

Title:

**From Empty Space to Sacred Place: The Role of 'Place-Specific'
Performance in Developing a Distinct Native American Theatre
Genre**

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby certify that any material contained herein, submitted here as a requirement for my candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is my original work except where due reference is made to other authors, and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I survey the current position of the contemporary Native American¹ theatre movement in the United States², questioning how the concept of 'place', so prevalent and influential in Native American culture, spirituality, and socio-politics, may be used for both its analysis and continued development. Above all, I challenge here the disproportionate number of Native American plays written for performance in theatres. While the 'Indigenised' Native American theatre that has emerged so far has done much to challenge and break down ethnic barriers within the conventional American theatre scene, I contend that the role of place in that institution often proves fundamentally at odds with its functioning in Native American performance culture. Consequently, the potential role place might perform in realising the aspirations of Native American dramatists to create, what theatre theorist Roland Meinholtz described as a 'strikingly unique' ethnic form of theatre, has rarely been explored. As an alternative approach, I theorise on the creation of more 'place-based' works, principally utilizing 'place-specific' practices, and which embrace the active performative nature of real places in Native American theatre.

¹ I use the term 'Native American' throughout here, as although I acknowledge the defining of a people is a contentious topic, with many terms interchangeably used including 'American Indian', 'First Nation', and 'First People', I would argue that 'Native American' is, in my experience, the most frequently reference of self-recognition used by the authors under investigation here. Native American also, I feel, captures well the contentious place occupied by many of the characters, and real individuals, encountered in this work, who exist dichotomously in both 'Native' landscapes and 'Urban' American cityscapes.

² The scope of this thesis is, as much as possible, confined to the United States, while acknowledging that a significant body of work exists in over areas of the continent; notably, in Canada.

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I am grateful to the University of East Anglia for partially funding my research trip to South Dakota to experience *Wicoun*, and, of course, to my supervisors, Dr Rebecca Tillett and Professor Richard Hand, and previously Anthony Frost, for their guidance and support throughout my research. Also, a special thank you to Dr Lizzie Conrad Hughes, for her consistent advice and support throughout my period of research.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge here the sacred nature of the quotes in this thesis to the people who first spoke them, and which I hope to have quoted faithfully here with all due respect to their beliefs. I also wish to extend my gratitude to the people of South Dakota, and especially the Native American population, for welcoming me to their land and assisting me in my research.

Key Terminologies

There are some key terms used in this thesis that, for some readers, particularly those from outside of the specific fields it covers, may prove problematic. While it would be impossible to cover all of these, I have attempted below to address the terms most frequently questioned.

I must warn, however, that this is a highly complex and challenging topic to address, one made all the more difficult by the multidisciplinary nature of the material under discussion. Moreover, any personal attempt to clarify such terminology will inevitably remain influenced by subjectivity, personal specialisation, and the specialised understanding of certain academic conventions. Some terms cannot be clearly defined in every instance of their use, and to attempt to do so would prove impractical in the context of the narrative. Additionally, many terms, both here and in the history of Indigenous scholarship, have become accepted conventions as shorthand for concepts that are clearly linguistically far more complex.

Perhaps most importantly and beneficially to stress here is that, in some respects, a super-objective of this thesis is to promote questioning of the terminology that has been applied to the Indigenous works under discussion, and how this functions to define, assign, and perhaps more concerningly, compartmentalise Native American dramatic works in the colonial mind. Although the analysis of the semantics used should remain a subliminal narrative running below that of the central themes under discussion here, and certainly something that should not prove overtly distracting to the reader, I would encourage the continued questioning of how these terminologies have been applied in the past, in the present, and to consider their continued appropriateness in future research.

Western Theatre

This term may prove one of the more controversial, as at first reading it appears too all-embracing in both breadth and scope. Yet it is a term which has been widely applied by authors working in the academic study of Indigenous performance, such as Blaine, Stanlake, and Meinholtz, in their formative writings on the subject. It is also the chosen terminology by many Indigenous practitioners working in the field of practical performance, such as Geiogamah, New, and Riggs, particularly during the flowering of the subject during the mid to late twentieth century. As such, it is a term that, in this text,

certainly encompasses a theatre form derived from classical theatre practices developed principally in Europe and the Old World, and imported globally through colonial expansion. While other terms could certainly be applied in many instances – such as 'classical theatre', 'commercial theatre', or 'colonial theatre' – such terminology often proves to be too strict for works that feature in this text. Some experimental works, for example, may well be heavily influenced by classical traditions – such as Brecht's 'Epic Theatre' – but it would be misrepresentative to describe such work as 'Commercial Theatre'.

Essentially, I have used 'Western Theatre' here principally as a shorthand to refer to the theatre which developed in western civilization in the Greek and Roman world and continued to be developed and refined through medieval times, the European Renaissance, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which largely remains the standard mainstream theatrical model today. Although this is obviously a great oversimplification, 'Western Theatre' is by far the most frequently used term among Indigenous performance practitioners to describe the mainstream form in contrast to their own forms of Indigenous theatre, drawn from their cultural perspectives.

Native American Theatre

This, again, is a term open to wide interpretation and likely to cause some contention. For example, some of the productions under discussion – such as pageants and outdoor performances – can hardly be described as Native American, as white colonisers rather than Indigenous peoples largely performed them. As above, such terms should always be considered in their context and questioned accordingly.

However, generally speaking, it is a term that has historically served as a contrasting shorthand to compare against 'Western Theatre' and rarely attempts a concise definition. For example, during the period when it began to be applied to the medium by academics, practitioners, and critics in the 1960s and 1970s, the term was used to define the style of theatre created by Native Americans, which also remained committed to the performance practices developed by the colonisers. As such, it might be seen as shorthand for 'Indigenised Western Theatre' or 'syncretic theatre'.

As with 'Western Theatre', it is a term most frequently used by those writing on the subject historically, and I have continued to use it here where it appears most appropriate, given the contextual material in which it is used and its cotemporary

commonality (for example, in the chapters discussing the period of the so called 'Native American Renaissance'). In chapters where I consider the term to be more contentious – for example, those where I suggest that what we are seeing is in fact a 'place-specific performance', or where it might be better termed 'ceremonial performance' – I have attempted to define what is being referred to more concisely within the text.

Lastly, I have favoured the term 'Native American Theatre' to clarify that this research will focus on Indigenous performance work emerging from the United States. While we might use other terminologies – 'First Nation Theatre', 'Indigenous Theatre', 'Ethnic Theatre', etc., terms I do use when appropriate – I feel Native American Theatre is more applicable to the majority of the content discussed here.

Indigenous Theatre Form

In contrast to the above, which are terms largely used to define the existing mainstream theatre and Native American approaches to using this as a form of expression, a Indigenous Theatre Form is used here to describe a performance form which draws more from the traditions and practices of Native Americans – ceremonial, ritual, aesthetic, and thematic – in preference to those imported by colonialism. As such, the term is mostly confined to the theoretical work of early researchers in the field, such as New, Meinholtz, and Geiogamah, and to the forms that have most recently been applied and experienced with, such as those by Cornerstone Theater Company, of stressing the use of more traditional Native American performance techniques, as opposed to those of mainstream colonial theatre.

Performance

Given the above, the often essentially simple term 'performance' becomes problematic in some of the contexts discussed here. What is strictly performance for an audience, or performing a ritual, or indeed, what constitutes a performance in the specific situations where recent place-specific and community performances have taken place, is highly subjective and open to debate and contestation.

It is certainly my preference to use the term wherever possible in this thesis when referring to the creations of Native Americans themselves rather than 'Theatre', as this, in my opinion, leads to inevitable comparisons with one's own interpretation of that word, and is almost inseparable from that dominant on the mainstream stage. While I

attempted to define my use of this as much as space and expediency in this text allow, I would once again encourage questioning this as an adjunct to provoking critical consideration of the importance of terminologies in Indigenous research and the need to scrutinize their ever-evolving significance and meaning.

Introduction

From the early twentieth century, Native Americans have worked tirelessly to establish a distinct presence in the national theatre of the United States. After centuries of crude and clichéd misrepresentation on stage, Native American playwrights began to pursue the creation of a contemporary Native American theatre, one that would, according to the Kiowa dramatist Hanay Geiogamah, 'stand proudly among America's other theatres' (Geiogamah, 1991, pp. 12). Others, such as the Cherokee theatre theorist Lloyd Keva New, looked to create no less than a unique Indigenous theatre genre. Writing in 1969, New stated that: 'one must acknowledge the fact that no pure traditional form of Indian theatre presently exists – one must be created. *New ethnic forms* [emphasis added] must result from the forces and ideas within the ethnic group itself' (New, 1969 [2000], p. 3). Writing in reflection of that time, Roland Meinholtz, who worked closely with New to develop his vision, explained:

Our project, as I understood it from Lloyd, was to develop an American Indian theatre that would be thoroughly contemporary, but, if informed by the entire historical performing culture of America's Natives, one that would also be *strikingly unique* [emphasis added]; as recognizable in its way as Japanese Kabuki, Indian Kathakali, or Italian Opera.

(Meinholtz, 2013, pp. 78-79)

Many of the elements Native Americans incorporated into their early theatre work were certainly innovative – unmistakably linked to their Indigenous cultural beliefs, aesthetic values, and political aspirations. On American stages that remained largely conservative in their practice, Native Americans were among the vanguard of those experimenting with avant-garde techniques, radically challenging the expectations and understanding of audiences and critics alike.

The first attempts by Native Americans to forge careers within the American theatre came at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but usually only in amateur or provincial productions, and rarely on the country's mainstages. Professional theatre practitioners, such as playwright Lynn Riggs (Cherokee) and performer Te Ata (Chickasaw), were only seriously accepted into the theatre establishment during the more ethnically tolerant years following WWI. However, it was not until the mid-1960s that more sustained participation by Native Americans in mainstream theatre took place, principally during a zeitgeist that saw the flowering of

what Kenneth Lincoln would later describe as the Native American Renaissance. Following in the footsteps of successful literary pioneers like N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), this period would see many young and aspiring Native Americans, seeking an artistic means to pursue their activism for Indigenous self-determinacy, begin to explore theatre as a mass-media vehicle for their voices. The period would also see successful Native American arts programmes, such as that founded at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), produce influential playwrights like Bruce King (Oneida/Seneca).

In contrast, on the East Coast, in the theatre district of New York, playwrights like Geiogamah were busy forming experimental companies like The Native American Theatre Ensemble (NATE), which would, in turn, nurture many emerging theatre practitioners. Other literary figures, such as established playwright Gerard Visenor (Anishinaabe), would later begin to turn their literary talents to playwriting in the 1980s, drawing more interest in the medium, along with prolific playwrights like William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (Assiniboine), who single-handedly would produce some forty-five Native American-themed plays during his career. By the time the 1990s arrived, a fresh burst of theatrical Indigenous activity emerged, with playwrights like JudyLee Oliver (Chickasaw), Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee), and LeAnne Howe (Choctaw).

Yet, although by the end of the twentieth century the pioneering achievements of Native American dramatists had contributed significantly to the fight for the Indigenization of the American theatre, the quest to establish 'New ethnic forms' that could be described as 'strikingly unique' in their Indigeneity arguably remained elusive. It is my aim in what follows to make the case that, in one key respect, this can be seen to stem from a fundamental incompatibility between Western and Indigenous theatre forms: to be precise, their disparate conception of the role of 'place' in performance.

Much of the early Native American theatre created in the United States was 'syncretic theatre'; a mode described as, '[the] acculturative blending of performance materials and practices from two or more cultural traditions, producing qualitatively new forms' (Coplan, 1985, p. vii). However, while Indigenous forms were to feature prominently, this new Native American syncretic theatre would also be one grounded in, 'true theatre settings' (New, 1969 [2000], p. 3). I will suggest this as problematic, in that arguably the underlying ethos of the Western theatre is the eradication of real places, in preference to their artificial re-creation through artistic means on stage. This is in striking

contrast to Indigenous performance forms, where place acquires an intrinsic and palpable presence in the act of storytelling. As such, I argue that the syncretic enclosure of Indigenous performance within the vehicle of the Western theatre tradition denies the contribution of place, which is one of the most ethnically distinctive aspects of Native American performance.

Making Sense of Place

When considering performance as environmental encounter, the theatre of Native America provides an interesting, and perhaps unique, perspective. Few would argue with the observation that Native Americans enjoy a deeper relationship with the places they inhabit than many Western cultures. A *sense of place* – of nature, land, and environment – holds intrinsic significance to Indigenous people the world over, and in the case of Native Americans in the United States, is something inseparable from their culture. So close is this connection that there is little written by Native Americans that has not been examined through a platial lens. Referring specifically to Native American literature, Dr Rebecca Tillett of the University of East Anglia, writes that: 'A clear and ongoing focus for many Native writers is the complex relationship between Native cultures and the land, and the impact this has upon concepts of identity' (Tillett, 2007, p. 136). Theatre is no exception, with the relationship between concepts of place and identity forming a characteristic thematic seam running through the work of Native American playwrights and theatre theorists. Indeed, place, according to Native American theatre scholar Christy Stanlake, 'figures so predominantly in Native American plays that one could argue that it carries the same value as characters do and often functions just as actively' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 39).

Given the above, there is much to support the examination of Native American theatre through its relation to place. For example, from the earliest pre-colonial contact, Native American ceremonial performance occurred within the environments from which it drew its practical, spiritual, and social inspiration. Consequently, as Ivanna Yi of Cornell University reminds us, for Native Americans, 'oral narratives often articulate a dialogue relationship with the land in which communities speak of, with, and for the land' (Yi, 2016, p. 10). Moreover, I contend that the recognition of the importance of place in achieving such a 'dialogue relationship' between performance texts and the environment

is a topic of scholastic enquiry that has been under-explored by both theatre professionals and academia and is worthy of much deeper investigation.

Research generally in the field of Native American theatrical performance is widely acknowledged as having been 'overlooked' by the academy (Huhndorf, 2009, p. 313). Indeed, Dr Birgit Däwes observed as recently as 2013, 'Despite the abundance of primary sources, scholarship in the field [of Native American theatre] is only just beginning to gain momentum' (Däwes, 2013, p. 2). An 'abundance of primary sources' there certainly are. Dating from the middle of the last century to the present, a substantial and often critically acclaimed body of Indigenous work has been created, with many Native American playwrights, working in a wide diversity of dramatic forms, seeing their work produced to considerable success. This work, as mentioned earlier, was overwhelmingly focused on the Indigenisation of colonial style commercial theatres, an approach that, for its time, was understandable, given the need to break from decades of invisibility and to challenge the bastions of colonial institutions by injecting a Native American presence. When in the early twentieth century Native Americans first began attempting to utilise theatre as a means of perpetuating their cultural legacy, several influential factors led to their adoption of the traditional venues of Western theatre as the location for their own work; most notably, the need to utilise established markets of artistic consumption as vehicles to increase the visibility of Native American identities and concerns. Because of this, later sustained work to build a Native American theatre was conceived and constructed to be performed in pre-existing commercial theatre spaces, predominantly located in the major metropolitan theatre districts on the East and West coasts. This was particularly true of the work developed in the 1960s and 1970s, during the period described as the 'Native American Renaissance' (Lincoln, 1983, 2013).³ This represented direct artistic action that promoted Native American concerns, literally in the spotlight, for the first time. Because of this, Native American plays were distanced, through what was then a necessity, from the often very real places they depicted.

³ The 'Native American Renaissance' is a contentious term, coined by Kenneth Lincoln, and I use it here in full understanding of the controversy which surrounds it. Nevertheless, I believe the term does serve well to define a period of sustained creative activity, and I will use it here simply as an expedient means of referring to that period.

Speaking with the Land: Defining a Native American Performance Genre

Indeed, paradoxically, early Native American plays, and again particularly those dating from the Native American Renaissance, conspicuously featured specific and identifiable locations of cultural, and often more importantly political, significance. This was a trait they shared with other Native American literatures at the time. For example, N. Scott Momaday, when approaching characterisation and structure in his work, considered that, 'The sense of place is paramount' (Fioupou & Besson, 2002, p. 326). Clearly, as most early Native American plays were geographically far removed from their true 'sense of place' when performed in theatre districts – one might even say culturally relocated away from the ancestral homelands they depicted – this was far from ideal. Moreover, as I have suggested, this is particularly problematic because Western theatre venues – conceptually embedded in the classical theatrical conventions of scenography dating back millennia – often represent, in a practical sense, formalised social constructs ideologically dedicated to the *elimination* rather than the *contribution* of place in performance. 'Sense of place' when present in a theatre is an entirely artificial orchestration, and must be formed through the creativity of dramatists, set, lighting, and costume designers, and, of course, the imagination of the audience. 'Theatre places', as we might term them, due to their artificiality, run the risk of being distorted, manipulated, and misrepresented just as much as Native Americans do in the theatre. Represented thus, the fictitious character of an Indigenous place can often be far from its true nature. Here, I suggest, most theatre venues are often diametrically opposed to the key platial mechanisms that underpin Native American performative traditions. Because of this, it appears reasonable to question whether contemporary Native American plays, at least those performed within the enclosure of Western style theatre spaces, although as Yi suggests often speak 'of' and 'for' the land, can realistically be said to speak as frequently 'with' it.

Of course, attempting to define what it means to speak 'with' the land is open to complex interpretation, and possibly, fierce debate. Does this mean to use the natural environment to convey man's thoughts and feelings? Certainly, as we will see, the role of land as an aide-mémoire in oral storytelling has formed the basis of much research (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1982; Basso, 1984, 1996). Does it mean to empathise with nature and attempt, perhaps through performative anthropomorphism, to give voice to what we

imagine a place desires to say? This is undoubtedly also true and frequently seen in the theatre. But more profoundly, and perhaps controversially, does it also mean to speak *alongside* the voice of the land itself? My own stance is very much to remain open to exploring the possibilities of the latter. Not least because again, as a research topic, it would appear from my review of the literature that this has attracted very little scholarly attention. Several intriguing questions are suggested by this approach: how does the voice of the land manifest itself as a perceptible 'performative' influence through our individual or collective understanding of a place? How does a particular place actively participate, or can even be seen to *generate* and *manipulate*, the dramaturgy performed and created within it? How does a place, along with the dramaturg, performers, and audience, generate a story and create a 'sense of place' in Native American drama?

This approach, however, may be subject to criticism. Some may challenge the credence of this line of questioning, considering it a nuanced topic somewhat irrelevant in comparison to other, seemingly more pressing aspirations of Native Americans, the aims and objectives of which are already effectively served by the Western venues in which Native American theatre is currently produced. For example, as we will see later, it is fair to say that the universal fight for decolonisation seems adequately served through the Indigenisation of the conventional and highly politicised institutions of commercial colonial inspired theatre. Why then the need for alternative theatre approaches based on location?

While I acknowledge such arguments may have some justification, not to recognise the practical contribution of place in performance is, to my mind, nothing less than to ignore its pivotal function in Native American cultural communication. Therefore, while conscious of the challenge, I will seek to show that the contribution of performance environments, or more specifically places, forms such an integral part of Native American storytelling, and proves so central to Indigenous concepts of community, identity, and artistry, that any dramatic endeavour cannot be fully appreciated if it does not allow the performative contribution of place.

Additionally, to pre-empt potential criticism, I feel it necessary to stress that what follows is in no way a condemnation of the staging practices employed by earlier, or current, Native American dramatists that based their work in theatres. As I have already stressed, the methods they used were undoubtedly in line with the conventions of their time and doubtless the most advantageous for the furtherance of their artistic, and again

importantly, political goals: again, most notably the 'Indigenisation' of previously colonial-dominated Western theatre institutions. In many instances, as we shall see, such goals remain current today, and even the practitioners liaising with place more fully as an adjunct to their work, often remain simultaneously active in conventional theatre settings. Pushing boundaries and challenging a lack of cultural diversity within Western theatrical conventions remains as important as ever. As Larissa FastHorse speaks of her goals in her work:

I'm specifically, in most of my work, indigenizing. ... I'm very specifically trying to indigenize our educational system, our arts, our audiences, our stages, our production people. I'm focused on indigenizing first to correct the foundation this country is built on, which is on an anti-Indigenous foundation.

(Derr, 2023)

Rather, I position this research to question whether traditional theatre approaches *alone* continue to best serve the aims and objectives of those responsible for shaping the contemporary Native American performance movement, and in the longer term, can realistically create a truly distinct Native American 'new ethnic form'. For example, I question if past theatrical approaches and ideologies, such as the concept of 'pan-Indianism' – a movement which dominated much Native American creative thinking during the Native American Renaissance in particular – continue to reflect the growing focus on re-establishing tribal sovereignty through affirmative practices which are often regionally land-based. Such contemporary Native American concerns would appear, I suggest, demonstrably more in step with the ever-growing interest in theatre that is, what we might call, 'out of place': i.e., the gamut of place-based practices which fall under the umbrella category of 'site-specific' performance. As scenographer and theatre theorist Kathleen Irwin, a recognised authority on site-specific practices, describes it:

The proliferation of these [site-specific] events reflects the increasing engagement of performance with resistant practices connected to contested circumstances, marginal populations, and transgressive spaces.

(Irwin, 2009, p. 110)

Therefore, I propose the necessity for a *plasticity* in approach to Native American performance practice. I echo the sentiment of Lloyd Kiva New, who, while one of the leading figures in the Indigenization of the Western theatre, also professed later in his career that for a truly distinct Native American theatre 'art form' to develop, 'as a major carrier and interpreter of Indian culture [it must transform] into the new configurations

demanding by the realities of a New Millennium' (New, 1999, p. iii). Such 'new configurations' may rightly be considered as those relating to the integration of place in performance, for as Irwin again observes, 'The defining experiences of the new millennium have found a response in site-specific practice, where the representation of place and the relationships to place are made concrete' (Irwin, 2009, p. 47). Again, this requires us to question if traditional theatre environments remain conducive to a 'strikingly unique' Native American theatre being realised.

Place as Meaningful Location

Before going further, it is perhaps important to define here my conceptual use of the term 'place'. Much research literature exists on the complex etymology surrounding place, particularly in relation to the humanities and philosophy (Casey, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2005; Cresswell, 1996, 2015; Tuan, 1977). In one sense, and perhaps its simplest, I use the term place here to denote a geographical location that has acquired significance over time, largely through the accretion of human activity and attention; places that represent, in the words of the art historian Jeff Kelley, 'reservoirs of human content' (Kelley, 1991, p. 34). My model concept of place for the purposes of this study, and in accordance with the political geographer John Agnew's definition of it, is as 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2015, p. 12). In Agnew's paradigm, place is constructed of three elements: 'location', a sociologically or politically defined area or region on the earth's surface; 'locale', the material shape, structure, and characteristics, that form a place and delineate it within the wider location; and 'sense of place', representing the personal and shared feelings, knowledge, and attitude that people have developed over time toward a particular place (Agnew et al., 2003, pp. 605-606). I believe Agnew's 'meaningful location' is a particularly strong conceptual framework for breaking down the constituent parts of place for analysis, and for isolating its materiality from its more intangible sensuality and spirituality so important to the dramatic works I will be discussing. For again, as the Salish poet and playwright Duane Niatum states, of all the themes found in Native American cultural expression, 'none of them may be more important than a sense of place, land, and geography' (Niatum, 1988, p. x).

Often, we mistakenly regard places as purely material constructs, products of natural geography, human design, or other distinguishing physical elements in the landscape. But this is rarely the case, for when we talk of places, we often describe far

more than just the physically defining architecture that fills a 'space'. In fact, place is largely constructed through the use of illusion, through metaphor, through allegory, chosen to express our feelings, memories, understanding, and imagination toward the history that its architecture represents. Ethnologist Keith Basso reflects on what he considers this Sartrean concept of place when he writes:

Animated by the thought and feelings of persons that attend them, places express only what their animators enable them to say. ... Yet this may be quite considerable, and so it is, as everyone knows, that places actively sensed amount to substantially more than points in physical space.

(Basso, 1996, pp. 108-109)

The places under discussion in the following thesis are indeed Indigenous 'meaningful locations', conceived in part through an intimate practical knowledge of their physical location and locale, but more from a deep understanding of the more ethereal human experience of their sense of place: conception fostered through oral storytelling, the recitals of legends, and the practicing of rituals and ceremonies. They are also composed from inherited community knowledge of more tangibly recorded historical incidents: battles, natural disasters, and the storying and interpretation of the physical traces that remain of prolonged early Native habitation. Since at least the late nineteenth century, documented written accounts of Indigenous places have added to their meaningfulness, often related to removal and ethnic relocation that increasingly became commonplace from the 1940s onwards. In this context, places can represent the repositories for shared experience of an Indigenous community's interface with postcolonial environments: the construction of cities, office blocks, freeways, sporting venues, civil engineering projects, places of Western worship, and perhaps most emotively for some sixty percent of Native Americans today, their new urban homes.

The paradigm of 'meaningful location' also aligns well with the essence of how place is frequently used by Native American communities as a means of storytelling. For example, it bears much in common with the practice of 'place-making', described by Basso as places used by Native American communities as, 'indispensable mnemonic pegs on which to hang the moral teachings of their history' (Basso, 1996, p. 62). Here, 'place-making' functions through the generations as a form of geographical identity building:

If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of doing history, it is also a way of constructing the social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.

(Basso, 1996, p. 7)

Because of this synergy between place and identity, when we consider place within the combined realms of Native American studies and Theatre Research, its interpretation grows ever more complex and intriguing. For example, if we talk of a 'sense of place' related to Native American belief systems, we cannot regard this as solely a human phenomenon. For in the Native American worldview, the distinction between human and non-human beings – such as those of the plant and animal kingdoms, and even those considered by other societies as the inanimate geological and geographic features of the landscape, such as rocks, rivers, and mountains – is far less clearly delineated. This perspective is fundamentally at odds with much of Western theological convention, for as Nash explains, 'the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its concept of man as superior to other living things by virtue of being made in the image of the creator, discouraged similar thinking' (Nash, [1967] 2001, p. 193). Therefore, in Native American spirituality, places cannot be considered simply as 'reservoirs of human content', but as a term embracing a wide environmental diversity of collective data gathering. Although an oversimplification, we might say that a 'sense of place', in the Native American worldview, is a phenomenological multidimensional repository that has gathered up, and continues to accrue, content through time, both before and after the interaction of man. Transcending human experience, places thus hold a profound and eternal sanctity for Native Americans that has largely been lost to the collective mind of most Western orthodox theologies.⁴

Indigenous Theatre as Cultural Intervention

While primarily focussing on the function of place as a collaborative artistic feature of the plays under discussion here, and a means of perhaps finally realising a 'strikingly unique' form of Native American focused performance, I also look to explore a deeper form of theatrical endeavour through place; how Native American 'place-based' performance in particular might be applied as a means of artistic cultural encounter with environments. Beyond its mere artistic or entertaining value, I postulate that an Indigenous theatre that fully melds with place can operate in a profoundly activist capacity, becoming an influential form of *cultural intervention* into the lives of Native American communities.

⁴ However, such beliefs are much more common globally, such as in Buddhism, Hinduism, and many other Eastern faiths.

While the overall theatre tradition in the United States might be said to have been historically more conservative in its experimental approach, at least a late developer, in comparison to theatre in other parts of the world, interest in exploring theatrical platial encounters such as those discussed here does have a considerable history. For example, theatre critic and author Todd London has written of an 'American theatre of place', that, with its 'place-based' methodology, formed the main conceptual artistic mission statement of many alternative theatre companies formed in the 1980s and 1990s (London, 1995). These companies can be regarded as early attempts at cultural intervention through theatricality.

Today, 'intervention' is perhaps most associated with its use in clinical psychology, where it is used to describe the situation faced by a patient that cannot break from a cycle of, often destructive, behaviour – such as addiction to substances or other forms of self-harm – without the intervening action of the medical professional. In the context of Native America, such a term might be seen as highly charged, particularly when used by someone from outside its community, where it could be misconstrued with the often-unwelcome Western 'paternalism' exercised in the past in Native American affairs by its colonial overseers. In an era focused on furthering the self-determinacy of Native Americans, this is obviously to be avoided.

But I use the term 'cultural intervention' here in a positive sense as a means of physically bringing to light conflicts surrounding Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies that often remain hidden, or have become invisible through familiarity, and can perhaps now only be reappraised through dramatic representation. Also, importantly, while non-native collaborators might be involved in the productions discussed later, the theatrical cultural interventions I will be describing are led by Native Americans themselves in their own communities. Therefore, learning through cultural intervention, to me at least, appears a particularly well-suited approach to reveal the challenges which historically face Indigenous people: the deadlock between settlers and colonisers over land rights; the suppression of traditional belief systems and the imposition of Western religious orthodoxy; the displacement by settlers and forced re-placement of Indigenous communities. Here, an effective and sensitive 'place-based' Native American performances might intervene to make visible the plight of a people who remain largely, as the Sicangu Lakota playwright Larissa FastHorse observes, 'invisible in plain sight' (London, 2023c).

From the practical perspective of this thesis, focussing on the cultural intervention theatre productions can perform is also a means to unify the otherwise disparate main areas of research which it bestrides: i.e., performance and Indigenous studies. In the case of performance, the 'place-based' theatre described here intrudes into places – disrupting the status quo that often exists within community environments, and problematising the way places are appreciated, understood, and utilized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In the case of the Native American experience, the subject falling under Indigenous studies here, it also represents the intervention into the challenging status quo and tensions that exist, often cloaked by social conformity, or ignored by political neglect, between Indigenous communities and a wider American society historically embroiled in the legacy of the colonial project's attempts at Native American cultural eradication: such as revealing the trauma colonialism has frequently wrought on Indigenous communities through forced removal from ancestral lands, the suppression of spiritual, social, and artistic practices, and forced assimilation to Western cultures. Practices some have even suggested equate to a systematic federal program of covert – and sometimes open – cultural 'genocide' (Lindsay, 2012).

Many Native American writers have utilised the potential for using literature based artforms as powerful intervention tactics, and as weapons to push back against the dominance of colonial intellectualism: for example, Tillett writes of author Gerald Vizenor's work that it, 'employs rhetorical strategies to disempower the colonisers and re-empower the colonised' (Tillett, 2007, p. 122). Similarly, I argue that a Native American 'place-based' theatre can be applied as a strategy to perform, however temporarily, the, 'linguistic reoccupation of the land' (Karamcheti, 1995, p. 183). In Canada, for example, direct action like this can be seen as following in the vein of First Nation activists such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), who seek a decolonising strategy that is, 'land-based and very much tied to that intimate and close relationship to the land' (Klein, 2013). Similarly, Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) envisions a practical approach to decolonisation through, 'an approach to resurgence that would see Indigenous people begin to reconnect with their lands and land-based practices on either an individual or small-scale collective basis' (Coulthard, 2014, p. 171). Significantly, Coulthard also advocates, 'the reoccupation of sacred places for the purposes of relearning and practicing our ceremonial activities' (Coulthard, 2014, p. 171). It is hard not to see 'place-based' theatre as exemplifying these goals.

Place-Based Research Methodology

Naturally, as with any research project which focuses on Indigenous cultures, it is important to apply a considered methodology. This must be one which is likely to produce discoveries, and function as a reliable means of assessing the intentions and efficacy of the work studied, while simultaneously remaining sensitive to the culture under its lens. It is also vitally important, when approaching the work of Native Americans, to remember the responsibilities that face academics in their choice of research practice; something for which, historically, the non-Indigenous academy has often been found lacking. As the poet and theorist Paula Gunn Allen points out:

Traditional American Indian literature is not similar to western literature because the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples are not the same. ... This difference has confused non-Indian students for centuries. They have been unable or unwilling to accept this difference and to develop critical procedures to illuminate the materials without trivializing or otherwise invalidating them.

(Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 85)

To avoid falling into this trap, I apply throughout this thesis a research methodology which, like the theatre it examines, is also 'place-based'. There have been past attempts to consider dramatic texts in relation to place as a methodology; for example, by the literary analysis of texts through the lens of 'platial theory' (Chaudhuri, 1997: Stanlake, 2005, 2009). As Stanlake describes it, '[platial theory] uses a theoretical discourse of place to develop a critical theory intended for the analysis of both mainstream and marginal drama from the nineteenth century forward' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 40). She goes on to explain: '[platial theory] is concerned with issues of identity in modern and contemporary drama [...] This theory of place focuses predominantly on the realm of the metaphor of home' (Stanlake, 2009, pp. 40-41). This becomes of particular significance in Native American works, where, 'the relationship between place and a person's existence in Native American literature extends the metaphor of home into a very literal understanding of place, specifically land' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 41).

However, lacking a defined critical methodology of their own, alternative theatre practices like 'place-based' theatre, by and large, have also been studied through the same literary techniques as conventional 'text-based' theatre. The difficulty with this approach, I believe, is that such textual analysis of written drama, based on its content alone and

often removed from the influence of its points of creation through twentieth century deconstructive literary concepts, are largely concerned with the analysis of texts irrespective of precise locations. While methods such as 'platial theory' serve well as a means of reading *depictions* of places in dramatic texts, or as they might function as literary devices, they remain analytical tools which cannot, and indeed actively strive not to, consider the specific actions of place in *real environments* during the performative act. Of course, this is not a problem for the literary functioning of place in conventional plays performed 'out of place' in theatres. By default, this includes most of the Native American plays produced to date, which, as I have already pointed out, have been written primarily with the goal of the Indigenising of Western literary and theatre traditions. Literary methods of text analysis alone, however, are clearly limited at best, or at worst totally unsuitable for the investigation of 'place-based' theatre, where they can prove at times nothing less than antithetical.

Placial Analysis

Therefore, I look here to expand 'platial theory' in scope to incorporate the 'performative' aspects inherent in place-based performance. Place, as a methodological concept, has become an established technique used by a host of disciplines. It is particularly well suited to the humanities, for as the philosopher Jeff Malpas explains, 'Place is central to understanding human being, and in fact, to understanding existence or being as such' (Malpas, 2017, p. 33). While certainly remaining indebted to 'platial theory' for its usefulness in analysing the literary contribution of place in the texts examined here, I look to combine this with an investigation of the elements that make up 'meaningful location' to reveal the active elements of place and its potential 'performativity', which Kathleen Irwin defines as, 'space in the generation of meaning' (Irwin, 2009, p. 12). This forms a methodology of investigation I term *placial analysis*. To this end, unlike a literary technique such as 'platial theory' alone, which by-and-large focuses on 'reading' a written performance text in isolation from a particular place or performance, placial analysis begins with a practical investigation of the locations from which a performance text emerges and forms part of the matrix of communication. In short, placial analysis considers how place-based texts may be shaped, or form a direct manifestation of, place. In this respect, the focus of placial analysis is on the way place practically affects the readable text seen in performance, which is a methodology perhaps more recognisable

to ethnologists or geographers than literature scholars, in that it considers place-based drama through 'in the field' analysis. Ideally, whenever possible, it should be a hands-on method of dramatic research and inquiry, and one best conducted by visiting, experiencing, and evaluating the sites of performance before, during, and after a performance event.

Cornerstone Theater Company, Larissa FastHorse, and 'Place-Specific' Theatre

The opportunity to extensively research Native American place-based performance through placial analysis has only become a practical reality in the last decade or so, largely due to the re-emergence of place-based theatre productions that challenge the dominance of staging Native American plays in conventional theatre environments. Above all, I cite here the ground-breaking work of Larissa FastHorse, and her long-standing collaboration with the Los Angeles-based Cornerstone Theater Company – one of the few remaining American place-based theatre companies founded in the 1980s – and their production of a trilogy of Native American plays specifically conceived to embrace the locations and communities from which they emerged. As works that impressively deviate from the mould of previous attempts to create a contemporary Native American theatre, and from the binding centrality of the theatre locus and omnipotence of the playwright, they offer a unique opportunity to research Native American performance as it relates to communities occupying specific placial settings. These are plays which, unlike the few attempts at locational Native American performance in the past, not only seek to draw stories from the wells of history, but to draw parallels with the contemporary Native American experience. Here, place unifies past and present, functioning to reveal the, 'coexistence of multiple stories-so-far' (Massey, 2005, p. 12). As such, I suggest this work epitomises performance as cultural intervention into places, or, as Cornerstone describes it, theatre that, 'disrupts assumptions' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 'Mission & Vision', n.d.). As the former Artistic Director of Cornerstone, Michael Garcés, explains, the company's work with FastHorse represented performance that was, 'very *place-specific* ... not site-specific in the sense that it was built for a particular site, but it was built to be on the ground in community' (personal communication, 2 June 2023).

Research Methodology

As I have already suggested, one consequence of so many Native American plays being written for conventional theatres, is that they have been overwhelmingly evaluated by reviewers, critics, and academics, through the Western analytical lenses of performance theory and literary criticism. But attempts to apply such Western critical theories and text analysis to the work of Native Americans have frequently proved unsatisfactory, distorting, and in many cases, misrepresentative. As Gunn Allen observes:

The study of non-Western literature poses a problem for Western readers, who naturally tend to see alien literature in terms that are familiar to them, however irrelevant those terms may be to the literature under consideration.

(Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 84)

To counter this, rather than scrutinising the work here under the standard literary methodologies used by Western critics and academics, I advocate a research approach more in line with the spirit and objectives of Native American scholarship. As Gunn Allen again reminds us:

It remains for scholars of American Indian literature to look at this literature from the point of view of its people. Only from this vantage can we understand fully the richness, complexity, and true meaning of a people's life; only in this way can we all learn the lessons of the past on this continent and the essential lesson of respect for all that is.

(Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 117)

As Randy Reinholz, the Choctaw artistic director and co-creator of Native Voices at the Autry Museum of the American West, counselled me early in the preparation for this research, 'Native people have been described, spoken for and represented. This is currently an era of self-representation and gaining our voice back from the colonizers. So, it could be tough to be an outsider judging Native theatre' (personal communication, 26 February 2018). Reinholz warned against a 'thumbs up or down' appraisal of Native American theatre, in favour of a methodology which focussed on, 'measuring the impact of the wide range of Traditional art forms employed by Native performers ... as a chronicle of the work rather than judge' (personal communication, 26 February 2018).

With this in mind, as much as possible, I have attempted to 'chronical' the theatre work discussed here. Also, I have attempted to avoid 'judging' the Native American productions I examine for their artistic merits, or as 'successes' or 'failures' in relation to

their critical or commercial reception. Nor is it my purpose to attempt a 'critique' of Native American theatre. Nevertheless, while a 'thumbs up or down' evaluation of Native American theatre is obviously to be avoided, 'measuring the impact', in other words its *efficacy*, as a communicative and socially transformational practice remains a paramount consideration. To ignore a performance's efficacy in these respects would be as disingenuous as any other critical approach. Moreover, any research project of this scope would be expected to address the success of desired outcomes, and particularly research projects which are expected to investigate current thinking, challenge this, and suggest new and original strategies for development. Native American dramatists, and the plays and performances they create, do have *purpose* in their work – often clearly stated – be it simply to entertain, educate, or, with more profound aspiration, to change the nature of society. To quote Anne Haugo: 'Native artists will continue to employ the medium of theater as a means toward healing the wounds created by colonialism or as a means towards achieving decolonisation' (Haugo, 2000, p. 249). Where purpose can be so stated, the resultant efficacy should be allowed to be appraised. This is particularly so of productions which aim to intervene in communities, as Kennedy Chinyowa explains:

The immersion of community theatre practice in local relations of power, authority and engagement tends to obscure its positive intentions. What begins as a benefit to the community can be affected, for better or worse, by the politics of location, agency and culture, with far-reaching implications for the identity of participants. Hence the discourses that surround community theatre interventions must be interrogated to understand the ambiguous nature of identities emerging from such work.
(Chinyowa, 2023, p. 193)

So, while remaining sensitive to the importance of Native American self-determinacy, I do feel that wider theatre scholarship has a sympathetic responsibility to scrutinise the efficacy of theatrical work which aims to achieve, say, decolonisation or education, and where possible, draw attention to directions which might potentially expedite the accomplishment of these goals. In the particular case of this research, if place-based theatre might be suited to realising a 'strikingly unique' Native American ethnic theatre form. Of course, irrespective of my personal conclusions, I leave the final choice to implement or not the findings of my research to Native American creatives actively working in the fields of theatre and performance.

Be the researcher Indigenous or not, assessing the efficacy of place-based performances presents specific challenges. Theatre researchers, such as Baz Kershaw,

have worked to understand, analyse, and quantify, the effect of locational performance, and, as he puts it, 'The potential that theatre may have to make the immediate effects of performance influence, however minutely, the general historical evolution of wider social and political realities' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 1). However, how to measure these effects on audiences remains, 'plagued by analytical difficulties and dangers' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 1). Kershaw highlights the pitfalls of more traditional forms of evaluating performance effectiveness, such as, 'work in the field, where the most common approaches to the issue – audience questionnaires and so on – seem always to produce inconclusive or superficial results' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 1). In preference to this, Kershaw suggests a more contextual analysis might be the answer:

What if we pay more attention to the *conditions* of performance that are *most likely* to produce an efficacious result? And what if we broaden the canvas for analysis beyond the individual show or production (but still including it) in order to consider the theatrical movements in relation to local and national cultural change?

(Kershaw, 1992, p. 3)

It is not hard to correlate the terms 'local' and 'national' here to those of 'locale' and 'location', which, as I explained earlier, are constructs of meaningful location, and it is my hope I can realise something of which Kershaw suggests here through placial analysis.

Another reason I have adopted the application of place as a research methodology is due to the benefits it offers an 'outsider' researching the work of Native American communities. In contrast to more conventional scholastic lenses traditionally applied by Western academia for the evaluation of dramaturgy, I contend that by focusing on place it is possible to adopt a more sustained and objective research approach to Native American dramatic texts. This is because a focus on place removes the work under review, largely at least, from the Western academic locus of literary and performance structures. For example, rather than critiquing Native American performance through its comparison to similar Western drama – all too often the stance indiscriminately of Western criticism – I discuss Native American performance here, as much as possible, as it relates to its individual context of location rather than other productions. In the case studies of place-based plays from Cornerstone and FastHorse which conclude this thesis, I have attempted not to provide comparisons to other theatre works, but rather to analyse them against the specifics of their locations of production. It is this contextualisation, I shall stress throughout this thesis, that is of vital significance if place-based Native

American performance texts are to be viewed as genuine reflections of distinctly Indigenous cultural, spiritual, and political worldviews: in essence, fully 'readable' in their locational context (Mike Pearson & McLucas, n.d., p. 2). As Gunn Allen again points out: 'Intelligent analysis becomes a matter of identifying smaller assumptions peculiar to the locale, idiom, and psyche of the writer' (Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 84). Again, Gunn Allen's terms of reference fall conveniently in line with the concept of meaningful location and placial analysis.

Place as Methodology

Tim Cresswell describes place as, 'a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world' (Cresswell, 2015, p. 18). Indeed, historically within Cresswell's own field of human geography, the phenomenological concept of place, distinct from the more utilitarian functionality of space, has attracted much attention. Place functions primarily as a valuable means of examining and analysing complex human relationships and their interconnection between environmental and socio-political issues. Since the millennium, the consideration of place has moved from being the sole province of geography, with the fields of environmental, sociological, and political research all contributing to a manifold increase in its application as a research methodology. It has even been applied to criminology (Cho & Yuan, 2019). As Cresswell says:

Place appears in one form or another in a remarkably diverse array of research and writing across academic disciplines as well as in the practices of artists, architects and others ... when reading research that evokes place it is important to analyse how the writer is using places as a way of looking at the world.

(Cresswell, 2015, p. 191)

Hence, the potential for place to function as an agent of interpreting place-based theatre appears considerable:

When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see worlds of meaning and experience. ... Here "place" is not so much a quality of things in the world as an aspect of the way we choose to think about it – what we decide to emphasize and what we decide to designate as unimportant.

(Cresswell, 2015, p. 18)

Similarly, Nick Kaye observes that the intimate relationships of performance locations and performances, clearly have the effect of producing:

Articulate exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined. ... If one accepts that the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their 'local position,' by the situation of which they are a part, then a work of art, too, will be defined in relation to its place and position.

(Kaye, 2000, p. 1)

Given this, it comes as no surprise to discover that the analysis of the arts in relation to place has a long history. As Gaston Bachelard famously argued in *The Poetics of Space*, the action of place has profound influence on our acquaintance with literature and art, and there is little doubt this is just as significant for dramatic texts written to be performed in specific locations (Bachelard, [1958] 1992). Performance theory has long focused on the interrelationship between location and the perception/reception of dramatic works by audiences. As mentioned in the introduction, this is particularly true given the rise to prominence of 'site-specific' events in the mid-to-late twentieth-century, which expanded the fields of art and dramatic performance out of their respective 'white cubes' and 'black boxes'. Allied to this, the movement to more innovative considerations of performance and installation spaces can be seen in the development of 'immersive' artistic creation, where the boundaries between creativity and real-life blur to a greater degree than in conventional galleries and theatres. At their best, both 'site-specific' and 'immersive' events draw their interpretation from the joint knowledge – latent or arising from pedagogical extrapolation – of artists, performers, and audiences at the sites, or more rightly the places, where their performances occur. Creatives working in these fields extract the complex issues and social history of their visited communities for their creative inspiration and potential. In the case of performance, such productions thus utilise 'local position' to, 'create theatre in places rather than containers' (Wiles, 2003, p. 266).

