

## **An Introduction to the North American Indian Drama Collection**

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### Viewing the Field

Beginning researchers of Native American drama quickly discover that in order to study this field, one must traverse several related, and sometimes competing, subject areas. Searches in “Native American drama” will turn up everything from anthropological descriptions of sacred Native rituals, to performance studies analyses of communal ceremonies, to reviews of outdoor summer dramas, to Native-themed plays written by non-Native playwrights. While these subjects can help inform the ways in which we read plays by Native American playwrights, who might structure plot to reflect a ceremonial event, or construct characters that speak back to Native stereotypes, these subjects are not the same as Native American drama, a dynamic field of theatre that is growing and gaining visibility.

The works in the Alexander Street Press’s North American Indian Drama Collection represent the broadening field of Native American drama, theatrical scripts written by playwrights who are members of the indigenous nations of North America. The plays contained in this collection are *secular* and *intertribal*. By *secular*, I mean that the plays are not tied to any specific Native American religion. The plays are not scripted religious ceremonies, nor do they convey sacred details that belong to private, religious observances of Native peoples. Instead, the playwrights in this field write for a secular audience, viewers who may or may not share the authors’ various religious belief systems. Yet, despite the secular nature of Native drama, many of the playwrights do include spiritual perspectives in their plays, and these views sometimes differ greatly from those expressed by many world religions, such as Christianity. Some Native literary critics, such as Jace Weaver (Cherokee) in *That the People Might Live*, argue that the dominant distinguishing feature of Native American literature is the way in which Native authors infuse their writings with worldviews that are—at their core—“theological” in nature (Weaver 28). Thus, when you read the plays

in this collection, you will notice intense moments when physical and spiritual worlds intertwine, such as in *Reverb-Ber-Ber-Rations*, when Gloria Miguel (Kuna/Rappahannock) is visited by the ancestors of the Black Hills and gains an understanding about her purpose in life (Spiderwoman 17-20). You will also notice an aesthetic distance. The playwrights stage the significance of the spiritual moment, but they honor the sacred nature of the details by keeping those private. In Bruce King's (Oneida) *Threads: Ethel Nickle's Little Acre*, we understand how the medicine inside Grandpa Woods's moose-hide bag transforms the family, without King's having to expose to viewers the scared items inside that bag (162-64). In JudyLee Oliva's (Chickasaw) *Te Ata*, we hear Elder Te Ata's story of the Corn Ceremony, but the dancers on stage present "a stylized version" that protects the integrity of the actual ceremony (9). These moments, which are pervasive throughout Native plays, present one of the many attributes that make Native American dramaturgy so unique and distinctive; meanwhile, the secular nature of the plays helps differentiate the field of Native American drama from religious ceremonies that incorporate performative elements.

Related to its secular scope, Native American drama is largely *intertribal*, meaning that these plays rarely address issues important to a single Native American Nation; rather, they present topics that are relevant to people across Native America. Native playwrights often create characters that portray the variety of Native nations. A Chickasaw playwright can decide to write a play centered on Navajo characters, such as Oliva does in *Spirit Line*; or Yvette Nolan, who is Métis, can write *Annie Mae's Movement*, a biographical account of Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, a member of the Micmac Nation. Likewise, when Native plays are produced, it is not uncommon for Native actors to play characters who come from nations that are different from their own. For example, when Native Earth Performing Arts premiered Tomson Highway's (Cree) *The Rez Sisters* in 1986, Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel, and Monique Mojica, who are all of Kuna/Rappahannock descent, played three Cree/Ojibway women (Highway x). Through this intertribal nature of Native American drama, readers and

viewers experience the multiculturalism of Native America, an abundant diversity that has existed long before colonization.

