through each saying. This theater of transformation is the circle that becomes the spiral proposed by feminist geographer Laura Harjo (Mvskoke Creek), the circle that Dian Millon (Tanana Athabascan) advises gives us the storied language, words, to escape the colonial-proscribed, history-circumscribed trauma loop. Laura Harjo uses Joy Harjo's (Mvskoke Creek) "Map to the Next World" as poetry's theater to open the path to "lush promise." This promise means the past and present do not control or destroy the future. Communities gather in healing community, new forms of ceremony are staged in activist theater to script vital futures: to have futures to story into existence. Here in staged and unstaged service, the young serve the ancestors by mapping futures for and to Joy Harjo's "Next World."[58]

Being in story together, we spiral into healing, integration, and transformation in our ritual and communal telling and retelling—become the healing community, a relationship to time that opens, reveals, and liberates. Remembering Deloria's insight, settler-colonial cultures view the linear progression of time and the movement of their ancestors into lands violated by "removals" as progress.[59] This view of time lionizes to obscure, to vacate, to make the past into the narrative of manifest progress. As Conn observes, this includes the present absence of American Indians in United States history, which—evolving, elastic, and convenient—promotes settler-colonial blindness to the genocidal realities celebrated as progress.[60] History is a weapon, perpetuating harm on the people from the pages of textbooks, the names of locations and landmarks, and the native words and symbols posted in the service of erasure. These are the injuries and dismissals that negate Native identities. Disarming history can be accomplished by exposing that this weapon of progress itself is damaged. Theatre, done in a good way, teaches that to disarm is to heal.

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[58] Written response to the author by Candace Waid, May 29, 2022.

[59] Deloria, *God Is Red*, 62.

[60] Conn, "Native Americans and the History of History," 5.

The largely place-based religions and cultures of Native North American can practice circular and cyclical relationships with time. When platiality and cultural specificity are foregrounded, divisions between the past, present, and future are permeable and under invoked circumstances can dissolve. On the power of playwriting, Glancy offers her insight that a realized Indigenous work is "a way of stretching or pulling language until it becomes a transparency through which other things can be seen—the old native thought patterns. . . . Native writing sometimes lays trap lines to catch a visage of the old world nearly transferred into this existing world."[61] On *Burning Vision*, May emphasizes the play of non-linear time in Native North American theater: "The indigenous viewpoint from which [*Burning Vision*] is written, and which it enacts, allows for simultaneity of past, present and future, in which the spirit world co-exists with the embodied world, in which nothing is inanimate."[62] Meinholtz, expanding on Native North American theater's relationship to time concludes: "Soul time or Heart time would be the operative measure in Indian theatre. Linear time especially, but indeed, all time is in flux and always susceptible to transformation."[63] Kneubuhl speaking about other relations Native North American Nations may share with time reminds that, "for Hawaiian people, the past is yesterday. You know? What happened a hundred years ago is just yesterday, and it's so, it's interesting, it's so fresh in our minds. And I think we have that . . . connection to the past because our parents and our grandparents feel that

[61] Glancy, *Writings on the Process of Writing Native Theater*, 7.

[62] May, "Kneading Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*," 7.

[63] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 89.

connection to our ancestors, too."[64] The connection to one's Ancestors is crucial to having a past. These relationships are an integral component of identity. To revisit Meinholtz's pedagogy of purpose: "If our students were truly to be themselves, to become people of strength, they needed to be reintroduced to the centuries of artistic achievement that was the gift from their ancestors."[65] When we heal histories wounded by genocide and genocidal erasure, it is the gifts of Ancestors we find. When we undertake this work alongside our people, we become people of strength. We feed our souls. We feed the Now People.

"I want native theater," Glancy aspires, "to try to seam its history—with what was, and what is, and possibly will be as native writers continue to write about the world into which we have survived."[66] Communicating important messages through selecting histories/fictions/stories/plays for dramatization and considering in detail how they will be told is a crucial way Native North American theater practitioners communicate and intimate depth with and through their audiences. The decision to dramatize histories/stories carries a host of messages for Native North American communities, selection in itself an act of deep significance with social, cultural, and religious power. This calling up—invoking the past—speaks to the people in the immediacy of relevance. Kneubuhl speaks on this topic, "I think if you look at the body of my work, that I come back to this theme of how the past collides and

[64] Kneubuhl, "Interview with Victoria Kneubuhl," 10:00.

[65] Meinholtz, "Coyote Transforming," 77.

[66] Glancy, *Writings on the Process*, 11.

influences the present. . . . Some of those . . . issues that are in the play are still issues in our community today."[67]

It is not just that the wounds of missionization, genocide, cultural destruction and theft, and colonization are slow to heal. These wounds are, year by year, still being incised—written, read, and performed—onto the bodies and spirits of the people. Theft, corruption, denial, bureaucracy, murder, rape, double jeopardy, the inability to prosecute or to adequately prosecute non-Native offenders, broken promises, and the denial of basic human rights and rights as citizens are injuries. These join to become a contemporary and prevalent reality for the people of all Native Nations.[68] This lived reality is evidenced in Native North American drama. "I think native drama makes a journey through the jagged edges of a play," Glancy writes. "It is a disrupted culture, after all, from which much has been taken."[69] Ours is also a culture from which much can be recuperated, remembered, and renewed. Crafting through story, foregrounding service for and with the people, Native North American theater and performative interventions use performance to mobilize sacred power to recuperate, remember, and renew—achieving a good outcome for the people by serving in a good way.

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[67] Kneubuhl, "Interview with Victoria Kneubuhl," 03:41.

[68] For a tongue-in-cheek accounting of recent atrocities perpetuated against Indigenous North American peoples, see King, "Forget about It," in *The Inconvenient Indian*.

[69] Glancy, *Writings on the Process*, 13.

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