Platial Theory to Placial Analysis

Given its importance for the analysis of both performance and Native Studies, place has inevitably already featured in the analysis of Native American dramaturgy. Perhaps the most sustained attempt to do this can be seen in the work of playwright and scholar Christy Stanlake, and her application described earlier of 'platial theory', after the fashion of Chaudhuri, to the work of Native American playwrights (Stanlake, 2009; Chaudhuri, 1997). As Stanlake points out: 'Native American plays offer a uniquely visceral venue for

us to explore the potential of theories of place' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 40). Yet much of the application of platial theory by Stanlake is confined to the consideration of place within the precincts of conventional text analysis. As I suggested in the introduction, I would argue that such analysis of the function of place, although considered in texts written to be performed, remains confined within the field of literature analysis, rather than attempting to appraise its *physical presence* in performance. Although platial theory recognises place as highly significant in Native American stage plays, its more practical functioning, through Irwin's 'performativity', has rarely, if at all, been analysed. Of course, this is again a consequence of the disproportionate number of Native American plays that have been conceived for production in conventional Western theatre: i.e., spaces where the practical influence and significance of place has largely been eliminated due to the onus on placial realisation through scenography by Western theatrical convention. Beyond the work of Stanlake, what little research conducted in the field so far has been focused on performance within, what the Native American performance theorist Roland Meinholtz termed 'formal theatre settings' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 86). Consequently, in performance the potential for Native American spatial occupation has been limited to the Indigenisation of Western theatre spaces, rather than the decolonisation of placial localities of significance. The distinction, as I will suggest throughout here, is significant.

Therefore, my aim in this thesis, while acknowledging the important contribution of platial theory in the study and comprehension of Native American drama, is to advance this methodology to embrace the performative dimension of place as meaningful location. Here, I use place as what might be considered, 'a conceptual tool of geographers and other academics' (Cresswell, 2015, p. 191). To do this, I address the requirement for a more definitive terminology to describe this increasingly place-centric dramatological approach. The term 'spatial analysis', familiar in human geography, has been employed previously to describe the functional workings of theatre spaces – most notable in their 'spatial dimensions' (Longman, 1981, p. 46). But no similarly descriptive adjective term appears to exist in the English language to describe the equally complex, and as I would argue, quite distinct, functionality of place. Therefore, I adopt here geographer and philosopher Edward S. Casey's use of the word 'placial' (Casey, 1997, p. 334). To me, 'placial' is more suited here than the word 'platial', which tends to suggest more of what as place *is*, rather than what it *does*. Moreover, I concur with Casey when he appears to suggest 'placial' represents something more spiritual, psychic, and altogether more

humane, than the more Newtonian connotations associated with the term 'spacial'. For example, Casey writes, 'To have substituted the spacial infinity of the universe for the placial finitude of the cosmos is to have effected a fateful tradition from ancient to modern thinking in the West' (Casey, 1997, p. 78). Indeed, the Western and enlightenment intellectual turn from focusing on place to space has direct relevance for work, such as I pursue here, which examines the experience of Indigenous people; in words which evoke concepts of Indigenous 'place-making', Casey again points out that, 'the domination of native peoples was accomplished by their *deplacialization* [emphasis added]: the systematic destruction of regional landscapes that served as the concrete settings for local culture' (Casey, 1997, p. xii). I will advocate, therefore, the use of placial analysis, where the adjectival form 'placial' appears to represent more of the active performativity that place contributes to Native American and Indigenous drama in performance. Indeed, my concept of placial analysis resembles, and aims to develop, Irwin's advancement of 'spatial performativity', which she defines as a way to investigate theatrical spaces, 'not as an elusive emptiness, but rather as a social reality that accrues and disperses meaning over time, and is made legible through performance' (2009, p. 12).

Internal Approach to Native American Research

Again, it is my hope that this experiment in approaching Native American performance through placial analysis proves a methodology that is Indigenously sensitive. Rather than exercising an *external* analytical examination focusing solely on dramaturgical or literary techniques and conventions in performance, consciously disassociated from placial considerations in the name of academic objectivity, as is often the case with deconstruction techniques, I envision placial analysis as a means of approaching Indigenous works more from *within*; appraising, where necessary, their efficacy in conveying the goals of their Indigenous creators from the viewpoint that inspired their creation – literally their *birthplace*.

In practical terms, placial analysis means approaching a place-based text by first breaking it down into the components of Agnew's meaningful location. The first step is to consider its *location* (the continental USA, or a state, or a National Park), then its *locale* (the specific boundaries within the location; a parking lot, its architecture, its setting), and finally its *sense of place* (the specific significance of the place to the local community, before, during, and after the performative event). After this, the performance text as a

whole is analysed through platial analysis to consider how these elements are realised in performance and their efficacy against the stated aims of the production. In this way, place has primacy over written text in analysis, as it did in the construction of the work. While most approaches to theatre analysis focus on what play texts *say* and *do*, the focus of placial analysis is on *where* they are.

Again, unlike conventional literary methodologies, placial analysis demands a more practical approach. For example, to gather material for the placial analysis of this work, during the summer of 2023, I travelled to South Dakota and New York to attend productions of Larissa FastHorse's play *Wicoun*, and the Broadway premier of her highly successful *The Thanksgiving Play*.⁵ I spent two weeks in the South Dakota region, driving over one thousand miles, and was able to attend four presentations of *Wicoun*, performed on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations, and in Rapid City. I was also able to visit many sites of value in informing me about the character of the place that is South Dakota, including the Black Hills, the Wounded Knee Massacre Memorial Site, and the Badlands National Park. Immersing myself in the locations of the places I visited, I purposefully chose the performances I attended to give me as wide an experience as possible of the productions in different parts of the region. One of the most important aspects of this fieldtrip was the opportunity to experience *Wicoun* placially in relation to its locations. Although while living in the United States, I had visited their performance sites prior to their performance, I was unable to attend *Urban Rez* in Los Angeles or *Native Nation* in Phoenix, and I felt this meant an important element in my research was missing. Given that my thesis is primarily concerned with Native American performance in relation to place, and that placial analysis requires fieldwork by its very nature, I felt it crucial to experience *Wicoun* in as much of an immersive way as possible.

National and Public Parks

Of course, I am conscious that the consideration of place is a vast research topic, and even within the narrow scope of the Native American dramatic productions under discussion here, risks the danger of becoming overwhelming and unwieldy within the limitations of a single doctoral thesis. Therefore, I have attempted to centre my analysis primarily within the context of the locations of public and national parks.

⁵ *The Thanksgiving Play* was performed at the Helen Hayes Theatre from 25 March 2023 to 11 June 2023 for 53 performances. Directed by Rachel Chavkin.

Parks in general are – as both public and civic constructs – multidimensionally complex in their representational symbiology. They are at once communal, disputed, liminal, and transitory spaces, and can become highly charged and controversial locations in the daily life of metropolitan communities. As the urban studies theorist Jane Jacobs described them, in almost anthropomorphic terms: 'Parks are volatile places. They tend to run to extremes of popularity and unpopularity. Their behaviour is far from simple' (Jacobs, 1961, p. 89).

The relevance of parks, and the oft-contested concepts that lie behind them in relation to the oppositional objectives of Native Americans and colonisers, runs, as I hope I will be able to illustrate, like a recurrent environmental stream throughout much of the dramatic material that will be encountered in this thesis. This is particularly evident when discussing many of the early theatre works featuring Native Americans, such as pageants and outdoor dramas, that were often inseparably linked to the formation of the National Parks system, and in the case studies which conclude this thesis, which were performed in city parks. Also, parks fit well with Agnew's definition of meaningful location. Their *location* is, for the most part, clearly defined within precise geographical areas; their *locale* is formed by their historical layout, the art they contain, and their design as utilitarian multi-use spaces; while their *sense of place* is multifaceted and socially fluid, defined by the different life experiences of the people that come to visit them.

Thesis Structure

This thesis has been divided into eight chapters. Conscious that the readership of this research may be from fields less familiar with Native American studies, the initial chapters seek to provide a background for the arguments I will be advancing later. For example, the fundamental importance of place in forming Native American identity and culture, and how this was realised through early forms of Native American storytelling, pictorial art, and performance activity. The middle chapters chronicle the emergence of early Native American dramaturgy and the contemporary theatre exploration that followed, later challenging the thinking that led to the staging of contemporary Native American plays almost solely in theatres. The final chapters offer some potential alternative approaches, principally advocating the adoption of more place-based theatre productions that promote 'place-specific' techniques – strategies which, it is my hope, may be developed further by the academy through additional research.

Chapter one aims to situate this investigation by describing the role of place within Native American culture, through examining three key aspects of this: building identity, storytelling, and ceremonial performance. I describe the sacred association with place through its role in forming Indigenous identity; its deep and defining influence in the spiritual lives of Native American communities, a phenomenon fundamentally unlike that commonly encountered in Western orthodox religion and society. Also, I describe the synergy that exists between Native Americans and the natural world, where man is seen as only one aspect of the wider environment.

Chapter two describes early Native American theatre activity, such as late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Native American involvement in pageants, the work of 'folklorists', and the later outdoor 'symphonic dramas', which often capitalised on the growth of 'cultural tourism'. Many of these early experiments by Native American performance creatives, although often flawed, I argue can today be seen as relevant to current attempts by Native Americans to develop more place-based performances.

Chapter three contrasts this early work, much of which was regional and location-based, against the plays from the more mainstream contemporary Native American theatre, which was mainly staged in classical Western style theatres. I focus on influential practitioners including playwright Lynn Riggs, Lloyd Kiva New and Roland Meinholz at the Institute of the American Indian, Hanay Geiogamah's formation of the Native American Theatre Ensemble, and the long-running and influential Spiderwoman Theatre.

The aim is again to familiarise the reader with this modern work, while also suggesting some of the ideology which led to its creation.

Chapter four begins by exploring the practical and ideological reasoning that led to the above instigators of the Native American dramaturgy working in Western-style theatre venues, later suggesting this may no longer fit the aspirations of many Native American playwrights today. I problematise this approach by suggesting the sustained development of a contemporary Native American theatre, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s during the Native American Renaissance, was primarily focused on the Indigenisation of the Western stage rather than realising the 'strikingly unique' Indigenous theatrical form of performance it originally aspired to be. While not wishing to disregard the achievements of this early work, I question what 'unique' Native American performative values, such as the role of place in performance, may have been negated by working in theatre spaces.

Chapter five highlights some of the problematic incompatibilities between Western and Indigenous theatre. Firstly, the problem of the Western 'enclosed' theatre, which removes performance from real locations, and the creation of a commercial and professional art-form which detracts from the more authentic form of performance when situated in local communities. Secondly, the problem with 'syncretic theatre', which, despite its value, also imposes the unwanted baggage of the traditional Western theatre's codes of expectation, through architectural determinism, on performers and audiences alike. Lastly, the problem with 'dramatized place', which being reliant solely on its artistic creation to convey its character and meaning, often suffers from distortion, misrepresentation, and historical inaccuracy.

Chapter six considers the potential for the Native American theatre adopting more of the practices found in the alternative performance movement. I describe the development of such alternative staging practices, principally those of 'site-specific' theatre, conceived to challenge the established dominance of theatre buildings, scenography, and the later proponents of the 'empty' theatre space. Through a case study of the large-scale production *The Weyburn Project*, I consider how site-specific works like this realises spatial performativity. From this, I advance the case that when applied to the Native American performance context, such work moves from being site-specific to *place-specific*, largely due to its greater intrinsic cultural connection with Indigenous communities.

Chapter seven presents an introduction to the work of Cornerstone Theater Company and Larissa FastHorse. Drawing on my experience of working with Cornerstone during their Intensive Training Programme, I describe in some detail their creative process, their methodology of community partnership, and their experience of working with marginalised Indigenous communities in specific platial locations. Similarly, I describe the work of FastHorse, attempting to convey something of her philosophy as a playwright inspired by place in her collaboration in creating community plays.

Chapter eight concludes this work by presenting case studies of place-based plays from FastHorse and Cornerstone: *Urban Rez* (2016), *Native Nation* (2019), and *Wicoun* (2023). While these studies provide an illustration of how placial analysis might be practically applied as a methodology, my main aim here is to show, while previous Native American plays may have been effective at Indigenising the Western theatre, the cultural intervention of this new work proves the value of place for the decolonising of lost Indigenous spaces through 'place-specific' performance.

Chapter 1 – Meeting Places: The Sacred Nature of Place and Native American Identity, Storytelling, and Ceremonial Performance

Three of the key roles of place in Native American culture are in forming identity, in contributing to storytelling, and in participating in the realisation of ceremonial performance. There are, of course, many other ways in which place features within indigenous cultures, but I concentrate on those chosen here because they are arguably the most significant when it comes to considering place in relation to theatre.

When researchers such as ethnologist Keith Basso first began to explore the role of place within Indigenous cultures, they found themselves both figuratively and literally in the wilderness, surprised by the lack of previous interest in the field. Basso's seminal book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, a thought-provoking account of his many years spent living among the Western Apache community of Cibecue, Arizona, was written at a time when little investigation was being conducted into what people, 'make of places' (Basso, 1996, p. 105). In the book's four short essays, Basso carefully reveals to the reader the intimate relationship the Western Apache and their language share with the land, chronicling the fundamental relationship between geographical locations and oral storytelling in Native American culture. Basso writes: 'For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth – in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields – which together inform and endow their lands with multiple forms of significance' (Basso, 1996, p. 34).

Although still an essential text, since the time of Basso and the first explorations of the Indigenous relationship to place by Western ethnologists, much more work has of course been conducted. Many contributions to this work have also come from Indigenous scholars, focusing not only on the historic significance of place to Native Americans, but how this continues to influence the shaping of identities, artistic practices, and cultural worldviews in the modern era. Academics such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Glen Coulthard, as referenced in the introduction, have written extensively on the use of the land not only as a pedagogical resource, but as a way of effectively employing land-based methodologies to conduct practical research more in step with the teaching practices of Native Americans, often favouring environmentalism and ecological values over those of the broader non-Indigenous academy, whose concerns tend to focus on the more theoretical and statistic. Similarly, Natchee Blu Barnd, in his book *Native Space*, a

contemporary exploration of Native American place-naming from the Indigenous perspective, paints a vivid picture of how today, 'Native geographies effectively reclaim indigenous identities, assert ongoing relations to the land, and refuse the claims of settler colonialism' (Barnd, 2017, back cover comments).

1.1 Identity

For Indigenous cultures, place is central to forming their 'identity' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 21). In *God is Red*, his seminal text on the position of religion in Native American culture, the scholar Vine Deloria Jr. states:

American Indians hold their lands – *places* – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind.

(Deloria, Jr., 1994, p. 63)

Yet, despite this apparently simple and indisputable fact, colonists, settlers, and academics from outside of Indigenous cultures have historically struggled to understand the cultural and sacred significance of place for Native Americans. As Kidwell & Velie point out, '[the Native American] concept of spirituality in the natural world may seem strange to those raised in one of the world religions like Judaism or Christianity that for the most part developed in urban environments' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 23). One reason for this, they suggest, is that Western belief systems typically, 'place more importance on events than places, and they put ultimate importance on the continuation of human existence in some world beyond the present' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 24). While acknowledging the significance of a 'sense of sacred places' in Western spirituality, Deloria Jr. also points out another crucial distinction from that of Native Americans:

But these [Western] places are appreciated primarily for their historical significance and do not provide the sense of permanency and rootedness that the Indian sacred places represent.

(Deloria, Jr., 1994, p. 67)

This connection is doubtless because, as with many early subsistence cultures, Native Americans historically, 'drew the resources for their physical needs directly from the environment around them' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 21). In turn, this led to Native Americans identifying as part of the mechanism of the natural world around them, rather than, as in many Western cultures, the masters of it. As Native American political historian Frank Pommersheim writes:

The importance of the land is severalfold. Beyond the obvious fact that the land provides sustenance, it is a source of spiritual origins and sustaining myth, which in turn provide a landscape of cultural and emotional meaning. The land often determines the value of the human landscape.

(Pommersheim, 1995, p. 14)

Indeed, early Native Americans acknowledged man's shared existence with the environment they inhabited, recognising their reliance on natural resources for their survival:

This idea that human beings are, indeed, causal agents in shaping their environments derives from the sense of place in Indian societies. They act both in the physical labor that they expend to hunt animals, to prepare skins for shelter and clothing, to clear fields, to plant, cultivate, and harvest, and also in the ceremonies that establish the relationships with the spiritual beings who are the ultimate source of what people need.

(Kidwell & Velie, 2005, pp. 27-28)

Moreover:

The source of American Indian identity is, as it has always been, their association with the land on which they live. The notion of land encompasses earth and the sky, the physical phenomena of lakes, rivers, oceans, the totality of flora and fauna, rocks and mountains.

(Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 22)

As such, the environment becomes, 'the physical manifestation of [Native American] spirituality' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 22). Perhaps this is most evident in the Native American belief in the sentience of the environment that surrounds them, where: '[The] natural world within which Indian people live is filled with beings – many of which whites would consider inanimate, such as rocks and hills – who are sentient and wilful' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 22).

Therefore, as suggested in the introduction, far from places being merely the constructs of human consciousness, in Native American belief systems, and many other Indigenous societies, the concept of place is constructed from the spiritual contribution of all 'beings':

This association about the relationship of land and spirituality means, in the beginning, that we must realise the seemingly capricious actions of the natural environment – storms, drought, the action of the hunter's prey – as evidence of will and volition, qualities seen in both human and non-human beings, animals, natural phenomena, and spirits.

(Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 22)

1.2 Storytelling

Naturally enough, given this close, sacred identification with the physical environment of place, Native American expressions of their culture remain linked inseparably to it. In short, the land and the environment function as an enriching, 'source of tribal memory' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 22).

Such linking of geography with storytelling is not a phenomenon restricted solely to the Western Apache described above by Basso. For example, for the Hopi, 'the land itself is physically inscribed as a repository for the oral tradition' (Yi, 2016, p. 10). While Kidwell & Velie describe a similar phenomenon found in 'world renew' ceremonies, that, 'among the tribes of California emphasize the importance of place, or renewing one's world through one's own efforts on an on-going basis' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 28). This is made possible because: 'The cyclical nature of time means that people have the power to renew the places in which they live' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 28). Again, such 'world renew' ceremonies illustrate how closely Native Americans view themselves connected to the environment that surrounds them:

The ceremonial activity involves moving from place to place, reciting the stories of events that have occurred at certain places, ritually stomping the earth to firm it – events that meld physical earth and human activity into a seamless whole.

(Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 28)

Indeed, there appear to be few Native American communities that have not historically based their storytelling at specific places. As Deloria Jr. again explains:

The vast majority of Indian tribes ... have a sacred center at a particular place, be it a river, a mountain, a plateau, valley, or other natural feature. This center enables the people to look out along the four dimensions and locate their lands, to relate all historical events with the confines of this particular land, and to accept responsibility for it.

(Deloria, Jr., 1994, p. 67)

Another practice which shows a clear correlation between place and storytelling is the telling of Native American 'origin stories', which recount ancestral emergence, often from the land itself, to populate the earth. Here, origin stories can be seen to, 'give a spiritual sanction to people's occupancy of their homelands. They provide a sense of the boundlessness of place' (Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 26). For example, there are stories such as the creation of the mountain of Mathó Thípila in Wyoming ('Devils Tower' or 'Bear's Lodge' to give it its colonial names). The mountain's unique physical scarring –

interestingly, still not fully explained by science – is attributed, in the Kiowa version of the creation story, to a giant bear's claws, as they, 'jumped and scratched at the rock' (Burton, 2002, p. 8). While similar stories attached to certain locations still exist within Euro-American folklore – one might think, for instance, of the Giant's Causeway in Ireland – for Indigenous peoples these connections are of much richer resonance and continue to form a greater part of their living culture.

That so many examples of Native American performative storytelling are linked to the land is perhaps not so surprising. It would appear these represent the phenomenon, described by the anthropologist Victor Turner, of 'social drama' (Turner, 1982, p. 61). Indeed, social drama of this kind for Indigenous peoples would appear, 'well-nigh universal' (Turner, 1982, p. 71). Many tribes, for example, 'hold that their people emerged from worlds beneath the earth. The Navajo, Pueblos, Coshatta, some Choctaw, and others have such traditions. ... The Native cultures' emergence stories also provide a strong sense of place, and a sacredness of place' (Champaign, 2000, p.7).

One of the most well-known manifestations of linking land to forms of human expression is the 'rock art' of petroglyphs and pictographs. As Richard Rogers of Northern Arizona University explains, 'Over the last three decades, Native American rock art has become increasingly visible in a variety of venues, including parks, monuments, museums, galleries, coffee-table books, souvenir stores, housing developments, and academic publications' (Rogers, 2018, p. 1). Due to many factors, petroglyphs and pictographs represent the most well preserved and extensive record of early Native American cultural practice available to us. Their relative accessibility, in North America at least, has led to their extensive study by a wide variety of interested parties. As Rogers explains:

This interest is deeply embedded in social structures, cultural politics, and webs of meaning spun by and from entities ranging from Hollywood to the Southwest tourism industry, from archaeology to evolutionary theory, from the landscapes in which rock art occurs to the New Age commodity machine, from the precontact indigenous peoples who produced the rock art to contemporary Native Americans.

(Rogers, 2018, pp. 1-2)

The term 'rock art' is contentious, as there is no way of knowing if these ambiguous markings and signs represent artistic impulses on the part of their creators or not. Indeed, due to the lack of any record beyond their physical existence, little is certain as to the

original function of petroglyphs and pictographs or what guided their creators to locate them where they are inscribed. Various explanations have been hypothesised: from the marking of tribal boundaries, or as dedications to the ancestors in thanks for hunting success, to more far-fetched theories such as alien communication. However, given the relative inaccessibility of much of this rock art at the time of its creation, which must have required some considerable commitment on the part of those wishing to see it, the location of many of these images suggests that the act of venturing to see them was in some way connected to their *raison d'être*. As with pictorial art today, which continues to be practiced widely by Native American artists, there perhaps existed little of the distinction which Western art places between art forms, with rock art images contributing only one element of some larger storytelling practice, ceremony, or religious observance, rather than performing a specific communicative function alone. The physical act of touching a place, and inscribing it with human consciousness, does seem to be a universal human desire, one dating from the earliest origins of human existence to modern graffiti artists of today. Examples of pictography can be found on every continent where humans have existed, and much of its form seems to stem from likeminded impulses, whatever those might have been.

1.3 Ceremonial Performance

Given these close ties between place, storytelling, and identity, it is hardly surprising that this land-based synergy came to be expressed through early Native American ceremonial performance. However, as with rock art, our knowledge of exactly what form this took is very incomplete. Although the Cherokee linguist Sequoyah developed a syllabary for his people in the early nineteenth century, prior to this, as far as we are aware, Native American societies in the United States were exclusively oral cultures. With no other archive – such as written media – the social history of a place is dependent on human memory passing it generationally down, through oral transference, for its preservation.⁶ No written accounts of cultural practices or beliefs – again, beyond those enigmatically inscribed through rock art – exist from pre-Columbian Native America. Even after European colonisation, accounts of Native American performance ceremonies were often

⁶ In many tribal groups, the official tribal historian is the one who knows and can publicly recount all the stories. As these are historians who rely solely on memory and must pass that on to the next generation, this becomes a huge problem when sudden mass deaths occur within the group because of contact or colonization – therefore, the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices has profoundly affected and disrupted by colonization.

based on the presumptions and cultural misperceptions of their Western chroniclers rather than born from informed understanding. Many ceremonies were recorded simply as 'dances' rather than serious attempts to describe the complex cosmological and epistemological meaning they represented. Some practices were regarded merely as barbaric, with little attempt being made to understand their meaning. It was, for example, such misunderstanding that led to many of the most sacred Native American practices, such as the Sun Dance, being banned by federal authorities ignorant of their significance as world-renewal ceremonies (Young, 2007). How much of early Native American cultural performance practice Western colonizers failed to record, or recorded with inaccuracy, before their more destructive actions eradicated it forever, is anyone's guess. As Gunn Allen points out, 'Because of this, much literature has been lost as the last initiates of particular tribes and societies within the tribes died, leaving no successors' (Allen, 1992, p. 85). The result of this is that an understanding of the earliest performative practice of Native Americans remains largely based, even by Native Americans themselves, on inference and guesswork gathered from the fragments left with us today. What was 'ceremonial', in that it was intended as a vehicle for communicating religious belief, and what was strictly dramatic 'performance', for the purposes of entertainment or artistic endeavour, if such a delineation did in fact exist, is even harder to establish. It is unlikely that historians will ever be able to confirm if anything resembling the type of stand-alone, secular 'theatre' performance, so prevalent in Western civilizations from their earliest formation, did in fact develop.

Although we will never know for certain, it seems likely that the first organised performance practices among Indigenous peoples evolved from earlier initiation celebrations. For example, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep considered some forms of environmental performative encounter as ritualised 'rites of passage' (Gennep, 1960). This term encapsulates a complex set of sociological practices, but most notably, performative acts at specific locations that define the activity. Such ritualised spiritual transitions can still be found in many Western practices; examples of which include pilgrimage to ritualised sacred sites (Lourdes, Mecca, Canterbury), accounts of prophets' travels in wilderness settings (Christ, Saint Francis of Assisi, Muhammad), as well as other initiation rites performed at designated places of religious observance: churches (baptism, confirmation), synagogues (Bar Mitzvah), mosques (Takleef), etc. This relationship between designated locations and social transformation is advanced in

Turner's concept of human 'liminal' and 'liminoid' states; periods of transition which people must sometimes travel through to gain mature understanding (Turner, 1974, 1982, 1986). The 'liminal' state represents the ritualised transition from one state of social standing to another, or a 'crisis' in being. This is a kind of spiritual 'adolescence' where the expectations of how one should behave becomes confused before reforming in maturity. Within the Indigenous context, perhaps the most famous example of this is the Aboriginal 'Walkabout'. In Native American culture, this is also a term that well describes certain aspects of the 'Vision Quest', which similarly requires young adults to undergo physical and mental challenges in often hostile environments, the goal of which is to discover their spiritual maturity. These environmental encounters are also singularly personal events, and it is important to remember that an encounter with a place can be a deeply individualistic experience:

The nature of this relationship may be understood in an intellectual way, but the specific nature of the personal relationship is beyond ken. It is essentially knowable only to the individual. There is ultimately no way that one person can have complete knowledge of another's visionary or dream experience with the spiritual forces in the environment.

(Kidwell & Velie, 2005, p. 28)

The 'liminoid' state relates to times in modernity at which people are similarly removed from their normal social roles, albeit not necessarily spiritually, through popular social upheaval or other transitory social activity. Turner cites as an example the challenge to societal norms seen in the 'happenings' participated in by the 'beat generation' and 'hippies' of the 1960s (Turner, 1969, p. 112). However, importantly for the later material in this thesis, the 'liminoid' state might also apply to people participating as audience members, or actors portraying characters in a fictional performance. Indeed, the relevance of this concept has been previously recognised in the field of performance by practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, particularly in his concepts of 'total theatre', and theorists such as Richard Schechter in his experiments with 'environmental theatre' and audience participation (Grotowski, 1968; Schechter, 1986).

To use a Native American analogy to illustrate the difference in these terms, a formally organised tribal powwow, one where traditions and beliefs are practiced with strict adherence to ceremonial protocol, may be described as a 'liminal' experience. While the relaxed and exuberant '49' that might follow, with its unorthodox dancing, drinking,

pop music, and revelry – if you like, a modern 'rite of passage' for the young men and women embarking on adulthood – may be considered 'liminoid'.⁷

What is noticeable about all these examples, is that they are all associated with specific places: the outback, the sacred wildernesses of deserts and mountains, Woodstock or Haight-Ashbury, the Ceremonial Grounds of the powwow, etc. We can perhaps conclude from this that when the first Native American ceremonial performances did occur, whatever form they took, they must have remained, just as with 'place-making', geographically localised to a relatively small area. The diversity of the tribal system that remains today – over 574 federally recognised tribes alone – would seem to indicate early tribal formation followed strict adherence to localised geographical areas (Federal Register, 2025). Had wholesale cultural integration taken place, such individual tribal distinction would surely over time have become much more diffuse than it has.

Although it is important not to reinforce stereotypical notions of pre-contact Native American societies being incessantly in a state of feuding clan warfare – many tribes lived relatively harmoniously under often complex negotiated treaties – Native American nations did fiercely defend their individual customs, beliefs, and above all, their territorial rights to land.⁸ As subsistence societies, Native American tribes needed to protect and defend their hunting grounds as a matter of pure survival. As such, as land rights were seen as ancestrally granted, tribes tended to guard their individual tribal identities and beliefs rigidly. For example, although intertribal marriages were common, those joining a tribe were expected to become one with its culture. Although tribal identity was a source of pride, this was not due to feelings of superiority, but for practical purposes of maintaining individual tribal identity. Sadly, however, such practices would later be distorted and manipulated by colonialism, and even white supremacist groups, for their own ends.⁹

Again, we see here some practical explanation for the deep-rooted cultural concept of land as a signifier of 'identity', described earlier in so many individual tribal cosmologies. Spatial definition – where one is born – is one of the principal ways to

⁷ Kent Mackenzie film *The Exiles* (1961) vividly portrays what attending a 49 was like, and the significance of it for a new generation of 'Urbanised' Native Americans.

⁸ This need for land was, of course, very different from that of Western settlement, as the need to maintain and take ownership of territory was a matter of survival given the dependence of hunting and agriculture.

⁹ Larissa FastHorse takes this as the central theme of her play *What Would Crazy Horse Do?* which is based on real events where the KKK invited Native Americans to participate in Klan organised Pow Wow in Sioux City, Iowa (Heidelberger, 2019).

indicate who does, and does not, belong to a particular group. Even today, in a supposedly global society, this remains overwhelmingly the case. Although some general similarities may have been present, the idea that forms of Native American performance, be they storytelling, pictographic representation, or ritualised performance, historically formed some kind of generalised 'pan-Indian' experience accessible to all, is simply unsupportable. This, as I will discuss later, becomes significant when we come to consider how elements of Native American performance came to be integrated into Western theatre traditions.

Although many anthropologists and ethnologists, such as Basso, Turner, and van Gennep, have explored the connection between place and performance from the perspective of their own particular scientific fields of interest, fewer Native American theatre practitioners have attempted the same. This may in part be culturally understandable, given the problematic relationship the anthropological sciences hold with many Native Americans. Particularly at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native Americans suffered greatly from Euro-American scientists misinterpreting and misrepresenting their culture and beliefs. Worse, their sacred sites, and the remains of their ancestors, were often desecrated in the name of advancing Western scientific understanding. Such actions continue to be a source of great trauma and pain to this day for Native Americans, with many ancestral remains and sacred artefacts still held in the possession of museum and university collections. That Native Americans would be wary of scientific examination of their past is hardly surprising.

An exception in adopting something of an anthropological approach in the consideration of early Native American performance was the work of Rolland Meinholtz (Cherokee/Scots/Irish): work which, 'spearheaded a search for the roots of American Indian theatre' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 77). Widely respected, Meinholtz was a central figure in the development of Native American theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. This stemmed from his ground-breaking work as Artistic Director at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). Seeking inspiration, Meinholtz, accompanied by the IAIA's director Lloyd Kiva New, visited many ceremonies and ritual sites in the Southwest, examining the continuing performance practices they witnessed for anything that might prove insightful for developing their theatre programme at IAIA. In a memoir, written many years later in 2013, Meinholtz reminisces on this period in his life:

Our Southwestern site also offered a rich tapestry of ancient Native places: Chaco Canyon, Aztec National Monument, and the lands of the Mimbres culture. Together with the copious petroglyph and pictograph sites strewn all over, the Southwest was a gigantic outdoor museum of places to investigate, play in, and dream of possible implications for a contemporary Indian theatre.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 79)

Meinholtz recounts in particular a 'Deer Dance' he and New witnessed in some detail, performed at Taos Pueblo near Santa Fe (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 84). For the Puebloans, the oral storytelling experience forms part of the fabric of the land, and one where, 'viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on' (Silko, 1996, p. 27). As with the Western Apache practices of 'place-making', Pueblo storytelling is not something confined to the past, but rather a living relationship that is as true in our present time: 'The landscape resonates the spiritual, or mythic, dimension of the Pueblo even today' (Silko, 1996, p. 36). The Taos Pueblo is the oldest continually inhabited settlement in the United States. The mudbrick adobes that form the site having been built somewhere between 1000 and 1450 AD, and the unique preservation of their architecture has led to them being named both a National Historic landmark and a UNESCO World Heritage site (Town of Taos, 'Situation Analysis Report', 2023, p. 58). The 'Deer Dance' continues to be performed today, along with other dances including the 'Buffalo', 'Turtle', and 'Matachina' dances. These, along with regular events to celebrate feast days, combined with the historical allure of the adobes themselves, makes the site one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Southwest. The Town of Taos saw a total of 1,751,575 day-trippers in 2022, and the Pueblo, with pre-pandemic figures of around 100,000, has consistently been, 'the top draw for many visitors' (Town of Taos, 2023, p. 59).

The dance Meinholtz describes, however, is from a time in the 1960s when the site was much more off the beaten tourist track. The all-day event was staged at various locations around the pueblo by local villagers, who re-enacted the story of a young boy's first, and perhaps what can be described as 'liminal', experience of a deer hunt. Meinholtz explains how the locations, interacting with the timing of the various episodes in the drama, contributed with the performers to keep the audience, 'amused by their antics as they "travel" about the plaza' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 84). For example, the opening scene was staged, 'As the sun rises and the hand pats that had shaped the brown adobe walls of the pueblo come out of hiding' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 84). Later, after the successful hunt,

the deer – portrayed by a man in deerskin and wooden hooves – is carried to the home of the child playing the boy hunter, which then becomes a location for the final action (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 84). The end of the performance is timed to capture the poignancy of the approaching dusk, as:

The remaining Deer are escorted to the edge of the pueblo as the shadows of dusk tint the mountains in pale blue greens and purples. Songs of praise and statements of the Elders assure them that this is exactly how they will always be treated. The Deer are peaceful and sure-footed as they delicately leave the pueblo and return to the hills, whose paps are now touched by the softest of alpine glows.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 85)

Although the Deer Dance here seems highly symbolic and ritualised, and indeed, probably represent the depictions of a coming-of-age ceremony, other events New and Meinholtz saw appear more designed for pure entertainment. For example, at another pueblo, they witnessed another improvised performance by Koshares, sacred clowns, traditionally performed on the San Geronimo Feast Day:

I saw Koshares at one pueblo engage in a lengthy improvisation while attempting to climb a twenty-foot-high greased pole to get food that was placed at the top. The action, skits, dialogue, and pratfalls were all furious in tempo and frequently outrageously funny.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 85)

This is perhaps more of a sporting occasion, or another rite of passage for the young men of the tribe to prove their maturity and physical prowess. Nevertheless, this appears to shed some insight on how performance which begins from ritual can, over time, acquire a more secular purpose. A process which, arguably, also lay behind the move from religion-based performance to formal theatre during the medieval period in Western culture.

Chapter 2 – Starting Places: Early Location-Based Native American Theatre

In the last chapter, my aim was to establish the fundamental relationship which exists between Native Americans and places. In particular, the importance of land, place, and location in forming Native American cultural identity. In this chapter, I expand on this through illustrating how location-informed early Native American approaches to theatre and performance. The history of these location-based performances, compelling and interesting as I hope to show, is a story of Native American performance endeavour which, in a field already neglected, has received very little attention. However, these productions represent a surprisingly rich body of work, and as I will later suggest, there are elements to be found in them that might assist in creating a more unique place-based contemporary Indigenous theatre in the future.

Ceremonial performances, like the ones which remain with us at places like Taos, were once endemic and widespread throughout North America in the pre-Columbian era. Because of the vast differences in individual tribal practices, beliefs, and perhaps most of all geography, these performances varied to a great degree. But after the invasion of the Americas by Columbus and his successors, this rich diversity of Native American cultural practice became systematically destroyed and repressed. This began with religious persecution and continued into the modern era through a succession of restrictive legislative acts focused on curtailing Indigenous cultural practices. There arose in the United States the infamous assimilationist dogma toward the Native American, which, in the words of R. H. Pratt, looked to, 'Kill the Indian in him, and save the man'. This process reached its height during the nineteenth century, with the almost total repression of Native Americans being allowed to perform their traditional ceremonial practices. It was not until federal attitudes began to change in the twentieth century, and Native Americans began to exploit innovative opportunities to pursue their creativity, that their participation in the performing arts would again emerge.

2.1 Background: The Emergence of Early Native American Theatre

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, except for those adventurous souls that had travelled to the Western frontier beyond the Mississippi, the average American's knowledge of Native America had been vicariously derived from the paintings, literature, and first-hand accounts of others. For the vast majority of white Americans living on the

East Coast and in the Southern states, places where the conquest of Native America had taken place centuries in the past, the land's original Indigenous culture had long been consigned to history books. Even to De Soto in the 1540s, fresh from his conquest of Mesoamerica and then travelling along the Eastern Appalachian spine of the continent looking for gold, it was evident that the once mighty Indigenous societies that had flourished there prior to first contact had already been largely vanquished. Without a physical blow being thrown, they had been wiped-out by earlier Spanish conquistadors who had introduced diseases to which they had no natural resistance (Wright, 1992, p. 88). Three hundred years later, the general nineteenth century understanding of Native Americans by the public, of their culture and way of life, was still dependent on the narrative descriptions sent back by a few intrepid adventurers: the journalists, travel writers, and missionaries that were the last chronicles of the fast-disappearing frontier. As such, it remained an entirely subjective understanding, based on the various prejudices and objectives of those who told the story.

In the literature from this time, Native Americans were habitually depicted as one of three stereotypes: as noble but doomed 'savages', an image indelibly established by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1823, and one which scarcely changed during the remainder of the nineteenth, and much of the twentieth, centuries; as uncivilised and warlike 'hostiles', such as portrayed in the myriad of 'captivity narratives' and dime store novels which swamped the popular non-fiction and fiction markets, 'titillating vast audiences with stories of Indian brutality inflicted upon hapless settlers' (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 20); or as 'Indian Princesses' or 'Indian Maidens', who again, though noble, self-sacrificing, and 'friendly natives', ultimately were depicted as naively romantic, dependent, and submissive to their newfound colonial masters:

The Indian maiden was sometimes sexy and "wanton," a wild woman who "goes without a petticoat." Sometimes she embodied feminine virtues of Christian piety. Sometimes she did both, depending on the author's agenda.
(Puglionesi, 2017)

Clearly, much of this literature was sensationalist, intended to focus on lurid and attention-grabbing headlines rather than faithful depictions of reality. Consequently, with little in the way of objective accounts, the popular beliefs held in society about Native Americans, in particular those regarding their supposed brutality and hostility, or

conversely their enfeebled vulnerability, remained distorted in the collective American imagination.

However, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, a number of events gradually began to change the public's perception of Native Americans. For one thing, the mid-nineteenth century saw the art of field photography perfected, largely due to the work of photographers chronicling the Civil War. Alexander Gardner (1821-1882), Mathew Brady (1822-1896), and Timothy H. O'Sullivan (1840-1882) could rightly be thought of today as the first 'photojournalists', and through their stark images of the battlefields of Gettysburg, Shiloh, and Bull Run, were the first to present the horrors of warfare to a shocked American public. After the war, many continued to follow the military pressing West into the frontier, heading towards its inevitable bloody confrontation with Native America. The work of such photographers, and their documentary style of photography, captured the human face of Native Americans as never before, and slowly began to erode the ingrained demonised image of Indigeneity. While their photographs introduced the wider American public for the first time to the resolute and defiant faces of famous Native American leaders such as Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud, their images also portrayed ordinary families, women, and children: displaced from their homelands and Native way of life, resettled in camps established by the military, and struggling to survive amid shocking scenes of squalor and poverty. In so doing, these images did much to dispel the concept of faceless 'hostiles', and increase public sympathy and condemnation of atrocities such as those committed at Wounded Knee, where as many as three hundred Native Americans had been slaughtered by the U.S. Army. Similarly, the literary work of missionary writers, such as Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), also began to reveal the truth of Native American life, particularly in her novels *Century of Dishonour* (1881), *Ramona* (1884), and in her submission of recommendations for the welfare of Native Americans to the U.S. Senate. There were also campaigning journalists, such as Charles F. Lummis (1859-1928), who, through his writings and his founding of the 'Sequoyah League', actively sought to preserve what remained of Native American culture and fight against the worst excesses of white prejudice.

Such was the change in popular feeling at this time that the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, just three years after the Wounded Knee massacre, introduced its many thousands of visitors to depictions of Native Americans engaged in, albeit dramatised, day-to-day life (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 42). Even *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*,

alongside its better-known sensation seeking re-enactments of famous battles like that at the Little Big Horn, now presented more realistic presentations of Native American life. These included, even if again highly staged, demonstrations of every day domestic camp life, and even some displays of hunting practises. When the show appeared at the 1993 Exposition, rather than presenting Native Americans as 'hostiles', it stressed them as new friends through 'reconciliation' (Slotkin, 1992, p. 78).

The growing interest in North America's Indigenous people was not, however, all due to sentiment for their plight and loss of identity under colonial rule. America was a nation still seeking its own mature identity, and to psychologically distance itself from its pre-independence adolescence, it looked to Native American traditions as an ideological spirit guide. Already by the late-nineteenth century, a fondness for 'Playing Indian' was a practice with a very long history, and, as Yankton Dakota author Philip Deloria notes, one that can be seen as, 'a persistent tradition in American culture' (Deloria, 1994, p. 7).¹⁰ Stories of people 'going native' had, of course, been part of popular American folklore, and very occasionally substantiated fact, since the earliest days of colonisation. However, these often highly embellished tales usually involved either abandoned settlers, lost mountain men, or others forced to adopt Native American lifestyles for sheer survival. But now, white Americans looked to their perceived image of Native Americans as the former natural custodians of the land, which was now under their control, as a means of declaring their own affinity with it. As Deloria expounds, 'The performance of Indian Americanness afforded a powerful foundation for subsequent pursuits of national identity' (Deloria, 1994, p. 7). Also of significance were the wholesale changes in social life during the nineteenth century, such as the shift from blue-collar employment found in the agrarian and industrial economy, towards administrative and clerical white-collar jobs in offices. As men found themselves competing for the first time with women on equal terms, they experienced a severe dent to their self-esteem and 'manliness'. This led, particularly amongst the white middle classes, to increased interest in those outdoor pursuits more commonly associated with Indigenous ways of life, such as hunting, fishing, and camping; activities which, 'suddenly seemed an absolutely indispensable remedy for the artificiality and effeteness of late nineteenth-century life' (Higham, 1965, p. 29). To

¹⁰ Deloria cites, for example, the 'Boston Tea Part', in 1773, when the Sons of Liberty, many dressed as Native Americans, attached ships belonging to the East India Company in the harbour (Deloria, 1998: 2).

such men, the election of Theodore Roosevelt as President in 1901 must have seemed something like the appearance of a messiah.

The upshot was that between the 1890s and the outbreak of the First World War, there swept across the country, what Elizabeth Hutchinson describes as, a widespread 'Indian craze' (Hutchinson, 2009, p. 3). What had previously been the necessary appropriation and adoption of Native American cultural behaviour by non-Natives purely for survival, became 'fashionable' for those in less challenging localities than the wilderness or the frontier: 'Men actually began performing "Indianness" as a means of creating new visions of the nation and bolstering its imperial ventures' (Hutchinson, 2009, p. 64). Building on the early success of men's groups – most notably the widespread membership of the albeit more elitist Masonic Lodges – countless Native American themed popularist societies were formed. Joining the long-established Grand Order of the Iroquois, founded in 1842, came The Order of the White Crane in 1897, The Woodcraft Indians in 1901, along with numerous other outdoor fraternal brotherhoods. Consequently, the ideology of such groups steadily spread through all levels of society, until the end of the nineteenth century could rightly be called the, 'Golden Age of Fraternity' (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 65). Later, Native American inspired youth organisations built of this – such as the American Boy Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls, both founded in 1910 – and sought to foster interest in 'Playing Indian' from an early, and impressionable, age.

Yet while the 'non-Indians' of fraternities and scout troupes amused themselves dressing up in feathers and enacting quasi-Native ceremonies, the early years of the twentieth century remained difficult for many Native American performers seeking careers in the theatre profession. At this time, Native Americans continued to be portrayed on stage through predominantly white, colonial eyes, just as they had in the preceding centuries of 'Indian Plays' – an uncomfortable spectre as we will see. Indeed, this cultural misrepresentation was spread far and wide. Perhaps the most famous international example found in the work of the German author Karl May (1842 - 1912), and his glorification of a romantic, and almost totally imaginary and Teutonic inspired, vision of Native American culture captured in his *Winnetou* novels. First finding fame in the 1870s, May's work would come to even greater prominence during the early decades of the twentieth century through mass-media adaptations. This was particularly evident in the performing arts, due to the rise to dominance at this time of cabaret, vaudeville,

and the film industry, with the latter confirming the already prevalent stereotypical images of Native Americans more than any other.

From silent movies to the first Hollywood blockbusters, the motion picture industry almost exclusively presented its predominantly Euro-American audiences with images of heroic cowboys engaged in derring-do against bloodthirsty 'savages'. The few cinematic alternatives to these fictions – such as Robert Flaherty's contentious *Nanook of the North* (1922) – while purporting to be more anthropologically 'scientific' and 'documentary', in reality proved little more accurate than the fare coming out of Hollywood.¹¹ With much of what was shown of Native American life more fitting for museum exhibits, films like Flaherty's were selectively composed to reaffirm the still current nineteenth century views of Indigenous cultures: terminally in decline, destined for extinction, and fundamentally unsuited to the vigorous demands of modernity. As Huhndorf writes: 'In the evolutionary framework [Flaherty] evoked, the primitive, however tragically, must disappear upon the arrival of the more advanced (read superior) Western world' (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 115).

Thus, at the start of the twentieth century, Native American performers found themselves on the horns of a highly uncomfortable dilemma. Cultural interest in them was at a previously unprecedented level due to the 'Indian Craze', and performance opportunities correspondingly began to open up. However, the work which was being sought, based on myths and inaccuracies about their culture, was that which was most in demand. Due to economic pressures, and the simple need to perform by those whose life was that of creatives, many had no choice but to accept work which often went against their own beliefs and ideological feelings towards it. This led to much theatre work produced at this time being derided by later critics, often without sympathetic consideration of the reasons Native Americans were compelled to participate in it. However, more recently this work has begun to be reappraised, and with a more sympathetic reading, it is now receiving something of the recognition it deserves. Finding themselves in this privileged position, many enterprising Native American artists looked to exploit the Euro-American fascination with all things Native American through, what we might term today, performative acts of 'Survivance' (Vizenor, 1994, 2008).