Although we can use the terms *secular* and *intertribal* to limit the field, Native American drama represents a broad range of complex theatrical activity growing out of the rich variety of Native cultural experiences. Well over 500 federally recognized Native Nations exist within the arbitrary boundaries that configure the United States, alone. Each of these Native Nations represents a distinct culture with its own history, language, homelands, and religion. And this diversity across Native America multiplies exponentially when one accounts for Native Nations that are not federally recognized; for individuals who are members of more than one Native Nation, or whose Native Nations straddle international borders that exist, such as the United States/Canadian border; and Native Americans who possess other ethnic backgrounds, such as German or African-American heritage. Other factors, such as whether a person grew up on a reservation or in the city, within their nation's cultural traditions or removed from those traditions, all create a multiplicity of Native experiences that shape the playwrights' expressions.

As one cannot say, then, that there is such a thing as "*The Native American Experience*," one must also note that Native American drama does not adhere to a fixed style of production. The plays that you see in this series provide a glimpse into the theatrical diversity emerging out of the field of Native American drama. These plays range from realism with climactic plot structures; to Diane Glancy's (*Cherokee*) experimental, poetic interplays of monologue and dialogue; to Spiderwoman Theater's (*Kuna/Rappahannock*) episodic, multi-media influenced, storywoven plays. The purposes for which Native playwrights create their works also differ and shape the structures of the plays. For example, Vera Manuel's dominant impulse to write comes from a need to heal her community. She explains, "My whole life I've been really working closely with my people, with the struggles that I see my people going through, generational grief things that people are struggling with" (qtd. in Howard 8). Accordingly, her *Strength of Indian Women*

adheres to a simple, single-location set that a community could easily stage. Conversely, other playwrights, including R. Lynn Riggs (*Cherokee*), Oliva, and Highway, write for professional, mainstream theatrical venues that possess the technical capabilities to stage grand theatrical visions. Oliva states, "I just think that Native people, as well as other cultures, need to see that we can tell our stories in mainstream theatre. We don't just have to have a small little set and tell stories and play the flute. We can have an orchestra, and the play can be about Native people" ("Interview with JudyLee Oliva" 116).

Another difference you will note amongst these plays is the types of casts that are required for the various productions. Some of the plays are written for specific performers: it is virtually impossible to imagine Spiderwoman Theater's *Sun, Moon, and Feather* performed by anyone other than the three sisters, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel, who created the autobiographical play. Yet other plays could be staged easily by companies of Native performers, and still others by companies of Native and non-Native performers. Hanay Geiogamah's (Kiowa/Delaware) *Foghorn*, which the Native American Theater Ensemble premiered in 1973, satirically depicts relationships between Native and European Americans (Huntsman xii, Geiogamah "Foghorn" *New Native American Drama* 46). Despite the play's inclusion of a few non-Native characters, such as the Lone Ranger and the First Lady of the United States, an all Native company of actors enhances the humorous depictions of such characters. Conversely, the dramatic effect of Oliva's *99 Cent Dreams* depends on a multi-ethnic cast, as Oliva specifically calls for two African-American actors, one Native American actor, and actors of other ethnicities to round out the ensemble (1). Some plays, like most of R. Lynn Riggs's, do not stipulate ethnicity and can appear to feature white characters; however, as Native literary critics reclaim Riggs as a Cherokee writer, some have argued that even his "non-Native" plays, such as *Green Grow the Lilacs*,

the play upon which Rodgers and Hammerstein based the musical *Oklahoma!*, actually center on Native American characters who present Native perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

### A History of Native American Drama

The plays that compose this series function collectively to reveal Native American theatre's history. R. Lynn Riggs (1899-1945) is the earliest of the playwrights represented in the collection. Born of Cherokee descent on Cherokee Nation land in the town of Claremore, Indian Territory (which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907), Riggs began writing plays while attending the University of Oklahoma (Weaver "Riggs Chronology" xvii, Weaver "Forward" xi). His impressive career as a playwright led him to New York City, where many of Riggs's scripts were professionally produced by theatre companies that featured first-rate actors such as Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg (Weaver "Forward" xi). Often, his plays dramatize relationships between people and their natural environments, particularly how the people and land of Oklahoma responded in the aftermath of Indian Territory's transition into statehood; however, it was not until recently that Native American literary scholars, such as Weaver and Jaye Darby, began to inscribe Riggs's contributions within the history of Native American theatre.<sup>2</sup>