¹¹ A rare exception to this was the pioneering work of the Nanticoke film-maker James Young Deer, who in the early decades of the twentieth century directed films which were much more sympathetic to Native Americans (Aleiss, 2013).

2.2 Pageants

The pageant movement had steadily grown in popularity throughout the United States during the nineteenth century. These pageants, often modelled after similar community performance events in Europe – such as the *Oberammergau Passion Play* – had travelled with colonisation to the New World. Capitalizing on the hunger Americans felt for a more connected relationship with their adopted land, pageants were particularly popular on the East Coast seaboard and in the Great Lakes regions where large populations of European settlers were found. In New England, pageants had a long tradition as popular 'folk art' events, and often provided a welcome extra source of seasonal income to rural communities otherwise struggling to survive. For example, the 1913 Pageant of Portland, which appears to have been modelled according to its artistic director, Constance D'Arcy Mackay, after the British pageant at Bury St. Edmonds, was described as a collection of 'municipal drama' and 'municipal music' (D'Arcy Mackay, 1913, pp. 7-8). It was composed of short plays, musical interludes, and poetry, some by Longfellow. As Christine Reiser notes, the scale of these productions was quite breath-taking:

Typically involving no less than 200 performers and at times as many as 7,000 players, all of whom invested weeks of rehearsals and performance. ... Even in smaller communities, the performances were viewed by anywhere from 2,000 to 80,000 spectators.

(Reiser, 2009, p. 39)

As the twentieth century began, given the search for 'Americanness', love of the great outdoors, and historical yearnings for a lost Indigenous Eden, clearly this was the sort of entertainment many Americans were seeking.

But while the success of large-scale pageants can be attributed to the ongoing search for a maturity in the American psyche, other factors also played their part. One of these, probably more significant if not as conspicuously worthy in its concept, was tourism. Although the concept of a tourist 'industry' was some time off, there was already a growing realisation of the potential in attracting outsiders, and their money, as a means of economic revival for many impoverished areas of the country. Tourism had been steadily growing in popularity in America since the late 1900s, but remained something largely practiced by the more affluent members of society due to expense.

This changed significantly with the establishment of the National Parks. The first National Park was Yellowstone, which opened in 1872, and proved so successful that even opponents of the concept were won over once it became clear parks like this, 'would

attract money-spending tourists' (Nash, [1967] 2001, p. 351). Yet, debate remained over the concept of a National Park system, and it was not until 1916 that the National Park Service Organic Act was signed, and the National Parks Service founded. By the 1930s, accessibility to the National Parks had opened to an increasingly wide section of society, due to the general availability of the automobile and the herculean expansion of the highways network by the Public Works Administration (PWA) formed under the 'New Deal'. Like the PWA, other New Deal programmes, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, also insured the development of the parks' infrastructure, and better amenities awaiting visitors on their arrival.

Most pageants focused on colonial history, and although this almost always necessitated some mention of Native American contact, this was most often described from a colonist's perspective: for example, the *History of Portland Pageant's* only Indigenous content is an account of an 'Indian Massacre' in 1675 (D'Arcy Mackay, 1913, pp. 15-16). However, albeit not always prominently, many other pageants featured Native American characters and plots; such as the *Historical Pageant of Bristol* (1930), which depicts events during King Philip's War, and the *Westerle Through the Years Pageant* (1936), performed to mark the tricentenary of Westerly, Rhode Island, and portrayed the life of the Narragansett leader Queen Esther (Reiser, 2009, p. 48). Some even focused solely on Native Americans and their history, such as the 1924 *Apostle Island Indian Pageant* in Wisconsin, a two-day event which saw over 300 Indigenous locals depicting the Chippewa history of the region (Vilas County News, 1925, p. 5). Conceived in connection with local historical societies and civic organisations, many of these pageants appeared only briefly, often for just one year to celebrate a civic milestone or other foundational event: 'Pageants of the late 1920s and 1930s grew more concerned with commemorating specific historical anniversaries, more driven by theatricality, more commercially produced' (Reiser, 2009, p. 47). Given the huge casts often involved, and that the vast majority of these productions were created by the historically inclined white inhabitants of the location, most casting was similarly filled from the non-Indigenous community. However, already by the 1930s, 'no longer was it acceptable for actors in "brownface", or even non-local Native people, to portray regional Native roles' (Reiser, 2009, p. 48). Therefore, many pageants were notable for including Native Americans in performance roles which would have been unheard of in more traditional theatrical settings. For example, *Westerle Through the Years* included, 'Chief Sachem Ousa Mekin

and numerus Narragansett tribal members' (Reiser, 2009, p. 48). While it might be comforting to believe the inclusion of Native Americans was solely on ethical grounds, we should also note that the preoccupations of those producing such pageants, again who were overwhelmingly non-Native, were, 'hyper-concerned for the accuracy of detail in pageant episodes' (Reiser, 2009, p. 47).

Sometimes, however, Native Americans themselves were involved even in the creation and choice of content for pageants. For example, one of the first to develop the pageant as a means of Indigenous performance was the Penobscot performer Lucy Nicolar, who, 'discovered a level of political and financial power through staging Indian pageants' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 53). Born in Maine in 1882, Nicolar began her career early, singing, dancing, and selling Native goods to tourists. It was here that she probably began to see the potential for connecting with those that rarely mingled with Native Americans. When she worked the touring Chautauqua Circuit, under the management of the theatrical impresario Thurlow Lieurance, she adopted the name 'Princess Watahwaso', and later formed her own band of dancers and singers in the 1920s. During the mean years of the depression, she moved back to her home on Indian Island, and began to work as an activist for her community. In 1931, working among the other communities of Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, she began lobbying for a bridge to link Indian Island to the mainland, which would significantly improve the local economy.

Nicolar saw an opportunity to capitalise on her talents as a performer, and set about adapting the medium of the pageant for her own purposes. The first year she staged a relatively small-scale event, featuring a, 'melodramatic plot fusing Pocahontas and Hiawatha storylines' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 55). However, it was a production that generated, 'such attention and profit that Old Town's Chamber of Commerce and the Penobscots of Indian Island sponsored the pageant's second year' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 55). By the time of the second season, the pageant had grown into a three-day event, including the reconstruction of a Native Indian village, and the re-enactment of the Norridgewock Massacre (Darby et al., 2020, p. 55). As Darby points out, 'Nicolar's pageant received accolades and generated profit for both Native and non-Native communities' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 55).

2.3 Folklorists

That Nicolai was able to achieve her dream of founding her pageant in the 1930s is especially impressive, given that this was an era that saw perhaps the most momentous social upheaval in America's relatively short history. The Wall Street Crash, the subsequent Great Depression it ignited, and the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl, all resulted in widespread material privation for broad sections of society. At the same time, as is often the case during catastrophic social events, they also fostered a renewed introspection on what defined 'white Americanness', as many Americans, just as they had at the end of the nineteenth century, 'identified with Native peoples in ways that recast the dynamics of American expansion' (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 64). Among artists, this searching resulted in a greater appreciation for simpler art forms through 'primitivism'; an idealistic approach that hoped to obtain a more holistic and harmonious existence with the universe. The century's fascination with Native American culture now subtly shifted in its focus; from a desire to practically master the land through the adoption of Indigenous ways, to one that centred on the appropriation of Indigenous beliefs, spirituality, and artistic practices to achieve an inner nirvana. While capitalist materialism established under Theodor Roosevelt was still seen as underpinning the American experience, the growing importance of more humanist socialist policies – which would contribute greatly to the election of Theodor's liberalist fifth cousin Franklin in 1933 – became increasingly influential. Often these sentiments found expression in 'traditional' and 'folk' art forms, and at one point or another in the 1930s, all sectors of the art world felt their influence. American literature saw books such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and photography saw the publication of Ansel Adams's first book of western images *Taos Pueblo* (1930). While music saw not only the continued popularity of Jazz – already well established since the 1920s – but also a growing interest by classical composers in homegrown ethnic forms, such as Aaron Copland in his compositions *El Salón México* (1936) and *Billy the Kid* (1938). Avant-garde creative movements of the period, particularly those of literature, music, and the fine arts, much of it focused on Native American and Mesoamerican cultural forms, flourished in places like Taos and Santa Fe in New Mexico, through the work of homegrown writers such as Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Hunter Austin, and Joseph Henry Sharp, among the most celebrated, while from further afield came D.H. Lawrence and Dorothy Brett. More nomadically, the artist Elbridge Ayer Burbank roamed the Southwest painting the Native

Americans he encountered, '[seeking] to salvage their identities in thousands of paintings and drawings' (Padget, 2006, p. 7).

In these turbulent early decades of the twentieth century, there began to emerge a growing body of more professional Native American artists who were no longer willing to tolerate the status quo of their distorted depiction to satisfy the Euro-American gaze. Often of mixed-race, which afforded them access to better education and fostered a more aspirational outlook, they formed a generation who lived a fluid existence between both Euro-American and tribal societies. One of the most fascinating people to bring the above elements together was the Chickasaw performance artist Mary Frances Thompson, better known under her stage name Te Ata.¹² As her biographers, Green and Troutman, explain:

Te Ata encapsulated this new form of fluid Indian identity, a cosmopolitan Indianness couched in modernity, agency, and authority, an identity homed in urban migration and entry into a burgeoning mass-entertainment industry in the United States.

(Green & Troutman, 2002, p. 298)

Born in 1895 to a Chickasaw father and a non-native mother, Te Ata grew up in the town of Emit in the Chickasaw Nation, which, before Oklahoma statehood, was then in the Indian Territory. She first attended Bloomfield Academy, a Chickasaw boarding school for girls which, unlike so many at the time, sought not to force students to assimilate into Western society, but rather, through remaining true to their Native American identity, be equal to it (Cobb-Greetham, 2007). Later, she studied liberal arts at the Oklahoma College for Women, where her talent for performance was spotted and nurtured by Frances Davis, the college's head teacher of 'drama and expression' (Green, 2002, p. 34). Originally destined for a teaching career, after spending some time on the gruelling Chautauqua Circuit – again, like Nicolai, under the management of Thurlow Lieurance – and a year at the prestigious Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Te Ata felt confident enough in her abilities to try and break into the mainstream theatre. Encouraged again by Davis, she moved to New York, and was soon landing small parts on Broadway.

But much of what Te Ata encountered in the theatre system at that time was at odds with her personal, cultural, and artistic sensibilities. The clichéd roles she was forced to audition for almost exclusively typecast her to conform to the expectations of Euro-American theatre producers. In particular, her looks ignited the fetishist desire for

¹² 'Te Ata' has no meaning in Chickasaw, and the reasons for Thompson adopting it are obscure.

the seduction of the 'Indian Princess', blinding casting agents to considering her in more imaginative roles. As Green, writes: 'She turned down offers, mainly through her Chautauqua contacts, because she would not present Indian people as stereotypes or in burlesque. She wanted to entertain and edify; she would present Indian culture artistically and authentically or not at all' (Green, 2002, p. 69).

For Native American performers like Te Ata, who refused to compromise their cultural and personal dignity by portraying stereotypes and clichés, the opportunities for finding work in mainstream theatre during the early decades of the twentieth century were virtually non-existent. At this time, the majority of mainstage entertainment – as was similarly the case in the movies of the period – continued to depict Native Americans tailored for general audience consumption; as stock characters, adjuncts to plot devices, and, if you were a woman, as sex objects. A few courageous performers were able to navigate the expectations of Broadway, and Hollywood, better than others. For example, the Penobscot performer Mary Alice Nelson, under her stage name Molly Spotted Elk, achieved considerable success in musicals, cabaret shows, and movies, but only by embracing the stereotypes through necessity, and by negotiating, 'her personal and artistic integrity within an exploitative economic system' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 57). Nelson once wrote: 'I am an Injun in the flesh parade. Feel terrible about being bare and walking around, but I must work' (McBride, 1995, p. 136).

While the homogenised 'Injun' Nelson was forced to portray may have satisfied Euro-American expectations, it of course failed to recognise the individual tribes, histories, or cultural traits of Native America. To a performer like Te Ata, with such a strong sense of personal individuality and pride as a member of the Chickasaw Nation, this was a situation that was quite unacceptable. Her initial experience, growing up as a mixed-race child in a land that was to be re-defined by the federal government through the imposition of Oklahoma's statehood, must surely have defined her dedication to preserving Native American tribal identity and refusing to play a part, literally as an actor, in distorting it.

Fortunately, she had already developed some solo performance pieces while at college. These were based on Native American stories told to her by her father, as well as material she requested from the Smithsonian (Green, 2002, p. 52). She continued to perform these regularly to support herself while attempting to follow an acting career, and after a few years, she had acquired a staunch group of enthusiasts for her work. As

Green explains: 'The years 1923–27 were a transition period for Te Ata. Her commitment to the theater was weakening while her desire to do more Indian programs was intensifying' (Green, 2002, p. 74). Among those who she could count as patrons were the future First Lady, and conspicuous advocate of independent young women everywhere, Elenore Roosevelt. Many of Te Ata's first performances took place in the homes of 'housemothers' like Roosevelt: wealthy matriarchs, who, 'provided encouragement and support but even more important, financial assistance, by hiring the young women to entertain in their homes at dinner parties' (Green, 2002, pp. 89-90).

Critics of 'folklorists' like Te Ata often point to the fact that they appear to be continuing to feed their white benefactor's seemingly insatiable appetite to consume the nineteenth century's image of the Native American as 'primitive'. That, although through their Native American ancestry they may be better informed and more sympathetic to Native American concerns and social issues, they rarely give voice to these directly in their work. They are seen rather as preferring to perform in accordance with their audience's more nostalgic and felicitous notions of the 'noble savage', the 'vanishing Indian', and particularly in the case of female performers, the 'Indian Princess'. While to some extent such criticism is understandable – agreed, there is a nostalgia inherent to Te Ata's work – it is also somewhat unrealistic and idealised rhetoric on the part of critics. For one thing, as Green stresses, '[Te Ata] was not, however, a political activist; she was temperamentally unsuited to participating in prolonged political discussions. ... She was an artist, and she felt that artists were obliged to practice their art' (Green, 2002, pp. 144-145). Even if her personality had been more inclined toward strident activism, it would hardly have been constructive for someone in her position to launch into an oratory on the illegality of imposed Oklahoma statehood on Indian Territory before a soirée consisting of the wives of New York's politicians, bankers, and industrialists. Instead, rather than critiquing the work of artists like Te Ata as missed didactic opportunities, her performances are again perhaps better considered as acts of 'Survivance', which Vizenor saw as, 'an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry' (Vizenor, 1994, p. vii). As Green and Troutman suggest, 'Te Ata scripted her life as she scripted her performances; she was in control or took control, even when she appeared to accede to the persuasive forces of public demand' (Green & Troutman, 2002, p. 298). While not overtly political in the content of her work, it is impossible to believe

that someone as clearly erudite and socially engaged as Te Ata, did not use the location of these events to privately educate those present on what was really happening on reservations and of the lives of the people she had encountered there. As Green and Troutman suggest:

Rather than see Te Ata (and her fellow performers)—as early-twentieth-century scholars might have done—as the inevitable product of assimilation policy, the sad end result of massive culture loss, the downside of urbanization, and thus the culturally marginal antithesis of authenticity, we can see her as a remarkable woman who stood in the vanguard for modern Indians.

(Green & Troutman, 2002, p. 298)

For a solo performer like Te Ata, the 1930s, with its increased interest in 'folk art', and its intimate connection with place, came as a golden opportunity for her to advance her career. She was now able to abandon her stage acting – with the rather reckless finality of handing in her Equity card – and re-invent herself as a full-time professional storyteller, or 'folklorist'. Models for what could be achieved in this field had existed for some time, with several female performance artists already having carved highly successful careers as solo folklore performers. Perhaps the most famous being Mohawk performer Pauline Johnson (1861 – 1913), known on stage as Tekahionwake, and whose career Te Ata's often mirrors.

Te Ata's newfound success led to an almost continuous run of bookings during the 1930s. Given the touring nature of most of this work, Te Ata, for a Native American woman of her time, became remarkably well-travelled. She had already acquired touring experience from her time spent on the Chautauqua circuit, having by the mid-1920s travelled the length and breadth of the continent – at a time when many Native Americans still lacked the vote. As Green points out: 'As one of the few Indians on the chautauqua circuit at a time when most Americans probably had never seen an Indian, Te Ata had an unusually rich touring experience' (Green, 2002, p. 54). Now, as a professional folklorist, Te Ata travelled extensively again throughout the United States and internationally. She visited and performed in places as far removed as Scandinavia, England, and Peru. Her appearances also included several at the White House – again arranged by Elenore Roosevelt – often before the President, and on one occasion, even before King George VI (Green, 2002, p. 210).

During her travels, Te Ata continued to visit reservations, and to study the Native American customs and stories she encountered. While she often used this as a means to gather material for her work first-hand, she was sure to gain the blessing of those to whom the work originally belonged. Green writes:

Te Ata was also an explorer. ... Geography was often of secondary importance to her. She loved venturing into new settings not so much to understand how things worked or developed *but how something stood in relation to the things around it* [emphasis added]. These were the things that Native Americans had been observing and recounting for countless generations.

(Green, 2002, p. 180)

Indeed, as a Native American storyteller, Te Ata's interest in the relationship between the events of her stories and their environmental setting appears highly reminiscent of Basso's description of Western Apache 'place-making'. For example, Te Ata was frequently in demand to perform in more environmentally distinct settings, the most notable being the Bear Mountain National Park in New York state. Bear Mountain was opened in 1913 as part of the efforts to preserve the historic area surrounding the Hudson River palisades. Here, situated only fifty miles from Manhattan, Te Ata was frequently engaged to educate groups of New York City children on Native American traditions, customs, and ceremonies. The first of these events occurred in 1929, and as Green recounts:

The camps were set in and around the palisades overlooking the Hudson River; most of the landmarks had Indian names, many dating from the time when the Iroquois and affiliated tribes lived in the area. The names were there but not the Indians. Te Ata could represent these tribes in educating the city kids in Indian culture.

(Green, 2002, p. 84)

While this rather compromised her attempts to remain faithful to tribal integrity – ultimately, the routines she performed consisted of a mixture of traditional material from various tribes – it certainly proved lucrative at a time of intense hardship, and afforded an opportunity for impressionable minds, that might otherwise never encounter real Native Americans, to consume Indigenous material presented in a more traditional, sensitive form.

Significantly, on these occasions, Te Ata incorporated 'performative' elements of the places at which she presented her work. As Green again writes:

Sometimes camps would join together at a central site at Bear Mountain amid the pines overlooking the Hudson River far below. A campfire was built, and more than two hundred squirming kids would sit cross-legged in a big semicircle around Te Ata.

(Green, 2002, p. 86)

In this carefully composed natural environment, timed to the rhythm of the sunset, Te Ata would attempt to capture the 'spirit of place' in her performance. She writes: 'As my voice and the drumbeat died away and I sank down with lowered head before the flickering fire, there was a moment of almost reverent hush' (Green, 2002, p. 86). Even if the material originated far from its site of performance, there were times when Te Ata would choose to perform a particular piece if it seemed apt to do so. One of her favourite pieces was a Navajo chant, which she performed at Bear Mountain:

You see, I am alive.
You see, I stand in good relation to the earth.
You see, I stand in good relation to the gods.
You see, I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful.
You see, I stand in good relation to you.
You see, I am alive. I am alive!

(Green, 2002, p. 86)

Again, such performances seem to invoke the same effect as 'place-making', in that Te Ata appears to be not only giving voice to her own existence, but also embodying the ancestors that once lived on Bear Mountain: acting as a conduit to the past, the environment, and those there to bear witness. Even more powerfully, her repeated chant of 'I am alive!' must have come as quite a contrast to the usual depictions the children at these performances would have encountered of Native Americans from books or at the movies. The informality of the location clearly enhanced this: 'Then the children swarmed around her, wanting to pull her braids to see if they were real and touch her buckskin dress and comment or ask questions about her stories and about her own people in Oklahoma, the Chickasaws' (Green, 2002, p. 86). It is doubtful if such a tactile, and demystifying moment of location-based performance would have occurred in a conventional theatre. Such was her impact in the area, in 1931 Elenore Roosevelt was influential in having a small lake at Bear Mountain re-named Lake Te Ata, and even presided over its christening ceremony (Green, 2002, p. 153).

2.4 Symphonic Dramas

While Te Ata and others worked to carve their Native American performance niche in the folklorist tradition, in the 1930s there also emerged a 'new genre of theater' in the United States, termed 'symphonic drama' (Bentley, 2012, p. ii). A uniquely American phenomenon, it is almost forgotten today, which is regrettable, for although not envisioned as such, symphonic drama holds an interesting position in Native American performance history.

From this distance of time, as with the pageant movement, it is hard to appreciate the scale that symphonic dramas managed to attain in the realms of popular entertainment; Paul Green, credited as the driving force behind the concept, wrote at least fifteen such dramas alone (Bentley, 2012, p. 65). Although drawing their inspiration from the pageant model, symphonic dramas were more lavish theatrical constructs. Combining music, dance, drama, and local history, the dramas were performed in large, often purpose-built outdoor amphitheatres, and while they reached the height of their popularity during the 1930s and the Great Depression, many still continue today. Often dismissed as more a manifestation of amateur theatre than serious dramatic endeavour, analysis of symphonic drama rarely features in academic studies on the development of the American theatre, let alone that of Native American performance. This is somewhat curious as many symphonic dramas, including three of the earliest and most popular – *The Lost Colony*, *Unto These Hills*, and *The Ramona Pageant*, all of which are still with us today – prominently feature Native Americans. For many years these dramas appear to have been dismissed as harmless displays of pageantry, or vilified for continuing to present stereotyped caricatures of Native Americans to white audiences. As we will see, some criticism of the movement is indeed justified, but it is also important to note that at the height of their popularity, for many thousands of people across the United States, symphonic dramas represented their only encounter with Native American concerns. Moreover, many of the subjects they depicted were highly controversial and rarely approached even on the liberal mainstages of New York, let alone in regional theatres. The topics they covered included colonial discrimination (*The Lost Colony*), forced eviction (*Unto These Hills* and *The Trail of Tears*), and even interracial marriage (*The Ramona Pageant*).

While pageants remained rather amateurish and homespun 'folk art' affairs, written and performed by regional theatre groups, historical societies, or dedicated

entrepreneurs like Nicolar, the more professionally produced symphonic dramas they inspired came to attract a more serious group of artists. Savvy left-of-centre playwrights could see in the medium of symphonic drama not only a potential for lucrative financial success, but the opportunity to exercise a freer artistic license than on the more conventional, and conservatively censored, stages of Broadway. Consequently, symphonic dramas attracted greater audiences in rural areas than even pageants, where the opportunity to witness professionally written and produced plays was a considerable novelty.

Arguably, the most famous symphonic drama is *The Lost Colony*. Produced in 1937, it has performed annually at the purpose-built Waterside Theatre at Manteo, North Carolina, ever since – with only short breaks during World War II and the Covid pandemic – and is the second oldest symphonic drama still performed.¹³ Conceived for local consumption – a pageant along similar storylines was already in production by 1925¹⁴ – *The Lost Colony* was commissioned in celebration of the founding of the Roanoke Colony in 1587, and was originally only intended to last till the end of the summer (The Lost Colony, n.d.). Nevertheless, the play's future tourist potential was soon recognised, and, according to its produces, the Roanoke Island Historical Association, the 'grandfather' of symphonic dramas has clearly proved popular with those far beyond its principality. In total, it has played to approximately three million visitors, 'from all walks of life' (The Lost Colony, n.d.).

Prior to *The Lost Colony*, Paul Green had already experienced considerable success on Broadway, even receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *In Abraham's Bosom* (1927). Green considered many terms to describe this new theatrical endeavour before settling on symphonic drama, which he considered conveyed best, 'a "sounding-together" in the true meaning of the Greek term' (Green, 1949, p. 179). For Green, symphonic drama seemed, 'to be fitted to the needs of the American People ... It is wide enough, free enough, and among the people cheap enough for their joy and popular use' (Green, 1949, p. 183). Clearly, Green's concept of symphonic drama fits into a wider movement during the inter-war years towards the formation of socio-political 'people's theatre' in the United States (The Lost Colony, n.d.). Jewish, artistic, and with a love of music and communism, Green

¹³ The oldest symphonic drama is *The Ramona Pageant*, adapted from a novel by Helen Hunt Jackson, and first performed in Hemet, California in 1923. It is, in fact, a pageant, as it pre-dates the symphonic drama title given the movement by Paul Green.

¹⁴ Celebrations had been held regularly by the Roanoke Colony Memorial Association from 1894, later developing into a more recognisable pageant (Downing, 2013, pp. 41-43).

was inevitably drawn toward Brechtian ideology, both socio-politically and aesthetically, and was an acquaintance of Brecht's collaborators Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya (Avery, 2001, p. 258). Indeed, 'epic' theatre practices clearly underpinned the conception of symphonic drama, which combined, 'all the available elements in modern theatrical art' (Green, 1949, p. 179). Perhaps this is most recognisable in Green's use of chorus and narration in *The Lost Colony*, features that link the classical stages of antiquity with those of Brecht, and which would appear in many other dramas to come.

While ideologically Green may have conceived symphonic drama as a means of breaking free from the commercialism of Broadway and developing a more socially accessible theatre form, more pragmatic reasons may also have enticed many like him to experiment with 'people's theatre' of this kind. For example, during the depression years of the 1930s, the American theatre industry faced particularly severe privation. As is so often the case, the arts were an area of social life looked upon as an expendable luxury when so many people were staggering on the poverty line. As audiences dwindled, many theatres were forced to close, and countless actors, dancers, vaudevillians, and all manner of other performance artists, had little choice but to either abandon the theatre, or, as we have seen with Nicolar and Te Ata, make their own luck.¹⁵ However, Roosevelt's 'New Deal' was not entirely oblivious to the importance of the arts in times of crisis and austerity. In fact, far from being a mere luxury, artistic endeavours were seen as morale boosting, and a means of mobilizing the now vast numbers of unemployed into some form of profitable activity. For example, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was established in 1935 as a relief measure to employ artists, writers, directors, and theatre workers.

At a time when belts were tightening around the waists of mainstream producers, the lure of 'community' projects like *The Lost Colony*, and the FTP funding they could attract, may have further enticed Green to break from the traditional theatrical mould. It was also no disadvantage that the story of the lost colony of Roanoke happened to underline one of President Roosevelt's pet obsessions: unwavering stoicism in the face of material privation. Roosevelt considered stories such as Roanoke's to be important, as they represented parables, 'from which we may draw inspiration and fortify our hearts' (Senter, 2007, p. 279). While there is no doubt Green's design of a symphonic drama like *The Lost Colony* arose mostly from artistic consideration, it also seems purpose built to

¹⁵ Theatre was increasingly coming under threat to retain audiences from the motion picture industry, and many star actors were now earning a living in the movies rather than on stage. It was also cheaper to attend a movie theatre than a live show.

exemplify one of the FTP's prime objectives: 'The far-reaching purpose is the establishment of theatres so vital to community life that they will continue to function after the program of this Federal Project is complete' (Flanagan, 1935, p. 1).

On the 18 August 1937, the 350th anniversary of the birth of Virginia Dare – believed to be the first Western child born on American soil¹⁶ – Roosevelt travelled to Roanoke to attend a production of *The Lost Colony*. In his address prior to the performance, Roosevelt mentions the Native Americans that had been displaced by the colonists only once – somewhat of an insensitivity to Native American concerns, given that during this very period Te Ata was performing on his lawn at the White House. Clearly, this was not to be an occasion to consider the fortunes of the original Indigenous inhabitants of Roanoke, similarly 'vanished', too deeply.

The Lost Colony tells the story of the first British colonists to the New World, under the urging of Sir Walter Raleigh, and their attempts to establish a colony on Roanoke Island off the coast of what is today North Carolina. Tragically, what begins as a friendly encounter with the local Secotan Indians, deteriorates through a succession of blunders and unnecessary brutality on the part of the settlers, into hostility. By the time the third party of settlers arrive, the situation has become one of outright warfare. The exact events that transpired on the island after the colonists were left alone remains one of conjecture, but in Green's play, the colonists, stranded without support from England due to the war with Spain, are gradually being picked off by the Secotans in retaliation for the crimes their predecessors committed. When the Spanish arrive, the colonists, starving and with no means to defend themselves, are faced with a stark choice; either surrender to the Spanish or seek sanctuary with the Secotans. They choose to risk all with the Secotans, and perhaps a 'noble' death in the wilderness, as opposed to subjugation under the Spanish. The play ends with the Secotans, magnanimous toward their now defeated former foes, leading the colonists away to safety, and into legend.

The Lost Colony was one of the first, and most widely seen, stage productions to explore in depth the early interactions between colonists and Native Americans, and the questions it poses about the role of place in Native American-themed theatre are surprisingly complex. Obviously, it would be hard to describe *The Lost Colony* as a Native

¹⁶ Some modern scholarship suggests mainland America to have been visited far earlier than previously thought, probably by Norse travellers. According to the Vinland Sagas, Snorri Thorfinnsson was the first child born of European decent, somewhere along what is now generally understood to be the Western seaboard of the North American continent, in the early ninth century (Vésteinsson, 2000).

American play, yet the Indigenous characters here, or more correctly the attitudes of white colonists towards them, make profound statements about how they are viewed on stage and in accepted history. Much of this is of interest here, as it is linked to the location in which the play is performed.

For example, we see that within the narrative of the text, the Native Americans depicted in *The Lost Colony* fall heavily in line with the image cultivated of them in the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to the concepts of 'home'. They are initially presented by Green as naïve and gullible innocents, exploited by the settlers, and, significantly, so 'at home' with the wilderness as to effectively prove the personification of it. While the Secotans are shown as 'hostiles' at times, they are depicted as historically removed from the present and consigned to the past, and Green thus renders these Native Americans as 'safe' through confining them in historical place. As such, their disappearance along with the colonists can be seen as an extension of the, 'nineteen-century literature of vanishing' (Brooks, 2005, p. 233). Rather than eradicated by the colonists, they appear tamed, like the landscape of the wilderness they personify. Ultimately, despite their former hostility, again like the vanquished wilderness, they prove supportive, generous, 'noble savages' when confronted by overwhelming assault from the outside world. Green's literary depiction of the place of Roanoke is benign and penitent in the wake of man's supremacy. In short, place in *The Lost Colony* functions to make Native Americans a part of the natural landscape: a landscape idealised as one that conforms to Euro-American imperial aspirations. Here, when Green speaks 'with' the land, he is very much using it like a musical score – a device that will help fashion the narrative he wishes to hear told by his play.

The play is performed at the Waterside Theatre, situated on the Fort Raleigh National Historic Site (Binkley & Davis, 2003). Established in 1941, the site is administered by the National Park Service, and currently covers an area of 355.45 acres. The area is obviously one of extreme importance to those interested in celebrating the foundation of the United States, and although not as well visited as other similar sites, such as Plymouth Rock, at its inception it already recorded 79,049 visitors. By 2023 this had grown to 263,571, a rise largely due to increased accessibility to the region (National Park Service, 'NPS Stats'). Its popularity amongst the historically inclined is also due to it being a site where a 'freedom colony' was established briefly for new emancipated slaves at the end of the Civil War (National Parks Service, 'The Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke

Island').¹⁷ In contrast, while this is a place of pilgrimage for those whose lineage dates from the founding of the States, and even for those African Americans whose road to freedom began here, for Native Americans, it marks a physical spot on the map where 350 years of suffering would begin. Because of this, it is a site that arouses great pain and trauma for many. While it is unlikely this was in the minds of many of those who paid to see *The Lost Colony* when it was first performed, today it is impossible to watch the play without such thoughts as the story unfolds before us.

The design of the Watershed Theatre dictates the message that the place of Roanoke reveals to us. It is positioned with its back to the bay, which means that the audience is given an unremitting vista of the ocean beyond. This effectively creates a cyclorama of nothingness – the audience's backs turned permanently to the 'wilderness' of the continent stretching behind them, and the 'home' of the Native Americans associated with it. This suggests that the focus is not the mainland continent, and the Native Americans that inhabit it, but rather the far-off and invisible land of England, from which the salvation of 'civilisation' will inevitably arrive, should be the main focus of the audience.

The Lost Colony draws on local knowledge of the myths and legends associated with the place that is Roanoke. Roanoke is depicted as mysterious, apparently engulfing people and making them disappear and become invisible, while at the same time, at least as far as its white colonists are concerned, raising them to the level of martyrs in the foundation of America. The theory that the colonists eventually assimilated with the local Indians, their descendants living on with them, embraces the early twentieth-century desire to find 'Americanness', and the romantic belief that to become more at one with their new home of America, colonists might adopt Native American sensibilities. Well known folklore surrounding the colonists' fate in the area, suggests that they 'went native' – as we have already seen a popular theme at the time of the play's writing – and became part of the Secotan tribe. Stories circulated that tribes had been found along the Eastern seaboard with fair hair and blue eyes, which led to the belief that the colonists had intermarried with the Secotans who offered them salvation. Although Green does not show this in his play, he hints at the possibility of such unions through the character of Old Tom, who apparently has taken a Native American woman as his wife (Green, [1937]

¹⁷ There is no museum dedicate to Native American history in the region (Downtown Roanoke, 'Museums', n.d.).

2001, p. 117). Significantly, in the legend it is the white colonists' traits that are preserved, suggesting that, while adopting Indigenous ways of life may be a means of establishing a distinct 'Americanness', physically, it is the traits of the white race that will continue to show their dominance. Clearly, for the Native American characters, doomed regardless of English or Spanish colonisation, assimilation is suggested as their only means of survival; a conclusion, as we will see later, which was adopted by future Native Americans in the Carolina region.

The supreme reign of the symphonic dramas was not to last long. In 1939, in a foreshadowing of the Joseph McCarthy era 'witch hunts' of the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee began various investigations of the FTP, especially targeting productions where 'community' trod a very thin line with 'communism'. Also, the cultural relevance of arts funding was again under attack in times of cuts and budgetary considerations, with one congressman showing little sympathy for the closure of the project: 'Culture! What the Hell – Let 'em have a pick and shovel' (Bentley, 1988, p. 340). Ultimately, the project was abolished, 'in part amid accusations of political bias that would metastasize into the Red Scare' (Pierce, 2021). A great deal rested on the success of the FTP, including plans to revitalise the regional theatre network across the country, and the creation of a welcoming and liberal incubator for the birth of an avant-garde theatre movement. When the FTP finally folded, and federal funding was re-focused on subsidising the safer bet of Broadway, it severely stunted the growth of regional and alternative theatre in the United States: a nutritional deficiency from which they have never fully recovered.

Funding was not the only factor leading to the FTP's demise. Competition from other forms of mass entertainment, such as the cinema and the new phenomenon of television, also contributed as they found their way into the most rural of communities, while conscription during WWII also resulted in a lack of able-bodied participants for live dramas. All contributed to the end of Green's dream that, 'the true theatre must live and be among the people' (Green, 1949, p. 183). The vast majority of symphonic drama productions, like the colonists of Roanoke, disappeared without trace. Only those with independent funding, or that had proven themselves popular enough to remain viable, survived. *The Lost Colony*, for example, aided by Roosevelt's continued presidential patronage and patriotic celebration of the conquest by civilisation over the wilderness, managed to soldier on while other dramas folded. But even for *The Lost Colony*, and the

other symphonic dramas that survived, it would be a focus on tourism that would provide their salvation from oblivion.

2.5 Cultural Tourism

At the end of World War II, the United States experienced a new surge of optimism, self-belief, and patriotism. This expressed itself in many ways, such as the baby boom, unprecedented economic growth, and condemnation of anything considered 'un-American' in activity. But perhaps nowhere more stealthily did this renewed sense of self-confidence find expression than in the continued, and quite phenomenal, expansion of national tourism.

Throughout America, the pre-war popularity for tourism expanded in the post-war years exponentially, as travel destinations were made all the more accessible by an increase in middle-class affluence, leisure time, and cheap air travel. Not surprisingly, many more rural areas in America, previously struggling to achieve subsistence, looked to tourism – something that could now be called a profession in its own right – and their local historical resources that might attract it, as a means of more regular and sustainable income. Correspondingly, many of the existing amateur festivals and pageants now began to adopt more commercial outlooks. For example, the previously free Indian Festival at Ticonderoga, Lake Champlain, New York, which had grown steadily since its creation in 1931 into a full-scale annual pageant, began charging an entrance fee in 1946 (Carr, 1948, p. 156).

Another regional organisation that recognised the commercial potential of tourism was the Western North Carolina Associated Communities (WNCAC) of Cherokee, North Carolina. The University of North Carolina's Matthew Thompson, who worked with the organisation as an intern during his doctoral research, notes that, 'It was after the war that Cherokee tourism grew from a small-scale operation catering mostly to adventurers and elites to a mass destination for the American middle class in the 1950s and 1960s' (Thompson, 2009, p. 5). The formation of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park – the dedication of which in 1940 provided another opportunity for Roosevelt to extol the potential exploitation of the historical resources of the Carolina region – had already led to renewed prosperity in the area, and with the increase in post-war tourism, the WNCAC saw the potential to capitalise on this: 'From the beginning the WNCAC's agenda focused on tourism by developing the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains National

Park' (Thompson, 2009, p. 34). Then as now, disagreement over the pros and cons of regular tourism were many, but 'cultural tourism' – which might be defined as traveling to sites of historical significance for edification rather than just leisure and entertainment – was seen as a worthier form of recreational enterprise than just vacationing. As Dr Greg Richards, Professor of Placemaking and Marketing at Breda University, points out:

These authentic experiences were also usually seen as encompassing high culture, or traditional local culture, while specifically avoiding popular and contemporary culture. ... Cultural tourism, because of its supposed connections with a search for authenticity and meaning, is also usually seen as a more serious form of tourism.

(Richards, 2007, p. 4)

With the natural beauty of the Smokies providing a healthy attraction, the potential in luring culturally inclined visitors passing through Cherokee by its Native American history seemed almost irresistible. As Thompson again notes: 'Cherokee cultural distinctiveness and non-Indian curiosity in that difference guaranteed that among the possible varieties and themes of tourism the reservation would develop as a destination for "cultural tourism"' (Thompson, 2009, p. 4).

When considering how to capitalise on the tourist boom, the WNCAC looked at the financially healthy *The Lost Colony* in the east of the state as something of an ideal blueprint to 'emulate' (Thompson, 2009, p. 40). The leadership of the WNCAC was derived from those outside of Cherokee ancestry – and, indeed, non-Native American altogether – as they had mainly relocated to the North Carolina from other areas (Thompson, 2009, p. 35). Therefore, they set about creating the Cherokee Historical Association (CHA) to oversee the development of tourism in the area based on its history, the centrepiece of which would be a new and original symphonic drama about the Cherokee Nation. The tourist potential of the location was clearly the reason behind the play's genesis, as it was created for, 'the specific purpose of telling the story of the Eastern Band of Cherokees to the great numbers of tourists who annually pass through their town' (Hayes, 1982, p. 109). In fact, the realisation of the potential for staging theatrical productions in the area can be traced back to the success of earlier local pageants as popular forms of entertainment. These included the Fall Indian Festival in 1914, and, perhaps more influentially, a large-scale pageant, *The Spirit of the Great Smokies*, in 1935 (Thompson, 2009, p. 4). As such, 'The Drama', as the new production would come to be

known, can be seen as, '[belonging] to an established tradition in mountain communities of performing Cherokee history for visitors' (Denson, 2017, p. 139).

Naturally enough, the CHA first approached Paul Green to write the play, who was resident at the time at the University of North Carolina. But he was, 'not interested in working with the Cherokee material' (Thompson, 2009, p. 40). Instead, Green proposed Sam Selden, a colleague with the local theatre troupe the Carolina Players, take ownership of the project. In turn, Selden proposed a recent UNC graduate student, Kermit Hunter, to write the play.

Already in his 40s and with scant professional theatre work to his name, Hunter had little to recommend him for the CHA project beyond Selden's endorsement. Born in McDowell County, West Virginia, in 1910, he graduated from Ohio State University in 1931, but it was not until after World War II – where he gained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and was awarded the Legion of Merit – that Hunter, drawing on the assistance of the GI Bill, chose to follow a professional theatre career. Furthermore, like the members of the CHA, Hunter had no ancestral connection with the Cherokee, or for that matter, any other Native American affiliation. In fact, apart from his studies at UNC and some work with the Carolina Players, Hunter, as a Virginian, had few ties at all with the Cherokee lands he would be expected to immortalise.

The result of Hunter's labours would be *Unto These Hills*, a play which, while a symphonic drama in design, is also a lasting monument to cultural tourism as grand theatrical enterprise. However, at first glance, it is easy to be disappointed with the play, and its text has been the target of considerable criticism. For example, Andrew Denson in his review of it, writes:

In its narrative, the drama celebrated Cherokee assimilation, employing language that strongly echoed that of termination advocates. Both the play and the policy belonged to a Cold War American culture that offered little room for the persistence of Indian communities as distinct peoples and self-governing nations.

(Denson, 2017, p. 136)

More positively, *Unto These Hills*, unlike *The Lost Colony*, does at least attempt to focus on telling Cherokee history, and specifically the events leading up to the 'Trail of Tears', principally the signing of the Treaty of New Echota in 1835. While far from being the only tribal nation to suffer under federal policies, the various acts committed against the Cherokee and their homelands would form a favourite subject for many dramatists.

Doubtless this is due in part to the particularly well documented accounts of the hardships to befall the Cherokee as a result: the tribal schisms enflamed by the federal Government while still in the East, the ensuing tortures endured on the Trail of Tears, and the Cherokee's further subjugation in the Western territories through a succession of devastating land acts, to name only a few. Such events naturally lend themselves to dramatisation.

However, the play becomes problematic largely due to the pragmatic approach Hunter adopted in order to meet his brief from the CHA. For example, he needed to create a play accessible to a wider audience than just local Cherokee Native Americans interested in their own history, or even the interests of the CHA. More importantly, he needed to create a play that could also embrace the interests of the largely white vacationers it would perform before on mass. Therefore, for the sake of popular appeal, he needed to extricate and simplify a storyline from the complex and potentially contentious political issues surrounding Cherokee sovereignty over their ancestral lands in the East. To further complicate matters, the play also needed to be told in a context relevant to the present day 1950s. To achieve this, he aligned the story with the more contemporary themes of the Cold War era: principally, American patriotism and the burgeoning civil rights movement. A stance, given the political and social climate, on considerably firmer ground politically and commercially. Moreover, due to his lack of familiarity with Native American history, but his personal experience as an ex-Naval Officer and a recent graduate from a Southern state university, doubtless Hunter would have felt more comfortable with this approach. President Truman had recently abolished segregation in the Armed forces, raising the subject of civil rights to a hitherto unheard-of level of concern within a section of society – i.e. the military – not known for its progressive views on equality. While the Cold War, which called on Americans to demonstrate their loyalty to their country in increasingly visible displays of staunch patriotism, was constantly in the headlines. Clearly, these themes would prove more accessible to mass audiences than a dramatic exploration of the dusty issues surrounding the alleged illegal crushing of the Cherokee Constitution under the boot of Western expansionism.

Regrettably, there appears to have been little prior discussion on the part of Hunter, or indeed, on the part of anyone, with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), about the production, its choice of themes, or the appropriateness of its

ideological stance. This was also evident in the choice of its performance location. As with *The Lost Colony*, a purpose built venue would be constructed for *Unto These Hills* – The Mountainside Theatre – situated conveniently at the entrance to the Smokie Mountain National Park: the main road leading to the national park, affording the opportunity for tapping into an already established tourist artery. As such, the site for the Mountainside Theatre appears to have been chosen purely for its aesthetic, and commercial logistical suitability, as opposed to any specific cosmological or historical significance to the Cherokee: 'It was a natural hollow sloping up from the creek where the mountains themselves would be a part of the scenery and would serve to shut out the sights and sounds of civilization, making the illusion of another time and people complete' (Simpson et al., 1956, p. 26). In other words, a site that, for all intents and purposes, functions in its exclusion of place as thoroughly as a conventional theatre does, and I shall return to this topic later in chapter four.

Similarly, when it came to writing the play and the choice of the material it would present, the only documented 'research' undertaken appears to have been provided via the reservation school:

In the winter of 1947, Mary Chiltoskey; Sam Gilliam, principal of the reservation and the Cherokee school; and Irma Mittelberg, music teacher at Cherokee, met to list possible episodes from Cherokee history which might be successfully used in an outdoor drama. Mary remembers listing several ideas from stories and information she had collected since arriving in Cherokee in 1942.

(Galloway, 1991, p. 16)

Given such license, Hunter appears to have been free to include, or more often *exclude*, any material based on his requirements to write a play equal in its commercial effectiveness to *The Lost Colony*. In fairness, the script which Hunter ultimately produced was shown to the EBCI tribal council, and some revision did take place when they complained that Hunter, 'took liberties with tribal history' (Denson, 2017, p. 141). But as Denson points out, 'Selden insisted that conveying the "spirit of the truth" in a popular entertainment required a certain amount of manipulation of historical fact' (Denson, 2017, p. 41). Ultimately, Selden and Hunter were going to be the ones that decided what *Unto These Hills* would say about the Cherokee, or, as importantly, about the federal involvement in their history, not the EBCI. For the CHA, where tourism was concerned, other factors had to be taken into consideration rather than providing a stringent

theatrical examination of the events that surrounded the removal of the Cherokee from their ancestral land. As Denson also observes, *Unto These Hills*, 'would be a non-Indian entertainment produced for a predominantly white audience, its authors more concerned with telling a story about the United States than about the Cherokees' (Denson, 2017, p. 141). Therefore, although it would be technically incorrect to state the EBCI did not have a role in shaping *Unto These Hills*, clearly, 'it was not the guiding hand' (Denson, 2017, p. 141).

Nevertheless, by way of appeasing a local community increasingly isolated from influencing the play, the CHA agreed to build the 'Oconaluftee Indian Village', where local artisans and traders could sell their goods to the tourists. They also committed to increasing investment in the Cherokee Museum, and even proposed education programmes to run alongside the drama. Here at least, the EBCI would exercise more control, and the Village and Museum quickly became inseparable from *Unto These Hills*. It is notable that while the commercial promises were kept by the CHA, the proposed educational programme never really came to pass, and as Thompson observes, 'Although these programs were designed and implemented with the best of intentions, they also served to quell discontent over non-Indian control of the drama' (Thompson, 2009, p. 53).

Hunter's 'manipulation of historical fact' occurs in several notable places in *Unto These Hills*. For example, there is only a brief allusion to the deep rift that federal policies of 'divide and rule' wrought on the Cherokee prior to the signing of the Treaty of New Echota, one of the most significant events in their tribal history. While two of the central players involved in this, the Cherokee elders Nunnehidihi, known to history as 'The Ridge' and sometimes 'Major Ridge', and John Ross, make no appearance whatsoever in the play, despite their clear political dexterity and shrewd ability at negotiating with the Government. By contrast, the signatories to the treaty that do appear, and particularly the characterisation of Elias Boudinot, portrayed them as a naïve and distinctly defeated body from the outset. Reviewer Donald Grose suggests Hunter's Native American image here is one of, 'willing victim and innocent child' (Grose, 1979, p. 252). Consequently, in the events leading up to the signing of the treaty, the Cherokee are depicted as a gullible and outdated race, unable to confront or contradict the relentless flimflam of Government land agents. This omission of the presence of Major Ridge in particular is significant for two reasons: first, it takes the play away from discussing the issues of Native American land, and the divisions within the Cherokee over the direction of its Nation's sovereignty;

While second, it allows Hunter to paint a picture where it is the unscrupulousness of those with their boots on the ground – i.e., state level land agents – that were alone responsible for the mis-selling of the treaty, not the American Government. This dramatically innovative approach, rather skilfully conceived for a relative novice dramatist like Hunter, distances the involvement of 'America', conceptually through federal authority, in the eventual act of removal. As Denson writes:

Hunter achieves this maneuver by making removal a question of race and prejudice, rather than property and colonialism. Wicked frontier whites persecute the Cherokees because they cannot accept Indians as human beings equal to themselves. True, they covet Indian land, but the key problem, the drama suggests, is racial hatred.

(Denson, 2017, p. 147)

It must be said that Hunter's dramatic licence in his depiction of events leading up to the Treaty of New Echota is not always detrimental to the image of the Cherokee Nation. For example, there is no mention of the 'blood right' in Cherokee law that imposed death on those that relinquish land to the Government without the consent of the Tribal Council. A violation of which Major Ridge and the other signers of the Treaty of Escala were allegedly guilty of, and may have been influential in the subsequent assassination of Ridge and Boudinot years later in 1839 (Rowley, 2022). Also, both Ridge and John Ross were complex characters, who, long before removal, were deeply assimilated into colonial society under America's policy of 'civilisation', and sought to become, 'political and social equals of their white neighbours' (Eyre, 'Trail of Tears', 2009). Ridge, one of the earliest to acquiesce to the Jacksonian removal offer, reputedly held more land, and maintained a better standard of living, than anyone in the state, white or Native American (Eyre, 'Trail of Tears', 2009). He was also, along with Ross, and an estimated eight percent of the Cherokee ruling elite, a slave owner (Eyre, 'Trail of Tears', 2009). This uncomfortable fact, had it been included in 'The Drama', would hardly have assisted Hunter in his attempt to suggest the story represented a call for emancipation and civil equality. He would surely have struggled to reconcile this, when at one point the dramatized President Harrison, on restoring Cherokee Nationhood, declares:

Democratic government means nothing as long as races continue to hate each other! I want the Indians to become citizens, and the Negroes too.

(Hunter, 1950, p. 92)

This is a truly remarkable artistic application of the 'spirit of the truth', given Harrison's repeated attempts to *expand* slavery to the Northern Territories when Governor of Indiana (Owens, 2011, p. 68).

Despite all this, or perhaps more concerningly because of it, *Unto These Hills* was a resounding success, and continues today to be performed to huge audiences annually. The first season saw an audience of 107,140, and, after peaking in 1954 at 150,966, for the next decade the average yearly audience was between 120,000 and 130,000 (Thompson, 2009, p. 329). Later, Hunter would move to the opposite end of the Cherokee removal story, when he was commissioned to write a follow-up piece, *The Trail of Tears* (1969), for the Oklahoma Cherokee. While not as successful as *Unto These Hills*, *The Train of Tears* still ran in Oklahoma until 2005, and two other Hunter outdoor plays, *Horn of the West* and *Honey in the Rock*, are still performed at the time of writing.

Chapter 3 – Theatre Places: Indigenising the Western Stage

At the same time as the location-based productions discussed in the last chapter were being created in the regions, other Native American writers, performers, and theorists were setting their sights on conquering the conventional American theatre in its established institutions. Ultimately, it was this path of exploration that would come to dominate professional efforts to form a contemporary Native American theatre in the twentieth century. While the history of the early Native American regional theatre remains somewhat obscure, the attempts to realise this contemporary theatre movement on the American mainstage have been more fully chronicled. This is particularly true since the millennium, when the first comprehensive primer, Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye Darby's *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*, appeared as a companion to their anthology of Native American plays in 2000. This was followed by the same authors with *American Indian Performance: Critical Directions* (2010). Later saw the publication of *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History* (Däwes, 2013), and most recently, *Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces* (Darby et al., 2020). Therefore, what follows does not aim to retell this history in depth, but to illustrate certain influential decisions taken in the last century by significant Native American practitioners when approaching the question of how to establish a contemporary Native American theatre presence.

The term 'Contemporary Native American Theatre', as a concept, only seriously began to achieve widespread usage in the second half of the twentieth century (López & Benali, 2016, p. 93).¹⁸ As with so much modern Native American creative enterprise, the most sustained period of theatrical development occurred during the Native American Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. Although a few Native Americans had attempted to create a presence on the American stage much earlier, the use of the word 'contemporary' is something of a misnomer, as it implies there existed an earlier Native American 'classical' theatre from which it should be held distinct: an emergence reminiscent of the contemporary theatre's rise in the West from the classical realms of the Shakespearian,

¹⁸ This is a contentious term, and as I explained in the *Terminologies* preface to this work, one which lacks specificity to define the many forms the Indigenous performance that have been collectively placed under its banner. Nevertheless, it is a term which was at the time of the first attempts to establish Native Americans in the mainstream there, and I feel it justified in its use here.

Roman, and Greek stages. Indeed, as I will discuss later, some spent considerable energy trying to detect just such a period of Native American 'formal theatre' in the distant past.

While it would be accurate to say that Native Americans did explore many literary avenues prior to the twentieth century, when it comes to the narrower craft of playwriting, it proves impossible to point to a significant body of work genuinely penned by Native Americans before those which began to appear in the twentieth century. López and Benali, rather mischievously, go so far as to describe the period prior to the Native American Renaissance as, 'The Dark Age of Native American Theater' (López & Benali, 2016, p. 97). While this might be something of an exaggeration, even when Native Americans began to explore other literary forms, 'Native theater was not being published and thus became the only main literary genre absent in the great proliferation of Native American literature starting in the late 18th century' (López & Benali, 2016, p. 97). In fact, prior to 1900, the only known Native American authored play was *Wep-ton-no-Mah, The Indian Mail Carrier*, written by Seneca author Gowongo Mohawk, and even this was probably in collaboration with a non-Native, Charlie Charles, in 1892 (Hunhdorf, 2006, p. 294).

Although Native Americans were frequently depicted on stage, as we have seen, most early mainstream theatre featured portrayals of them and their culture as imagined by non-Indigenous playwrights for non-Indigenous audiences. Generally, Native American culture was either 'appropriated' or 'staged' in plays for dramatic effect or pure entertainment, often only included to satisfy the more gratuitous appetites of the majority white theatregoing public. As Don Wilmeth stated in his historical summation of Native American plays at the turn of the millennium:

American playwrights, only a handful of them Indians, did little honestly and objectively to depict the Native American but created their own image of what an Indian was, reflecting most often their own values and beliefs.
(Wilmeth, 2000, p. 128)

The most notorious examples of this were the ubiquitous 'Indian Plays' performed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here, Native Americans were depicted almost exclusively as stereotypes, 'ranging from the noble savage to ruthless, varmint redskins or lazy, drunken, dissipated rascals, from Indian princess to the squaw on the fringe of white society' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 128). A typical example was *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* by John Augustus Stone, which appeared in 1829, and

which did much to perpetuate, 'the more pernicious of the Euro-American stereotypes of Indians' (Huntsman, 1980, p. ix).

The reality is, due to social, economic, and cultural constraints, Native Americans themselves were not significantly involved in the creative process of professional theatre making in the United States until relatively recently. As late as 2000, Wilmeth could still write: 'In truth, the number of Native American playwrights is few' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 146). As such, the whole concept of Native American theatre is a relatively new phenomenon, and all – or almost all – of the plays to this point in time could be said to fall under the category of 'contemporary', in that they have all been written in the last hundred years.

3.1 The Founding of the Contemporary Native American Theatre

Although Native American theatre is a relatively new concept, the whole history of the theatre in North America is of course a comparatively short one. Western settlers undoubtedly brought the concept of playmaking to the New World early on – theatre was popular enough to see the building of the Curtain Theatre in London in 1577, eight years before the first British colony was established at Roanoke in 1585. The first performance of a play was noted in 1665 in Virginia, while the first play penned and performed by an American, Benjamin Colman's *Gustavus Vasa* was written in 1690 (Hornblow, 1919, p. 30). Yet, the theatre's subsequent development in the New World appears to have been rather muted; perhaps, as some have suggested, due to its disapproval by Puritanism (López & Benali, 2016, p. 97).¹⁹ Indeed, throughout the eighteenth century, theatre was banned in many places, particularly in the Northern states, where it was considered by many, 'the highway to hell' (Hornblow, 1919, p. 24). In fact, the first permanent purpose-built theatre only appeared in 1736, just forty years prior to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.²⁰

Despite its slow start, the American theatre soon became an established and much-frequented attraction, with many actors quickly acquiring the status of 'celebrities'. The actor Junius Brutus Booth had firmly established his reputation with the public by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was the equal of the European 'stars' of his

¹⁹ During the significant colonisation of America in the seventeenth century, theatre in England was largely banned: first, from 1603 to 1613 due to plague, and second, from 1643 to 1660 due to Puritan-led parliamentary decree.

²⁰ The claim to this title seems somewhat disputed, but according to the National Register of Historic Places, the first purpose built theatre was the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina.

age, such as Edward Kean and William Macready.²¹ Early American theatres, too, were modelled after the fashion of European theatres of the time, and for the next two hundred years, little could be said to change in that respect. Theatres remained conservative in their architecture, where the standard configuration of auditorium and stage was universally adopted, along with the familiar opulent trappings of velvet curtains, ornate and gilded decorative mouldings, and exclusive state boxes. Arguably, the most well-known example of this design in the United States, albeit for its infamy, is the Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, preserved in perpetuity as the site of Lincoln's assassination by Junius Brutus Booth's son, John Wilkes. Despite its New World location, Ford's Theatre would look entirely at home alongside any theatre in nineteenth century London's Westend.

However, although outwardly conformist, where the American stage did show considerable imagination and innovation was in its technical achievements. America, almost from the outset, had shown a particular leaning towards realistic scenography – another import from the romantic naturalism movement in Europe, and something the proscenium arch was particularly well suited to embrace – and worked with a tireless colonial zeal to 'hold the mirror up to nature'. Much of the energy of designers and producers was focused on inventing ever more ingenious technology to provide the illusion of reality on stage. This included highly sophisticated stage machinery to change sets, complex lighting and sound effect devices, and realistic props. In 1879, David Belasco's production at the San Francisco Grand Opera House of Salmi Morse's *The Passion Play* went as far as to employ a flock of real sheep (Marker, 1975, pp. 26-27).

Yet, while livestock might have been welcomed on its stages, theatre was nowhere near as inviting toward Native Americans. While participating in other artistic fields, there exists little record of Native American participation as actors, writers, or anything else, on the Western mainstage – at least, openly.²² When Native American characters were called to appear in the plays of Western playwrights, they were most often, 'played by white actors in red face from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 20). True, there were instances where some material was written, and

²¹ So popular did theatre become in the nineteenth century that saw several riots were caused by it in America. Perhaps the worst of these was the Astor Place Riot of 1849, when devotees of American actor Edwin Forrest rioted in New York during a performance of *Macbeth* by his rival, the British actor William Macready, and around 30 people died.

²² Many actors and other involved in the theatre must surely have been able to claim Native American ancestry had they so wish, and it was surely due to societal considerations which led to them keep such affiliation secret.

could even be said to have been 'performed', by Native Americans which contained a degree of theatricality; such as the sermons and ullages of the preachers Samson Occom (Mohegan) and William Apess (Pequot). As Rochelle Raineri Zuck of Iowa State University tells us: 'The theatricality and spectacle of their preaching blurred the distinctions between the sacred and the secular, between the pulpit and the stage and the charitable and the commercial' (Zuck, 2021, p. 569). However, the 'spectacle' they performed from expediency was clearly far removed from the period's melodramatic theatricality associated with the actors appearing in these theatres.

The professional American mainstage remained resolutely attached to theatrical conservatism, technical exactitude, and ritualised social formality, well into the twentieth century. Given this, its contentious moral position in society, and its unsympathetic portrayal of Indigeneity on its stages, the theatre posed a formidable and highly challenging environment for Native Americans to break into. These factors would also come to make it, in the eyes of more activist Native Americans, an apparently unassailable Western institution ripe for Indigenisation.

3.2 Lynn Riggs and *The Cherokee Night*

Only with the coming of increased societal mobility, due to legislative, educational, and social reforms, in particular following WWI and the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act, did Native Americans begin to feature seriously as co-creatives in the process of making professional theatre.²³ Of those to emerge from that time, the Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs is regularly cited as one of the most successful and influential by breaking into the American theatre establishment. Indeed, his most notable play, *The Cherokee Night* (1932), achieved a number of firsts. It was the first recognisably mainstream play penned by a Native American playwright, the first to focus on contemporary Native American characters and the issues they faced throughout, and the first to be produced within the mainstream American theatre system. Because of this, it has been recognised as, 'a major work in modern Native American theatre' (Darby, 2007, p. 9).²⁴ Moreover, primarily due

²³ Approximately 12,000 Native Americans served in WWI, 'generally as scouts, snipers and code-talkers' (Waxman, 2018). Native America involvement in WWI proved a 'pivotal moment' in their wider acceptance into American through citizenship, 'as American Indian soldiers earned high praise for their service' (Waxman, 2018). The Indian Citizenship Act, also referred to as the Snyder Act, was passed in 1924 to grant automatic citizenship to all Native Americans born in the USA. As a side note, interestingly individual states had the constitutional right to decide who was eligible to vote. Some states set requirements which severely deterred Native Americans from voting, such as the introduction literary tests as a requirement to voter registration ('Literacy Test', 1924, p. 4).

²⁴ In 1936, *The Cherokee Night* was published by Samuel French, another first for Riggs and for a Native American penned play.

to the play's dramaturgical experimentation, it is considered by many as in the vanguard of the arrival of a contemporary Native American theatre. As López & Benali have observed, '[Riggs] paved the way for the development of a contemporary Native theater movement' (López & Benali, 2016, p. 99). While Stanlake considers the text of *The Cherokee Night* to display, 'a distinctly Native American style of dramaturgy' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 7).

By now, much has been written about Riggs's personal life and work (Braunlich, 1988; Womack, 1999, pp. 271-304). It should be said, however, that Riggs was hardly a household name even at the height of his success, and his orientation towards commercial theatre was later treated with some circumspection by Native American theatre biographers. For example, Wilmeth gives scant attention to Riggs's contribution to the Native American theatre, preferring to dismiss *The Cherokee Night* as 'unsuccessful' (Wilmeth, 1999, p. 146). Wilmeth also describes Riggs personally as a 'minor American playwright', and that his work might be considered as that arising from a dramatist, 'more interested in the cowboy culture of the Indian Territory than that of the Indian' (Wilmeth, 1999, p. 146). Such criticism stems perhaps from Riggs's most acclaimed play, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), eventually gaining international recognition through its ketch reimaging by Rogers and Hammerstein as *Oklahoma!* (1943).

However, early judgements have proven to be inaccurate reflections of Riggs's legacy. He is increasingly recognised today as one of a group of early twentieth century Native American artists who actively used their artistic talents and newfound popularity as a means of activism – even if somewhat covertly at the time, as we saw in the case of his fellow Oklahoman, Te Ata.²⁵ Drawing on his personal experiences, Riggs's plays are thematically among the first attempts to depict the experiences of a generation of Native Americans growing up in the post-removal, post-allotment, and post-statehood years of the early twentieth century. Even Wilmoth acknowledges, despite its shortcomings, *The Cherokee Night* can be seen positively to reflect, 'a growing tendency after the 1920s of placing Indian characters in more contemporary settings, and, in fact, showing them in milieu other than the traditional or historical' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 146). In addition, recognising Riggs's passionate objection to the imposition of Oklahoma statehood, the Cherokee literary critic Daniel Heath Justice writes that, '[Riggs] worked toward

²⁵ Daniel Heath Justice suggests the vaudeville and Hollywood star Will Rogers (1879-1935) as another candidate for this category (Justice, 2006, p. 124).

articulating Cherokee peoplehood in a historical period of great chaos and uncertainty' (Justice, 2006, p. 94). As a result of this late recognition and the renewed interest in his work, Riggs's Indigenous themed plays were re-published as an anthology in 2024, which also contained many of his theoretical writings on the theatre. Reviewing this, Larissa FastHorse wrote that, 'Riggs's essays and letters outline a dream for a "new" theater that speaks directly to the theater practitioners of today' (Cox & Alexander, 2024, back cover comments).

Several of Riggs's plays centre on Native American issues – for example, his less well-known *The Year of Pilar* (1938), and *Cream in the Well* (1941) – but nowhere more so than in *The Cherokee Night*, first produced at the Hedgerow Theatre in Pittsburgh.²⁶ Set in the town of Claremore, both before and after Oklahoma statehood, the play is comprised of seven, non-sequential scenes, covering a period of forty years. Significantly, each of the scenes occurs in a location of special poignancy. Act one, for example, depicts a group of young mixed-race locals enjoying a 'picnic' on the town's most prominent feature, Claremont Mound; a sacred site, and also the scene of the bloody massacre of the Osage tribe that originally peopled the area. Their picnic is interrupted by an old souvenir hunter, Talbert, distraught at having found the grave of the Osage chief Clermont, who, along with his people in 1817, was killed by a Western Cherokee raiding party. By 1817, the Western Cherokee had already largely assimilated to Colonialism, which is displayed in their brutality toward the Osage, and Riggs uses this geographic disparity of tribal sensibility to dramatic effect, having Talbert warn the teenagers that they are guilty of having, 'sunk already to the white man's way' (Riggs, [1932] 1999, p. 26). Each of the scenes that follow dramatize the misfortunes that befall the picnickers, and it is suggested the group are at the mercy of fate, held accountable for the crimes their ancestors committed against the Osage, by 'the curse of the Cherokee blood' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 146). The subsequent scenes depict how the characters are, one by one, morally destroyed by the various sins they commit through assimilation to modern Western life: one character falling foul of police corruption, another killed by a group of insane religious fanatics, and another committing the very un-Native American sin of abandoning a sick relative.

²⁶ It eventually transferred to New York, produced at the Provincetown Playhouse by the Studio Theater in 1936, under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP).

Beyond its obvious significance as one of the first Native American plays to be produced professionally on the American stage, Riggs's *The Cherokee Night* is important, particularly for this research, for two reasons. One is that, arguably, it is the first Native American play to fully explore the possibilities of the, 'platiality of the stage' (Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 9). Indeed, Riggs's use of place is so much in evidence that Stanlake cites *The Cherokee Night* as a key text to exemplify 'platial theory' for the analysis of Native American drama (Stanlake, 2009, pp. 53-60).²⁷ Here, the play proves both edifying and potentially problematic, largely in equal measure, and I will discuss this further in chapter four. Second, is that *The Cherokee Night* is, again arguably, the first play by a Native American dramatist to realise the techniques of 'syncretic theatre'; a technique which would feature, as we will come to see, in the work of almost all subsequent Native American dramatists.

Technically, *The Cherokee Night* appears surprisingly sophisticated for its time. Not only did it radically challenge racial attitudes by its uncompromising depiction of Native American characters, but it also employed many unconventional avant-garde and expressionistic effects. These included back projection, abstract lighting and sound effects, and representational scenography. But it is perhaps through its 'blending' of both Native American and Western performance techniques that it is at its most seminal, at least when viewed as a foreshadowing of the Native American theatre to come. Certainly, here it proves visionary of the syncretic approach that would become the mainstay device of the contemporary Native American theatre. This was an important step, for as Christopher Balme suggests, syncretic theatre can be seen as an act of artistic decolonisation:

Syncretic theatre is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without *slavish adherence to one tradition or the other* [emphasis added].

(Balme, 1999, p. 2)

Although we might question to what extent plays such as this meet Balme's definition of 'decolonizing'. Theatres are not intrinsically Indigenous spaces, and as such, are not colonised-places that have themselves suffered from colonisation. Rather, it would be

²⁷ Stanlake also cites the Chickasaw playwright JudyLee Oliva's *The Fire and the Rose*, and Hawai'i playwright Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *The Story of Susanna* (1998) as examples.

more accurate to describe syncretic theatre as an effective means of *Indigenising* colonial spaces. Whatever effect is actually taking place here, there is no doubt that the use in *The Cherokee Night* of syncretic theatre techniques was striking for the times in which it was produced. This is at its most visually obvious in the central characters being of Native American descent, the flashback manifestation to the time of the Osage chief's reign, and through the incorporation of elements such as traditional Native American drumming (Darby et al., 2020, p. 73). The Indigenizing of the play can also be detected in more subtle ways. For example, there is Riggs's use of a distorted narrative timeline, a technique very alien to the established conventions of the Western naturalistic stage, but one wholly at home in Native American storytelling. Although such techniques would be accepted today almost without comment, at the time the radicalness of this appears to have been a major stumbling block to the play's transfer to New York, especially when Riggs refused to adapt the scene sequence to a more chronologically standard format (Darby et al., 2020, p. 74).²⁸ Riggs's use of non-linear time seems designed to convey both a sense of man's existence at odds with the Western understanding of the physical universe, and the distinctly un-Western concept of time that underpins much Native American cosmology: namely, the lack of temporal distinction between past, present, and future. It was certainly an element personally important enough for Riggs to demand it be used in future production, with the non-linear ordering of scenes also maintained when the play finally appeared in print. But rather than this being an act of stubborn artistic intransigence, Riggs appears to demonstrate here a refusal to change intrinsic Indigenous elements of his work, and those that most relate to the uniqueness of Native American performative traditions, to suit the expectations of Euro-American audiences and critics. While *The Cherokee Night* might not have been acknowledged as such at the time, it is hard not to recognise it today as the first step on the path to the Indigenisation of the American stage that would come.

While Riggs's Indigenous plays briefly brought the concept of a Native American theatre to the American mainstage, they proved to be isolated events. Although it is an overused phrase, to describe Riggs as a 'man before his time' would not in his case be too much of a cliché. Although, as we have seen, there was considerable interest in Native American artists among the public at this time, Indigenous equality was far from being a

²⁸ So radical was this temporal abstraction, Riggs felt compelled to add a clarifying programme note to prevent it being seen as a 'stunt' (Witham, 2013: 84).

high priority of national debate. Artists like Riggs, again, as was the case with Te Ata and Molly Speckled Elk, still owed much of their success to the exotic and cosmopolitan allure which their Indigeneity ignited in the public, and little deep consideration of the issues their presence as Indigenous people raised about Native Americans in society was paid to them at the time. As well as this, insurmountable external forces, such as the lingering effects of the depression, which led to the closure of many smaller theatres and the termination of state funded programmes like the FTP, meant that many avenues that minority playwrights such as Riggs had just begun to exploit vanished almost overnight. When the lights went down on *The Cherokee Night*, the spotlight on Riggs also dimmed, and although he continued to work on plays, by-and-large, the participation of Native Americans in mainstream theatre production regressed once more; either to working in minor production roles in the theatre or performing stereotypical caricatures in the now dominant motion picture industry.

3.3 The Native American Renaissance

The 1940s and 1950s were lean periods for Native American theatre. Most employment in the arts for Native Americans was now to be found in the film industry or the peripheral symphonic dramas, pageants, and other regional outlets described earlier in chapter two. While not as gratuitously offensive as in the days of the 'Indian Plays', Native American performances continued to cater for the desire of Western audiences to see clichéd and comfortably stereotypical images of Indigeneity.

Another phenomenon that did little to improve the image of the Native American in the mind of the public, was the mid-twentieth century development of 'Hobbyism', which amongst the white population came to form, as had the 'Indian Craze' of earlier years, a national obsession. Indeed, Hobbyism spread far and wide, to become not just an American, but an international movement, with many Hobbyist societies forming in the United Kingdom and in Europe (Taylor, 1989, pp. 562-569). For example, German Hobbyist interest focused on the author Karl May, and the glorified, romantic, and almost totally imaginary, vision of Native American culture found in his hugely successful *Winnetou* novels. As already mentioned, although first finding success in the 1870s, the *Winnetou* novels gained greater popularity during the interwar years of the 1930s, as disenfranchised and idealistic German youths looked to the myth of the 'Noble Savage' to satisfy their own struggle for individuation. Later, fascination with the character would

enchant a new generation of post-war Germans through a series of hugely successful films in the 1960s.²⁹ This resulted in an obsession with the character in Germany, and for the appropriation of Native American culture, that continues to this day. Annually, there are at least ten Karl May Festivals, the most famous of which, in Bad Segeberg. This event attracts approximately a quarter of a million visitors a year, the highlight of which is a fully dramatized theatrical production of *Winnetou* which has been performed continuously since 1952 (City of Bad Segeberg, 'The Karl-May Festival', n.d.). Internationally, the Native American Hobbyist movement forms a multimillion-dollar entertainment industry. Dr Hartmut Lutz has even invented the term 'Indianthusiasm' to define the phenomenon, which, he explains, 'really means an exaggerated, mainly ahistorical, romantic infatuation with aboriginal people' (Haydon Taylor, 2019). As Deloria explains, earlier Hobbyist pow wows frequently featured, 'native people of different tribes mingling with costumed *non-Indians* [emphasis added] interested in the recreation of detailed craftwork and the performance of Indian dance and song' (Deloria, 1994, p. 128). This questionable trend towards such depictions would also spur the rise of so called 'plastic shamans', a pejorative topic of controversy that would dominate the years to come.

It was not until the 1960s that sustained and serious exploration toward building a contemporary Native American theatre by Native Americans themselves would resurface. As discussed earlier, the period of the Native American Renaissance represented a heightened reappraisal of Native American cultural heritage by Native Americans (Lincoln, 1983, 2013; Velie & Lee, 2013). As Velie and Lee write, the social influences which led to this were many, and included, 'changes in economics, politics, and public presence,' which, 'increased prosperity and sense of achievement among Indians' (2013, p. 3).

The Native American Renaissance did not appear, as is sometimes suggested, from nowhere, but was built upon the rise of earlier movements that sought to unite the sovereign system of tribal nations, which had historically prevailed, to form a more cohesive political force of united Indigenous activism. The early work of organisations such as the Society of American Indians (1911), the Association on American Indian

²⁹ Adolf Hitler reputedly had a large collection of May's books (Waite, 1978, p. 11). While Albert Einstein was another avid fan, stating, 'My whole adolescence stood under [May's] sign. Indeed, even today, he has been dear to me in many a desperate hour' (Morton, 1987).

Affairs (1922), and the National Council of American Indians (1926), would eventually lead to the formation of National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in 1944. But the late-1940s and early-1950s would see the devastating effects of enforcement of federal policies of assimilation during the 'era of termination' (Iverson, 2002, p. 111). As Peter Iverson writes: 'Termination sought to immerse Indians in the mainstreams of their counties and states' (Iverson, 2002, p. 111). In 1949, the Hoover Commission Report, and in 1952 the House Report, both recommended cultural integration of Native Americans into wider society. As a result, 1953 saw the passing of House Concurrent Resolution 108, which withdrew many of the federal policies granting Native American tribes their sovereign recognition, and which had previously provided some level of financial aid. As well as its cultural implications – through the loss of previous recognition – this had serious effects financially, leading to many Native Americans, often with divisive tribal disproportionality, suffering extreme hardship and privation through, 'sporadic but persistent efforts to reduce or eliminate federal services and protection for American Indians' (Iverson, 2002, p. 111). The Relocation Act of 1956 also led to an estimated three-quarters of a million Native Americans moving to urban locations, adding to the loss of their sense of tribal origins as they were thrown into the tumult of post-war 'urban Indianism' (Deloria, Jr., 1969, p. 206). From that point, many Indigenous younger activists believed that to counter this seemingly insurmountable federal attack, a more centralised coalition between tribes than had previously existed was necessary for Native American cultural survival. Therefore, the era of the 1960s saw greater sustained political organisation on an inter-tribal level – such as at the Chicago Conference in 1961, which saw the proclamation of a 'Declaration of Indian Purpose' (Iverson, 2002, p. 115). More radical movements soon followed, such as the formation of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) founded in 1961, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968 – cultivators of the Red Power Movement, fashioned loosely after more militant civil rights organisations like the Black Panthers, which grew steadily in influence throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, the 1960s was a period where 'pan-Indianism' took root as a workable concept of homogenised national Native American resistance; described during the era of its emergence by one commentator as, 'the attempt to create a new ethnic group, the American Indian' (Thomas, 1965, p. 75). It was a concept that would be explored to varying degrees of effectiveness over the course of the next fifty years, and one that heavily influenced the ideology of those involved during the Native American

Renaissance. All these factors spurred the emergent contemporary Native American theatre of the time, which, as Darby acknowledges, 'had its impetus in the Red Power movement – in Indian resistance and drive for increased treaty rights, political sovereignty, and self-determination during the sixties' (Darby, 2000a, p. vi).

Of course, the Native American Renaissance was only part of a much wider reassessment throughout American culture and society. This was fuelled not only by the civil rights movement, but protests against the war in Vietnam, an unprecedented embrace of social mobility, and sexual liberation. For Native Americans, and particularly those in urban areas, a primary goal at this time was to use the social upheaval and 'counterculture' to obtain greater social visibility: to escape the invisibility within romanticised landscapes and distorted histories that assimilationists had consigned them to for centuries. One means by which this goal might be realised, activists believed, was by the 'Indigenisation' of Euro-American institutions and cultural activities – sport, art, academia, government, etc. Particularly by actively practising in established Western art forms, but retaining their individual Indigenous identities, Native American artists would usurp for their own cause the very institutions colonisers had used previously to sell and maintain their colonial projects to the masses. As the Cherokee anthropologist Robert K. Thomas observed, many believed 'pan-Indianism' might prove, 'very productive, as nationalist movements often are, in literature and the arts' (Iverson, 2002, p. 116).

In the arts, this newfound Indigenous optimism, and the activism it propagated, first appeared prominently in efforts to develop a canon of Native American literature. The early success of writers such as Momaday, with his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), inspired a whole generation of young writers, many of whom would come to dominate the Native American literature scene throughout the late twentieth-century and beyond, such as Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), Leslie Marmon Silko (Pueblo), and Sherman Alexie (Spokane). But the period also saw Native American artists exploring Indigenous creativity through the gamut of 'other arts' (Velie & Lee, 2013, p. 3). This included Native American artists working in the mediums of painting, music, and dance. As part of this, the Native American Renaissance saw a concerted effort to sequester the established mainstream theatre to its cause, with Indigenous dramatists, 'committed to the artistic and academic development of Native Theatre' (Geiogamah &

Darby, 2000, p. iii). Their vision involved the creation of a professional, technically advanced, but thematically Indigenous, Native American theatre movement.

Many Native American creatives of the time adopted a similar approach to challenging the then Euro-American domination of the arts in the United States. This principally involved establishing themselves in the pre-existing Western artistic melee, and the 'blending' of Native American and Euro-American artistic forms through the process of Indigenisation. For example, Momaday in his writing, 'negotiates between Indian and white worlds to produce language that reflects the influence of both his Euro-American literary studies and of traditional Kiowa oral forms' (Tillett, 2007, p. 37). In the theatre, Native American practitioners sought to finally break from the theatre's history of producing clichéd work by inserting authentic elements of their cultural heritage and worldview into works which remained still recognisably 'plays' in the Western tradition. Conceptually, and following in the footsteps of Riggs decades earlier, this approach led to the widespread adoption by Native American theatre practitioners of 'syncretic theatre'.

3.4 Lloyd Kiva New, Roland Meinholtz, and the Institute of American Indian Arts

The first sustained scholarly consideration of how exactly to develop a distinct Native American theatre aesthetic might be credited to the experimental work and writings of Lloyd Kiva New. New's mission in the 1960s, as founder of the recently established Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), was, 'to provide Native students with a *formal fine-arts* [emphasis added] education articulated through a curriculum that emphasised the *integration* of Native traditions into contemporary works of art' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 16). The terms of 'formal fine-arts' and 'integration' are, as I will discuss subsequently, very significant. As part of this approach, New set about developing a Native American theatre programme at IAIA that would come to be considered, 'one of the earliest and most significant contributions to Native American drama' (López & Benali, 2016, p. 100). This would also be a project focused on syncretic theatre's techniques.

Although passionate about the subject, New had little practical experience of theatre at this time – his background was in fine art, fashion, and design – and so collaborated closely with the programme's more experienced Director of Theatre, Roland Meinholtz, on the theatre element at the institute (Institute of American Indian Arts, n.d.). Together, New and Meinholtz explored the ceremonies, customs, and performance

practices of numerous Native American tribes in the Southwest, particularly in the New Mexico region where IAIA was based:

Being situated in New Mexico, we were sited in the middle of Pueblo, Apache, Navajo, Ute, Zuni, Hopi, Havasupai, and Pima/Papago lands. Most of these tribes conducted active ceremonials. Our Southwestern site also offered a rich tapestry of ancient Native places: Chaco Canyon, Aztec National Monument, and the lands of the Mimbres culture.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 79)

Their aim was to explore how an 'integration' of Native American performance elements with the traditions of the mainstream commercial theatre might be achieved in practical terms, to create a unique, cross-cultural performance style. After some years working with students at the IAIA, New published a statement of theatrical intent that would remain the blueprint for much of the theatre produced by Native Americans for the next five decades, and which he describes as a, 'Credo for American Indian Theatre' (New, [1969] 2000). Clearly a seminal theatrical manifesto, New's Credo has been described as representing a 'conceptual framework' for the Native American theatre that was to come (Darby, 2000a, p. iv). The influence of the Credo is also due to the success of many of New's former students who subsequently sought to apply its theory in their own practice. As Stanlake says of New's Credo and its legacy, it has, 'continued to be invoked across the field of Native American drama' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 16).

Most significantly for this research, in the Credo, New advocated that a Native American theatre should, 'examine Indian culture for that which is theatrical, and then find ways to interpret those unique aspects for contemporary audiences in *true theatre settings* [emphasis added]' (New, [1969] 2000, p. 3). Clearly, again, this is in line with a key objective of syncretic theatre as described by Balme, where Indigenous theorists, 'look at Western theatre from an understanding and background of indigenous performance and ask in what way they are similar and how can they be combined in some way to create a *new form* [emphasis added]' (Balme, 1999, p. 26). While Balme recognises syncretic theatre as a globally accepted technique by Indigenous dramatists, he singles out the significance of New's Credo as exemplary and representing, '*in nuce* the essential points of a theory of syncretic theatre' (Balme, 1999, p. 56).

New's personal legacy is undoubtedly his Credo, which, according to Stanlake, 'set the metaphorical stage for a conscious development of Native American dramaturgical expressions, which have continued to reverberate throughout the field of Native drama'

(Stanlake, 2009, pp. 8-9). While IAIA's contribution is perhaps most influential through the playwrights it has nurtured, such as Monica Charles and Bruce King. For example, of King, Stanlake notes:

Bruce King is perhaps the best example of how the school's philosophies inspired the growth of the Native American theatre movement. In addition to his playwriting, King has remained influential in developing Native theatre companies through his work with the Indian Time Theater Project in Chicago, Echo-Hawk Theatre Ensemble, Thunderbird Theatre at Haskell Indian Nations University, and two tours as a returning faculty member in IAIA's theatre program.

(Stanlake, 2009, p. 9)

Much could be written on the importance of New and Meinholtz's foundational work at IAIA, particularly how it may have influenced the choice of venues for the envisioned Native American theatre to come. The one point to take away, however, is that it seems clear New and Meinholtz at IAIA at no time considered the 'new ethnic forms' they were hoping to create would be performed anywhere other than in recognisable theatre buildings. In fact, New's concept of an ideal Native American theatre is vividly exposed in the IAIA's Outdoor Theater Bowl in Santa Fe, a theatre he helped design with the architect Paolo Soleri. Modernist and daring as this outdoor theatre may be, featuring much drawn from Native American architectural forms, it retains a striking conformity to the archetypal Greek amphitheatre. Interestingly, it is also highly reminiscent of the Watershed and Mountainside theatres of *Unto These Hills* and *The Lost Colony*. In fact, it was at one time not even conceived as this radical, being originally envisioned as an entirely enclosed theatre space, and owed its final open-air design primarily to a lack of funding (Paolo Soleri Amphitheatre, 'Design', n.d.). I will return to this, and the problematic questions this raises, in the next chapter.

3.5 Hanay Geiogamah and the Native American Theater Ensemble

By the beginning of the 1970s, thanks to the efforts of pioneers such as New at IAIA and the wider social advance of the civil rights movement in the previous decade, Native American actors had begun to feature more prominently in the performing arts. Yet the roles available, and substance of those roles, often as characters to highlight bigotry and social injustice, continued to be of a lesser degree than for some other minority groups, most notably, African Americans.

This disparity is most evident in films from the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, major Hollywood movies such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Shaft* (1970), portrayed African Americans as confident, self-determining, and increasingly integrated in the modern world. While in contrast, similar popular films from the same period depicting Native Americans, such as *Little Big Man* (1970), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), and *Soldier Blue* (1970), continued to reflect the popular image assigned them in the nineteenth century: that of a defeated, vanishing, and doomed race consigned to the past.³⁰ At a time when the concept of white actors appearing in black face in films would already have met with immediate condemnation and outrage, no such reservations were felt to while actors in red face, such as Bert Reynolds in *Navajo Joe* (1966) or Charles Bronson in *Chato's Land* (1972). Significantly, from a placial perspective, the same films depict African Americans occupying modern urban environments, where their presence demands respect, challenges social stereotypes, and actively pursues racial equality; the featured Native Americans, on the other hand, remain located in nineteenth century 'wilderness' settings, where they foster more benign feelings of 'otherness', pity, and above all, sentimentality. As Native American characters in these films were more intimately connected with place, they often functioned more as metaphors for wider social and environmental concerns than those of Native Americans themselves.

Perhaps nowhere is this cinematic environmental politicisation of Native Americans more vividly illustrated than in the Keep American Beautiful 'Crying Indian' campaign (Dunaway, 2015, p. 79). The campaign's series of public service films, featuring the actor Espera de Corti in his screen persona of Iron Eyes Cody³¹, were conceived to promote Earth Day, 22 April 1971. The most well-known of this series of commercials, filmed with an almost dreamlike quality, begins with Cody paddling his canoe down an unspoiled forest river, bathed in soft golden sunlight which ripples harmoniously on the metallic surface of the water. Suddenly, he finds himself dwarfed by a looming industrial landscape, its factories belching pollution which is silhouetted starkly against an ominous sky. Beaching his canoe among the urban flotsam that litters the shore, he approaches a busy highway and stands, silently, watching an endless stream of traffic flowing past in a

³⁰ Remarkably, Mackenzie's film *The Exiles* at this point was still the only widely known film to focus on Native Americans in urban contexts and with a largely Native American cast.

³¹ Ironically, despite being one of the most well-known depictions of a Native American, Corti was discovered after his death to in fact be of Sicilian descent (Aleiss, 1996).

mechanized parody of the river he has just left. Suddenly, one of the drivers hurls a bag of garbage from a passing car, which lands at Cody's feet and explodes like an environmental grenade. Slowly, Cody turns to the camera, a single tear running down his cheek.

Just like the Hollywood films cited above, the Crying Indian campaign connects Native Americans with the perception of the pre-industrial land as a mythologised place from another time; he stands as a representative for a people out of touch with modernity, and powerless before challenges of capitalism, industrialisation, and environmental destruction. The narrator – the distinctively white American voice of the actor William Conrad – states 'People start pollution, people can stop it'. In a second film, *Iron Eyes Cody* is seen riding a horse through a Los Angeles park, which, we have been told again, not by Cody but by Conrad, 'community volunteers' have been responsible for restoring to its 'natural beauty'. Significantly, while we are again told by the unseen white narrator that Native Americans hold the land in 'simple reverence', subliminally the images we see convey a sense that they are not recognised as a credible force for its preservation. While everyone's contribution to conservation is obviously necessary, what is striking here is how these films reinforce the paternalistic assumption that Native Americans need the colonisers' superior skills and intellect to illicit change. *Iron Eyes Cody* is struck dumb by what he witnesses; Conrad's articulate 'American' must speak for him. Although the Crying Indian's tears convey a sensitivity, he is alone; he can do nothing due to the place he finds himself, and it is the white man that must save him. Hinted here is another theme prevalent in such depictions, the saving grace of assimilation. Growing from the late-nineteenth century ideal of forming a unique 'American' persona by adopting the practices of the land's original Indigenous inhabitants, it suggests, 'European Americans are the proper heirs of "Indianness" as well as of the land and the resources of the conquered Natives' (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 5). At the same time, it suggests the futility of Native American cultural attitudes in contemporary Western society, and that the only redemption for Indigenous people rests in their acceptance of assimilation with 'America' and the security this might afford them. Although the Crying Indian is one of the most readily accessible, frequently cited, and overt examples of its kind, it is just one instance of the highly politicised use of Native American encounters with place that appear to be depicting sensitivity to the environment, while covertly continuing to distort Native American identities in the course of Western socio-political objectives.

Coming to prominence at the time when these advertisements were first aired, was Hanay Geiogamah, whose theatre work finally began to break the status quo of such Native American dramatic distortion. Indeed, as a literary contemporary of Momaday and the influential philosopher Vine Deloria Jr., Geiogamah is considered today in the Native American performing arts as a 'foundational figure' (Valentino, 2013, p. 296). Even by the time of the millennium, he was still viewed by some as the only Native American dramatist that could be said to have gained national attention (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 146). Although not directly affiliated with New or the IAIA, Geiogamah's work also concentrates on the adoption of a syncretic theatre approach to forming Native American theatre, albeit in more practical rather than theoretical terms (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 176).

Geiogamah's political stance was formed during the early days of the Red Power movement in the 1960s, leading him to hold a position that was strongly 'pan-Indian' (Geiogamah & Darby, 2000, p. vi). Although a theatre major, his heightened awareness of the socio-political objectives of organisations such as AIM were honed as a journalist during his student days at the University of Oklahoma (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 177). Geiogamah writes that: 'By 1968 my political crusading and my interest in theater began to merge, initially in a conception of writing plays which would depict the truth about the condition of American Indians' (Geiogamah, 1980b, p. 14). By the beginning of the 1970s, Geiogamah could be credited with several stunning theatrical achievements. For example, Geiogamah was the first, in association with Ellen Stewart's La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, to successfully found an all Native American theatre company in 1972: the American Indian Theater Ensemble (AITE).³² Later changing its name to Native American Theatre Ensemble (NATE) (Darby et al., 2020: 96).

It was with AITE that Geiogamah produced his first play *Body Indian* (1972), which contemporary critics excitedly predicted as marking the birth of a new Native Theatre: 'When the history of the American Indian theater is written ... it will probably record it all began in 1972' (Phillips, 1972, p. 56). Geiogamah's next play was *49* (1975), which received much additional acclaim for its ground-breaking mixture of traditional ceremonial dance, music, and resonant political satire. The play also brought Geiogamah

³² Although, there were some minor muted attempts mounted in the 1950s to found Indigenous theatre companies. One such earlier attempt was the Cherokee director Arthur Smith Junaluska's American Indian Drama Company in New York, which lasted from 1956 to 1958 (Haugo, 2000, p. 252n). Another, created in the late 1960s by Jay Silverheels (Mohawk), George Pierre (Colville), Noble 'Kid' Chissell (Cherokee), was the Indian Actor's Workshop in Los Angeles (Huntsman, 2000, p. 95).

and his company to the attention of leading theatre innovators, including British director Peter Brook.

Given its distinct 'Agitprop' stylistic overtones, it is easy to understand why Geiogamah's work was categorised by some as 'Brechtian', with his early work being met with cries of 'This is Brecht' on its initial reception (Lincoln, 2000, p. 292). This even resulted in a short residency with the Berlin Ensemble (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 187). There does appear some superficial similarity between 'Brechtian' theatre and 'syncretic theatre', both of which at times combine elements of 'folk' culture with more mainstream theatre practice (Willett, 1964). However, Geiogamah apparently did not, 'subscribe to Brecht's alienation theory' (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 187). In fact, according to Geiogamah, he felt, 'that alienation thing seemed corny' (Lincoln, 2000, p. 293). Nevertheless, Geiogamah's vision as a young playwright clearly shared Brecht's socio-political activism. For example, Geiogamah stated that he saw the need to produce plays that were, 'for and about Indians, their past, their despairing present, their hopes and dreams and daily lives, presented by Indian artists' (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 178). Interestingly, Geiogamah's later reflections on the similarity between his work and Brecht's, suggested that, 'what [Geiogamah] may have in common with [Brecht] is just a *generic and instinctive affinity in theater practice* [emphasis added]' (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 187).