The life of Riggs's theatrical contemporary, Mary "Te Ata" Thompson Fisher (Chickasaw/Choctaw), is chronicled in Oliva's biographical play, *Te Ata*. Also born in Indian Territory, but upon Chickasaw Nation lands, Te Ata (1895-1995) became the first Native student to graduate from Oklahoma College for Women, where she studied theatre before embarking on a performance career, touring the Red Path Chautauqua Circuit, performing graduate work at Carnegie Tech, and then moving to New York City, where she performed on Broadway (Oliva "Te Ata—Chickasaw Indian Performer" 7). Though a successful mainstream actress, Te Ata found more fulfillment using her theatrical skills to perform one-

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<sup>1</sup> For a fascinating discussion of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and the ways in which the character Curly stages a Native American worldview, please see: Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> See also: Jaye Darby, "Broadway (Un)Bound: Lynn Riggs's *The Cherokee Night*," *The Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance* 4.1 (2007): 7-23.

woman shows that presented Native American legends within contexts that educated audiences about the unique differences amongst Native American Nations. Performing for Native and non-Native audiences, Te Ata toured her one-woman shows across the Americas and Europe for over seventy years. She gained the title of First State Treasure for the state of Oklahoma, which honored her again when it designated Oliva's *Te Ata* World Premiere as the inaugural event for Oklahoma's centennial celebrations (*Te Ata* World Premiere).

Related to using plays to reclaim Native American theatrical history, Janet Rogers's (Mohawk/Tuscarora) *Pauline and Emily, Two Women* draws its main character from Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), a Mohawk author who provided theatrical readings of her poems and stories during her book tours.

The plays of Hanay Geiogamah and Spiderwoman Theater represent the beginning of the Native American Theatre Movement, when Native theatre artists began to form professional companies that possessed the necessary autonomy to construct their own images of Native American people and critical issues. The first productions of Geiogamah's *Body Indian*, *Foghorn*, and *49* were written for the Native American Theater Ensemble, which formed in 1972, when Ellen Stewart, director of La Mama Experimental Theater Club, worked with Geiogamah to obtain the grants and performers needed to found a Native American theatre troupe (Huntsman xii). From NATE's sixteen member theatre company, we can trace the careers of many Native theatre artists, including Geiogamah, who went on to form the American Indian Dance Theatre in 1987 and Project HOOP (Honoring Our Origins and People through Native Theatre, Education, and Community Development) with Jaye Darby in 1997. Since Project HOOP's first publication, *Stories of Our Way* in 1999, the organization has emerged as a leading source for Native American theatre education and development.

In a similar fashion, Spiderwoman Theater, whose core members are Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel, began in 1975; moreover, the group has continued since its inception and is now regarded as the oldest continually-performing women's theatre

group in North America. The four Spiderwoman Theater plays that appear in the Alexander Street Press collection, have been performed all over the world, introducing audiences everywhere to Spiderwoman's signature style of creating plays, which is called "storyweaving." In this process, the sisters build their plays with interweaving types of stories (personal memories, family stories, traditional myths, contemporary songs, and historical events) that structure the dramatic action through overlapping moments of theme, sound, and image ("Spiderwoman Theater" *Stories* 501). In addition to their work as a theatre company, the members of Spiderwoman Theater have inspired Native and non-Native theatre artists through their storyweaving workshops and artist residencies at universities, reservations, and conferences. Each woman also works actively as an independent artist, writing her own plays and acting in various professional theatre venues. The legacy of Spiderwoman Theatre will continue well into the future, as playwright/performers such as Monique Mojica and Murielle Borst (Kuna/Rappahannock), daughters of Spiderwoman Theater's core members, continue to shape the future of Native American theatre.<sup>3</sup>

Two of the playwrights included in the Alexander Street Press's original edition of 2006, represent a new cycle of producing Native American drama. Like Riggs, Oliva and William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (Assiniboine) are playwrights whose scripts are reaching large theatre audiences through mainstream, professional productions of their scripts. The *Te Ata* World Premiere, which was funded largely by the Chickasaw Nation, was a fully staged, highly technical, equity-level production. Its publicist writes that:

Nearly two hundred cast, crew, and staff members from across the nation worked together to bring *Te Ata* to the stage. The cast included actors from ten states and eight Native [American Nations]. More than 3,300 audience members from thirty states enjoyed eight performances [; these viewers

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<sup>3</sup> Please see: Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, eds., *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada P, 2003).

included] state and federal officials and a dozen reporters for state and national publications. Opening night was preceded by a gala event hosted by Governor Bill Anoatubby of the Chickasaw Nation and a host of Chickasaw legislators. Eighty-six members of Te Ata's remaining family attended the performances, which were made possible by twenty-eight corporate, foundation, and individual sponsors. (*Te Ata* World Premiere Website)

Likewise, in October of 2005, Trinity Repertory Company and Penumbra Theatre Company coproduced Yellow Robe's *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, a family drama based on descendants of both Native and African American grandparents. The production then toured between New England and the Midwest, gaining distinction for becoming the United States' "first fully-mounted professional collaborative touring production by regional theaters of a Native American play by a Native playwright" (Press Release). Unlike Riggs's professional, mainstream productions, *Te Ata* and *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* are productions that show how contemporary Native dramatists can successfully enter national venues while still maintaining control of their artistic visions and openly addressing Native issues through Native dramaturgy.

#### Themes in Native American Drama

The themes addressed by Native American drama differ greatly; however, you may discover that across the field certain issues reoccur, such as reclaiming identities, revising history, revisiting oral traditions, and healing Native communities. Because of the general theatre's long history of constructing Native American stereotypes of Indian princesses, vanishing nobles, and bloodthirsty savages, the Native American theatre presents an ideal venue for deconstructing such images. *Foghorn* presents a world-wise Pocahontas who mocks Captain Smith's erectile deficiencies; and in the play's following scene, Tonto slits the Lone Ranger's throat before the Lone Ranger can rewrite their episode to hide his dependency upon the sidekick (Geiogamah 12-17). Spiderwoman's *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* comically lambasts German author, Karl May's, series of Winnetou

stories, princesses from Wild West shows, and hobbyists' representations of Native American spirituality. Spiderwoman ends the play on a serious note, telling those who have co-opted and commoditized elements of Native spiritual traditions to, "step back, move aside, sit down, hold your breath, save your own culture. Discover your own spirituality" (*Winnetou* 30).

In addition to reclaiming representation of Native peoples' individual identities, many Native American plays revise history to honor the various ways Native people have survived European colonization of the Americas and international efforts to eradicate Native American cultures. Oliva's *Call of the River* presents the stories of contemporary Oklahomans who are descendants of the over thirty Native Nations who were force-marched to Indian Territory beginning in the 1830's under the Indian Removal Act. Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement* explores the controversies surrounding the violent murder of Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, a leading member of the 1970's American Indian Movement (AIM), whose death raises questions about the abuse of power in both the FBI and AIM. Plays such as Diane Glancy's *Man Red* question the long lasting effects of boarding schools, where Native American children in the United States and Canada were forced to live away from their families while receiving an education that forbade speaking Native languages, practicing Native religions, and retaining Native cultural traditions. To better understand such plays, it is helpful to obtain a basic background in the history of and laws pertaining to Native American-national government relationships, especially those regarding Native homelands, languages, spiritual practices, education, and identity.<sup>4</sup>

Contradicting the systematic, historical attempts to remove Native peoples from their own cultures, many of the plays in this field of drama return to Native American oral traditions to construct their characters and shape their plots. Many of Joseph Bruchac's

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<sup>4</sup> An informative source for approaching some of these issues is: Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P) 1995.