Although Geiogamah did not attend IAIA, it is significant that, 'About half of the theatre artists who Geiogamah would bring together in the American Indian Theater Ensemble would be IAIA-trained artists' (Haugo, 2013, p. 45). Therefore, it seems certain that New's theatrical vision would have been very familiar to Geiogamah. But, in contrast to New's more theoretical approach, Geiogamah was a dramaturge who considered, 'practice should have priority over theory' (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 178). Like New, he believed that a contemporary Native American theatre should seek an integration of traditional Native American performance practices alongside the prevalent conventions of the Euro-American stage. Again, in an approach reminiscent of New's use of syncretic theatre techniques at the IAIA, Geiogamah was clear in his belief that Native American dramatists should perform an 'interethnic exchange' through their work, while remaining mindful of 'Western theatre traditions' (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 180). It is hard not to conclude that 'visibility' was a primary objective in Geiogamah's work, and his chosen means to accomplish this was to appear in the spotlight on the established Western stage. We see this most strongly, as Balme notes, in 49, with its blending of traditional elements of

Native American ceremonial practice and traditional Western stagecraft. As such, according to Balme, the play, 'can be termed syncretic' (Balme, 1999, p. 57n).

Like Riggs, Geiogamah's plays heavily focus on specific places. The setting for *49*, for example, being a thinly veiled depiction of a real ceremonial ground in Oklahoma. As Geiogamah explained:

This [ceremonial ground] in the play is described as an old, ancient place that's been there for many generations. And it's inspired for me by a place that's actually ... in Oklahoma on the farm of the Whitehorse family of the Kiowa tribe. And it is about ten miles west of Anadarko. And there they have this little dance grounds on the farm that has been there for time immemorial – many, many years. And it's just sort of a worn down little area, but it can come to life very easily when there is a dance there and a ceremony there.

(Darby, 2000b, pp. 203-204)

Even without his confession of the fact, so faithful is Geiogamah's depiction of this location, it is still possible to identify it precisely, 'through the names of the roads and towns dropped in the dialogues' (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 185). Similarly, Geiogamah's *Foghorn* is notable for its use of specific and significant confrontational location settings, including Alcatraz Island, Wounded Knee, the Washington Monument, and a Courtroom in Rapid City. While the setting for the AITE company production of *Coon Cons Coyote* (1973) is set in a mythical forest, surrounded by beings from the natural world and the wilderness.

Eventually, having changed the name of the company to the Native American Theatre Ensemble (NATE), Geiogamah made attempts to take the work back to the reservations of its inspiration, most notably when he produced *49* in his home state of Oklahoma in 1974 (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 179). But this production was never fully realised, as the company was already in decline. Although internationally successful, and acclaimed in New York, NATE proved a relatively short-lived enterprise. It disbanded in 1976, principally, according to Geiogamah, due to, 'a lack of discipline' (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 179). Because of this, and despite his focus on location in his work, Geiogamah's plays were produced only within Western theatre spaces.

There is no question that Geiogamah's contribution to the contemporary Native American theatre was highly significant, particularly in launching the future careers of many individuals. The practices of NATE, for example, inspired many:

From NATE's original sixteen-member theatre company, we can trace the careers of many Native theatre artists actively working today, including

Aleut actor and educator Jane Lind, and Navajo playwright and actor
 Geraldine Keams.

(Stanlake, 2009, p. 9)

Geiogamah later went on to found the American Indian Dance Theatre in 1987, and, along with Jaye Darby, collaborated to create UCLA's highly influential Project Hoop in 1997.³³ Geiogamah has also gained a reputation as a leading scholar on the Native American theatre, and by far the most sustained research practitioner in the field through his professorship at UCLA. He has published several key texts, and, as referenced earlier, edited along with Jaye Darby the first primer of Native American theatre, 'intended primarily for theater students, educators, and artists' (Geiogamah & Darby, 2000, p. iv). A key text, which remains an essential repository for researchers on the subject, as my frequent references to it here can testify.

3.6 Spiderwoman Theater

Another of the most important instigators of the contemporary Native American theatre in the last century is Spiderwoman Theater³⁴, a company that has been described as having, 'profound influence upon the development of Indigenous theatre' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 136). Formed in the mid-1970s by three Kuna/Rappahannock sisters, Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel, and Lisa Mayo, it has continued to produce work for almost fifty years, and as such, it represents, 'the longest running Indigenous women's theatre company in North America' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 136-137). Although unmistakably an Indigenous company, its longevity is also acknowledged as due to it being, 'the longest continually running feminist theatre company in North America [and] profoundly influences feminist theatre, Indigenous theatre, and the productive synergy between the two' (Darby et al., 2020, pp. 101-102). Indeed, many of the themes of both movements, such as sexual violence against women and gender discrimination, feature prominently in its work (Haugo, 2000, p. 238).

As with the approaches of both New and Geiogamah, the underlying approach of Spiderwoman's work is one of blending traditional Native American storytelling practises with Western theatrical techniques to form a syncretic theatre. The upbringings of all three sisters brought them into contact with traditional Native American storytelling,

³³ HOOP stands for 'Honoring Our Origins and People' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 9).

³⁴ The company takes its name as the mythological character of the Spider Woman, or Spider Grandmother, appears in several Native American cultures (Hopi *Kokyangwuti*, Navajo *Na'ashjé'ii Asdzáá*).

alongside popular Western forms such as vaudevillian 'snake oil' shows (Haugo, 2000, p. 239). Later, they obtained more formal classical theatrical training. Muriel originally trained as a dancer, then began her acting career working with The Living Theater Company in 1962, and later was one of the co-creatives with Geiogamah in realising AITE at La MaMa (Darby et al., 2020, pp. 102-103). Gloria trained at Oberlin College, where she studied with Bill Irwin (Haugo, 2013, p. 47). Lisa had started out studying opera, but later concentrated on acting, under the guidance of Charles Nelson Reilly and Uta Hagen (Haugo, 2013, p. 47). Joining theatrical forces, the three sisters – together with other politically active members of the feminist theatre movement, including Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, and Brandy Penn – produced their first play, *Women in Violence*, as Spiderwoman Theater in 1976. Although the company expanded in time to include many other members, the nucleus of the company remained the sisters.³⁵ Especially after Weaver and Penn left to develop their own company,³⁶ Spiderwoman, 'began to focus solely on issues relating to Native American representation' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 10).

Spiderwoman's trademark process of theatre making is 'storyweaving', by which the company, like their Hopi deity namesake, 'weaves the world into being through her conscious act of creation' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 103). Through this process, Spiderwoman, 'build their plays with interweaving styles of story (personal memories, family stories, traditional myths, contemporary songs, and historical events) that structure the dramatic action through overlapping moments of theme, sound, and image' (Stanlake, 2009, p. 10). Another distinctive characteristic is the company's practice of 're-memembering'; a process of, 'developing plays that come from memories, dreams, Native American, and Western myths, re-telling these threads of stories with their bodies in ways that defy usual Western characterization' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 104).

Much of Spiderwoman's material is devised through storytelling workshops with groups of women from various Indigenous communities. One of the first occurred while the group were 'finger weaving', and at the same time, sharing their personal stories with each other (Haugo, 2009, p. 61). Later they employed another process of collaborative creation, as they worked collectively to produce a quilt with the community during rehearsals, which eventually formed a symbolic backdrop for its productions (Darby et al., 2020, p. 137). But Spiderwoman Theater is still heavily reliant on a syncretic theatre

³⁵ Lisa Mayo died in 2013.

³⁶ Weaver and Shaw founded the equality influential company *Split Britches* in 1981.

approach in production. For example, in *River-ber-berations* (1990), elements of Native American performance, such as rhythmical drumming and a performance of the Bowl Dance Zuniga, are combined with 'other storytelling devices' of theatre practice, such as the use of pop songs as a soundtrack, and 'raucous physical and slapstick comedy' (Darby et al., 2020, p. 13). This is most evident in their production *Three Sisters from Here to There* (1982), a satirical reimagining of Anton Chekov's *Three Sisters*, which not only transported the action from Russia to Brooklyn, but incorporated multimedia elements such as, 'home movies and photo stills' (Haugo, 2000, p. 239).

Spiderwoman Theater's ethos, again reminiscent of New at IAIA and Geiogamah at NATE, is clearly focused on drawing authentic stories, concerns, and images from real Native American communities, while remaining faithful to the material's origins and showing integrity toward it. They also draw heavily on methods of traditional Native American performance practice for the presentation of their work. However, again, their practice, although at times performed 'on reservations', has predominantly been one of gathering up of Indigenous material to be performed in 'mainstream American society' almost exclusively within its established theatres (Darby & Fitzgerald, 2003, p. 231). It is hard not to see their major contribution again as the Indigenisation of the Western stage and the presentation of national Native American causes. Although their work features locations prominently, these tend to be more archetypal, or personal to the sisters, rather than specific to places or particular communities. This is most evident in plays such as *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* (1988), a comic lampoon of Karl May's Hobbyist icon, or *Three Sisters from Here to There*, where locations are either fictitious or generalised to make broader comments on their social interests and relationships to such places. In this respect, Spiderwoman Theater remains largely pan-Indian in theatrical ideology. Although in its realisation on the stage it perhaps comes closest to something we might term a 'unique ethnic form' than the other work cited here, Spiderwoman Theater is a project which remains focused on the Indigenisation of Western performance spaces first and foremost.

Chapter 4 – Changing Places: Changing Attitudes of the Post-Millennium Native American Theatre

Although only focusing on a limited number of examples, the above proves representative of the approach of Native American playwrights in the twentieth century, in that the majority of their plays were produced for, and performed in, the 'true theatre settings' of Western-style theatres. Although I have chosen the practitioners and productions cited here for their recognised stylistic and ideological influence in shaping the contemporary Native American theatre, and as importantly, for shaping the approaches of the Native American practitioners that followed them, many more examples could have been given. For example, of the seven works published in the first anthology of Native American plays, *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*, all were premiered in traditional theatres (D'Aponte, 1998). The same can be said of the eleven works comprising *Stories of Our Way* (Geiogamah & Darby, 2000), and the eight found in *Keeper of the Morning Star* (Darby & Fitzgerald, 2003).

Of course, this substantial and accomplished body of work is a legacy to be proud of, one deserving of more recognition, and not one to be diminished by hindsight complacency. Any approach which leads to colonised Indigenous peoples being able to actively participate in, and in so doing, influence, change, and diversify institutions historically dominated by the views and practices of the respective colonising society is to be applauded. By familiarising generations of Native American performers, writers, and directors with the skills and techniques of the Western stage, the practitioners I have highlighted undoubtedly launched countless Native Americans into successful mainstream theatre careers. Their contribution has again been significant, working in high-profile theatre venues and with prestigious companies, changing attitudes toward Native Americans in the performing arts, and providing inspirational positive role models. Indeed, this later generation of theatre practitioners – such as Larissa FastHorse, Madeline Sayet (Mohegan), JudyLee Oliva, and the First Nation dramatist Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibwe) – have continued to practice successfully in the same Western theatre traditions employed by those that preceded them.

As I have stressed before, it is not my intention to criticise the work of these early practitioners, but simply to draw attention to the disproportionate utilisation of theatre spaces opposed to alternative forms of performance, such as ones that incorporate place,

and to challenge the efficacy of this approach for furthering the goal of establishing, in Lloyd Kiva New's terms, a contemporary Native American theatre that is 'strikingly unique'. Most significantly, with few exceptions, the above analysis reveals that, prior to the millennium, very little experimentation was ever attempted with place-based performance practices by any of the leading practitioners active in the field. In fact, more experimentation with place-based forms was seen in the work of pageant organisers and folklorists, such as Lucy Nicolar and Te Ata, than any of the major Native American theatre practitioners during the Native American Renaissance. This is clearly both surprising and paradoxical for Native Americans working in the performing arts, for whom place is clearly a pivotal element in their artistic communication. Indeed, while the majority of contemporary Native American theatre plays produced in the last century, and certainly those from its most noted custodians, do feature the role of place prominently in their texts, its realisation in performance is exclusively achieved through necessity by imaginary creation in traditional theatre environments. It seems reasonable at this point to question why this was the case when the earlier Native American work had focused on regionality, locations, and place so prominently.

Clearly, given the times when it was developing, there were many practical factors which influenced the choice of Native American theatre professionals to work in theatres over any alternative venues that might have been available. Such compelling factors included the restrictive social conditions at the time, such as the discrimination that was directed towards those identifying as Native American in the performing arts, and conservative attitudes within Native American communities to the use of 'sacred' material for dramatization and entertainment purposes. Moreover, there were more pragmatic reasons, such as the need to attract and accommodate audiences and the limited opportunities for casting Indigenous actors.

Arguably, however, among the many influential practical factors, there was the overarching ideological goals of those constructing the contemporary Native American theatre, especially those that picked up the task in the late twentieth century. Among these, achieving a clear delineation from the previous Indigenous themed performance work was paramount, which had arisen from a number of driving forces. Perhaps the most understandable of these was that the practitioners of the contemporary Native American theatre needed to distance the new movement's work from the clichéd and distorted depictions that had featured in the 'Indian Plays'. Rather than plays written to

exploit Native Americans for the titillation of Western audiences, the new work, as Geiogamah conceived it, would seek to produce a theatre, 'for Indians and created by Indians' (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 178). Ideally, according to Geiogamah the audiences for such plays would be composed of, 'Indians themselves and only secondly whites and others' (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 178). Along with the 'Indian Plays', these stipulations clearly also made much of the content of the earlier work, particularly the symphonic dramas, appear less than palatable.

Doubtless there was also a need to establish that the work of this new generation of playwrights would be of a previously unseen professionalism and dramatic sophistication; material worthy to be appraised in comparison artistically and technically against those of the established mainstream Western stage. Geiogamah stated, for example, that his vision of the contemporary Native American theatre would be one aiming to be equal to America's other theatre forms, 'ethnic, commercial, and educational' (Geiogamah, 1991, p. 12). Again, it is understandable that this aspiration rendered much of the earlier work unacceptable.

However, arguably, more than anything else the instigators of the contemporary Native American theatre sought to consciously distance their new 'professional' theatre work from certain specific forms of performance, regardless of their Native American content or popularity at the time. In particular the work of folklorists, pageants, and 'Hobbyist' circuit, that performed outside of conventional theatre settings. By the 1960s and 1970s such performance endeavours, despite their continued mass popularity, had become to many progressive Native Americans outdated, and their 'outdoor' performances too easily linked to 'primitivism' for comfort. This desire not to be viewed as 'primitive' may lie behind the less than comfortable experience Geiogamah and NATE had during their brief association with Peter Brook and his team in the 1970s, which prompted the Native playwright to comment: 'It became increasingly obvious that Mr. Brook had encouraged his company members to look for elements of the primitive or atavistic in us and our performances, and that is what they applauded when they thought they had detected it' (Geiogamah & Darby, 2000, p. 180).

At the same time, and also perhaps as a result of needing to dispel any lingering association with primitive conceptions of Native American performance, Meinholtz and New felt it justified to question: 'But what about *physical theatre structures*? [emphasis added] Have Indian peoples always danced out of doors around a fire?' (Meinholtz, 2013,

p. 86). The performances Meinholtz and New witnessed in the 1960s during their research at Taos may have been acceptable stylistically for inclusion in their vision of an Indigenous syncretic theatre, but their conspicuous lack of 'physical theatre structures' simply did not fit well with their Western-influenced understanding of what would constitute a 'contemporary' theatre. As Däwes writes:

Indigenous theater has often been separated from Western performance by formal criteria, often hypothesizing that the former uses more 'primitive' or simple forms ... while the latter relies on technically sophisticated equipment.

(Däwes, 2007, p. 67)

Arguably, conscious or not, it was due to a drive for sophistication and distinction from primitivism that certain techniques, widespread and popular among Native American performance elsewhere, were purposefully not considered by the emergent contemporary Native American theatre of the late twentieth century. Most notably, *productions that overtly stressed the practical integration of places and locations for performance and lessened the significance of the physical structures of theatre buildings*. For example, while acknowledging its many shortcomings, it is otherwise somewhat inexplicable that the chroniclers of the Native American theatre, particularly those that emerged during the Native American Renaissance, remained largely silent, ambivalent, and at times even hostile, towards much of the earlier location-based work in which Native Americans had previously been involved. For instance, by the millennium, Ann Haugo, when attempting to write biographically about Te Ata, can tell us little more than she was, 'a Chickasaw woman who began performing professionally in the 20s', because, 'little research has been done to document the careers of theatre artist of that period' (Haugo, 2000, p. 229). Haugo also reveals that at that time, amazingly given her significance, only one article by JudyLee Oliva on Te Ata had been previously written (Haugo, 2000, p. 229).³⁷ At the same time, in a review of *The Lost Colony* concentrating on the play's content alone, Wilmeth dismisses it succinctly as, 'offering nothing new for the Indian's image' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 147). Indeed, the symphonic drama movement as a whole is condemned by Wilmeth for portraying an image of Native America that, 'represents a stereotype from the past and little more' (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 147). Again, acknowledging their many contentious elements, these performances still involved

³⁷ Oliva, J. (1995). *Te Ata – Chickasaw Indian Performer: From Broadway to Back Home*. Theater History Studies, 15, pp. 3-26.

Native American theatrical participation more than anywhere else at the time, and would have in itself been expected to be discussed for its significance.

If indeed, as I am suggesting, it was the case that this early work, principally due to it being place-based and therefore hinting at an unsophistication, was deliberately ignored to align the new Native American theatre more closely within the sophisticated Western theatre, this would be troubling. For as Haugo warns:

The paradigm of "success" as recognition in the professional theatre world is seductive, and worth questioning. If this is the primary measure of quality and success for contemporary indigenous theatre, what work might get lost in the margins?

(Haugo, 2013, p. 60)

In this case, what appears to have been lost are the lessons that might be learnt by the new Native American theatre work from the centuries of incorporating real places in Native American performance art. This may be especially true of the mode of presentation chosen during the Native American Renaissance, focused as it was, and has largely remained ever since, on the creation of imaginary 'place-worlds' in Western theatre spaces. A predominance of plays that meet the conventions of Western theatrical tradition at the expense of the 'unique ethnic forms' found in Native American location-based performance. The upshot of this is that while Native American dramatists did realise the complexities of place through the Western theatre's ability to psychologically fill the locational void of the theatre space, what they achieved, although important, was the *Indigenisation* of the Western theatre space, rather than exploring the potential to *decolonise* Indigenous places through the medium of locational performance. In so doing, for all its achievements, the Native American theatre that emerged fell some way short of realising Lloyd Keva New's dream of creating a 'strikingly unique' ethnic form.

To examine this further, let us consider in more detail some of the factors which led to the adoption of colonial style theatre spaces by Native Americans for their own theatre. First, I examine some of the practical considerations which might have led to this, and then ask if those causational factors still apply today. Next, I consider some of the ideologies that may have led to the place-paced early work we saw in chapter two being largely ignored, and again ask if these justifications are still supportable given the aspirations and goals of Native American dramatic performance today.

4.1 Casting

One practical consideration which has always proved problematic and limiting for Native American performance producers is casting. Native American actors traditionally gravitated to the major metropolitan areas of New York and Los Angeles due to their proximity to the film industry, and the steadier performance work they could find there. During the early days of the Native American theatre movement, Indigenous actors working in the theatre industry were a rarity to say the least. Even by the time it came to cast the first New York productions of NATE in the 1970s, Geiogamah had to resort to, 'reading cast lists and playbills of every production he could find that listed an Indian performer of any kind' (Brown, 2000, p. 171). Though Geiogamah cast his net widely, initially hiring Indigenous cast members from states as far away as Wyoming, this still proved problematic when regional actors, 'did not enjoy New York and returned to their homes' (Brown, 2000, p. 171). Generally, and few as those might be, it was easier to stage Native American plays with Indigenous actors already established in metropolitan areas. Radical and experimental as la MaMa might have been, its various resident locations over the years – in Manhattan's loft and basement spaces – were reassuringly recognisable enough as theatre venues not to discouraged audiences from attending.

Today, casting continues to prove a challenge. For example, one reason the characters in Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play* are not Native American binary, and which perhaps has contributed to its phenomenal number of productions, was that many of her previous plays, according to her, had been considered by producers, "uncastable," even in major American cities' (Easter, 2019). However, Native American performance companies can be found today in many cities throughout the country, and many more Native American actors now work in the professional theatre compared to the time of the Native American Renaissance. This, together with increased funding for arts programmes aimed at minority groups across the United States, means more Native American actors can reside today in regional communities rather than having to relocate permanently to the East or West seaboard.

4.2 Alternative Theatre

Alternative venues to the mainstream theatres of the day may also not have been considered by early Native American theatre practitioners because few opportunities to experience the influence of such avant-garde staging practices existed. Throughout much

of the twentieth century, the conventional mainstream theatre in America *was* the theatre in America. As discussed in chapter three, theatre across the United States remained more institutional, conservative, and generally less adventurous compared to other parts of the world, with avant-garde, experimental, and place-based practice slower to gain a foothold compared to their widespread adoption globally.

Another significant factor was the early demise of the FTP. Indeed, until relatively recently, even well-established alternative production forms popular since the 1960s were virtually unknown outside of fringe experimentation in the United States. Moreover, some alternative theatre companies which practiced location-based theatre were looked upon with suspicion, as had been the case with many of those associated with the FTP, for their politically subversive leanings.

Yet, while the conservative nature of the American theatre remains a challenge, this too has changed in recent years. With the coming of high-profile and successful European site-specific theatre companies, more and more alternative theatre is being produced, confronting the expected norms within the industry and audiences alike. Arguably, the most significant influence in the United States finally realising the potential of site-specific theatre was the breakout success of the UK's *Punchdrunk Theatre Company* in the early 2000s. The huge success of *Sleep No More*, which transferred from London to Boston in 2009 and later to New York, was eventually rewarded by winning the Elliot Norton Theatre Award for Best Theatrical Experience 2011. In a survey of companies and artists identifying as site-specific, Wilkie discovered a clear growth:

Of the 41 respondents for whom I have a founding date (three solo artists did not give dates of starting to perform), the average (median) date of founding is 1993. Of these:

1 (Out of the Blue) was founded in 2000;
 24 were founded in the 1990s;
 9 in the 1980s;
 5 in the 1970s;
 2 (Welfare State, Moving Being) in 1968.

(Wilkie, 2002, p. 141)

While data on site-specific companies in the United States is negligible, there was a blooming of companies following the arrival of *Punchdrunk*:

9 founded in the 2010s
 5 founded in the 2000s
 4 founded in the 1990s

2 founded in the 1980s

Due to the success of companies like *Punchdrunk*, funding for alternative theatre is also more forthcoming than before from arts councils, private endowments, and corporate sources.

4.3 Audiences

Earlier generations of Native American theatre practitioners may also have questioned whether audiences would attend less formal theatrical events outside of theatres. Even today, concern remains among producers as to audience willingness to abandon the comfortable trappings of the traditional theatre. Writing as recently as 2015 of site-specific theatre in the United States, Randall Harmon suggested such practice remained a 'novelty':

While site-specific production activity migrated to the United States in the mid- 1980's, outside of the local phenomenal success of En Garde Arts in New York, 1985-1999, and a few other notable companies in Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans and New York, the U.S.A. has few sustained companies systematically exploring this type of work. In general, site-based theatre in the United States remains a novelty for audiences.

(Harmon, 2015, p. 210)

Generally, however, there is clearly more willingness to accept different theatre forms among theatregoers today than before. The pageants and symphonic dramas which continue all over the country provide nothing like the level of comfort audiences attending a Broadway show can expect, but this does not appear to affect attendance figures. Although we might think of symphonic dramas as a theatrical experience whose popular heyday is located in the past – before the days of mass entertainment such as TV, cable, and the internet, and when people were more willing to 'rough it' to attend a show – this is not the case. As relatively recently as 1973, the full-scale symphonic drama *Tecumseh!* was premiered in Ohio. Telling the story of the eponymous Shawnee leader, it has proved so popular it continues to this day, and over the course of its fifty-year run has attracted 2.5 million visitors (*Tecumseh!*, 'About the Show', 2024).

4.4 Race

Racial factors were probably among some of the most pressing considerations in the choice of production venues. In the still ethnically conflicted times when Riggs was

writing in the 1930s, and even in New and Geiogamah's era of seismic social upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s, the chances of ethnic minority avant-garde theatre groups attracting audiences outside of more bohemian Metropolitan theatre districts were remote. It would have proved an almost suicidal approach for prospective Native American theatre companies, such as Geiogamah's NATE or Spiderwoman Theatre, to launch experimental ventures on reservations such as Pine Ridge or Rosebud given the racial challenges, which essentially amounted to open warfare, they would surely have faced. In fact, in such tinderbox places as reservations, the conservatism of Native American communities themselves may have influenced Indigenous practitioners to remain in the safety of cosmopolitan theatre districts as much as fear of racial hatred. The more culturally free-thinking environment Native American theatre companies found in cities would have provided a level of artistic freedom lacking in more rural settings, and particularly on reservations. As Geiogamah reflects:

The sense of freedom I constantly felt during the three years the Native American Theater Ensemble lived and worked in New York City was both exhilarating and unsettling. There was nobody to tell us what we could and could not do in our work, no tribal traditionalists, no cultural police patrols or purists to warn us against transgressing the sacred, violating spiritual taboos, or entering restricted or forbidden areas.

(Geiogamah, 2011, p. 2)

But today, although conflicts and challenges remain, there is a greater freedom for ethnic participants to engage in theatre, and a sense of liberation to explore their culture, than existed previously. Indeed, far from being a disadvantage, staging outside of traditional theatre districts and traveling to more regional and rural communities, often to perform in alternative venues provided by Native American organisers there, can be seen as a viable alternative to hiring expensive theatre venues. Moreover, in liberal times, there is unlikely to be the same constraints placed on dramatists wishing to produce work in traditional settings, and far less daunting for Native American performance artists to consider returning to their tribal communities to perform their work. As Geiogamah observes:

Thankfully, the precedents for full, complete, and honest representation have been established, and I can't imagine an Indian theater now, in the twenty-first century, being held back by the self-righteous, well-intentioned censorship of the cultural police.

(Geiogamah, 2011, p. 2)

4.5 Ideologies

Although pragmatic reasons as those above were probably highly influential when choosing venues, ideological factors, particularly political views, were likely just as decisive. Much early work from contemporary Native American theatre artists reflected an overwhelming commitment to current mainstream political ideological causes. While this is detectable even in the views of Riggs and Te Ata – although mixed heavily with commercial considerations – it is particularly evident in work from the time of the Native American Renaissance, where many were committed to a direct 'pan-Indian' response to increasing threats of cultural extinction by federal colonialism. As we have seen, many Native American theatre professionals openly supported nationally organised movements, such as AIM and Red Power, and it is hard not to view the role of their work, at least in part, as an artistic response to the call from these organisations for direct action. Due to this, while many plays may have been written, as Geiogamah suggested, for, 'primarily Indians themselves and only secondly whites and others', the infrastructure of the already established mainstream theatre was an expedient necessity for practically presenting their political content to a wider, and perhaps legislatively more influential, audience (Pinazzi, 1999, p. 178). Even by 2009, it was still possible for Stanlake to write:

Native American drama is largely *intertribal*, meaning that Native plays rarely address issues important to a single Native American nation; rather they present topics that are relevant to people across Native America.
 (Stanlake, 2009, p. 18)

However, even here, such ideological and artistic focus has changed over time. The dominance of pan-Indian ideology – such as a focus on multitribal productions, with participants drawn from various Native American groups, focusing of issues that faced the diversity of Indigenous of the United States rather than one group in particular³⁸ – which influenced the thinking of Native American artists for so long, has seen a turn in interest towards considering more regional, and tribal based approaches to achieving the

³⁸ As discussed early, the twentieth century saw a concerted effort to more national organisations, that sought to unify the diversity of Native American tribes to present more solidarity in fitting against government policies that affected all Native Americans. Dennis Kelley describes 'pan-Indianism' as collective movements or intertribal united, where 'Indians have taken advantage of their collective identity to preserve rights and traditions' (Kelley, 2015, p. xvi).

goals of Indigenous activism. The need to pursue this trend in the theatrical context was recognised as long ago as 2013 by Birgit Däwes, when she wrote:

More work is needed on the interactions between theatrical communities and their audiences, the differences between reservation-based and urban theatre groups, and the local and global arenas that Native playwrights and companies use as sites of creative development.

(Däwes, 2013, p. 12)

This move away from pan-Indianism is conspicuous in more recent Native American performance work. The assertion by Stanlake that 'intertribal' works dominate Native American theatre seems hard to agree with today, as more and more playwrights look to explore the specifics of individual tribal cultures through their work. For example, in Theresa J. May's account of devising the play *Salmon is Everything* (2014), a community production created in collaboration with the Klamath People of Northern California and southern Oregon, and which tells the story of the environmental disaster to strike the salmon population of the Klamath River in the Pacific Northwest, she states that the production was performed in, 'various locations on the Klamath River' (May, 2014, p. 26).

This trend towards focusing on tribality is also evident in the work of Madeline Sayet, in plays such as *Where We Belong* (2020), which focus on her ancestral Mohegan heritage. As fellow Mohegan, Madeleine Hutchins, wrote when reviewing the play:

Finding Native representation in art and media when I was growing up was difficult. Finding anything good or specific? Nearly impossible. Imagine my joy at a piece of theater written by a Mohegan about Mohegan that uses Mohegan language, teachings, history, and cultural motifs.

(Hutchins, 2021)

Similarly, Larissa FastHorse, as we will see later in this thesis, focuses on particular tribes in her devised work with communities, such as those in California and Arizona, rather than attempting to write solely a 'pan-Indian' stance. She also draws heavily from her Lakota heritage for inspiration in her non-devised work as a playwright.

4.6 Sophistication

Linked perhaps to political objectives, particularly during the Native American Renaissance, was a drive to find a 'sophistication' in the new work that was emerging. Perhaps, as I suggested in the introduction, to distinguish it from the low quality of Native American themed dramaturgy in the past. I want to consider here Lloyd Keva New and Roland Meinoltz at IAIA during this period, and I should again stress this is not to single

them out for special criticism. I cite them here simply because the theories they developed for the Native American theatre and explored at IAIA, and which later found widespread circulation through the publication of New's *Credo* and the success of the institute's alumni, were seminally important in the role they played in shaping the Native American theatre's future. Their work also represents one of the few chronicles of the thinking of those involved in realising the contemporary Native American theatre during its earliest creation.

The first thing to note is that New and Meinholtz's appear to hint that, contrary to most accepted thought, early Native American performance may have been closer in form to the type of classical theatre that developed in the old world than previously imagined. For example, writing in his memoir, Meinholtz revealed his scepticism in the 1960s of current 'scientific' pronouncements by non-Native scientists on the apparent historical absence of organised Native American performance practices. As Meinholtz explains: 'Through research I began to discover that assumptions that seemed self-evident about Indians and theatre were not true' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 83). Later, he expands on this view, when he writes:

The received scholarly wisdom at the time we began our project was that the Native peoples of this country did not develop a *formal theatre* [emphasis added], even though they had had thousands of years in which to do so.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 83)³⁹

After describing the Deer Dance and the pole climbing contest at the Taos Pueblo, which I covered earlier in chapter one, Meinholtz reflects on the significance of these performances, writing:

Some authorities, especially back in the sixties, will argue that the events I am describing are examples of what might be called "protodrama." And they are right, in that key hallmarks of formal theatre, items such as *physical structures* [emphasis added], scripts, and noted authors at first glance seem to be nonexistent.

(Meinholtz, 2013, p. 86)

From the outset, Meinholtz's use of the term 'formal theatre' in this context is problematic. Whenever we consider definitions of 'theatre', as an art form, it is important to remember that it is a medium constantly in the process of re-evaluation and

³⁹ There have been many great civilisations which do not appear to have developed a formal theatre; for example, the Egyptians, the Mayans, and the Aztecs.

adaptation. Much of this is driven by artistic fashions, current social thinking, and trends in fields such as literature, philosophy, and perhaps most of all, politics. It is also, and significantly for this study, heavily affected by geo-socio events. Therefore, we can only ever describe what constitutes 'formal theatre', in anything other than the broadest abstract sense, in relation to the times in which the theatre in question exists. For example, the meaning of 'formal theatre' for Shakespeare would have been very different from, say, Chekhov, or any other nineteenth or twentieth century author. One observation we can make with some certainty, is when people speak of 'formal theatre' they are usually describing, what I have described as a shorthand throughout this thesis as '*Western theatre*', as a sort of benchmark. In turn, this tends to reflect, however subconsciously, stereotypical conceptions of theatre relating to classicism. This is, of course, troubling when applied to the consideration of Indigenous 'theatre' forms.

Then there is Meinholtz's suggestion that much early Native American performance, again such as the Deer Dance or the pole climbing contest at Taos, which he appears to agree with scholarly wisdom represent 'protodrama', in that they do not contain the defining elements of 'formal theatre' which represent for him, and by association New as well, the conventions and traditions of the classically inspired American theatre they are most familiar with. This includes, as well as the other trappings of theatre, 'physical theatre structures' – in other words, the theatre building. In his defence, Meinholtz, in step more than he might have thought at the time with anthropological 'scholarly wisdom', may be presuming the evolution of theatre buildings just another aspect of Turner's 'well-nigh, universal' theatre forms found in indigenous 'social drama'. I will return to this in the next chapter, as it is clearly factually incorrect.

This question over physical theatre structure, as well as attempting to incorporate Indigenous beliefs and ceremonies into their vision of a distinctive contemporary Native American theatre, appears to have led Meinholtz and New to seek wherever they could bricks-and-mortar evidence of this within the historical landscape.

For example, Meinholtz and New seem to have dedicated considerable energy attempting to interpret many of the features they encountered in their field research as akin to theatres as would be recognised in the West. In particular, they hypothesised on the Great Kivas in New Mexico as possible evidence of 'physical theatre structures' that might fit the Western theatrical model. Consider Meinholtz description of one reconstructed Kiva, the Great Kiva in Chaco Culture National Historical Park, where he

appears to be indicating a clear audience/performer spacial delineation: 'Citing contemporary Pueblo practice, one can guess that the bench probably would have been for performers, elders, and officials of the ceremony' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 86). He also indicates the likeness to a traditional theatre space when he writes: 'Not only had these people developed a magnificent, subtle, and *complete theatre structure* [emphasis added], but like the Mormons in Salt Lake City, or the Greeks at Epidauros, they had command of perfect acoustics!' (Meinholtz, 2013, p. 87).

The problem with this approach is that, while their observations on the similarities which might have existed between Native American performances and those seen in the classical theatre are intriguing, in reality, as I discussed in chapter one, it is impossible to say with certainty what form the earliest Native American performance took if such a thing existed, let alone with certainty where. Perhaps, if an available covered space existed, it would have been utilized on occasion, but there is certainly no way to know if this was the norm. After all, the acoustic observations and the communal nature of the Kivas' seating design, which Meinholtz ascribes as indicative of some type of auditorium, would have been just as advantageous for many other activities. There is little to support Meinholtz's pronouncing them as 'complete theatre structures' with any certainty.

Moreover, if specialist 'theatre' spaces were important enough to Native Americans to build elaborate structures such as the Great Kivas, there appears no convincing argument why they did not continue to be used for that purpose. Certainly, this is not the case at Taos, even though the Pueblo were technically accomplished enough to build adobes which have remained standing for millennia. And from a theological standpoint, we would have to question the likelihood that when performing cosmologies which saw no boundary between the natural world and man's spiritual and ceremonial practices, people would actively then seek to confine them in a purpose-built building. As we will see, the 'enclosure' of the Western performance space to form the theatre space we recognise today arguably arose from specific practical reasoning, and would not have formed part of the considerations of early Native Americans. Again, there exists little or nothing to support such a claim. While our scientific understanding of the Kivas that Meinholtz describes indicates that their function was indeed outside of utilitarian everyday use, such as for dwellings or crop storage, their exact use remains, and is likely to remain, unclear. It may be their function was governmental (for example, for holding

council meetings), ceremonial (for holding ritual gatherings, perhaps relating to the celebration of the seasons), or some kind of performance (such as those conjectured by New and Meinholtz). Most likely, a combination at times of all these uses.

It's worth noting that the soaring imagination of New and Meinholtz is not alone. The ease with which a lack of concrete evidence about a site can lead to misinterpretation like this is strikingly illustrated by controversy claims that the Anasazi, those ascribed as having built these structures, used the kivas as sites of human sacrifice. Paleoanthropologist Christy Turner has claimed that markings on bone fragments found at the site are consistent with the removal of flesh using tools, concluding that this was evidence of butchery, perhaps even cannibalism, on the part of the Anasazi (Engel, 2000). Understandably, the present-day Pueblo, descendants of the Anasazi, who historically had been noted for their peaceful nature, were outraged by this and strongly refuted the claims (Engel, 2000).

Again, such focus on 'sophistication' of performance in the 1960s and 1970s seems most likely less driven by serious academic consideration, and more the result of politically motivated wishful thinking. With the movement to disperse the perception of the 'vanishing' and 'invisible' Native American, it appears to have been an imperative to create 'sophisticated' works of highly visible Indigenous creativity within Euro-American cultural institutions, such as the professional theatre, even if this came at the cost of sacrificing some of Native American performance's most 'strikingly unique' features.

Chapter 5 – Problem Places: The Conflicts Between Indigenous Theatre in the Classical Western Theatre Space

From the above, it is clear there existed some practical justification for the early exponents of the contemporary Native American theatre founding their practice within traditional Western style theatre settings. Also, at that time, there were few established practical alternatives to enclosed theatres, and those that did exist would have been unlikely to achieve the aims of the Native American theatre movement. It may even have been dangerous to pursue some alternatives, such as regional staging and touring to reservations, given the turbulent social situation in the United States. Moreover, the ideological stance held by many, such as forming pan-Indian solidarity amongst different tribal members and the Indigenisation of Western cultural establishments, made working in more conventional locations attractive, even if this meant jettisoning some traditional Indigenous performance conventions.⁴⁰

However, reappraising these factors in our own time, although challenges remain, it is hard to justify on either practical or ideological grounds Indigenous theatre continuing to be produced so disproportionately in traditional theatre settings. Today, many of the obstacles which previously prevented the incorporation of place in theatre productions have largely been removed. Now there is a greater respect and interest for traditional forms of performance, and rather than considering them as 'primitive' or lacking in 'sophistication', we increasingly appreciate them for their authenticity and elemental simplicity. In fact, as I will discuss in chapter six, traditional performance practices are now firmly recognised by the theatre establishment as advanced forms of cultural artistry in their own right.

But as well as less practical justification for producing Native American performance in theatres, there are also technical and ideological considerations which make fitting Indigenous performance into the mainstream theatre space challenging. While there is little doubt working in traditional theatre venues is effective in fostering an Indigenised theatre in the United States, it is my aim in what follows to suggest that

⁴⁰ As discussed previously, there were of course many instances where Native Americans would challenge established white institutions during the pan-Indian era: from their increased visibility in academia and the arts, and in competing more actively in sports and politics. Moreover, no longer individual tribal campaigns were the sole concern of the regions, but the major protests which took place, such as those at Alcatraz and Pine Ridge, drew multi-tribal activists from across the United States, building on the increasingly vocal narrative that to succeed, Native Americans had to appear more united to challenge the already organised forces of colonialism.

some of the qualities of mainstream theatre are arguably inconducive to developing a 'strikingly unique' Native American ethnic theatre.

5.1 The Problem with Theatre Enclosure

Earlier, I quoted Roland Meinholtz's apparent surprise that scientists had concluded, wrongly in his opinion, that Native Americans did not develop a 'formal theatre' despite the 'thousands of years in which to do so'. There are other ways, however, of looking at this. For example, although the development of performance has historically led to the enclosed spaces we recognise as 'formal theatres' today, in most cases, performance developed first through 'place-based' or 'place-specific' endeavours. I would suggest that it is the aims and objectives of those involved in creating theatre, or more often the surrounding social and political melee influencing them, rather than an inevitable theatrical fatalism that leads to the enclosed performance environment in theatres.

The theatre which developed in the west, in the structural sense, is of course ancient. Its genesis rests far back in antiquity, and, pre-dating literacy, it was a form of creative expression originally founded in oral and bardic traditions. Theatre likely emerged from ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations, perhaps linked to religious events or the passing and worship of the seasons, as these gradually became more organised. Theatre in the West was shaped largely by the classical concepts ascribed by Aristotle and others over two and a half thousand years ago – probably around 500 or 600 BC, depending on the sources consulted. However, the theatre we recognise now has not arisen from an unbroken evolutionary progression since the first productions at Dionysus. In fact, the theatre in Greece does not last even to the Christian epoch, fading out around 220 BC due to complex and multiple factors, including the decline of the power of the Grecian state system and various political upheavals. Much of its stylistic form, however, and the formal concepts behind play-making and stagecraft, were adopted and loosely re-imagined by the Romans, who, prior to this, again appear to have performed more along ceremonial lines rather than constructing a formal dramaturgy independently. The Romans, as expansionist empire builders, spread the reincarnation of Greek drama to all four corners of the then-known world, but, after the fall of Rome, the classical theatre once again declined. During the so-called 'Dark Ages' – a term now

widely contested⁴¹ – organised 'formal theatre' appears to have largely vanished. Performance continued in simpler forms, such as in the rituals and ceremonies of pagans, Celts, and the fast-growing organised practices of Christianity. These simple, less formal events, had little call for specialist physical structures, and so little evidence remains.

As the medieval period progressed, more organised performances gradually began to re-emerge, primarily from two sources. One was the church, as religious practices and ceremonies, just as they had likely been the progenitor of the Greek theatre, gradually took on more performative overtones, eventually becoming the 'passions', 'pageants', and 'miracle' and 'morality' plays associated with the late medieval period. Clearly, these performances were very community oriented, involving members of the community in all aspects of the enterprise. Although these were originally performed in churches and other sites of religious importance, later they would spread through processions around towns and cities, and eventually dedicated performance sites began to be created for their enactment. Some of the most interesting, and ones that remain performed at even today, are the *Plen an Gwari*, or 'playing places', found in Cornwall and various other locations in the United Kingdom (Coleman, 2015). Such outdoor performance arenas probably appropriated sites that were already associated with some form of sacred celebration or community performance, again, perhaps pagan or Celtic in origin. They may even have been an attempt by the church to replace such 'heathen' sites of pagan worship with more acceptable Christian practice.

In more rural areas, there also formed at this time independent troupes of travelling 'players' and 'minstrels', whose work shared some religious content with 'morality' plays, often based on fables, parables, and the more salacious of biblical stories. These performances were far less formally orchestrated than those by the church, more light-hearted, and much more in line with folk forms, revelry, and Celtic traditions such as those found at pagan festivals. These strolling troupes, unlike the amateur performers of the town pageants drawn from trade guilds and more noble citizenry, were more entrepreneurial, theatrically skilled, and performed as a means for making a living. As such, they can in many ways be seen as the true predecessors to 'professional' actors.

⁴¹ For many early historians, the lack of written historical 'written' sources indicated that creation during the period from 411 to the Middle Ages simply did not occur. However, art, or what we would consider art today, continued to flourish outside of 'classic' forms, and just because written accounts of it are not available does not negate its creativity. For example, in Scandinavia there was continuous creative and artistic production, as was also the case in the Middle East and Asia. Also, Celtic performances continued closer to home.

Nevertheless, although the religious festival may have developed recognised playing places, and the travelling players no doubt had their favourite spots at which to perform, both were conspicuous in the absence of overtly 'physical structures' for performance.

When the medieval world gave way to that of the Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and with the rediscovery of Greek and Roman aesthetics at its heart, the former classical theatre returned, now combined with the baser, altogether more earthy tone of the medieval moralities, the folk origins of the strolling players, and other forms of popular secular entertainment such as the carnivalesque. This 'blending' of forms was accompanied by the appearance of skilled playwrights, who, particularly during the Renaissance staging of their work, helped conceive the re-birth of the notion of 'formal theatre': a largely secular enterprise incorporating, and moving at times freely between, classical and prosaic elements. It is at this point the full removal of performance from the environment begins, as it was relocated indoors and distanced away from the local community. Performance was first conducted in pre-existing halls, chambers at court, and palaces, before eventually purpose-build theatres such as the Curtain (1577), Rose (1587), and Globe (1599) were constructed.

In fact, the classical theatre was never quite as connected to its surroundings as we sometimes think. When we visit a Greek or Roman amphitheatre and sit in its circular seating, we envision actors playing their parts against nothing but the open scenery behind them; an image which has been reinforced by the design of many modern open-air theatres. An early example of this from 1930 is the much-imitated Minack Theatre, at Porthcurno, Cornwall, which plays directly against the backdrop of the Atlantic. In reality, and by at least 465 BC, the Greeks were already using temporary man-made backdrops or *Skené* to close off the up-staging distraction of the scenic view, and by the time of the Romans, this had become a permanent stone structure or *scaenae frons*, making amphitheatres often no more open than coliseums. A classic example of this is Palmyra, where the *scaenae frons* is so massive as to eliminate from view almost everything other than the sky. This more enclosed later Roman design, in preference to the earlier and more open amphitheatres from the early Greek period, would be the model the architects of the Renaissance theatres chose to implement.

But the copying of classical design and interest in architecture are only two of many factors which contributed to the theatre's further enclosure and its distancing from the local environment. For example, there are obvious economic advantages to the

exclusivity which theatre achieved through enclosure. As already mentioned, during the medieval period, pageants, passions, and mysteries were celebrated by citizenry themselves, usually by members of guilds, taking any performance parts as necessary. As Wiles describes the scene: 'If we look at booth theatres of the early modern period, pictured by Dutch artists like the Brueghels, we see a stage that is open to all' (Wiles, 2003, p. 95). They entertained in the fashion of community members rather than professionals, ideologically embracing the 'sense of place' of their performance: 'In the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, the actors we see are amateurs who belong to the guilds or Chambers of Rhetoric' (Wiles, 2003, p. 95).

However, as this popular entertainment developed to become more overtly 'professional', due to commercial considerations, its 'sense of place' had to become progressively more removed from the wider, and non-paying, community. Wiles again writes:

A fundamental change took place in the seventeenth century, when the fairground booth became an indoor theatre. Images of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fairgrounds depict facades before which actors appear, delivering a prologue or dumb-show that will lure a paying public through the doors of the makeshift building. The change was in the first instance economic. ... Later the performers are professionals, and it is in their economic interest to close off and privatize the performance space.

(Wiles, 2003, p. 95)

Wiles also points out that, beyond these commercial considerations, the gradual segregation of performance from the distractions of the location that surrounded it, may also have resulted from wider changes in ideological artistic attitudes related to the performance encounter:

At a more philosophical level, we may discern in the enclosure of the booth a new conception of space. In the pre-Copernican world, the performance was visible to all, and for its duration the fixed point at the centre of its own small universe. When the elite demanded perspectival viewing, the fairground gradually adapted.

(Wiles, 2003, p. 95)

Theatre was still further enclosed as it became patronised by a more affluent paying public, as well as those of the nobility and monarchy, who were less favourably inclined to endure the elements 'groundlings' had done previously. Theatres thus began to be constructed fully contained, such as those in London's courts and salons. This again favoured the propagation of 'professionalism' in the theatre, as separation from the

elements now permitted their re-creation on stage artificially, greatly extending the options open to playwrights for what could be depicted. For the first time, a scene set at night did not have to be literally referenced in the text and completely conjured from the imagination of an audience; it could now be achieved 'technically' by extinguishing a candle. Thus, the theatre was set on its course to become an *artificial environment* where the playwright, and later the director and designer, would reign with a superabundance of authority and God-like autonomy over the now tamed playing place.

The enclosed performance can also be seen as a necessary by-product of professionalism's increasing need to wield control over its participants and audience. Once a production is enclosed – cut off from the general public's participation and interaction – those that wished to be a part of it are not only required to demonstrate professional standards or pay an attendance fee, but more insidiously, they are also required to accept the 'codes' of the venue they are attending. In other words, enclosing performance stems from a need to exercise control over the proletariat.

From its earliest beginnings, concerns over the theatre's conduct, it being not only a mass form of public entertainment but also one of possible insurrection, were voiced by the state and the self-appointed guardians of good artistic taste and propriety. Even in the Greek era, the content of plays would be scrutinised by representatives of the ruling authorities, and the price paid for displeasing or disrespecting them on stage would have been severe. This was later reflected in Elizabethan times, when playhouses, due to their perceived ungodly practices, were not only located outside the city walls of London, but were heavily policed and censored for signs of disrespect towards the crown or state authority. Performing in venues now became a privilege, not an absolute right, and being allowed to join an acting company became a competitive business. It is sometimes forgotten that, as recently as twenty years ago, and still in some quarters, professional actors could not perform unless they were members of organisations such as Equity: the modern equivalent of a medieval guild, in some respects. Similarly, as theatre developed in its 'sophistication', so did the expected codes of behaviour from its audiences, and the adoption of strict protocols of decorum. Such 'architectural determinism', interestingly, is a phenomenon the theatre has in common with the development of orthodox religions, which also gravitate towards 'buildings' – churches, mosques, synagogues, etc. – and similarly require devotional adherence to specific codes of behaviour. Such codes relating to architecture are so socially ingrained today that, at least in the Western context,

audiences do not have to learn them. For example, audiences inherently know to quieten as the lights in the theatre dim, and to clap when the show is clearly at an end. As Baum writes:

In its most extreme form, this position argues that the environment causes certain behaviours, denying any interaction between environment and behaviour. Architectural determinism poses the idea that people can adapt to any arrangement of space and that behaviour in a given environment is caused entirely by the characteristics of the environment.

(Baum, 2001, p. 510)

I will return to this later, and again, the difficult implications this raises for Indigenous audiences.

The need for a formal theatre was further enforced, advocated, and perfected, particularly in the design of ornate theatres, during the late period of the enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a time when classical architectural design was held as the apex of man's artistic accomplishment, and again, was a generally held belief that spread throughout the New World under colonial Imperialism. The Palladianism evident in the architectural works of Jefferson, such as that at his home at Monticello or the University of Virginia, stand in testimony to this. For almost two hundred years thereafter, the 'formal theatre', in the West at least, was one almost exclusively confined to palatial theatre buildings of classic design.

To return to Meinholtz's question again, what we see here is that the creation of 'formal theatre' has very little to do with the time a civilization has existed, or for that matter, the level of technical and intellectual sophistication a society has achieved. For large periods of its history, 'formal theatre' did not exist, not because it lacked time to develop, but because the resources were either unavailable to support it, or the performances that continued in its absence did not need 'physical structures'. Rather, the enclosing of performance within theatres can be seen to result again and again from a complex set of societal, economic, and political determinates.

Although what is recognisable as 'formal theatre' is indeed prevalent globally – raked seating, proscenium arch, raised stage, etc. – these features did not spontaneously evolve from Indigenous performance practices to conform with some inevitable grand theatrical design. Obviously, they were the result of Western cultural influences being spread through colonisation. The major colonial powers that advanced around the globe during the age of conquest, England, Spain, Portugal, France, and so on, all carried with

them the same basic theatrical blueprint founded in the Renaissance, which itself was grounded in classical Greek and Roman theatre design. As such, global 'theatre' can often be seen as just another aspect of the Western colonial project looking to replace Indigenous cultural practices with that of its own.

Ultimately, Meinholtz's question proves easily answered. The reason Native Americans did not develop physical theatre structures is because there was no necessity for them. Meinholtz thinking has fallen into the same trap which led generations of history scholars to condemn the period following the end of the Roman empire as 'Dark Ages', simply because there is little tangible physical evidence of the artistic endeavours remaining from the period. Most, if not all, of the causal factors which led to the enclosed 'formal theatre' in the West simply did not apply to Indigenous societies, and because of this, Native Americans, and many other Indigenous people, did not develop the structures we associate with 'formal theatre'.

5.2 The Problem with Syncretic Theatre

I have earlier stressed the importance of syncretic theatre as a means of decolonisation, and there is no doubt it is an effective means of achieving this. However, despite this and its widespread popularity amongst Native American theatre practitioners, there are those working in other artistic genres, most notably literature, that have raised concerns about Indigenous artists continuing to situate their work within Western conventions. The contentious concept of 'hybridity' in literature, the stylistic 'blending' of Indigenous and Western literary forms, something which bears much in common with syncretic theatre, has formed the basis of vigorous debate in Native American literary criticism (Taylor, 2010). It was heard most distinctly in Elvira Pulitano's charge that Indigenous writers, while advancing 'Nationalist' approaches in their work, continue to embrace hybridity and the use of Western stylistic forms as their chosen *modus operandi*. Literary forms which, by their very nature, often run counter to traditional Indigenous practice. As Pulitano sees it:

Defining a Creek or Native perspective is, indeed, problematic; even more problematic, I argue, is insisting on an essentially Creek or Native perspective in novels when the novel itself is ... a genre rising out of social conditions antithetical to whatever we might consider "traditional" Native American oral cultures.

(Pulitano, 2003, pp. 90-91)

In essence, the charge that Pulitano makes is that such authors demand their work to be considered under concepts of Indigenous critical analysis, even though the Western material forms they adopt are at times antithetical to their own culture's artistic heritage. Many of the writers Pulitano aims such criticism at have long mounted challenges to her allegations of ideological, artistic, and cultural inconsistency; indeed, the book *American Indian Literary Nationalism* was published almost exclusively for this cause (Weaver et al., 2005). In this, the Creek / Cherokee author Craig Womack goes as far as to dedicate his entire contribution of some eighty-three pages to a rebuttal of Pulitano's claims (Weaver et al., 2005, pp. 91-174). Matthew Cella, in his review of the controversy, attempts to sum up the Nationalist stance of writers like Womack when he writes:

They do not reject the validity of hybridity-based theory, nor do they deny the influence of "Amereuropean" culture on Native peoples, but they do take umbrage with the fact that postmodern critics such as Pulitano want all Native writers and critics, as Womack says, to "confess" their hybridity and utilize Western theory as their primary *modus operandi*.

(Cella, 2009, p. 243)

Others have similarly challenged literature hybridity due to the dominance it can place on Western textual practices over traditional Indigenous orality. For example, the scholar Louis Owens, like Pulitano, drew attention to this issue between written and oral storying, when he wrote:

For the Indian author, writing within consciousness of the contextual background of a non-literate culture, every word written in English represents a collaboration of sorts as well as a reorientation (conscious or unconscious) from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language.

(Owens, 1992, p. 6)

Globally, this criticism is just as vocal and particularly strong in ex-colonial countries, where it often focuses on the use of the English language to translate and publish Indigenous texts. The Kenyan poet and Professor of Literatures at Cornell University, Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, suggests that this amounts to collusion with the aims of colonialism to eradicate Indigenous languages (wa Ngũgĩ, 2018). He writes:

History moves on, theories of liberation march alongside it, but without our languages we will remain trapped within what literary critic Adam Beach calls the English metaphysical empire.

(wa Ngũgĩ, 2018)

Speaking of the many African authors who have insisted on publishing their work in their own languages, often to the disapproval of mainstream publishing houses, he also observes:

Liberating Africans out of the English metaphysical empire and neocolonialism had to be done in African languages. Pro-people and revolutionary literature could not contribute to decolonization if written in a formerly colonial language the people could not understand.

(wa Ngũgĩ, 2018)

Fundamentally, wa Ngũgĩ highlights the debate about the use, and dominance of, 'structural forms' in cross-cultural arts. Despite their differences, what Pulitano, Owens, and wa Ngũgĩ are voicing is the common concern that, however judiciously applied by Indigenous artists, many Western forms found in the arts, conceptually and practically, remain ideologically incompatible to 'blending' with core concepts of Indigenous culture, such as spirituality, activism, and artistic aesthetics. To this list, of course, I would add concepts of the role of place in performance.

While this debate is somewhat outside the investigation here, it serves to highlight the controversy surrounding blending found in cross-cultural approaches such as syncretic theatre. While blending can be argued as an attempt to Indigenise Western artforms – which, as discussed previously, probably stands as the strongest argument for Native Americans entering the institutions of the traditional theatre of their colonisers – equally, and more problematically, it might be questioned for showcasing Western concepts of artistic worth over those of traditional Indigenous practice. Indeed, the symphonic dramas discussed previously could be said to employ syncretic theatre in much the same way as the contemporary Native American theatre does, but few would suggest plays like *Unto These Hills* represent serious attempts to Indigenise the mainstream theatre establishment. While the fundamental concepts of performance are indisputably shared by Indigenous and Western cultures, the formally organised and codified form of 'theatre' is by no means as shared a commonality.

5.3 The Problem with Dramatised Place

Another problematic element, and one I will argue is particularly so in the Indigenous context, is the creation of place on stage in theatres; or perhaps it would be better to term this the 'dramatised' portrayal of place. This is a difficult task for all dramatists, who, lacking the luxury of novelists to spend many pages describing it in words, a sense of

place is largely reliant on the skills of designers to faithfully realise it on stage. Artificially portraying place suffers from a number of deficits, not least of which is the fact that an audience seeing a play which features a specific location may have absolutely no personal experience of it, and as such, can contribute very little to its three-dimensional imaginary realisation. This is particularly problematic for Native American playwrights in the United States, that not only have to convey a true sense of place, but must also attempt to counter centuries of colonial distortion of Indigenous places, such as reservation and camp life, which have become embedded in the public's mind. Some Indigenous playwrights have been lucky enough to work with considerate and dedicated designers, who have realised the significance of place in the work of Native Americans. Larissa FastHorse describes such an experience during one of her early productions:

As a Native American playwright working in this medium, I was used to working outdoors at powwow and feeling the Earth in the ground. So [the designers] found a way to bring actual trees and water and everything that meant so much to me and my play that I didn't think I could have in theater. They made it alive, not just for the audience, but for me.

(FastHorse, 2012)

However, for most playwrights it is usually down to them to 'create place' purely through the ingenuity of their writing, and all in the couple of hours of an average play's running time.

The norm is represented by Riggs's *The Cherokee Night*, a particularly vivid example of a Native American playwright exploring the potential of, what Chaudhuri described as, the 'platiality of the stage' (Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 9). He is single handedly responsible for creating the 'theatre place' his audience will come to understand, and it is here where problems can arise.

For example, Stanlake's choice of *The Cherokee Night* as a case study in the application of Chaudhuri's 'platial theory', based as it is on discourses about the 'metaphor of home', becomes obvious the more we understand of Riggs's early home life. Born in 1899 in Claremore, home for Riggs was the former Indian Territory prior to Oklahoma statehood. Riggs was clearly a complex character, and one for who his birthplace bore a deep, and often problematic, significance throughout his life. For a man with his origins in the Midwest, Riggs was also, as with other aspirational Native American artists of the time like Te Ata, exceptionally well-travelled. Leaving home shortly after his graduation from high school, Riggs lived in many diverse locations,

including Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Santa Fe. Later, as the recipient of a Guggenheim scholarship, he spent a considerable time in France. He quite literally held an 'understanding of place, specifically land', as his mother, who was one-eighth Cherokee, had secured him his own allotment, and it is hardly surprising, with so many hardships directly related to the surrender or acquisition of Cherokee land, that this features prominently in his plays.

However, surprisingly for a playwright whose work drew so heavily from the location of his birth, Riggs apparently, 'seldom returned to Claremore as an adult, and when he did visit, he did not tend to linger' (Morrow, 2014). For someone like Riggs in the 1920s and 1930s, a young aspiring artist, a 'mixed-blood', as was still acceptable derogatory terminology at the time, and a homosexual, this is understandable. Riggs doubtless felt more at ease within the social diversity of Hollywood – often acting as a 'walker' for the likes of Bette Davis – or mingling with the bohemian literati found in Santa Fe's desert communes, than in the Midwest of the former Indian Territory. Sadly, throughout his life, Riggs appears to have remained, 'constantly wary of Oklahoma's judgments' (Braunlich, 1988, p. 13).

Nevertheless, the affinity he felt for his homeland, and the injustice metered out to its Native American population – something he probably personally experienced, and doubtless witnessed and identified with first-hand as a child – remained highly influential throughout his career. Writing to his friend and fellow playwright, Paul Green, Riggs confessed that, 'Like you, I carry my own state with me' (Braunlich, 1988, p. 87). Significantly, this seems to reveal Stanlake's observation of the connection between 'home' and 'land' for Native American artists: how this sense of *inner place* influenced, 'the interplay of community, setting, history, and *land* [emphasis added] for Riggs as a playwright and director' (Darby, 2020, p. 66).

Given this understanding of his life, Riggs's personal depiction of place in *The Cherokee Night*, and his depiction of his hometown, is clearly a less than candid comment on his ambivalent feelings towards his position in society there as a Native American. Commentators have also suggested a link to his homosexuality here, for Womack points out, Riggs in his plays, 'brings together Indian and queer concerns', that are, 'deeply embedded in Riggs's philosophies' (Womack, 1999, p. 288). Such human conflict in relation to place forms the central theme of *The Cherokee Night*, woven throughout Riggs's play by the use of real locations. Here, Claremont Mound is used to provide some

visual unity, portrayed as it is, 'hovering over each of the individual scenes' (Witham, 2013, p. 84). However, its real purpose as a dramatic device is to emphasize the history associated with the Mound. In one way, the Mound – rising up from the surrounding prairie in much the same manner as Uluru in Australia – appears to 'perform' on behalf of the land a symbolic response to the intrusion of Oklahoma statehood. Conversely, as the site of a bloody act of slaughter perpetrated by the Cherokee upon the Osage, it also 'performs' as a warning of the consequences of inter-tribal disunity in aiding the destructive objectives of colonialism. In this respect, the Mound represents, 'a contested place in Cherokee lore serving as a *background* [emphasis added] for the violence they perpetuated against the Osage as well as a sacred burial ground for the fallen victims and the warriors' (Witham, 2013, p. 82).

However, the problem with Riggs's very personal depiction of place, and something he shares with not only Hunter but all playwright's writing plays to be performed in theatres, is that place can only ever be conceived and presented from *one person's* perspective. It is in essence overly *personal*. It is understandable why Riggs might harbour negative feelings toward Claremont Mound and what it must have represented to him and his generation, but the problem is the actual place itself has no opportunity to speak in its own defence, or for those who might actually be present at the place to contribute their counter view of its nature as they follow its depiction in the play. In other words, there is no opportunity for it to contribute true 'performativity', as was the case of the Snake Water spring which Charles Henry encountered when 'place-making', the actions of which fundamentally changed the understanding of the story he would tell. Riggs's place is, indeed, more of a conventional theatre *background* to support his writing.

Troublingly, as I suggested in the introduction, under these circumstances place in the theatre can all too easily become as misrepresented to our eyes and ears as people can when artificially recreated in an author's own image before an audience. For example, from our point in history, Riggs portrayal of Claremont Mound, radiating its malevolent forces on its trespassers, may appear more than a little clichéd. Reviewer Qwo-Li Driskill describes the play as so, 'filled with ghosts, ghouls, thieves, and murderers,' as to be 'downright spooky' (Driskill, 2015, p. 180). Indeed, it does pre-empt the sinister reputation of the Native American 'burial ground', so often negatively appropriated by Hollywood in films such as *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *The New Daughter* (2009), and in popular fiction such as Stephen King's *Pet Semetary* (1983), and

The Shining (1977). Indeed, Riggs's concept of place, reflecting the darker side of Native American cosmology, is far from benign, with the monolithic Claremont Mound depicted as a powerful, all-seeing malignant entity; it is a demonic point in the cosmos, and one to be respected for its power to seek its own redress from those who fail to respect it.

Ultimately, we have no way of knowing if Claremont Mound is really a place of sorrow and fear and nothing more. It is certainly far from this today, for it is both a much-needed greenfield historic site in the local area, and somewhere that now commemorates and honours its past as the resting place of all those that died through conflict. It is also a precious natural habitat for wildlife and a place of escape for the town people of Claremont. In short, it is a place which is multifaceted in character, just like the Native Americans that remain in the area. Which face Claremont Mound chooses to show is one determined by the experience and understanding of it by those that venture there.

Chapter 6 – Alternative Places: Transforming Theatre Space to 'Place-Specific' Theatre

The last chapter attempted to illustrate that, although the choices which Native American practitioners made at the time of embarking on forming a contemporary Native American theatre may have been justified, today it seems self-evident they should be re-examined. Certainly, as I have stressed so far throughout this work, Native American dramatists should not consider abandoning the work they are creating in theatres, as this is valuable and continues to function as a means of invigorating, and Indigenising, an American mainstream theatre badly in need of this. But today there seems little justification for totally disregarding the contribution that earlier Indigenous location-based performative work has made to exploring Native American dramatic performance in the context of place. Again, although many of the works I cited in chapter two – the pageants, symphonic dramas, and the work of folklorists – may run contrary to more progressive thinking on the representation of Native Americans in fictional literatures, the discoveries and practical technicalities they explored in relation to place, in my opinion, are worth fresh appraisal.

More problematic, I would suggest, is how by adopting the theatre imported along with colonialism as its vehicle of presentation, Native American theatre can become all too easily dominated by the expectations and traditions of Western colonial society. Such theatre, as we have seen, has always been, and to a large extent remains today, a highly challenging institution for Indigenous creatives looking to participate in it. Not only must they work to create their art while at the same time confronting prejudice and discrimination, but are additionally working to accommodate their own cultural artistic heritage within a Western theatrical medium that is frequently at odds, and highly resilient to accepting, their own. This is something, which is at times forgotten I feel, just as problematic for Native American audiences, who often find the institutional environment they enter when attending a play just as hostile and uninviting. In particular, they are confronted by the behavioural expectations which classical and commercial theatres impose on audiences through 'architectural determinism'; the subtle but implicit theatregoing 'codes' that may be very different from those Native Americans adopt when attending their own forms of performance. This can easily slide to a level at which it begins to suggest institutional racism. A recent example of this was when *Playbill* inserted

in the programs for the New York production of *The Thanksgiving Play* a guidance flyer explaining suitable ways to behave at the performance, and which it suggested would help, 'maintain the sanctity of the space' (FastHorse, 2023c). But as FastHorse saw it:

It was super-racist, it was white, it was written for white supremacy, from the viewpoint of white supremacy. This is what white Western theater should look like, this is what an audience looks like, this is what behaviour looks like – that's not what any of those things are, and all the rest of the communities just in this country – you know, forget the rest of the world – on this continent, what they were describing is white Western culture. If you're going to call it out and say that, great! If you're going to say: we are expecting you to act like white people, in the way that white western people have decided is appropriate in the way that theater should be experienced, then great, say that. But [*Playbill*] didn't. They're making it 'this is the way you act', and it's like no, this is the way *white people* act – it's not the way the rest of the vast, vast, growing majority act in theater, when we gather and share our stories it's not how we act. So, if you're going to say that then say it. Say this is what we're saying, that this is a white only space and we want you to act like white people.

(personal communication, 2 June, 2023)

But there are, of course, many viable alternatives to the orthodox Western 'formal theatre' discussed so far. Performance forms that, rather than sited in traditional enclosed theatres, are more 'place-based' in their connection to the environment. More importantly perhaps, these are performances that offer a closer connection with the communities they perform to. Therefore, having so far explored Native American theatre in relation to the dominant Western mainstream stage, I now turn to examine the alternative theatre movement. Although much of this is again based on Western performance theory, unlike the mainstream theatre's concentration on productions in theatre buildings, the alternative theatre has focused on location-based practices, most notably in its use of 'site-specific' techniques. I will argue that this is a form of theatre endeavour that appears more in line with the aspirations of the Indigenous theatre movement today than that of the 'formal theatre' above. Building on this, I suggest that such location-based work, when combined with Native American performance considerations, does indeed become a 'strikingly unique' new ethnic form: Indigenous 'place-specific' theatre.

6.1 The Empty Theatre and the Placeless Stage

Today, most students and professional practitioners involved in theatre are familiar with alternative approaches, and location-based techniques are widely implemented. Terms such as 'site-specific' theatre, for example, once the province of experimental and avant-garde fringe groups, are now firmly accepted terminological concepts in the mainstream theatre lexicon. But this change has been slow coming. Given the centuries that the 'formal theatre' of enclosure has existed and dominated, its institutions have become culturally engrained in the artistic traditions of many countries. In England, the 'National Theatre', as a cultural concept, is firmly a brutalist concrete one, where questioning the appropriateness of theatre venues, and the desire to explore alternatives to the classical Western understanding of theatricality, are a relatively new phenomenon. For most of the theatre's existence, those involved in its furtherance have remained satisfied to create their work in venues that Aristotle or Shakespeare would have had little difficulty in recognising as 'formal theatre' as they knew it in their day.

Of course, there has been no shortage of theatrical experimentation *within* the formal theatre itself, although this has primarily focused on reimagining the dynamics of theatre performance spaces and scenography. Since the early twentieth century, exploring this type of *internal* alternative theatre has provided the basis for considerable research and experimentation. While rethinking of theatrical elements is commonplace – style of performance, devising or playwriting, lush realistic scenery or abstract set design – experimentation on the dynamics of the theatrical environment, and the physical audience and actor relationship, has been an even greater primary point of focus. One way this can be seen is in the drive by creatives to move theatre away from its more rarefied locations – the theatre districts of intellectuals and the elite – and to situate it back into the popular venues where it was once dominant, often, it might be suggested, for political ends. For example, writers such as Bertolt Brecht took theatre back from its exclusivity before the elite in ornate theatres, to the popular venues of bierkellers and cabaret clubs. Another common approach among many was to re-think the theatrical experience through a re-configuration of 'theatre space'. But again, here the focus of innovators was on changing the space and environments *within* theatres, rather than considering using the places *beyond* them. This is most evident in the work from the 1920s to the 1960s by experimenters like Adolphe Appia, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, and perhaps most influentially, Peter Brook. Theatre in

the round, promenade, and immersive theatre all became the subject of intense exploration during this time. However, radical as these practitioners might have been, they remained unswervingly loyal to the 'codes' of theatre – either in an effort to further them or shock by breaking them – and, most of all, to the protective cradle of theatre buildings, without which such codes would evaporate.

Arguably, no one was more influential in this way than Brook. His ideas, although considered groundbreaking, even radically subversive, when they first appeared, unlike the more fantastical imaginings of theatrical anarchists like Artaud, remained just realistic and practical enough to be workable within the mainstream theatre. Most importantly for the custodians of the theatrical establishment, Brook's manifesto did not involve the knocking down of any theatres. Not only that, but Brook's approach also fitted conveniently with the stark, brutalist vision of theatre's future. This vision is epitomised nowhere better perhaps than in the rectilinear form of the National Theatre: a theatrical sarcophagus in which the nation might entomb its dramaturgical legacy for the ages; or, as the future King Charles III described it in 1988, 'a clever way of building a nuclear power station in the middle of London without anyone objecting'. Brook's magnum opus *The Empty Space* (1968), coming at a time in the mid-to-late twentieth century when the relevance of traditional scenic aesthetics in the theatre was under attack from minimalist post-modernist ideologies, such as nihilism and the absurd, seemed to offer a much longed-for respectable justification to proponents of 'black box' dramaturgy. In micro-summary, Brook suggested the stripping of artifice and technical sophistication, advocating instead a theatrical refocusing on the primary constructs of performance: the elemental exchange between performer and spectator. There is no doubt that Brook's work proved revolutionary,⁴² and of vital importance in revitalising the creative potential of a mainstream theatre that had stagnated and become 'deadly' (Brook, 1968).

Arguably, place had never been something 'formal theatre' was inclined to be overly concerned with. In the Western theatrical tradition, place often plays a far more subordinate role than other stylistic and political priorities. Even Aristotle, one never to shy from writing his prescriptions for drama, uncharacteristically did not stipulate that actual locations should be named in plays, or indeed, provide much insight into locations at all. In fact, throughout most of its history, place on the Western stage, when referred to

⁴² Brook's essays that formed *The Empty Space* were written at a literal time of 'revolution' within the arts, academia, and society in general: The riots of students at the Sorbonne and the 'Prague Spring' uprising perhaps being the most famous expressions of this.

specifically, only existed for one of three reasons: as generalised and convenient locations for action to occur (temples, Italianate courts, idyllic gardens, or fashionable salons of the Renaissance and Restoration); a necessity to be referenced due to some significant event having taken place there (Mount Olympus, the battlefields of Shakespeare's history plays, etc.); or much later, as a metaphorical representation of a character's inner mental anguish (Ibsen's isolated and frigid fiords, Chekhov's tundral winter dachas of exile, the claustrophobic salons of Sartre). Ultimately, the unimportance, even perhaps inconvenience of specific places, when discussing man's more existential theatrical pondering, would come to dominate the post-nuclear stage of the twentieth century in the nihilistic voids of Samuel Becket, Edward Bond, and Harold Pinter.

The misinterpretation of Brook's ideas, or perhaps the misconception of the overly evocative title of his book, can with hindsight be seen not only to have led to a wholesale emptying of the stage's scenic clutter, but it also sounded the final death knell to place through its over-enthusiastic abandonment altogether. From the perspective of the new millennium, with its focus on environmentalism and community engagement, this has become problematic, for as the performance scholar Fiona Wilkie writes:

While Brook's was a reaction against the conventions of the theatre as he experienced them at the time, an attempt to extract from the 'trappings' of mainstream drama the essence of what it is that makes a theatre event 'work', when re-examined in the current theoretical climate his disregard of the character, history, people and practices of each theatrical space and the implications of these for performance is notable.

(Wilkie, 2004, p. 33)

Reading the work of mainstream theatre theorists from the mid-twentieth century, it is easy to conclude that they are deeply concerned with breaking free from traditional notions of theatre spaces and scenography. But emptying the space not only resulted in ejecting a superabundance of artifice from the theatre, but any slight trace of place along with it.

Similarly, we may think the same of the work of 'environmental theatre' advocates, such as Richard Schechter, who, like Brook, attempted to redesign and reconfigure the traditional conceptual boundaries that existed in the theatre between audience and actor (Schechter, 1968). Yet, environmental theatre is a misleading term, leading us to expect otherwise, when in fact it refers principally only to the environment *within* traditional theatre buildings. Place is certainly explored by both Brook and Schechter, but it is

'theatre-place', either on stage or in the auditorium, that is the main foci of their interest. Neither Brook or Schechter reach out to embrace the reality of the environment beyond a theatre, or suggest with any seriousness that its Jericho-esque walls may also need to tumble.

Another attempt to explore place within the confines of the theatre environment by some has been to embrace its wider geographical location. For example, a production at the National Theatre might reflect the place that is 'London', or 'England', or even 'Europe' rather than the specific place that is the South Bank. As such, plays in theatres can also represent the placial circumstances of people bound within these larger encompassing circles of place. These might be based along the lines of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. As such, place becomes a type of 'pan-place' in performance, without the need for specific knowledge of the performance site to be understood. The problem here is that although such performances depict a broad concept of place, they convey little of the precise individual characteristics or personality of places, as we saw in earlier examples. More troubling, the experiences of theatre audiences are so diverse, so individualistic, that it becomes impossible to find enough common ground for these pan-places to be experienced collectively, at least in the West. An interesting example of this is seen in the work of Jerzy Grotowski, a contemporary of Brook, and another leading challenger of the traditional theatre. This can be seen in his attempts to rediscover a 'poor theatre' with 'holy' actors (Grotowski, 1968, p. 43). Here, Grotowski – whose experimental Laboratory Theatre conducted an almost religious 'communion' between small, virtually hand-picked groups of 'witnesses' within highly ritualised spaces – sought to recreate the type of spiritual intimacy that may have taken place in early dramatic forms, where the divide between audience and spectator was less formal; such as in shamanistic ceremonies, or that perhaps had even lingered on in the passions of the medieval theatre. An attempt, in other words, to counter modern theatre's effect of, 'dislocating the text from its space' (Wiles, 2003, p. 57). In the Western theatrical arena, Grotowski came closer than many to achieving this goal, but ultimately failed in the attempt. The problem for Grotowski was, even in a place like Poland in the 1960s, where there still existed a deep collective social understanding for the 'codes' of Catholicism and religious observance, this simply was not strong enough to ignite the type of consuming act of catharsis he hoped to achieve between his actors and their audience. Ultimately, Grotowski concluded that forging such connections between actor

and spectator within contemporary Western theatrical contexts was bound to failure due to the secular nature of modern society in comparison to earlier, more religious times:

After so many explorations, experiences and reflections, I still doubt the possibility of direct participation in today's theatre in an age when neither a communal faith exists, nor any liturgy rooted in the collective psyche as an axis for ritual.

(Fumaroli et al., 1969, p. 177)

While this might be true in the context of Western society, as we have seen, this is far from the case with Indigenous societies. I would argue that the problem with Grotowski's approach lies not in that it was necessarily wrong in principle, but that removing his productions from the immediate experience of those connected directly to the place of performance – i.e., the local community – greatly diminished the chance of finding cohesion through their localised commonality, individuality, and placial understanding.

6.2 Site-Specific

However, during the same period, there were those who more radically wanted to move out of the theatre context altogether, counterintuitively suggesting that to grow, performance needed to abandon more 'evolved' formal structures of 'sophistication' to free audiences from the codes they imposed through theatregoing conformity. As the visual artist and poet Jean-Jacques Lebel, proposed, 'if artistic activity was to renew and intensify human perception, then it needed to escape from supposedly sacred places like theatres and galleries' (Wiles, 2003, p. 240). Such work represented a zeitgeist in contemporary theatre mid-twentieth century, and came to reflect, 'a shift away from architectural concerns with enclosure and modelling within bound spaces' (Pearson, 2010, p.5). Many of those that shared this view would come to form what might be called the 'location-based movement', whose mission was not only to challenge the conventions of theatre performance within theatres, but to finally explore alternatives to the theatre building itself. While the most familiar theatre theorists remained experimenting in mainstream enclosed theatres, many others, although not as widely recognised, dedicated their careers to furthering innovation in the use of location-based practice. One of the earliest advocates of this approach was Polish theatre and art theorist Tadeusz Kantor, who furthered the cause through his place-based performance manifestos in the 1960s, most notably his *Theatre Happening: The Theatre of Events* (1967), and through the 'Happenings' that he staged (Kobialka, 2002). Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, appeared

Mike Pearson's subversive practical interventions into Welsh communities through his work with *Brith Gof*, and later his long-term collaboration with Mike Brookes. And most recently, Felix Barrett's founding of *Punchdrunk Theatre* came to prominence in the 2000s, described as having 'Reinvented Theatre', finally introducing the American theatre market to site-specific work, decades after its roots were planted in Europe (Hoggard, 2013). These, along with countless others, have been instrumental in raising the credibility of site-specific practice as a serious alternative to mainstream theatre staging. Thanks to those that have championed it, site-specific performance is now not only known by theatre professionals, but is probably the most well-known form of alternative theatre practice in the mind of the general public.

The popularity of site-specific performance, however, has not come without some cost. Through overuse, the term has become something of a catchall to cover a vast variety of performance techniques of an unconventional nature, not only in theatre, but also in art, dance, and music. The distinction between site-specific theatre and site-specific art is particularly blurry – although, to some extent, this diversity in perception is understandable and unavoidable. After all, the term site-specific was originally appropriated by dramatists from earlier modernist art movements, and only came to prominence as a stylistic theatrical methodology in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, sometimes the term site-specific has been misapplied to work that, on closer examination, is far from this. As Kathleen Irwin notes of the early emergence of site-specific movements:

The boundaries between using site-specific strategies that rely on performance and actors doing site-specific work blurred increasingly during this period, whether because of experimentation of expressions of resistance in both forms.

(Irwin, 2009, p. 49)

Movements in art have continued to contribute to the complexity, overlapping their own work with elements of site-specific drama. As Irwin again points out, today the term site-specific has at times embraced, 'everything from intimate installation, spontaneous happening, and public intervention, to elaborate spectacle in any sort of traditional or non-traditional venue' (Irwin, 2009, p. 8).

The magnitude of difficulty in defining the term can be gleaned from Mike Pearson's observation that, 'Although the search for a practicable, encompassing definition of site-specific performance has long claimed scholarly attention, it remains

slippery' (Pearson, 2010, p. 7). Growing as it does from, and variously appropriated for, all manner of artistic genres, the term site-specific, even when considered solely within the confines of theatrical practice, appears to cover an alarming multitude of stylistic conventions, approaches, and artistic ideologies. Indeed, such has been the confusion, finding consensus even among critical commentaries as to what constitutes a working definition of site-specific performance remains highly challenging. Naturally enough, most commentators, when searching for a definition of the term, focus on the location site being the determining factor. For example, according to theatre theorist Patrice Pavis, previously of the Université de Paris III and The University of Kent, the location definition for a site-specific performance can be liberally described as:

An unusual [site] that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighbourhood, house or apartment. ... The insertion of a classic or modern text in this 'found space' throws new light on it, gives it an unsuspected power, and places the audience at an entirely different relationship to the text, place and its purpose for being there.

(Pavis, 1998, pp. 337-8)

In contrast, performance art historian Nick Kaye of the University of Exeter describes site-specific performance much more prescriptively:

Site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within, and conditioned by the particulars of the found space; existing social situations or locations, both used and disused: sites of work, play, and worship. They make manifest, celebrate, confound or criticize location, history, function, architecture, microclimate. ... They are an interpenetration of the found and the fabricated. They are inseparable from their sites, the only context within which they are 'readable.'

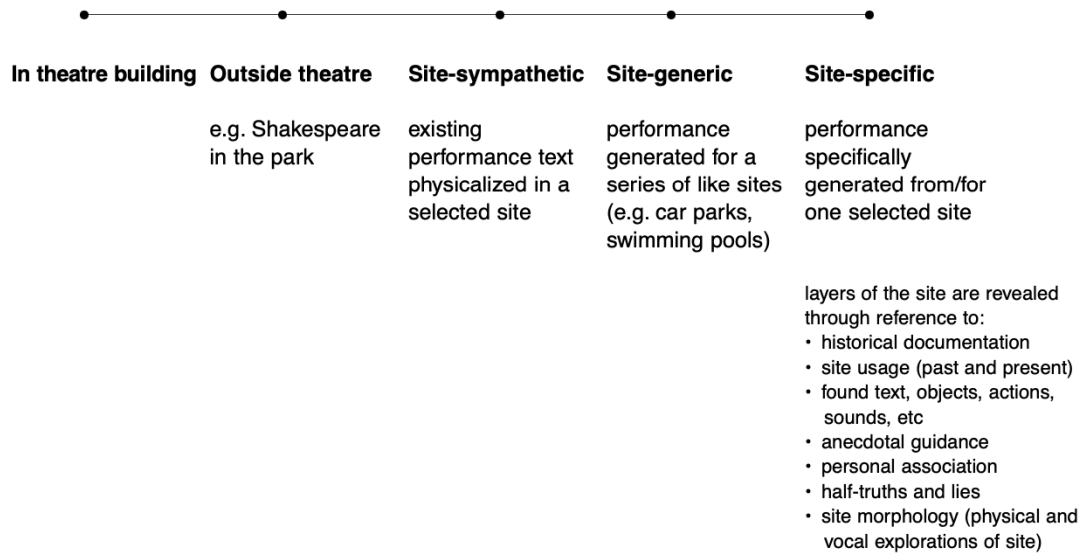
(Kaye, 1996, p. 211)

These two descriptions, both from leading experts in the field, illustrate the diversity of meaning that the term site-specific has acquired over time. It appears Pavis envisions that a text, even of 'classical' origin with no connection to the location per se, may still be regarded as suitable site-specific material through virtue of the fact that the 'found space', 'gives the performance an unusual setting of great charm and power' (Pavis, 1998, pp. 337-8). On the other hand, Kaye's description appears to confine site-specific performances to those that 'are conceived' from the locations at which they occur, and very much utilise, 'architectures that are not backdrops' (McLucas et al., 1995, p. 46). Kaye's view would seem in line with the views of site-specific artists such as Richard Serra, who believes that in the case of site-specific art, 'To move the work of art is to

destroy the work' (Serra, 1994, p. 194). Serra's comment serves a dual purpose here, for it, 'points to the centrality of its specific location to the work of art and also offers a key definition for site-specificity' (Irwin, 2009, p. 48). In other words, the site *makes* the production.

Arguably, part of the disparity here stems from the fact that Pavis and Kaye are approaching the problem from disparate descendant branches of the site-specific tree. Pavis is viewing the medium from the conventions associated with Western theatrical practice, while Kaye is drawing his perceptions from, 'both dramatic and visual art traditions' (Pearson, 2010, p. 7). Kaye's more intimate site-centric approach can again be said to echo the expressions of Serra, an artist that emphatically states: 'I don't make works that can be relocated or site adjusted. I make works that deal with the environmental components of given places' (Cresswell, 2015, p. 156). Kaye and Serra both view the term site-specific as conceptually referring to art that finds its genesis in the environment in which the work is situated. Serra's use of the word 'environmental' – not to be confused with its use in the theories of, say, Richard Schechner's 'environmental theatre' – is intriguing, for it suggests more than mere physical consideration, but rather something which attempts to capture the socio-political conditions found at a given site.

The academic Fiona Wilkie has attempted to provide more clarity, distinguishing these differing viewpoints through more precise terminology (Wilkie, 2002, pp. 140-60). While agreeing with Kaye that the term site-specific should stand to denote productions that draw their material from the uniqueness of the locations at which they happen – to the point where they prove inseparable from that locality – Wilkie also advocates, encompassing the views of Pavis, additional categories for site-specific practice: such as 'site-sympathetic' as the preference for productions where an existing text may function, or perhaps be imposed, upon a particular site, and 'site-generic' for performances that might be performed at several sites that are different, but that bear recognisable similarities (Wilkie, 2002, p. 150).



(Wilkie, 2002, p. 150)

Perhaps another way to assess a play's site-specific credibility is by considering it in relation to Irwin's term of 'performativity' (Irwin, 2009, p. 12). In other words, the more we understand from the site itself, the more site-specific a performance becomes. We might imagine a type of *performative spectrum*, designed to show a scale on which plays draw their material from the environment where they are performed. On such a scale, the earlier example of the Pueblo Deer Dance at Taos would rate 'high', while those for which the real physical environment of performance contributes little or no part, such as Hunter's *Unto These Hills*, written to be produced in a conventional albeit outdoor theatre, would have to be placed 'low' on the scale.

But more problematically, what is significantly lacking in much discussion of site-specific theatre is any great emphasis on consultation with the communities involved at these locations. True, Wilkie's site-specific definition includes 'anecdotal guidance' and 'personal association' as defining factors for a site-specific production. However, most worryingly, none of these definitions require the presence of any *specific* community involvement at all. It would be possible, for example, for an external theatre company to perform a play in a building no longer in use, before an audience from outside the area, and still satisfy the criteria to be a site-specific production. In this respect, Pavis's definition of site-specific theatre typifies the nature of most productions that are produced under its banner. Although he suggests that a suitable site should be one that

is 'imbued with history', he rather importantly fails to suggest the relevance of *whose* history this might be, and, of equal importance, *who* has written what it is. Countless productions are staged at Pavis's 'unusual' locations, most often chosen for the novelty of their aesthetic value, or some other significance to the production, but rarely with any deeper meaning or intimate connection with the text being staged for the communities involved. The views and issues of the communities in which they are located, or even passing relevance to the themes of the play itself, are subordinate to the scenic aestheticism that these locations provide. One only has to think of the myriad of 'al fresco Shakespeare' productions performed every year against the backdrop of National Trust battlements and open-air Royal Parks to appreciate this (Wilkie, 2002, p. 146). Defining the communities at such locations is sociologically challenging to say the least, and the suggestion that their needs are given any serious consideration by the organisers of these events would be generous in the extreme. In reality, very few productions occur at locations solely due to Kaye's 'inseparable' synergy between the production and the site of its performance, and where, 'Creation takes the notion of open-air theatre extremely seriously, arguing that too much of it fails to exploit properly the possibilities presented by the environment in which it is performed' (Martin, 2001).

In its most prevalent form, the majority of site-specific theatre derives its choice of locational settings based on the aesthetic peripheries and scenic concerns of its producers, people who themselves, may have little understanding or connection with the sites involved. As Pearson observed, the way Pavis describes them, they are productions that, 'relate specifically to the practices originating in theatre' (Pearson, 2010, p. 7). Again, the site here becomes all too often a scenic consideration, an unconventional replacement for a painted backdrop and wooden scenery, in contrast to Kaye's understanding of the integrity of a location's identity as the hallmark of genuine site-specific performance.

6.3 Case Study: *The Weyburn Project*

Fortunately, there have been those that have focused much more on the importance of community in the formation of site-specific work. Many practitioners have sought not only to produce innovative theatre outside of traditional theatre environments, but also to perform 'cultural intervention' into the lives of the communities to which they performed by allowing them to collaborate with the production. For example, this can be

detected in the aspirations of alternative theatre practitioners such as Mike Pearson, co-founder⁴³ of the highly influential experimental theatre company *Brith Gof*, whose site-specific work aimed to, 'make performances that fold together place, performance, and public' (Pearson, 1998, p. 35-41). As Wilkie explains, because of such connections, *Brith Gof's* performance sites, 'might then be understood not just as a geographical location, but as a place in which cultural identities and social relationships can be productively examined' (Wilkie, 2008, p. 95). Largely community based, this type of theatre's ethos typified, as Kershaw describes it, the 'alternative theatre movement' in Great Britain in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: performances that aimed to create an artistic interruption, or '*cultural intervention*' into their sites of performance (Kershaw, 1992, p. 6). Part of a wider cultural movement of militant activity aimed at the political, cultural, and sociological re-structuring of Great Britain at the time, the alternative theatre movement shared a similar agenda to, 'subvert the status quo' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 7).

A particularly good example of a site-specific production that sought to explore an 'interesting site', while also concentrating attention of the role of the community in its construction, can be found in *The Weyburn Project* (Diener & Wolfson, 2013). Produced in Saskatchewan in 2002, *The Weyburn Project* was devised by the research team of Andrew Houston and Kathleen Irwin, and arguably serves as an archetypal model of large-scale site-specific methodology in practice. It has also been documented in detail by Irwin in her book *The Ambit of Performativity* (Irwin, 2009). Irwin chooses to define *The Weyburn Project* generally as a site-specific one, agreeing that the term best, 'embraces a range and history of disunified [*sic*] and disjunctive practices that overlay and inform one another' (Irwin, 2009, p. 49). *The Weyburn Project* serves well to illustrate the alternative approach by theatre practitioners when creating performances that emphasise the site itself as the genesis for most other production considerations, while still confronting the many complex ramifications of using these techniques. It also typifies the objective of site-specific art to create performances where, according to former *Brith Gof's* artistic director Clifford McLucas, 'history, location, political and industrial ownership, all resonated through the work' (McLucas et al., 1995, p. 48). As Irwin observes, The Weyburn Mental Hospital proved, 'seductive and clearly the inspiration for the devised

⁴³ *Brith Gof* was founded in 1981 by Pearson and Lis Hughes Jones. The company was originally concerned with physical performance over dramatic text, and shunned the conventional theatre's elements of stage, proscenium arch, and auditorium. In 1988 focus shifted to site-specific work when they were joined by artistic director Clifford McLucas. The company closed in 2004.

work, serving to bracket the diverse perspectives the project put forward' (Irwin, 2009, p. 50). Arguably, it is the combination of McLucas's historical and political elements, combined with what Irwin terms the 'seductive' nature of a site's importance to its community, which makes this type of theatre so powerful. The metaphor of the mental hospital, a place where a person's ability to think and behave rationally is questioned, has often proven attractive to the imagination of theatre practitioners. Famous examples on the stage being the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964), directed by Peter Brook, and Dale Wasserman's Broadway adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1963). And more recently, institutional care in the form of the millennial rehab clinic featured in the National Theatre's production of Duncan Macmillan's play *People, Places and Things* (2015). For Irwin, the site of the Weyburn Hospital appeared, 'unstable, never totally in control of itself, never forecasting on the possibility that it may become unhinged' (Irwin, 2009, p. 9). Irwin's use of anthropomorphic imagery here is notable, and again conveys a sense of how places can acquire palpable sentience when contributing to stories told at them.