(Abenaki) children's plays emerge out of the figures and events found in Native American legends. Glancy's *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance*, is a drama for adults that uses the Cherokee myth of Ahw'uste, a spiritual deer, to represent the conflict between Girl's and Grandmother's opposing beliefs about the world and each woman's purpose in it. Joseph Dandurand's (Kwantlen) characters, Sister Coyote and Brother Raven, in *Please Do Not Touch the Indians* possess qualities from their trickster namesakes. In a powerful move that honors oral traditions, Spiderwoman Theater takes its name from the Hopi deity, Spiderwoman, "who taught the people how to weave and said, 'You must make a mistake in every tapestry so that my spirit may come and go at will'" ("Spiderwoman Theater" 501). The group's method of creating their plays emerges out the nature of storytelling. When addressing audiences, Muriel Miguel often speaks of the interconnected, resonating ways in which stories emerge by explaining:

Storytelling is the way you feel and know where you are within your family, your clan, your tribal affiliations, and from there into the history of how you fit into the world. Storytelling starts at the kitchen table, on your parent's lap, on your aunt's and uncle's laps. Storytelling begins there, about who you are. . . . Then it continues from there about who you are in the family; of where you are as a tribal member, as part of that particular nation; then where that nation is in the community; and where that community belongs in the world. There's always circles upon circles upon circles. And that's how Spiderwoman approaches theatre, through circles upon circles upon circles. (qtd. in Haugo 228)

#### Native American Dramaturgy

This close connection between Native storytelling and Native American theatre is a significant reason that this drama functions, not as a subset of American or Canadian drama, but as its own field. Glancy has called Native Drama a new "Native American oral tradition told with what it is not—the written word—then returned to what it is by the act of

the voice" ("Native American Theater" 359). Glancy's and Muriel Miguel's words challenge the views of critics who perceive Native American drama as merely a European form of expression used to convey Native American identity-based concerns. Native writers and literary critics, such as Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), have argued that using the English language or certain literary conventions does not make the work any less Native; rather, these works are Native American in its "truest and most authentic sense" because of "the creative ability of Indian people [to] gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms" (Ortiz 254). The unique, "creative" qualities that make the dramatic form "meaningful" in Native American terms is what sets Native American drama apart from other fields of theatre.

These distinctive dramaturgical elements that we encounter when reading or viewing Native American plays are actively pushing the boundaries of generalized theatrical performance and criticism. We have already touched upon how the movement of storytelling influences the construction of Spiderwoman's scripts; however, the non-linear, sometimes cyclical, structure of plot is found in many works by Native American dramatists. Sometimes, the traditions of Native storytelling break the fourth wall to implicate the audience and make the viewers' experiences and stories part of the entire drama, referencing the communal nature of Native storytelling. In these plays, we also see different ways of staging place, existence, and character.

Jace Weaver contends, "the single thing that most defines Indian literatures relates to [a] sense of community and commitment to it. It is what I term 'communitism'. . . . formed from a combination of the words 'community' and 'activism' or 'activist.' Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including the wider community," which Weaver defines as the natural world and interrelations of its inhabitants, human and other (*That the People Might Live* 43). The focus on reciprocal relationships between all beings and the larger world shapes the actions of Native plays. In some scripts, even the landscape functions as a character, influencing

dramatic action. View how Claremore Mound, "Where the Osages and Cherokees fought their last big battle," proceeds and retracts as the mixed-blood Cherokee youth claim or deny their Native heritage in *The Cherokee Night* (Riggs 12), or how Te Ata's transformation occurs in the sacred environment of Loon Island when she encounters the Loon People (Oliva *Te Ata* 83).<sup>5</sup>

Te Ata's surreal interaction with the Loon People points to another aspect that appears frequently in Native American dramaturgy, the ability for physical and spiritual worlds to exist simultaneously. Native Drama often rejects linear representations of time in favor of perspectives that show the liquid boundaries between past and present, present and future, life and the afterlife. Weaver contends that Native literature's rejection of "any split between sacred and secular spheres" gives Native writing its distinctive quality, a worldview that "remains essentially religious, involving the Native's deepest sense of self and undergirding tribal life, existence, and identity" (28).<sup>6</sup> Such earthly/spiritual interconnections open dramaturgical possibilities. In Oliva's *Te Ata*, the title character is played by two actors: Young Te Ata, who grows from a young girl into an elderly woman; and Elder Te Ata, who not only steps out of the sky in order to directly address the audience and tell her life's story, but also steps into the past to affect the actions and world around Young Te Ata (4). In Spiderwoman's *Reverb-Ber-Ber-Rations*, Lisa Mayo/Elizabeth swings backwards and forwards into the spiral road of time, as she tells her audience:

The world of the five senses is the world of illusion. [ . . . ]

Reality cannot be seen with the physical eye. [ . . . ]

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<sup>5</sup> I offer a detailed, critical analysis of how place functions in Native dramaturgy in: Christy Stanlake, "JudyLee Oliva's *The Fire and the Rose* and the Modeling of Platian Theories in Native American Dramaturgy," *Modern Drama* 48.4 (2005): 819-41.

<sup>6</sup> Here, Weaver uses "secular" in a different way than I do at the beginning of this article. While I discuss secular in terms of Native plays not staging any specific Native American religion, Weaver's use of secular refers to worldly, or irreligious, perspectives.

The responsibility of creators; people who make  
things, build, mold and shape things is to  
Interpenetrate the layers  
Bring information between the layers [. . .]  
Going back into the before to use for the future. (35)

The grandmother in Glancy's *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance* physically presents such a past/present duality when the elder claims to be both a grandmother and a mythical deer, who keeps her other two feet under her dress (5). From concepts of human reciprocity with the natural world and stories that feature tricksters, who evade easy definitions by shape shifting, Native dramaturgy capitalizes on the extreme possibilities of human potential. In Marie Clements's (Métis) *Urban Tattoo*, Raven takes over Rosemarie's persona in moments when the young woman's life becomes too painful. This trickster/human pairing allows for Rosemarie to survive abuse and poverty until she is able to take active control of her identity, past, and future.

#### Native Drama's Future

These permeable boundaries between time, realities, and even species are dramaturgical differences that sometimes challenge non-Native viewers of Native American plays.<sup>7</sup> However, from Oliva's production of *Te Ata*, Yellow Robe's production of *Grandchildren*, and Highway's acclaim as one of Canada's leading playwrights, we see a widening appreciation of the exciting work that Native American playwrights are creating. Concurrently, theoretical scholarship in the field of Native American dramaturgy is growing and attempting to approach Native American plays from perspectives that emerge out of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Howard's discussion of Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA) authors facing obstacles during productions of their plays. Howard writes, "These difficulties seemed to center on the problem of people unable (or unwilling) to understand or 'translate' a perspective that seemed clear to the individual doing the writing," especially when the subject involved "coexistent spirituality" (8, 9).

literature itself and the cultures that produce it.<sup>8</sup> While access to Native American play scripts was once a major obstacle for understanding the field of Native drama, that problem is also dissipating with the many Native American play anthologies that have entered the market in the new millennium and with projects, like this series, that aim to make Native plays broadly accessible to various communities.

One of the greatest challenges now facing Native American plays is that of production. Dramatic literature is written to be produced, after all, and while we have seen that Native plays can draw audiences, there is still a fair amount of reluctance for theatre companies to “take a chance” on presenting Native scripts. Producers often worry that they will not be able to find enough Native actors, that audiences will not relate to Native subject matter, and that production teams will not stage the issues properly. One of the Alexander Street Press Collection of North American Indian Drama’s strongest achievements is that it shows that the field of Native American drama is larger than many realize. By providing information about Native American plays, playwrights, companies, actors, and criticism, this series offers resources that can encourage the development of artistic networks for the production of Native plays. Most importantly, by providing a glimpse into Native theatre’s own story and characters, perhaps this resource will also help to inspire the future generations of emerging Native American playwrights and theatre artists.

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<sup>8</sup> Please see: Jaye Darby, “Re-Imaging the Stage: Tradition and Transformation in Native Theatre,” *The Color of Theater: Race Culture, and Contemporary Performance* (New York: Continuum, 2002): 61-81.

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