Plainly, Kaye's site-specific performance model, which stipulates that such productions cannot be removed from their places of inception, applies to *The Weyburn Project*. In her examination of the placial dynamics at work in the production, Irwin's thinking is in line with Kaye and Serra's conception of the centrality of location in site-specific art, when she writes: 'While the building itself represents a collective history of twentieth-century mental health practices across North America and Europe, the specificities of this *community* [emphasis added] and its local contingencies are unique' (Irwin, 2009, p. 49). For example, Irwin illustrates something of the site's uniqueness when she writes that the hospital was both, 'a source of pride within the community,' while at the same time conducting behind closed doors, 'maverick and ill-timed LSD experiments' (Irwin, 2009, p. 54).

Therefore, *The Weyburn Project*, drawing its inspiration directly from the events of the Mental Hospital's past and the surrounding local community it served – such as recounting the individual stories of those that worked and lived within its walls – could not be performed anywhere else without dislocating complications. In fact, the thought of transporting *The Weyburn Project*, even to another former Mental Hospital, let alone attempting to confine it within a traditional theatre, seems bordering on the exploitative. Using it only to provide an 'unusual setting' even more perverse.

While the production illustrates well the use of site-specific techniques, it also reveals the complex preparation, research, and social and artistic negotiation required to bring to fruition a performance piece so psychologically and physically connected with the location and community from which it emerges. *The Weyburn Project* highlights the difficulties that lie in attempting to construct a working definition of site-specific performance, even within the Euro-American context. Irwin describes the production as a, 'full-scale, multi-disciplinary, site-specific, community-based event' (Irwin, 2009, p. 48). But she also suggests that, 'To think of this event as "intervention" denotes perhaps a more apt sense of the negotiation that characterizes performance/installation outside the institutional frame of theatre or gallery' (Irwin, 2009, p. 49). Of the terms Irwin uses here, 'intervention' is perhaps the most interesting, for it appears to denote that the production intervenes at a specific moment in the conversation, both past and what is to come, at the location about which the conversation is focused. In this respect, Irwin's thinking is very much in line with Kershaw's description of the alternative theatre in the United Kingdom (1992, p. 7). At the time of the play's performance in the early 2000s, the future of the Weyburn Hospital was a matter of heightened local interest. The authorities that owned the vacant site were in discussion with the local community as to whether it should be torn down or reimagined as, 'a cultural centre' (Irwin, 2009, p. 54). Irwin and her collaborators saw the production in part as, 'a catalyst to bridge and activate these groups to consider options for the building's future' (Irwin, 2009, p. 54). Cultural intervention as a 'catalyst' for change is a particularly apt way to think of it.

Again, the key takeaway from studying productions like *The Weyburn Project* is their inseparability from the sites to which they relate, illustrating that criteria as the bedrock requirement for them to be termed site-specific. They prominently display the key elements that define site-specific drama as a genre emerging directly from this foundation, such as drawing content from local sources and the stress on community involvement. It is only through the inclusion in a production of a community's collectively accrued socio-specific information, as it forms Kelly's 'reservoirs of human content', that a site ceases to be a mere coordinate on a map and actively begins to perform as a site-specific location. This might include telling the stories that arise from the immediate surrounds, retelling legends connected to the site, and re-enacting the practices that are associated with it; in other words, a kind of socio-archaeological excavation of the history of the location. Indeed, Pearson frequently uses the metaphor of archaeology to describe

such site-specific practice (Pearson, 2001, 2010). For example, when he writes: 'Through our passage, movements, moments, actions, encounters, we constantly mark our material surroundings. ... These marks we make, these traces we leave, are ineffably archaeological' (Pearson, 2010, p. 43).

6.4 Community Performance

Looking at *The Weyburn Project*, it fits well with Kaye's call for site-centricity as the defining criteria for a site-specific production. More importantly, it practically illustrates the overwhelming importance of recognising 'community' in creating a true site-specific performance. It is at this point of recognition, arguably, that site-specific productions become 'cultural interventions' and of heightened social value beyond entertainment or artistic endeavour alone: As Jen Harvie explains:

Site-specific performance can be especially powerful as a vehicle for remembering and forming a community for at least two reasons. First, its location can work as a potent mnemonic trigger, helping to evoke specific past times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meanings of those times.

(Harvie, 2005, p. 44)

In the case of *The Weyburn Project*, during their initial stages of research, Irwin and her collaborators worked extensively with the local community to discover the background and stories arising from the hospital's past:

Realizing the centrality of the hospital to the social fabric of Weyburn, participants were aware of how perceptions of the project might be shaped by local expectations surrounding the building. To manage these diverse perspectives from the outset, we actively engaged in discussion with the several orders of community that were linked through the building: the citizens of Weyburn, former patients and staff, and artists themselves.

(Irwin, 2009, pp. 51-52)

Irwin agrees here with the ethos of practitioners like Mike Pearson, who highlighted the importance of integrating the stories of the places at which site-specific performance takes place: 'The site of Brith Gof's performances might then be understood not just as a geographical location, but as a place in which cultural identities and social relationships can be productively examined' (Pearson, 2010, p. 5).

Connected as they are to the local history of a given community, and another reason why these productions are impossible to relocate even to similar venues, is their

frequent integration of members of the local community into the performance. Again, this is a factor inherited from site-specific art movements, which regard the integration of the community into their work as keystones to their ideological thinking. For example, 'Culture in Action', another large-scale, site-specific event held in Chicago in 1993, also placed great importance on community involvement. As Miwon Kwon explains:

The eight projects included in "Culture in Action" were structured as community collaborations in which, with the help of Sculpture Chicago's administrative staff, the artist joined with a local organization or group to conceptualize and produce the artwork.

(Kwon, 2002, p. 102)

Similarly, Susan Chandler Haedicke sums up the conceptual ramifications of this type of community-based performance-come art activism, when she writes that it, 'provides an avenue to individual empowerment and community development as it moves the audience into a new role: an artist, a maker of culture who can create a community' (Haedicke, 1998, p. 132).

Moreover, in their inseparable affinity to the location, site-specific theatre productions frequently blur the boundaries between traditional roles for actors. Not only are professional actors asked to collaborate with the community rather than purely respond to a director or a dramatist's requirements, but good site-specific productions will aim to combine the participation of local community in the final performance. Again, this was the case with *The Weyburn Project*:

A group of about twenty psychiatric nurses volunteered to learn the performance route, don period uniforms, and take on the ambiguous role of tour guide/warden. The "whites," donated by the hospital, transformed these untrained actors into hybrid characters (part performer, part interpreter, part guide) who assisted spectators in the tricky negotiation between the reality of the site and the artifice of the performance.

(Irwin, 2009, p. 61)

Such 'immersive' performances as described here also blur the lines between actor and spectator. As Wilkie observes: 'many practitioners seek both new audiences and new performance audience relationships through their site-specific stance' (Wilkie, 2004, p. 185).

Lastly, such site-centricity contributes to the pedagogic content of site-specific productions in a way rarely seen in conventional play construction. Usually, this is in the form of social or political messages of particular relevance for the people that reside in the production area – again, culturally intervening to give new voice to social discussions

that might otherwise have fallen silent. But given the unique connection with the physical environment in which people live, it also opens these productions up to the possibility of investigating larger issues of environmentalism and land-based activism. As mentioned above, in the specific case of *The Weyburn Project* a fundamental consideration was the input of the local community's concerns surrounding the fate of the Mental Hospital. According to Wilkie, site-specific performance like this provides, 'possibilities for responding to and interrogating a range of current concerns, and for investigating the spatial dimension of contemporary identities' (Wilkie, 2008, p. 89). Of particular note, site-specific performances allow the exploration of not only, 'formal and aesthetic but also political choices' (Wilkie, 2008, p. 98).

6.5 Place-Specific

It seems clear that location-based performances like those discussed above potentially offer a new approach for contemporary Native American dramatic performance in comparison to the work it has produced so far. Firstly, there is a fundamental similarity with the practice of 'place-making' by Native American people (Basso, 1996, pp. 5-6). Pearson himself even goes as far as to describe his work as, 'performance as place-making' (Pearson, 2010, p.5). As we saw in chapter one, Indigenous communities attempt through place-making to give voice to geographical features in the landscape, and to ask, 'what happened here?' (Basso, 1996, p. 7). Moreover, Harvie's use of the term 'mnemonic trigger' to describe the effect of a site-specific event's location is strikingly similar to Basso's description of how place-making represents 'mnemonic pegs' (Harvie, 2005, p. 44; Basso, 1996, p. 62). Examples of this range from largescale creation stories – as in the example in chapter one of the story behind the creation of Mathó Thípila – to features more locally significant to small communities, sometimes down to the level of using place-making to explain how individual streams, lakes, and micro-geographical areas gained their renowned. In this way, place-making seems to share with site-specific theatre practice what Buchli and Lucas describe as, 'the archaeology of the contemporary past' (Buchli & Lucas, 2001, p. 5). If you like, we might say both traditional Native American storytelling and site-specific performance perform performative archaeological 'excavations' of the historic past. As Basso describes it:

Place making is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of “what happened here.” For every developed place-world manifests itself as a possible state of affairs, and whenever these constructions are accepted by other people as credible and convincing – or plausible and provocative, or arresting and intriguing – they enrich the common stock on which everyone can draw to muse on past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them anew.

(Basso, 1996, p. 6)

It is interesting to note here that Basso’s terminology is highly reminiscent of Kaye’s when describing his concept of true site-specific theatre. Indeed, it is hard when reading Basso, and his accounts of Native American storytelling in situ, not to see this as a form of site-specific experience, one that he describes as, ‘a form of narrative art, a type of historical theatre’ (Basso, 1996, p. 533). The approach taken by practitioners such as Irwin and Pearson, whose sites of performance in their work represent the alpha and omega of the creative process, clearly align with Native American storytelling practices; conveying places’ stories, embellishing them with imagined content, and re-imagining them through the creative act. Writing of *’ágodzaahí*, or the ‘historical stories’ of the Western Apache, Basso again observes:

Most significant of all, historical tales are distinguished from all other forms of Apache narrative by an opening and closing line that identifies with a place-name where the events in the narrative occurred. ... It is hardly surprising, then, that while Apache storytellers agree that historical tales are “about” the events recounted in the tales, they also emphasize that the tales are “about” the sites at which the events took place.

(Basso, 1996, p. 51)

Such similarities between site-specific and Native American performance often appear self-evident, such as in the description by Meinholtz of the Pueblo Deer Dance in chapter one. In fact, it is almost impossible for anyone reading his account of this, and who is at least slightly familiar with site-specific practice, not to identify it as just that. It utilises the structures of the location, it draws from the stories that reside at the site, and it is a creative product of direct community involvement.

Community involvement is also a keystone of Native American and site-specific practice. For example, Theresa J. May’s *Salmon is Everything*, while not a site-specific play as such, drew heavily from an extended period of research into the issues of the Klamath River watershed and the communities directly affected by the ecological disaster that took place there. She writes: ‘We must turn to our collaborators – the community we serve and of which we are a part – and ask. Doing so precipitates knowledge sharing,

which is, after all, a central purpose of community-based work' (May, 2014, p. 109). Such productions as May's place extremely high importance on integrating members of the community alongside professional actors, and look to combine ceremonial and spiritual connectivity with the sites of performance; a practice that simply no longer exists in the majority of mainstream theatre going traditions. *Salmon is Everything* also integrated a sense of the sacredness of the place by incorporating local music into the performance on a case-by-case basis, for as May recommends, those putting on the play should, 'invite people in your community to perform music or songs that belong to them' (May, 2014, p. 31). As we will see, this approach would form the bases of the productions between FastHorse and Cornerstone with their Native American productions.

Also apparent is the pedagogical dimension that links site-specific theatre and place-making. A site-specific production intrinsically aims to educate attendees about the history of its performance site, retelling of its past stories, and often uses this to problematise the community relationship to the site in the present. Place-making is constructed to function in a similar way, teaching moral and ethical considerations among the tribal population from which the practice emanates. In some respects, there is an element of similarity here with earlier manifestations of Western ritualised drama, such as the medieval 'Morality Plays' and 'Passions'. Basso writes:

Stories of the '*ágodzaahí* variety are morality tales pure and simple, and when views as such by Apaches – as compact commentaries on what should be avoided so as to deal successfully and effectively with other people – they are highly informative.

(Basso, 1996, p. 51)

Although tempting, it is perhaps unwise to use the term 'didactic' here, particularly when we consider the political and activist connotations in the work of many contemporary Native American forms of literary expression. Rather, the 'informative' learning Basso describes seems intended to educate at a more humane, individualistic level rather than preaching a moralistic sermon on the difference between right and wrong. Better described perhaps as, 'Land as Pedagogy' (Simpson, 2014). Place-making is indeed something more akin to the informality of the 'morality tales' found in medieval theatre, where although moral learning was important, also, 'the marketplace was a site of freedom and the home of popular culture' (Wiles, 2003, p. 92).

Yet, although *The Weyburn Project* clearly held relevance for the inhabitants of Weyburn, particularly in exposing the still-raw issues of the Mental Hospital, it is

debatable if its significance reaches the same degree of sensitivity that a place-based Native American production could, largely due to the same problem to thwart Grotowski in his efforts to form a 'communion' with his audience: namely, the dissociated nature of Western society. However, for Indigenous communities this may not be the case. The unifying action of place in establishing identity, culture, and the relationship to the past and present, may well be strong enough for just such communion as Grotowski sought to occur. For Indigenous groups, place offers a direct link to their ancestral belief system, spiritual freedom, and the epicentre of their drive for recognition and the regaining of Native sovereignty. In fact, these elements are of such fundamental importance that the form of place-based theatre we see emerge from Native Americans, while similar to Western site-specific theatre, moves far beyond this in its significance. It is at this point that the practice which emerges transcends site-specific theatre, to become one that can truly be described as 'place-specific'.

Chapter 7 – Real Places: An Introduction to Cornerstone Theater Company and Larissa FastHorse's Process and Collaboration

Having made the case for the potential for place-based techniques, I turn now to examining companies that truly embrace this as the bedrock of their methodology. In this chapter, I specifically focus on the work of Cornerstone Theatre Company, and their collaboration with Larissa FastHorse, to create productions that, through a centring on Indigenous communities, build on site-specific techniques to create just such 'place-specific' theatre described above.

But before turning to the three case studies of Cornerstone and FastHorse's collaboration, I present here some background to their work. Although Cornerstone has a long performance history, it remains generally unknown outside of the small arena of American community theatre. As creators of unique and bespoke productions, which by their very nature are rarely recreated or published after the original run, Cornerstone's work gets little exposure outside of the communities to which it performs. There is also the inherent difficulty of describing work, which again by its very nature, requires you to be present at its performance to be fully understood. Therefore, I would direct the reader to the archival material, particularly the video footage and photo records of Cornerstone's performances, which is available on the company's website.

Similarly, FastHorse is a relatively new arrival on the cultural scene, and although her exposure and fame has considerably increased following her Broadway success, familiarity with her work remains limited, particularly outside of the United States. However, as one of the most sought-after playwrights working today, and due to her ability to speak for widely diverse voices in society, there is now a considerable and ever-growing body of reference material available on her work, much of it online, for those interested in learning more about her methodology. Again, I would advise the interested reader to explore this.

7.1 Cornerstone Theater Company

Cornerstone Theater Company was founded by Bill Rauch and Alison Carey in 1986. Their original vision for the company was as a touring ensemble, and in the early years they travelled all over the United States, mostly performing in community settings. Todd London describes the early Cornerstone Company ethos rather idealistically as, 'a troupe

of Harvard grads who shared a beautiful dream of taking theatre into the American heartland, to make plays with the folks they found there' (London, 2023a). The concept of community theatre was therefore the bedrock of their ideology. For example, the company conducted a national Shakespeare tour in 1991, *The Winter's Tale: An Interstate Adventure*, which travelled to thirteen states, and drew participants from the many locations it visited rather than a single community. In their documentary on Cornerstone, Ives and Kantor (1999) reveal that this tour was composed of individuals such as waitresses, farmers, teachers, nurses, and hairdressers, drawn from the rural communities across America where Cornerstone lived and worked during the production. Cornerstone have been remarkably successful in securing funding, and between 1998 and 2017 were awarded \$1.1 million from the National Endowment for the Arts alone (Gelt, 2017).

Although the company made the decision to settle in Los Angeles permanently in 1992, it kept its community focus, and from that point began conceiving community residencies in 'Cycles', usually around a single unifying theme. These play cycles were designed to culminate in 'Bridge Shows', which were specific productions bringing together artists and audiences from previous productions. Over their nearly forty years of making community-based theatre, Cornerstone have developed a very firm, and workable, methodology for making performances within the community theatre field. Although the techniques they employ are not unique to them – many such community theatre companies applied similar approaches – Cornerstone have consistently adapted and evolved their methods to meet the fluid demands of the communities they work with.

One way this can be seen is in the company's evolving approach to embracing diversity in their work. Arguably, when they began to produce theatre in the 1980s, a specific 'community' was much simpler to define in the United States than it is today, with communities typically being more homogeneous, compartmentalised, and segregated into recognised districts. However, in cities such as Los Angeles, the once clearly delineated 'Black', 'White', 'Hispanic', or 'Chinese' communities, and the neighbourhoods they inhabited, are no longer definable along such clear-cut racial lines. Such generalised terminology no longer represents the multi-layered and diverse populous of American cities, and a 'community' today is not only defined by its ethnicity, but equally embraces sexual orientation, political affiliation, disability, and religious belief. Many communities in the United States are communities not comprised of similarity, but diversity; formed

by those who celebrate their independence from socially imposed definitions. Others have no physical geography at all, with their community existing online and their only unifier being the internet.

Of course, some communities do retain geographic specificity as one aspect of unification. When Cornerstone performed at the Angelus Plaza – the largest low-income housing complex for seniors in the United States – the community was very much defined by the geography of the housing project. But along with communities with clearly definable locations, there are also those 'dis-located' from their surrounds and have little or no definable geographic base. For example, Arab Americans from across the Southern California region. Identifying a community might also arise from a subject to which a company member feels emotionally or intellectually connected, such as 'faith'. If this proves to be the starting point, the next step is to imagine a community in which the concept of 'faith' might be realised: the experience of Catholic immigrants, Islamic refugees, or, of course, the beliefs of Indigenous Native Americans. Ultimately, Cornerstone believes that: 'In a community collaboration, who is involved determines what the work is' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 53).

Something of Cornerstone's constantly changing approach to working with communities can be heard in their mission statement:

Cornerstone Theater Company collaborates with communities. Our work reflects complexity, disrupts assumptions, welcomes difference and amplifies joy. We aim to advance a more compassionate, equitable and just world.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 'Mission & Vision', n.d.)

Ultimately, though willing to adapt its methodology to reflect the concerns and needs of an ever-changing world, Cornerstone's core values remain unchanged:

Our experiences have reaffirmed the ideas upon which the company was founded: that everyone is an artist, and that every community and every individual can wonderfully realize artistic self-expression if given the opportunity and means. Whether in rural or urban settings the goal has been the same: to create theater with people who would normally not come together, for people who do not usually go to see theater.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 1)

During Cornerstone's early years, performances always occurred in the communities for which the productions were intended. This has become harder today in urban collaborations because, as outlined above, many communities no longer possess a clearly definable geographic centre. The company originally relied on free community venues,

but this has also become increasingly hard in cities such as Los Angeles, and a significant proportion of funding must be set aside to convert even 'free' spaces into viable performance venues. This was probably a major factor which led to the company's increased focus on 'place-based' productions. For example, for their 'Faith-Based' cycle, the company looked to produce the plays in existing places of worship. When it proved impossible to find churches, synagogues, or mosques able to accommodate Cornerstone's long rehearsal and production schedule, the company opted to perform instead, 'in spaces with connections to each community: a theater located in a Jewish neighbourhood, a private Muslim school, etc.' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 23).

While Cornerstone continues from time-to-time to stage community collaborations in traditional theater venues, they mainly utilize more non-traditional sites. These include empty buildings, schools, places of worship, and community centres, and what they term 'off-hour' spaces; venues that are closed outside business hours and can be sequestered for a production (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 23). In particular, as we will see in the case studies later, for their Native American plays Cornerstone often utilised the free-spaces of public parks.

Cornerstone's early work was largely in the form of adaptations. They cite a number of reasons for this, including the fact that adaptations took less time than original plays to create, and usually needed less structural reorganisation during the rehearsal process (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 43). Adaptations also reduced the inherent risk in deciding whose story gets to be told and whose does not. In the adaptation process, Cornerstone's team of core members, alongside community participants, worked together to discover parallels between the community and the play. However, original plays had the advantage of providing the opportunity for community members to voice their own stories, and today Cornerstone mainly creates original work. This, in the conservative theatrical atmosphere of the United States, marks the company out as something of an exception. Performing place-specifically in a community provides the opportunity to sew together a play directly from the cultural and physical fabric of that community's identity.

Another early example of geographical specificity was when Cornerstone, in collaboration with Touchstone Theater, created *Steelbound* (1999) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. At the time, the town was still reeling from the closure of the Bethlehem Steel Plant – historically a major employer and iconoclastically linked to the area's

identity – and the resulting play became an attempt to help community residents address the upheaval in their lives. In fact, the play was actually performed in the redundant steel plant, which its former workers had been barred from since its closure. Returning to that space was significant to the people of the town, whose feelings transformed the venue into an almost sacred space; reminiscent perhaps of Irwin and her team's 'cultural intervention' through the *Weyburn Project*, which culturally intervened into the community controversy surrounding the future of the old psychiatric hospital.

7.2 Larissa FastHorse

FastHorse's work as a contemporary Native American playwright, director, actor, and choreographer, has, in a relatively short period of time, brought her to prominence as one of the most distinctive and innovative voices on the Native American cultural scene. Her work as a playwright and dramaturge seeks to present a wide variety of social, political, and environmental issues to diverse audiences, both specifically within the Native American community, and to wider communities across the United States and globally.

To date, FastHorse has already received an extraordinary number of awards in recognition of her work, including the MacArthur Fellowship for 2022, the PEN/Laura Pels Theater Award for an American Playwright, the NEA Distinguished New Play Development Grant, the Joe Dowling Annamaghkerrig Fellowship, the AATE Distinguished Play Award, the Inge Residency, the Sundance/Ford Foundation Fellowship, the Aurand Harris Fellowship, and the UCLA Native American Program Woman of the Year.

As well as her work with Cornerstone, FastHorse's plays include *Average Family* (2007), *Teaching Disco Square-dancing to Our Elders: A Class Presentation* (2008), *Cherokee Family Reunion* (2012), *Landless* (2015), *Vanishing Point* (2016), *What Would Crazy Horse Do?* (2017), and *Cow Pie Bingo* (2018). Her most recent work includes *For the People* (2023), an adaptation for a touring production of *Peter Pan* (2024), and *Fake It Until You Make It* (2025). FastHorse's most successful production to date is *The Thanksgiving Play*, which was the first play by a Native American playwright to be staged on Broadway (O'Bryan, 2023). It was one of the top ten most performed plays in the United States during the 2019-2020 season (Tran, 2019).

As well as her work as an artist, FastHorse has also been vice chair of the board of directors of the Theater Communications Group (TCG), and co-founder of Indigenous

Direction, which offers consultancy on Indigenous arts projects. In 2023, she joined Arizona State University's Department of English as a Professor of Practice in Literature.

FastHorse's collaboration with Cornerstone began in 2016, when she was commissioned by the company to act as dramaturge on their devised Native American play in the 'hunger cycle'.⁴⁴ FastHorse, as with all those who wrote for this cycle, was given free rein to interpret the term 'hunger' in whatever way she felt fit, and for her this was 'hunger for culture' (Clemenco, 2016). When beginning with Cornerstone as a 'Guest Artist', FastHorse was required to participate in their intensive programme to familiarise her with the company's methodology. FastHorse later shared her experience of this:

Going through the Cornerstone Institute Intensive was incredibly rewarding as a playwright – and as a human. For me, it was a formalization and deepening of a process that I was inherently doing and gave a whole other dimension to my work. This process really changes the way you do theater. I will say it kind of screws up making regular theater. It ruins just sitting at home and writing.

(Clemenco, 2016)

Indeed, FastHorse is very much a 'hands on' practitioner, particularly in her devising work with communities. For example, during her work with Cornerstone, she was involved with 'Story Circles' throughout; a key element in the company's methodology as will be discussed later, designed to generate material for scripting through community involvement. As one observer noted at the time of her Story Circle work with participants for *Native Nation*: '[Larissa FastHorse is] interviewing them or just there, listening to them tell her about their culture [The community] tell her about what it's like to be indigenous here in Phoenix' (Hill, 2019). FastHorse explained the locational importance of these interactions:

We're talking about the original people, on whose land we're standing, and finding ways to learn about that land and learn about the people that are all around. ... You learn about ways that you can participate and support that community.

(Hill, 2019)

But given her Indigenous heritage, FastHorse frequently found her role in Cornerstone's Native American productions inevitably becoming one not only of playwright, but also that of gatekeeper to the local community, particularly during the early stages of project

⁴⁴ Previous cycles of plays had been based on themes such as 'faith' and 'justice' (Cornerstone Theater Company, Hunger Cycle, n.d.).

development. Discussing her unique position with the Company, FastHorse reflected that:

It's several years of us doing community engagement, and in that work, because we're working with indigenous communities, I'm at the lead because I'm the person they want to talk to, because I'm Indigenous, right?
 (Kramer, n.d.)

While FastHorse's deep commitment to creating diverse community theatre is obvious, she is equally committed to her Sicangu Lakota ancestry:

A Lakota person cannot be linguistically or culturally defined as a singularity, there is no 'I' in traditional Lakota culture, no way of defining myself as just one person standing alone. If you imagine me at the centre, my definition of self is defined by what I see: so, in the first circle I see mother, father, brother, those things define me as daughter and sister. As the circles expand, I expand my definition of self: as friend, wife, storyteller, cohort at Creative Capital 2019, and on, and on, into all of time and space. These endless circles who are telling me who I am.

(FastHorse, 2019)

Therefore, bringing community theatre to her own Lakota people was clearly something FastHorse felt passionately about. In a speech given in the autumn of 2019 at the Creative Capital Artist Retreat, during the original build-up to her third collaboration with Cornerstone, then known only as *The Lakota Project*, FastHorse revealed the significance of the production personally to her:

This summer, my team will take the first of many trips to my homelands, the Lakota Nation in South Dakota; a Lakota playwright will create a Lakota play, with Lakota people, on Lakota land. ... This will be the most personal journey of my life, because, as you now know, from those circles, by defining my community, I am defining me.

(FastHorse, 2019)

Although recognising the importance of her success in the mainstream theatre – at the time, *The Thanksgiving Play* was slated to perform in over twenty cities across America, something which would unfortunately be curtailed due to the global pandemic in 2020 – the opportunity to return to her native South Dakota was obviously a long-held dream for FastHorse:

Western theater has been very good to me, and it pays my bills, it's moved me into a career in film and television coming up this season. However, there's another world that I live in is much harder to define. It's called community engagement artist, community created theatre, even Indigenous art falls into this catch-all category. It's done in prairie amphitheatres ... it's done in powwow grounds, parks, and sacred spaces.

(FastHorse, 2019)

It seems clear that FastHorse's work with Cornerstone is a means for her to unify the two worlds she exists in; those of mainstream theatre and place-based theatre in the community:

[the work with Cornerstone] brings those two worlds together for me in innovative ways. It places my definition of 'self' as someone who's literally defined by the community around me, in the centre of the art making process, through radical community engagement.

(FastHorse, 2019)

Even when working on devised projects with Cornerstone, which requires the playwright to concede to the needs of the community to a large extent, FastHorse's work often continues to be personally reflective. Content material for the productions may have been generated by the communities with which she worked, but FastHorse clearly then shaped this in relation to her own personal experiences and understanding. For example, as Latzko explains about FastHorse's research for *Native Nation*:

FastHorse says these dialogues helped her to see common issues that were affecting indigenous people in the Southwest. Some of the stories stuck with her after the talking circles. She was especially touched when hearing about foster children being taken from their homes barefoot and in pajamas and not having their clothes or toys with them at new foster homes.

(Latzko, 2019)

Indeed, hearing of the plight of foster children in the region must have been particularly meaningful to FastHorse, who was herself adopted by non-Native parents in South Dakota. Her own experience is reminiscent of the story of the main character in *Native Nation*, who must choose between staying with her Native American community or accepting adoption from a non-Native family. While intercultural adoption can open up the opportunity of living a more affluent American lifestyle, it comes with the inherent danger of losing a connection to ancestral history. As FastHorse explains:

I grew up in South Dakota, where my Lakota people are from, but I was adopted at a young age, an open adoption to a white family who had worked on the reservation for a long time, the reservation where I'm from. ... I was always raised very aware of my Lakota identity and my Lakota culture, and they brought a lot of mentors into my life, and elders, to help me stay connected. But, at the same time, I was growing up in a very white culture.

(Cunningham, 2023)

Although obviously not the same as the trauma experienced by children placed in foster care, or for those that endured the horrors meted out to children at boarding schools in the past, FastHorse's childhood experience is common of that faced by many present-day Native American children who find themselves, for one reason or another, torn between their ancestral communities and the opportunities they might seek elsewhere.

7.3 Cornerstone Methodology

Much of the information that follows about Cornerstone's methodology when working on community productions is drawn from my attendance at their Intensive Programme, held online in June 2021. This was a course designed to give a practical overview of the company's ideology, methodology, and practical community devising techniques for those interested in working with the company. The material here is drawn largely from the material provided during this; in particular the details contained in Cornerstone's 'Community Collaboration Handbook' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006).⁴⁵

7.4 The Jam

Cornerstone's collaborative methodology regards identifying the community that will eventually become the subject of a production as the fundamental genesis for a collaborative project. This process often starts with a 'jam',⁴⁶ where the company, 'discuss common interests, questions, inspirations, and ideas for collaborations' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 7). All members of the company can contribute suggestions at this stage, and consultations are also held with 'community partners', that represent, 'organizations and individuals with close ties to the community' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 11). They work with Cornerstone's Manager of Community Projects and its core company members, assisting with a production's planning, and importantly, 'networking with the community' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 11). Because the permanent members of Cornerstone are often from outside a specific community – at times from an entirely different state – community partnerships are central in helping to

⁴⁵ The Cornerstone Collaborative Handbook is the copyright of Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, and reproduced here for the purposes of education only.

⁴⁶ Cornerstone describes 'Jam' sessions as, 'ensemble and guest-actor-only rehearsals that provide a means for the experienced theater artists on the production team to work out certain aspects of the production, and that ultimately allow less experienced artists to make their fullest contributions during regular rehearsals' (Cornerstone Theatre Handbook, 2006, p. 77).

achieve such things as 'referrals' and 'introductions' to the community (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 11). They act, if you like, as 'gatekeepers' to the community:

One major difference between a Cornerstone community collaboration and a traditional theater production is that Cornerstone utilizes points of contact within the community to help shape almost every aspect of pre-production tasks, such as finding physical resources or organizing community gatherings.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006: 11)

7.5 Community Partners

A broad range of factors are considered by the company when choosing Community Partners to collaborate with. Most pertinent to my research here, is that some communities that work with Cornerstone, despite the diversification described above, often continue to be defined geographically, with place playing an important role in that definition. These geographic factors range from the state-wide to a single block; the most obvious example being Native ancestral lands. For example, the homelands of the Tongva/Gabrielino, discussed at length later in the case study of FastHorse's *Urban Rez*, are now occupied by the metropolis of Los Angeles. This focused the geographic investigation for the play to that area: 'When we were in Los Angeles with *Urban Rez*... we centred around the Los Angeles River basin, so it was geographically a very much smaller area' (FastHorse, personal communication, 2 June 2023). In this instance, it was natural that the Gabrielino Foundation, who are the custodians of one of the only remaining preserved oasis of ancestral land in the city, Kuruvungna Springs, should be the community partners on the project.

Conversely, while still geographically bound, their later production of *Native Nation* would embrace a much wider area, engaging with, 'indigenous people in different parts of Arizona and in New Mexico. The conversations included military veterans, activists, members of tribal governments, and people from urban and rural settings' (Latzko, 2019). The production was commissioned by Arizona State University Gammage as part of their 2019 Pow Wow Festival (Arizona State University, 2019: 'news'). The position of community partner for *Native Nation* thus fell by default to ASU. These Pow Wows, presided over by the ASU Pow Wow Committee, are intended to, 'preserve the inter-tribal cultural heritage of the American Indian students at ASU and to enrich and demonstrate the cultural diversity of the ASU community and surrounding population'

(Arizona State University, 2019: 'news'). ASU also recognise that: '[Native Americans] represent an increasing percentage of the student population at ASU and with pride seek academic and cultural enrichment by maintaining and sharing heritage and traditions with the community' (Arizona State University, 2019: 'news'). As Desiree Ong, the then educational enrichment program manager for ASU Gammage and logistical planner for *Native Nation*, explained: 'It's a part of the identity of living here in Phoenix, we're all about being inclusive. ... It's not about who we exclude, we're an inclusive University. [It says] in our mission statement, in our charter' (Hill, 2019). Ong stressed the production's value to ASU students, in that it might provide, 'a good opportunity to break down barriers and stereotypes and educate themselves about Native American culture which is so important to our community in our area' (Hill, 2019). Similarly, in advance of the production, Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, ASU Vice President for cultural affairs, stated:

We are so excited to welcome the entire community in April to celebrate and honor indigenous culture with these two incredible events at ASU. ... With the mission of connecting communities, ASU Cultural Affairs believes cultural events facilitate building significant bonds of respect between communities, and no connection is more important than with the American Indian community.

(Arizona State University, 2019: 'news')

Ultimately, many cast members came to the production through the agency of ASU; through reaching out to its student body and its long-established contacts within the Native American community of Arizona. As had been the case when creating *Urban Rez*, for the Cornerstone team, 'Building connections was an essential part of developing *Native Nation*' (Latzko, 2019). This was not only true for potential actors for the project, but for those involved throughout the production and marketing process. For example, Ong recognised during the planning stage that, '[ASU] probably could use some volunteers as well for the final event. ... We would also greatly appreciate it just to share the word about the project... that's a great way that an ASU student could help' (Hill, 2019). Ultimately, many such volunteers would be employed to create the Indian Fair which surrounded the production.

7.6 Building the Team

In their community productions, the Cornerstone team remain responsible for, 'the art and the art-making, including casting, design, and script choices' (Cornerstone Theater

Company, 2006, p. 15). Also, although Cornerstone strive to actively draw talent from communities, some core members are always cast along with them. Professional 'guest artists' are sometimes brought in to fulfil key positions, such as director, writer, and stage manager (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 1). By doing this, Cornerstone believes: 'Fresh voices and perspectives strengthen the company artistically, and including artists from outside of the ensemble can often more fully represent the community' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 19). When attending the intensive introductory programme run by Cornerstone, guest artists are also reminded that at times they will be very much subordinate to the demands of the community:

In a community residency, we tend to value most the needs of our community participants, and the professional artists are often asked to adjust to those needs. For instance, we will create a rehearsal schedule around the availability of community participants, which means that we are often rehearsing a play out of order, or, if a participant has a conflict, with a rehearsal stand-in in place of the missing actor.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 19)

Moreover, guest artists are also expected to understand that the *entire* Cornerstone ensemble are 'producers' of the project, including, 'actors, directors, playwrights, designers, technicians, and administrators' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 19). As such, everyone is, 'collectively responsible for everything that the company produces' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 19). As FastHorse explained this to me:

We are here to do whatever the community wants us to do ... if the community says we just want you to serve concessions at a pow-wow, and all-night session of a pow-wow, whatever it is the community is interested in we'll do.

(personal communication, 2 June 2023)

Such an approach by guest artists like FastHorse is obviously the key to establishing the Cornerstone principle of 'respect' for community partners and participants:

Respect — Since one of the goals of a community collaboration is to give voice to a story of the community, our plays usually challenge some of the community's assumptions about itself. The most respectful thing we can do is to listen and engage in a dialogue when differences arise.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 47)

7.7 Approaching the Community

Largely, it is the chosen community that is responsible for the final material that appears. A great deal of effort is invested in building the confidence of the community with which Cornerstone works so that it might be an equal collaborator in the creative process. As FastHorse told me:

That's part of our practice. We invest – it takes the first year just to convince people that we are truly here to serve the community, do what the community wants, and how the community wants to be seen. And how then, with our capacity and resources, we can fulfil those desires. So, we truly have nothing in mind, so it takes a good year to get people to believe us.

(personal communication, 2 June 2023)

This approach represents a paradigm shift from most former attempts to create Native American theatre, which, as I have illustrated many times previously, have almost exclusively focused on realising the vision of individual Indigenous playwrights or theatre companies. This collaborative 'Diversity' is another of Cornerstone's key principles:

Diversity — Because we are always trying to be inclusive of as many community members as possible, the script will inevitably represent diversity in language, backgrounds, beliefs, and approaches.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 47)

Of course, at some point, roles within the production do have to be established and delineated, hopefully with the full agreement of the community partners and participants involved. This is something which, as much as possible, all concerned are allowed to develop organically over time. However, on occasion this can prove problematic, particularly for core artists working on the productions that come from outside a community. Clearly, in this situation, everyone needs to demonstrate great sensitivity in providing 'cross-cultural leadership' (Kramer, n.d.). FastHorse describes this negotiation process when establishing Garcés's role as director on Cornerstone's Native American productions:

My collaborator [Michael Garcés] is not Indigenous; he's Cuban and grew up in Colombia but he is white-presenting, and he's very aware of that. So when we're doing the community work and I'm the playwright and kind of leading the way in getting the trust of the community to create these large-scale pieces that takes several years, and I'm the leader. ... A lot of that work is about Michael – who's the director, who's generally seen as leader – stepping back, making sure that he doesn't look like a leader. He's

constantly being aware that he's on someone else's land and he's in someone else's culture. He's super-aware of where he has privilege and makes sure that he deflects as much of that privilege as possible, because the point is to uplift the community.

(Kramer, n.d.)

It required a great deal of tact to establish the role of Garcés as director, as FastHorse continues to explain:

We've had to really study leadership and study how to transition leadership. So when Michael takes over as director in the room, which is what he's much more skilled at than I am, how do we make that transition of leadership? We work really hard at it, and I think we've gotten quite successful at it.

(Kramer, n.d.)

FastHorse describes a specific example of this when working with Garcés and the local community in Arizona and their production of *Native Nation*:

I remember the second week working in this project we just did in Arizona [*Native Nation*]. After two and a half years of engagement, of me being the leader, we were in the second week in the rehearsal room. I remember him saying something to one of our actors, and one of our community members whom we've known for a while said, "I have no idea what you're saying, Michael, but I trust you, so I'm going to do it." And I was like, "Ah, job done. We did it!" We transferred my leadership to him. We think a lot about leadership and how we're constantly equalizing that in the room.

(Kramer, n.d.)

This is a gradual process, and again, FastHorse and the company must work patiently to establish their leadership roles within the rehearsal:

Then when we make that transition into production, I'm in the room, but I'm actively helping deflect my leadership over to Michael. By that time, though, he's worked with this community for a couple of years, and he knows what their cultural protocols are. He knows what their cultural values are, and he knows how to work within that culture very specifically.

(Kramer, n.d.)

Although these may appear mere tactical rehearsal strategies, they are also employed to entice the most input, and thus fashion the resulting production largely from, the needs and requirements of the community partners. By the time that Garcés takes ownership of the practical realisation of the production as its director, the community's input, guided and refined by FastHorse acting as community dramaturge, is thoroughly established.

7.8 Casting

In the case of *Native Nation*, along with inviting community members from across the state, ASU students also took part in the play's developmental process by sharing their stories and experiences of Indigenous life in Arizona. As Garcés explained, again with a nod toward culturally intervening into the local conversation, Cornerstone hoped to hear stories to present to the audience that:

Look at an issue they are very familiar with, but through a different lens and make them think about it differently. ... That's what I hope theatre does – help us see the world in a different light.

(Hill, 2019)

As mentioned above, Cornerstone's first step is to choose the lead artists, frequently including the ensemble members who had the idea for the project. However, this is not always the case. For example, although FastHorse as writer, Garcés as director, and some other core Cornerstone actors (for example, Peter Howard and Kenneth Ramos, who previously played The Government Person and Max in *Urban Rez*, appear in new roles), featured prominently as they had in *Urban Rez* in the production, *Native Nation* focussed more heavily on drawing performers directly from the Native American community in Arizona. Garcés stressed that, '[Cornerstone] were commissioned [...] with the intention that it would be like a combination of both professional and community actors performing the play that was inspired by the community stories and voices, and our experience of the community' (Hill, 2019).

Indeed, Cornerstone historically believes casting to be, 'one of the most critical junctures in the process' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 97). With this in mind, the company, with the help of its Community Partners, always look to draw the most suitable 'Community Participants' possible (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 53). This is vital for bringing to light new perspectives, particularly genuine ones from within communities, and as Garcés sees it: 'Nonprofessionals bring things to the table that are so true and authentic to their experience and really help us to create something that has authenticity. I'm always surprised with their amazing instincts' (Latzko, 2019). With *Native Nation*, it was the community actors that shaped the overall vision of FastHorse's script, the working atmosphere, and much of the artistic process. This also helped with one of the remaining problems when casting a Native American play, namely, as discussed in chapter four, finding enough Native American actors to participate.

Cornerstone also stresses: 'Being open-minded during casting is key to selecting the right community members for the cast' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 53). For example, one community cast member of *Native Nation*, Ceyshe Napa, a member of the Navajo Nation, explained how, although new to working as an actor, she felt a particular sense of personal investment and connection to her role in the production:

I think this is important, not just because we are invested in this personally, but this is a community investment. ... This is something that I'm very fortunate to be a part of and very proud to be a part of.

(Latzko, 2019)

Napa explained that her involvement in *Native Nation* began because, 'I wanted my daughter to see how this works, especially since this is a Native production, with a Native playwright. You don't see that at all' (Latzko, 2019). In *Native Nation*, Napa's role as a family child carer is one of personal significance, because, 'she helped to care for her niece and nephew when they were young' (Latzko, 2019). Similarly, 'Napa works with LGBTQ youth at Glendale Community College, so stories of LGBTQ youth not being accepted and being kicked out by their families also resonate with her' (Latzko, 2019).

For Cornerstone, the contribution of the personal experiences of participants like Napa is vital:

Researching in community collaborations is one of the most informative and eye-opening steps in the process. It's during this time that people tell you all about themselves, their families, and their jobs.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 53)

7.9 Story Circles

To begin the devising process, Cornerstone, in collaboration with community partners, as mentioned above, host 'Story Circles' or 'Talking Circles' – a process that can sometimes take many months (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 97). In the case of geographically defined communities, such as those of *Urban Rez*, *Native Nation*, and *Wicoun*, the use of Story Circles proved vital in providing insight into the lives of the Indigenous communities that live in places like Los Angeles, Arizona, and South Dakota. Learning about these places, asking communities why they chose to stay there, or how things have changed, was a phase in the creation process less about extracting information and more about listening to what the people had to say. Cornerstone describes the Story Circle process as:

A Story Circle is a workshop that brings designated members of the community together with the lead artists to participate in a sharing of information. Simply described, a Story Circle is a group of people sitting in a circle sharing stories. In practice—and in planning—Story Circles are a powerful research tool. They're also a good way to let a lot of people know about the project quickly.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 97)

As Michael John Garcés explains about how this works for place-based companies such as Cornerstone:

When we start asking people in the community to participate in telling a story so we can make a play, we have no idea what that play's going to be about or what the structure is going to look like. And a lot of what we find out along the way is, informationally from people, is not only what the stories are but really what form it should take in the context of that community.

(Arcos, 2016)

likewise, as Larissa FastHorse explains:

Because I come from a tribal background, that historically did not have a written language, I rely very heavily on oral history. When I do research as a playwright I depend on talking with people and I conduct a lot of interviews

(Clemenco, 2016)

However, when working with multi-ethnic and multi-tribal communities, given the diversity of voices and perspectives, the company acknowledges, '[Cornerstone] can only tell *a* story – not the story – of the community' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 33). How that story was found, chosen, and developed can only be determined from within the context of the community itself. One of Cornerstone's central goals in community collaboration is a commitment to the hearing and voicing of stories, as this can hold tremendous significance for a community and its identity. As discussed in chapter one, Native American communities know themselves by their stories, and storytelling often has the power to clarify, reveal, and strengthen community identity. Told wrongly, as we have also seen by those that have not studied the individuality of places and the people who live there, they can also do much harm. Cornerstone recognises the value of 'listening' is often as much a part of the storytelling process as speaking:

The term "story" as we use it here does not necessarily refer to a community's past historic events, nor does it refer only to the narrative

tales that individuals tell about themselves and others. Community collaborations are about the community dynamics and the individual lives that exist at that moment. Descriptions, images, phrases, and anything at all that is a part of the community can and will contribute to the play. Listening is key.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 35)

The challenge here, particularly for a playwright, is that although the main ideas for the story a given community wants to tell may remain the same throughout the process, this is often in a continuous state of revision and appraisal. There is a constant interplay between the dramatist's work and that of the community with which they are co-creating the final play, so a mixture of professional and non-professional devising is called for. Guest artists are therefore expected to display a high degree of understanding and patience in this respect. This is inscribed in the Cornerstone Handbook's value of 'Mutual Mentorship', when it states:

Mutual Mentorship — The entire research process is based on the premise that the community participants are teaching us so that we may build upon and create from that knowledge. The more that the professionals and the community learn from each other, the more the script can attentively give voice to the community's most integral issues.

(Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 47)

As London explained about FastHorse's role when working on *Wicoun*: 'This project isn't about [FastHorse's] imagination, personal interests, or concerns' (London, 2023a). Indeed, although FastHorse, as a Lakota person, was well versed in the issues that faced the inhabitants of her home state, and particularly those found on its reservations, she set great store in lettering the community guide her in the story which *Wicoun* would tell:

The work is predicated on depth of listening and service. The work happens at a restaurant in Chamberlain or a picnic table in Lower Brule or a bar out in the middle of nowhere – it's always uncertain, it's always intense, it's always surprising. You can have 10 story circles of 20, 30, or 40 people, and it's one conversation with one person that changes everything. That gives me the key to how to tell the story for the community.

(London, 2023a)

7.10 Venues

Community partners work to identify rehearsal and performance sites, often contributing their own facilities to accommodate rehearsals and performances. Again, a good example of this was Cornerstone's partnership with the Gabrielino/Tongva Springs Foundation,

who provided the resources of Kuruvungna Springs as a location for *Urban Rez*. ASU was also engaged in identifying possible rehearsal spaces, with script readings eventually being held at ASU's Center for Indian Education for *Native Nation*, and locating the performance venues for the production, such as the Steele Indian School Park.

In particular, the choice of performance venue can be a long process, the logistical challenges of which at times are legion. There are also practical health and safety considerations and other codes which must be met, such as if the venue has access for the disabled, or how many audience members can it accommodate. There are also the challenges of the basic human amenities that are sometimes lacking in the communities in which Cornerstone works. As FastHorse explained when speaking of the challenges ahead in producing *Wicoun* in South Dakota:

We will be working in the poorest County in the nation, food and security is a daily issue, transportation is difficult at best, and locations are hundreds of miles apart in one day, lodging is scarce, travel is expensive.
 (FastHorse, 2019)

Just paying for food is perhaps the most logistically difficult obstacle to overcome. This is something it is hard to comprehend as a consideration for most theatrical endeavours today, but one that brings home the depth of poverty the company often encounters in communities with which it works. Again, as FastHorse explains about the tour of *Wicoun*:

We have a lot of people that we need to feed every day, except that might be the only meal they get, so donations of healthy food will make a life-changing difference to our participants.
 (FastHorse, 2019)

More aesthetic questions include whether the planned production will 'fit' in a space, or how the space will 'feel', or 'inform' the story in a meaningful way (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 23). Cornerstone must also consider the community's attitude to the venue: such as what does the space mean to the community, what is its history, meaning, and message. Something of this can be heard in Shannon Scrofano's description of working on the design of *Urban Rez*, when she writes:

As we began the design process of researching and understanding how these cultural events operate physically as spaces, we knew we needed to land the fair in two very different locations – the viaduct, a parks- adopted concrete-sided triangle under the Broadway bridge on the north side of the Los Angeles State Historic Park in Chinatown, tended to by the wonderful staff there; and Kuruvungna Springs, a sacred site surrounded by University High School near Santa Monica, and cared for by the

Gabrielino/Tongva Springs Foundation, made up of a mighty group of dedicated individuals.

(Scrofano, 2016)

Pre-production scouting trips are conducted by Cornerstone prior to the production, when, '[the company] try to keep in mind that we are seeing community spaces with fresh eyes and that residents often take their own spaces for granted. They may see an empty building as a nuisance. We may see it as a perfect performance space' (Cornerstone Theater Company, 2006, p. 25).

Therefore, as with the collaborative process between playwright and community members, designers like Scrofano that work on productions with Cornerstone must also look to contribute to the telling of the community's own story. Perhaps, as Scrofano describes of the function of the set of *Urban Rez*, something of this is indicated, when she writes:

In conjunction with our market out front, audiences begin to have access to the astounding, exhilarating vibrancy of the native community – so many individuals devoting their energy and talents and resourcefulness to multiple organizations, on a variety of issues.

(Scrofano, 2016)

Like any other ensemble artist involved in a community collaboration, designers such as Scrofano must look within the community for ideas, so that the sense of place of the community is visually reflected in elements of the performance environment, literally or symbolically:

We gravitated towards circles, looking at circular spaces, simple or inverted, understanding how native performance works in circles and how housing and built structures worked in the Tongva/Gabrielino cultures in this area of Southern California. That included their beautiful dome-shaped homes, their shape a direct result of the materials they are constructed from.

(Scrofano, 2016)

Another good example of this was in the pre-production study trips for conducted for *Wicoun*. As Todd London, who was present through much of the run-up to and performance run of the show, described these:

Each trip – each stop – is different. They meet with potential partner organizations, ranging from other theatres to schools, social service and community centers, pow-wow committees, a skate park, city

administrators and mayors, tribal health boards, and youth development programs

(London, 2023a)

Through this process, Cornerstone was able to locate the community partners that would help facilitate the tour, conduct its usual Story Circles drawn from the communities they met, and scout potential performance locations. Although this informal and collaborative spirit was important for divining the themes for the play, just as it had been in the previously productions, it was perhaps most important for getting a 'feel' for the since of the places the team would be working in.

Chapter 8 – Case Studies: The Placial Analysis of Larissa FastHorse and Cornerstone Theater Company's Place-Specific Productions *Urban Rez*, *Native Nation*, and *Wicoun*

The following case studies provide examples of how placial analysis can be applied to explore plays where place performs an important role in their creation, realisation, and reception. Each of these plays is unique, illustrating how their individual platial circumstances drastically alter how they function within their respective communities. Each play, *Urban Rez*, *Native Nation*, and *Wicoun*, are here explored using the same format. Conscious that these works will be unfamiliar to most readers of this thesis, each case study is premised with a brief production background and synopsis. Next, the place of each production is analysed using the elements of meaningful location: location, locale, and sense of place. In conclusion, a brief textual reading of each play follows to complete the placial analysis. As I have attempted to avoid throughout this research, I am not critiquing these productions aesthetically, and certainly not performing a 'theatre review'. Rather, I focus on their efficacy to intervene into the place-specific concerns of the communities from which they emerged and later performed.

8.1 Case Study One: A Placial Analysis of *Urban Rez*⁴⁷

Background

Urban Rez was first performed in 2016. Although Cornerstone proposed a play that would focus on tribal ancestry linked to the area, they also wanted the production to embrace the diverse multi-ethnic, and in this case multi-tribal, communities residing in present-day Los Angeles. The play would be required to provide, 'a responsive experience gathering up the community in many forms around it' (Scrofano, 2016). Although the Tongva/Gabrielino are tribally those most associated with the Los Angeles basin ('Tongva' itself means 'of the earth'), and acted as the main community partners for the production, the 'many forms' of the extended community stretched to encompass a broad inter-tribal demographic, comprising, 'individuals or families who may have come from other tribal lands across the current U.S. map' (Scrofano, 2016). Ultimately, *Urban Rez*, 'included representation from over 15 tribal nations' (Pham, 2016).

Set in present-day Los Angeles, *Urban Rez* tells the story of the members of a marginalised Native American community, who, through a discordant multicultural alliance, and a 'hunger for culture', regularly come together to stage a community fair – the titular 'Urban Rez' of the play. Here they sell traditional Native American food and art, practice the Native American traditions of song, dance, and storytelling, and above all, campaign to raise awareness on various social issues affecting Native Americans with the attending spectators.⁴⁸ After what might be described as a 'raid' by a government official – an anonymous everyman described only as 'The Government Person' – one community member, a local artist named Max, is threatened with prosecution. As a descendant of the Nicoleño, Max cannot prove his Native American ancestry, and is faced with a charge of falsely selling his artwork with the label 'Native American Art', which contravenes the 'Native American Arts and Crafts Act'. The play then follows the community as they join Max's battle to gain federal recognition for the 'extinct' Nicoleño tribe from which he might claim his Indigeneity, and thus avoid going to jail.

Location

By 1776, it is estimated that approximately three hundred thousand to one million Indigenous people occupied the region now known as California. The area was

⁴⁷ A version of this chapter was presented at the University of Chichester's *Encountering Environments Symposium* on 8 October 2022.

⁴⁸ Cornerstone prefers to the term 'spectators' to 'audience' for those attending their predictions.

consequently one of the most linguistically diverse, comprised of some seventy distinct ethnic groups (Eargle, 2008, p. 36). However, as with those on the East coast, Native American tribes on the West coast were early victims of foreign conquest. Long before their lands were settled through the Western expansion of the United States, tribes up and down the pacific coast suffered from invasion, easily accessible as their lands were from the sea, and from routes up from Central America. For the Indigenous people of California, and its offshore islands, first came occupation by the Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then by the Mexicans from 1821 to 1848. Due to this, Native American tribes were decimated by disease and largely subjugated, by Spanish and Mexican military and missionary operations, much earlier than tribes in the centre of the continent, protected as they were by the natural barriers of mountains and deserts. Similarly, offshore island communities were occupied by maritime exploration – experiencing early the fate of colonisation that would later befall Indigenous people across the pacific, in places like in Hawaii and Polynesia, in the wake of eighteenth-century Empire-building explorers like Captain Cook.

The Los Angeles basin, and further North, the bay of San Francisco, offering naturally inviting inlets from the sea and easy access to the richly fertile alluvial soils further inshore, have historically been the most contested stretches of the Californian coastline. Unsurprisingly, they are also historic places of friction between Native Americans and colonial nations. Once wholesale migrations from the Eastern states began to arrive, fed by the Oregon, Santa Fe, and Californian wagon trails, and later by the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, more and more strain was placed on the resources of the Native Americans of the region. Their traditional hunting practices were placed under threat from Western cattle ranching, their children were taken to Mission and Boarding Schools which focused on assimilation, and their sacred lands were scarred and desecrated by mining. The increased demand from the industrial hubs of Los Angeles and San Francisco to supply cheap labour for their foundries, slaughterhouses, and trading ports, had a double negative effect. First, many Native Americans were used as virtual slave labour under so-called 'apprenticeships', while the promise of work led to even greater competition from immigrant workers from China, Ireland, and Mexico. Even with the coming of the twentieth century, and Los Angeles's new persona as home to the motion picture industry offering the glittering promise of a name in Hollywood

lights, would mean for Native Americans little more than 'extra' film roles as 'savages' in exploitative Westerns.

Largely due to the movies, California has arguably been more responsible for the 'mythologising' of Native Americans than anywhere else in the United States – something I covered in chapter three. It has also attracted some of the most free-thinking and liberal ideology in the United States, and because of this, its cities have seen some of the strongest effects from the 'counterculture' movement of the 1960s. Along with other powerful displays in support of the civil rights movement, some of the most organised challenges to the existing societal position of Native Americans have taken place there. In San Francisco, the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, which lasted for over two years, placed the demands of Native Americans in the national and international media spotlight as never before. Then, in 1972, protesters on 'The Trail of Broken Treaties' marched from California to Washington DC, an endeavour that culminated in the occupation of government buildings. Later, in 1978, this time starting from Alcatraz, the so call 'Longest Walk', another protest against proposed legislation by Congress many considered as violating treaties regarding fishing, hunting, and mineral rights, saw an original band of 24 protesters march again to the United States capital. By the time they reached there, the group had been joined by some three-thousand supporters.

While the counterculture movement did have its positive effects, such as raising awareness and solidarity for Native American concerns amongst the majority white voting public, it also propagated some less admirable trends with non-Natives. Growing from earlier Hobbyist activity, and the avant-garde communes in places like New Mexico, 'New Age' thinking, particularly so-called 'plastic shamanism', flourished in California in the last decades of the twentieth century. The long-held desire to adopt Native American modes of living now became the full-scale exploitation of Indigenous spiritual beliefs by some, largely for no loftier goal than that of profit. Many New Age authors claimed tenuous Native American ancestry in order to speak with supposed authority on the benefits of treading a 'spiritual path' to enlightenment (Aldred, 2000).

Given all this, the popular perception of Los Angeles as the home to a largely relocated and displaced Native American population, and the epicentre of Indigenous pan-Indian sentiment, became ingrained. Indeed, it has been a place where, for over a century, those forced from their true ancestral lands have been relocated in accordance with a variety of federally imposed political, social, and economic policies. Arguably,

considering the historic failure of the State of California to recognise this marginalised group of people, this might be one of the least likely regions to court interest in the fight for Native American recognition. Despite California being home to the largest population of Native American peoples in the continental United States – there are some 109 Tribal Nations – they are recognised in only 34 of its 58 counties (NCIDC, 2024). Los Angeles County, the state's biggest county by population, has none.

Yet, while California as an alien land is sadly true for many, there are those among the city's community that can call it their ancestral home. The Tongva/Gabrielino people, for example, have inhabited the area for millennia (Pacheco, 2017). While the Nicoleño – a tribe which originated on San Nicolas Island, and that the U.S. government refuses to recognise due to being declared 'extinct' – populated, cultivated, and honoured the islands of the Westcoast seaboard long before the concrete, steel, and glass imposition of settler colonialism came to dominate mainland California.

One factor that led to their supposed 'extinction' was a massacre the Nicoleño suffered in 1814 at the hands of foreign traders. This left the numbers of Nicoleño seriously depleted, and in 1835 the few remaining tribal members were removed from San Nicolas Island and relocated to mainland California. One woman, Juana Maria, remained on the island alone for eighteen years, known popularly as the 'Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island'. After her own removal in 1853 to Santa Barbara, and her death the same year, as the only known person to speak her language, and with little documentary information on the fate of the other islanders that had been removed earlier, it was concluded by researchers and tribal scholars that the Nicoleño line had entered into extinction (Morris et al., 2016, p. 91-92). Lone Woman's story is told in Scott O'Dell's children's novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960). More modern research now indicates that the lineal descendants of the Nicoleño can still be located within the population of today (Morris et al., 2016).

Locale

Both of the venues for *Urban Rez*, Kuruvungna Springs and Los Angeles State Historic Park, are recognised sites of Native American historical importance. The original inhabitants that lived there had their identity shaped by them in the past, and they continue to shape Indigenous identity today. Native American communities in Los Angeles hold them significant for their cultural and socio-political understanding.

As I have suggested previously, parks are contested places today, and that, 'in the metropolis of Los Angeles, parks stand at the frictional intersection between nature and modernity with the same oppositional force as the fault lines running beneath its streets' (Novell, 2025, p. 42). The Springs and the State Park have a confrontational history with city authorities. Green spaces in the city are a rarity, and its parks often struggle to accommodate all the various uses they are expected to meet.

Urban Rez premiered at Kuruvungna Springs (see Fig. 1).⁴⁹ Originally a source of fresh water for Native Americans in the area, it also provided much needed spiritual energy (Kuruvungna Springs Cultural Center, 'About Us', n.d.). In the past, the Springs have been endangered by industrial encroachment, and inevitably pollution, and in an attempt to protect them from this, the Gabrielino Tongva Springs Foundation was formed. Wendy Teeter, who is a lecturer in archaeology and Native American studies at UCLA, points out the significance of the Springs: 'This is one of the only places you can see the richness and diversity of what L.A. looked like at first contact. This is a rich opportunity to promote Tongva history and heritage' (Hamilton, 2020). Unfortunately, problems remain, and the lease agreements with the Foundation are now on an annual renewable basis, meaning their development for profit has returned. This fragile state of being, as Denise Hamilton, suggests, is symptomatic of the position of Native Americans in Los Angeles as a whole:

It's tempting to see Kuruvungna as a metaphor. For the abysmal treatment of Native Americans and their land. For the fragility but also the resilience of nature. For the battle between rapacious development and the hunger in our souls for spiritual transcendence.

(Hamilton, 2020)

Fortunately, for now, there remain many battling to preserve the Springs – community activists, students from UCLA, and ecologists – from future development.

The second production site, the Los Angeles State Historic Park, like the Springs, also has a contentious history. After over 20 years of planning discussions, failed proposals by the State Park Service, and disagreements about its use amongst various factions of community activists, it was finally completed in 2017, becoming the first state park in the city (Jao, 2017). Situated only a stone's throw from Chinatown and Los Angeles Central Station, the park occupies what in times past has functioned as railroad

⁴⁹ Significantly, the 'na' in Kuruvung-na is the Tongva expression for 'place'.

sidings, storage depots, and warehouses. Destined to be permanently built over as an industrial complex, it was saved in the 1990s by the community action group the Chinatown Yard Alliance (Pacheco, 2017).

Despite many proposals for the site's final use, its fate remained undecided for decades. In 2015, 'The Cornfield', as the site was colloquially known locally, briefly functioned as just that, albeit representationally, courtesy of the 'Not a Cornfield' installation by local artist Lauren Bon. No one knows exactly why the area was called 'The Cornfield', although corn, as one of the main staples for early subsistence cultures, would have been grown, 'since the pueblo days in the neighbourhoods' (Hernandez, 2015). A more pragmatic explanation for the nickname is that freight trains, arriving from the Midwest bread-belt, accidentally shed some of their cargo which took root along the tracks (Perry, 2020). The art project – constructed by Bon through the planting of 32 acres of decorative corn⁵⁰ in the centre of the disused lot – was meant to be 'a point of celebration for the multiethnic history of Los Angeles' (Hernandez, 2015). However, the project was not without its critics. Some suggested that the commission of the artwork was, 'approved through hastily called and poorly publicized public meetings' (Hernandez, 2015). As such, perhaps a stalling tactic by City Hall to delay the building of the proposed, though costlier, state park. While other visitors simply described the artwork as, 'kind of hard for people to understand' (Hernandez, 2015). Yet, in relation to a country where so many Native Americans continue to live below the poverty line, struggle to afford enough to eat, and where oil alternatives may offer greener alternative sources of renewable and sustainable energy and prevent the further exploitation of Native American land, it is perhaps not so hard to 'understand' the symbolic metaphor underlying Bon's creation. Moreover, The Cornfield offered a brief opportunity for those involved in its creation to connect spiritually with the land through the traditional planting, nurturing, and reaping of the corn: 'The first seeds were planted at dawn after an all-night vigil and a Native American ceremony meant to request Earth's permission to plant in it' (Hernandez, 2015). Such activity is clearly beneficial in preserving cultural Indigenous identity, for as ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan explains, 'the preservation of traditional agroecosystems must occur in conjunction with the maintenance of the culture of the local people' (Nabhan, 2002, p. x).

⁵⁰ Bon's intention for the harvested corn was that it be used for further art projects at the site. A smaller, edible plot of corn was also planted nearby (Hernandez, 2015).

The park today, designed by architects from the State Park Service and built at a cost of \$20.8 million dollars, includes a 'Great Lawn', vegetable plots, and various green field areas, 'planted with a wide selection of native and imported plant species, including species introduced to the area by Spanish conquerors; agricultural specimens; and ornamental plantings meant to denote the region's post-World War II flora' (Pacheco, 2017). There are also Native American inspired art installations, a running track, and various innovative examples of alternative water management systems: 'Portions of the park are designed to become submerged during rain events in order to allow for groundwater infiltration and sequestration' (Pacheco, 2017).

Archaeological excavations have found evidence of early Native American settlement here – founded, it seems, due to the proximity to the LA river, which, like the Kuruvungna Springs, gifted an essential water source for the day-to-day needs of the original Indigenous people (Pacheco, 2017). Unlike the Springs, there is no direct evidence of sacred association with the site; however, it seems reasonable to suggest there would have been, and perhaps along the lines of that enacted when planting Bon's cornfield. And the site's more recent historical significance cannot be denied, for as the then California State Senate President Pro Tempore, Kevin De León, pointed out at the time of its opening: 'This spot is intrinsic to the birth of L.A. and is just as much a museum to LA history as it is an open green space' (Pacheco, 2017).

Indeed, regardless of its sacred associations, this place is a salient reminder of the struggles generations of Native Americans have experienced while adapting to city life. As one commentator said of such locations, '[they] deserved to be preserved as places where the often-overlooked early chapters of the city's history were written in the dirt' (Hernandez, 2015). For example, the railroad tracks, the same ones that hauled corn from afar to take root here, also deposited those uprooted from their homelands, hoping against all expectation that they too might flourish in the fertile land of California. Throughout the twentieth century, along with immigrants from further afield, trains brought Native Americans to Los Angeles along the tracks that once criss-crossed what is now the park: Uprooted Cherokee from Oklahoma and North Carolina; Hopi from Amazon and New Mexico; Chickasaw from Mississippi and Kentucky.

Sense of Place

Conveying the sense of place found in California, Los Angeles, and both Kuruvungna Springs and the Historic State Park, was obviously a key concept even prior to the performance of *Urban Rez*. FastHorse and Garcés launched the production in Indian Alley, Los Angeles, amid the eye-catching decorative street art and colourful murals of iconic figures such as Robert Sundance and Toypurina. Situated downtown, only a few blocks from 'Cardboard City' and 'Skid Row', Indian Alley – the colloquial name for the tight-knit and multiculturally diverse arts district surrounding the historic Regent Theater – would seem an unlikely venue to launch a production destined to perform in the leafier surrounds of the city's parks. Similarly, for a play that would focus on the importance of ancestral land to Native Americans, Los Angeles would appear to represent the antithesis of Native American 'homelands', as it is a place which has historically shown little interest on their attempts to be recognised. FastHorse was fully aware of this during preliminary work on the play, observing that, 'it's been an endless battle to try to get that recognition and try to get Indian land' (Arcos, 2016).

In fact, rather than being a paradoxical location, Indian Alley perfectly conveyed the platial complexity which Native Americans experienced in cities like Los Angeles. The sites chosen for *Urban Rez*, too, would act as catalysts for revealing anew the hidden stories that often go unnoticed and become lost within a modern-day, bustling metropolis such as Los Angeles; such as the seemingly endless quest for recognition of the Native American communities that live there. For FastHorse, her hope was that those witnessing *Urban Rez*, '[realized] how many Native people they are interacting with every day, how many times they are standing on Native land' (FastHorse, 2016b). Perhaps *Urban Rez*'s most significant cultural intervention here was through its ability to permit, albeit temporarily, a glimpse of what may have become invisible by disrupting, agitating, and generally working to, 'subvert the status quo' (Kershaw 1992, pp. 6-7). As Julia Bogany, president of the Kuruvungna Springs Foundation, poignantly observed of the first performance site, 'It's in the middle of the city, but no one sees it' (Hamilton, 2020). Something that could easily also be said of many Native Americans resident in Los Angeles.

This highlights one of the most striking effects at work in *Urban Rez*, and the one most subtly suggested by its place-based venue. The land unites these people; but it also divides them. It makes them invisible; but it also reveals who they are. This is a message

extended to the audience, which as participants of the action rather than passive theatregoing consumers of it, were encouraged to become one with *Urban Rez*; forcing those attending the show to recognise that the Native Americans they encounter here, rather than fictitious characters created for a dramatized reservation in the theatre, form a living breathing part of their urban environment.

From the unconventional opening moments of *Urban Rez*, its participants were environmentally removed from comfortable distancing that usually exists with the performance space – breaking the expected codes when attending a play, and challenging them to think, and act, differently to that usually imposed on them by architectural determinism. For example, the introductory 'Format' notes to the production provide the direction:

As participants (audience) check-in they should be encouraged to explore the fair, but not directed in any way except to be told when to enter. ...
 There is value in both agency and alienation for this experience.
 (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 'Format', 2016a)

When the audience was finally permitted to enter the compound forming *Urban Rez*, the production prevented them from simply becoming passive recipients of 'drama'. Rather, it coercively, subtly, persuaded them to adopt the role of active 'participants' in it. Gone were many traditional theatre elements they would normally expect to see, such as curtains, a raised stage, a proscenium arch, etc. These were replaced with the communal open arena, surrounded by market stalls, fairground booths, and sideshows.

Participants at *Urban Rez* were encouraged to have fun, before, during, and after the performance, and were invited to take part in the various activities available in the booths. The nature of some of these was humorous, if subtly didactic, such as the 'MAPPING THE AREA/GOOGLE MAPS 1491 (CA VERSION)', 'GREAT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CITY/ INDIAN RELOCATION ACT', and 'INSTANT KARMA/GUILT REDUCTION' booths. Participation was further encouraged by Neasha – described as a 'female elder, Nicoleño' – in her introduction to the audience:

NEASHA

Thank you. The bathrooms and the exit are back out the way you came in. There's lots of things to experience today. Choose something that sparks your fancy and see where it takes you. There's no right or wrong way to experience Urban Rez.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 2)

The participants attending *Urban Rez* mingled in the space with the performers, who were already in the space and initially indistinguishable from other attendees. This blending of reality with performance, eliminating the shielding effect of the fourth wall, forced spectators out of their distant objectivity of the action by 'immersing' them in the place, and in turn bringing them to a closer affinity with the issues, dialogue, and most importantly the immediate *location*, presented in the play. Place-specific productions like this, staged in the local neighbourhoods where they were devised, again intervene into the issues and challenges most relevant to the local demographic in ways traditional stage productions rarely can. By bringing all the participants, performers and audience, into intimate proximity, the demarcating lines between fiction and reality blur not only in the physical sense of the staging of plays like this, but more importantly, in the closer application of the issues their texts seek to address. Spectators here are reminded that this is also *their place*, and not simply a fitting scenic backdrop for an entirely fictional dramatic work. The places where *Urban Rez* performed were also, as described above, contested ones; battlegrounds physically and psychologically between Indigenous history and progressive modernity. They were arenas where the fight for recognition of one's right to a homeland might be played out – something FastHorse suggests through breaking the action in *Urban Rez* into 'Rounds', and through several references to specific places of historical conflict between Native Americans and the federal government; such as the 'Battle of Little Big Horn', 'Wounded Knee 1890', and 'Alcatraz Occupation' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 58.). The effect of this is both symbolic and subliminal, hinting at a greater concealed conflict; the cultural genocide that has been perpetrated on the Indigenous people of the continent. For example, as a tribe now officially extinct, this is particularly true for those of Nicoleño decent, but also relevant to everyone, as all the characters, in one fashion or another, are dislocated from a true sense of belonging and acceptance – such is metropolitan life.

Conversely, *Urban Rez* is also depicted as an island of unity. By focusing on the importance of the place in which the play is performed, the text introduces the theme of place as the central unifying element in the story. Among this fragmented social gathering of disparate characters, a thread of solidarity exists to bind them; the lingering primal 'hunger for culture', or more exactly, the culture of this specific place. Max gives voice to this when he says:

MAX

Hunger for culture. I feel like I don't belong here everyday [*sic*]. The land is invisible. I am invisible. Our culture has been devoured and it feels like there is nothing left.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 2)

Max, as an unrecognised Native American, characteristically relates his feelings of alienation to the actual land he genetically feels connected to, yet no longer legally recognised as its guardian. The place once sacred to his ancestors is now buried beneath city blocks and freeways, rendered 'invisible', and as he shares such close affinity to it, feels himself now rendered equally invisible to the world. Perhaps this hidden, yet ever-present, paradox between man and land is reflected in the curious fact that, although there are numerous references to California and Los Angeles, the play remains strikingly deprived of specific references to the two geographical locations for which it was written – the State Historic Park and Kuruvungna Springs. Such an obvious omission cannot be totally unintentional. Perhaps, while not drawing literal attention to the surroundings, the constant noise, smells of pollution, and feelings of transience that emanated from the viaduct at the Historic Park, contributed more than words could express: an ever-present reminder of the true *Urban Rez* of Los Angeles, which, without the clearly defined borders of a defined reservation, reaches out into the far distances of California seemingly without end. Conversely, the soft pungency of the well maintained, manicured flower beds of the Kuruvungna Springs perhaps succeeded wordlessly in conjuring a more sentimental, nostalgic hope of a return to nature and historical ancestral simplicity – something that might never be possible, or even desirable, to the majority of Native Americans for whom *Urban Rez* is the only home they have ever known.

Perhaps this unified synergy with the land, and the fear of becoming permanently alienated from it, is most clearly articulated in the exchange between Walter, another member of the Nicoleño tribe, and Antoine, who discover a shared affinity with homelands even though stemming from different continents:

WALTER

It's more than the people. There is a place on this earth that has always been ours. Our DNA is connected to this piece of the planet. We could be anyone, but the land makes us who we are.

ANTOINE

I've heard people say they felt that in Africa. Like everything just clicked for them. I've never felt that.

WALTER

I feel it every time I am with my tribe on my land. I don't know who I
 would be without that connection.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 71)

The character of Robie, in a similar way, reaffirms this unification with ancestral place even in the city, when she informs us:

ROBIE

But then I remember that once there was a village at the beginning of
 the Harbour freeway. The ancestors travelled those places that
 became roads so when I drive on the freeway it is ancestor time. Time
 to remember the stories.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 2)

All of this focus on location was obviously something *Urban Rez* aimed to confront, and its scenic designer, Shannon Scrofano, was acutely aware of this as she approached the set design for the play:

Place, land and relationship are the ground of cognition for native
 consciousness. The ground of perception, identity, and pursuit. The design
 elements we introduced to the work would need to find this core as well.

(Scrofano, 2016)

This was a tension that Scrofano's set design – minimalist to the point of spirit-world ethereality – strove to reveal rather than obscure. What little practical set there was functioned to depict the fair motif in performance as a platial comment on the dichotomous, transitory existence between permanence and impermanence that urbanised Native Americans occupy. Similarly, this brittle situation was enhanced by the booths and sideshows of *Urban Rez*, which called to mind the temporary, yet recurring, nature of a typical fairground; a passing event, yet also one that suggests a cyclical permanence through its perpetual dismantling and rebirth in another location. Connected to the day-to-day life of the community, such fairs – reminiscent of urban village communes of the past – create vital micro-societies through their market stalls selling locally produced plants, herbs, and homeopathic medicines, and remind us of how important such land-based commerce is in maintaining Indigeneity.

Similarly, booths and vagabond stalls convey the intrinsic impermanence inherent within both Western and Native American cultural places, particularly multiuse ones such as public parks. They are temporary shanty constructions, reminiscent of encampments perhaps – both the bivouacs on ancestral lands of the past, and the cardboard shanties on the present-day sidewalk – that can easily be picked-up, packed-

up, and carried away when the show is over, or the land is cleared, or the street has been swept-up and cleaned. Again, the use of this location can be seen as reminiscent of Basso's description of 'place-making' and 'historical theatre', as a means of storying the land through platial experience of it.

Disquietingly, and drawing attention to how these locations remain encircled by the ever-present threat of being 'devoured' by the city's encroachment, the 'openness' of the set design prevented the spectators becoming distanced, or, 'cut off from the space beyond' (Scrofano 2016). Along with being reminded of the dangers that the encircling city might hold, attendees were perhaps also encouraged to consider through the revelation of the cityscape that beneath the seemingly self-supporting structures of modern Los Angeles – its office blocks, freeways, and urban sprawl – it is Native American ancestral land that supports it all. As FastHorse writes about her concept here:

In creating the format for this play, my goal was to decolonize the theatrical experience to give you the gift of encountering our stories in our ways. I want you to consciously think about where your feet are on the earth as you hear words spoken in ancient languages. I want you to stand face to face with Indigenous people from fifteen different tribal nations and laugh together at the ridiculousness of our shared humanity. I want you to see the buildings of Los Angeles differently because you are aware of what was lost to create them.

(FastHorse, 2016b)

As Scrofano points out, this kind of 'place-keeping' is central to preserving Native American cultural ecosystems, describing it as, 'a term I am thrilled to hear more and more often in dialogues about community capacity, cultural vitality and civic health and equity' (Scrofano, 2016). She goes on to explain that *Urban Rez*, 'hatches directly from the urgency of this need to keep place, and to make its keepers visible in their very diverse narratives' (Scrofano, 2016). Similarly, for FastHorse, such 'place keeping' was at the forefront of her preparatory research:

They keep this place, keep its histories, keep rich knowledge of its possibilities, and keep our attention on its critical, incalculable resources. ... It hinges on diverse and direct mutual investment of local stakeholders, shared governance, powers of observation and acknowledgment to bring the implicit assets – including people – to the forefront of the way we view places, and encourages nurturing, partnership, and a robust sense of sustenance and maintenance of the places we live, work, visit, preserve and restore.

(Scrofano, 2016)

This practice of 'place keeping' is threaded throughout *Urban Rez*, with the sense that its characters, through their regular gathering at the fair, are in some small way 'place-keeping' the local community alive, and reaffirming their identity, by simply gathering their feet on an undeveloped plot of ancestral land.

Although open to investigating many issues facing Native Americans living on urban 'reservations', it was the stories she heard during the many Story Circles of these people, the original Indigenous inhabitants of the Los Angeles basin and coast, that FastHorse chose to spotlight in *Urban Rez* by dramatizing their stories and articulating their struggles. Recognising the sacred associations of Kuruvungna Springs in this regard, FastHorse chose to incorporate many traditional aspects of Native American ceremony into the construction of *Urban Rez*. The use of the cultural fair motif was again pivotal here, because, as Scrofano explains: 'Along with pow-wows and other ceremonial practices, these kinds of events serve a critical conjunctive function in Native American communities' (Scrofano, 2016). The fair's communal atmosphere lent itself to one of the most unconventional approaches the production was to adopt: the use of 'immersive' techniques. Such experimentation with audience and performance integration, within the history of the contemporary Native American theatre at least, as we have seen is a rare phenomenon bordering on non-existence. But here it would play an integral role in sharing the storytelling process with the spectators. As one spectator at the performance described it: 'By immersing the general audience in an interactive play, where actors stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the audience, we were better able to contextualize and relate to the story in front of us' (Pham, 2016). In this respect, we could say *Urban Rez* functioned as a form of 'ceremonial theatre', which has been described as one where, 'approaching the audience as part of the community or tribe is a key component' (Geiogamah, 2011, p. 38). Additionally, while satisfying Cornerstone's mission to embrace the wider communities involved, this platial approach also remained sensitive and reminiscent of more traditional Native American modes of storytelling found throughout the continent. The enactment of 'place-making', described earlier by ethnologists like Basso, where geographical features in the landscape are used as 'mnemonic pegs' to chronicle the past, is an example of this (Basso, 1996, p. 62). Practiced by many Indigenous cultures whose history is largely handed down through oral succession, this is one of the oldest methods of storying the land employed by Native Americans, and, given its often dramatic content, has even been described as a form of

'historical theater' (Basso, 1996, p. 33). Much of this local produce found its way onto the stalls at *Urban Rez*.

Many came because of 'Indian Relocation Programs', which, as we are taught in *Urban Rez* by Walter:

WALTER

Enticed Native people to leave their reservations and move to urban centers. Some people did well, but many became assimilated and lost touch with their Native cultures. Or never became assimilated and struggled.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 49)

It was with this turbulent historical juxtaposition of the urban and ancestral Native American experience in mind that Cornerstone chose to situate the production not in the park's greenfield areas, but rather in its more developed Eastern extreme; pitching Scrofano's bivouac set under the North Broadway Viaduct, next to the train tracks that serve the city.⁵¹ This site provided a unique opportunity for the production to encounter and interact with the local dystopian urban environment; a fortunate happenstance of 'place' that Garcés's direction, as FastHorse explained to me, actively sought to capitalise on:

[Michael Garcés] is such an organic director, and he's so responsive to where he is ... he used the viaduct tremendously. But he also used trains going by; so, there was a train, so we could fight the train, or we could ignore the train, or he made it a rule that every time a train went by everyone had to wave and yell at the train. No matter what was happening, they had to wave and yell at the train.

(personal communication, 2 June 2023)

These interactions with trains, cars, and the frenetic motion of the city provided a constant rhythmic accompaniment to the play's narrative: reminding the spectators of the dichotomy of the situation between Native American land and its encircling urban environment. Similarly, the cars roaring overhead, and the trains rushing past – carrying holiday makers to the Pacific surf of the bay area or tourists down to Sunset Boulevard, oblivious to the lives of *Urban Rez*'s characters playing out only feet from them – provided a not too subtle commentary of the position of Native Americans in society today; waving to them like lost castaways upon an urban sea.

⁵¹ Formally known as the Buena Vista Viaduct, it was the first Beaux Arts bridge constructed by the City of Los Angeles in 1911 (Los Angeles Conservancy).

Placial Analysis

The intervention of *Urban Rez* into its places of performance is also realised through FastHorse's characterisation. This is most clearly achieved through the depiction of Max's struggle to gain recognition for the Nicoleño who once occupied this land. But more generally, the picture FastHorse paints is a paradoxical placial existence for all her fictional characters in *Urban Rez*, and, we must remember, the real communities that inspired them during the Story Circles. Theirs is a disconnected relationship with the place in which they find themselves, and the land on which they stand; a place that is at once alien and hostile, and yet, also their home. These locational themes remind us that a loss of platial interconnection often leads to a reciprocal loss of identity and self-recognition. As FastHorse explained, this provided fertile ground for her imagination as a creative when approaching the concept of 'hunger':

They are here – have been here for thousands of years – and yet have no claim to their ancestral lands, no claim to their own name even because the federal government has declared them extinct. There felt to me to be this huge hunger for so many things. At the same time, we are all living, and working, and doing this play on this land that actually belongs to someone else who has no ability to claim it – which I found to be both tragic and a fascinating way of thinking about hunger.

(Clemenco 2016)

While many of the characters in *Urban Rez* are recognisably three-dimensional – such as Max, Robie, and Antoine – many are less naturalistically fleshed out, and heavily lean towards cliché and caricature. These characters are arguably the most interesting and prove most insightful in what they tell us about the place of performance, and I will concentrate on these here. For one thing, these characters allow FastHorse to present a commentary on a complex sociological place like Los Angeles, where many people present 'personas' to the world rather than their true identities.

This is perhaps most apparent in the play's depiction of the federal government, which has for so long interfered facelessly in the lives of Native Americans through legislative and bureaucratic practices, not least, as outlined above, in its decisions that affect both the Springs and The State Historic Park. This theme of the omnipotence of the federal government is a central one that runs throughout the text, personified in the larger-than-life character of the Government Person. This character might be read as embodying the sense of the ever-present threat that federal and state authority

represents – the constant ‘battle’ to save the Springs, or the proscribed use for the State Park by the federally funded Parks Service. He suggests malignant patriarchal control, manipulation, and a contempt for Native American self-determinacy, and, perhaps most interestingly, an agent for the instigation of inter-tribal division. The text imparts a feeling that this Uncle Sam – an image invoked by the character's Star-Spangled costume – is forever watching the events that occur on *Urban Rez*. From the safety of his confine within the ‘FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BOOTH’, he is a character always threatening to physically intervene, invade, and dominate this place at the first sign of unauthorised or insurrectionist behaviour. This, in the wider historical context, parodies the continued state and federal interference on reservations which have supposedly been granted the autonomy for their own self-government.

For example, initially the Government Person, and the federal administration he represents, appears in a subdued, even benevolent, mood. At one point, he reminds the Elder character, Xavier, who as a full-blood Tejon holds federal recognition, they may consider themselves, ‘officially pals’ (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016, p. 3). While the Government Person is clearly a caricature of federal bureaucrats, he also suggests the duplicitous ‘shape-shifter’ figures found in many Native American stories such as those of Coyote. His appearance seems to change during the play – the Stars and Stripes costume of good old avuncular Sam, condescendingly patriarchal, undergoes a metamorphosis in the later scenes, donning a more clerically officious three-piece suit to match his newly coined legal persona of legalese spouting bureaucrat. This caricature brings to the Government Person a timeless quality, representing the countless federal administrative figures that have been playing a game with Indigenous peoples throughout history. Consider this sparring between him and Xavier:

XAVIER

So it's just you playing? Guess you're going to win.

GOVERNMENT PERSON

No, this game's been going on for hundreds of years. I'm just one in a long line of players, but I think my chances are pretty good today. I can at least get on the leader board.

XAVIER

Wow. What's the game called?

GOVERNMENT PERSON

The American Government Plan for the Eradication (or Assimilation) of All Indigenous Peoples.

XAVIER

Catchy. Guess you don't want me on your team.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 25)

The 'game' the Government Person appears to be playing is one of placial 'Divide and Rule', a tactic frequently utilized by colonial administrations to break up the unity of Indigenous groups. Through the stirring up of traditional territorial conflicts that might already exist, colonialism looks to destabilize traditional governance systems of law and order, and, in the aftermath, hopes to facilitate the implementation of colonial law and authority instead. Something we saw executed by the land agents on the Cherokee, depicted by Hunter in *Unto These Hills*. For example, on arresting Max, the Government Person immediately suggests a means for his escape, namely by obtaining federal recognition of the Nicoleño. However, the true motive behind his actions might be questioned. On the face of it, confiscating Max's art, supposedly to protect the authenticity of Indian artefacts, is a means of control over what is, and is not, deemed federally acceptable to be displayed as 'culture'. But an alternative motive might be to pit one tribe's legitimacy over another; to single out Max's actions as those that are going against 'legitimate' Native American artists. This is something the character of Neasha appears to see clearly in the Government Person's plot:

NEASHA

That's it! This is exactly what the government want. They want to divide us and pit us against each other until there's no one left.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 81)

At this point, we might be forgiven for considering *Urban Rez* to be just another play about the seemingly endless conflicts between the United States federal government and besieged Native Americans. While this is certainly a prominent theme, the play suggests a deeper, more troubling sub-text. It implies there is also some complicity of both ordinary Americans, and even Native Americans themselves, in the conflicts that have historically plagued, and that continue to plague, any attempts to regain Indigenous sovereignty.

Caricature again appears employed here by FastHorse to suggest these wider connotations. For example, consider the problematic character of Wanda. Described in

the Cast of Characters as 'Not Native American, wanna be NDN'⁵², and more derogatorily as a 'twinkie' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 56). The use of these epithets becomes clear when Wanda displays, often painfully, the stereotypical attitudes displayed by many non-Indigenous people in Western society that desperately seek solidarity with Indigenous groups in the hope of finding a place to 'belong'. She also represents perhaps the 'Plastic Sharman' movement, described above, and inseparably linked to the 'New Age' counterculture endemic in California. Wanda is a rather pathetic character, and little of her background is revealed other than a historical desire to be part of something. For Wanda, it is *raison d'être* enough to, 'just want to belong' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 73). Wanda would like to be seen as a sympathetic ally, someone who is, 'just trying to help' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 36). But her repeated attempts to be accepted into Max's campaign for the Nicoleño signals a desperation, and her defence for this obsessional desire to be recognised as Native American seems terribly trite and lacking in substantiating clarity, when she states, 'I've always felt it' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 19). For Wanda, *any* Indigenous cause is worth joining, and such is her desperation to belong she carries protest signs in her car which are, 'Generic ones, just in case' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 16). It is hard not to read Wanda's character as an exposé of those who, perhaps originally with the best intentions, become frustrated and resort to doggedly pursuing identification with marginal groups, like the Nicoleño, to satisfy their own personal inadequacies. In the process, the insecurities and desire of such people to 'belong' dilutes the cultural meaning and significance which genuine tribal membership represents. She may wear a buckskin jacket, but this uncomfortably appears a visual image more in line with those that don feather headdresses to show solidarity with Native Americans without any respect for the ceremonial traditions such attire represents. As one character, Hailey – host of the 'APPRECIATION VS APPROPRIATION' booth – informs us, 'That's appropriating something sacred to another culture because you want it' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 13). In a way, Wanda represents a borderline personality with a 'hunger for culture': cultural cannibalism resulting from a desperate need for Indigenous recognition whatever the cost.

Wanda in many respects also represents the cliché of 'going native' – those who we have already seen through 'fraternalism' and 'Hobbyism' attempted to self-identify

⁵² NDN is a shortening of Native Indian, usually used by Native Americans in the United States to refer to themselves. Obvious, this is ironic when referring to the character of Wanda.

with Indigenous groups in the belief it might bring them a greater spiritual connection with the land they find themselves inhabiting. While again based in naïve good intentions, Wanda reminds us of the uncomfortable truth that many Americans, finding themselves with no clear understanding of their ancestral roots or placial identity, again find solace through an affiliation with marginalised communities. Indeed, in the locational context, at times Wanda appears to consider it almost a birth right to be allowed to join the Nicoleño, Native American ancestry or not. Her affiliation, it seems, preordained by the trail of Manifest Destiny which led her forbears to California, perhaps on the trains that once ran alongside the Historic State Park. Unfortunately, the section of 'wanna be' society that Wanda represents possess little understanding and sensitivity to share in genuine Native American cultural perspectives. Often, Wanda manifests the typical disrespect and ignorance of those attempting to appropriate another culture for themselves through their failure to truly learn about the people they profess to be a part of. She appears to have no comprehension, in fact less than even the Government Person does, of the complexities of Native American affairs. For example, she demonstrates no understanding of geographical sovereignty when she fails to comprehend Mexicans are North Americans (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 55). Wanda even manages to disrespect the entire Nicoleño tribe, the very tribe from which she expects recognition, by mispronouncing them as the 'Nickelodeon' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 5).

Wanda's attitude to being recognised as Native American is depicted in contrast to that of another main character, Antoine. Antoine has even more to gain than Wanda from such recognition – it would also mean his romance with the Native American character Nikki could be officially recognised – and he clearly has no problem with the hypothetical possibility, even likelihood given his African American ancestry, that he may possess some Native American blood:

ANTOINE

You know my people and your people have been sheltering each other and intermarrying for centuries. I could be Native American.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 20)

Yet, although he would be willing to accept some tribal affiliation, unlike Wanda, Antoine is only prepared to accept this through legitimate means. When he is offered membership of the Nicoleño by Max, he refuses, saying, 'I don't want to be a fake Indian' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 75). The text here suggests too that it is fine to seek connection with

Native American culture, even to seek ancestry, but what matters is respect for the traditions that make such a quest legitimate. This is something Antoine is capable of, while Wanda is not, and in the final analysis, suggests that accepting who we truly are is all that matters. As Antoine himself puts it, 'I'm black. I like that' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 75).

Another character that displays elements of caricature is Xavier, who, along with Neasha, acts as the play's master of ceremonies. Perhaps to describe Xavier as a caricature is somewhat disingenuous, as he appears more in line with the type of cosmological archetypes found in Native American culture. Through his constant interruptions of the play at inopportune moments, often with non-politically correct joke-telling, Xavier might well be interpreted as representative of a Trickster figure, an archetype frequently encountered in Native American tradition, whose antics are designed to bring disorder to the best laid plans of humanity. While it is important to avoid playing, what the playwright Daniel David Moses is quoted as describing as 'Spot the Trickster' in Native American literary criticism, it is hard not to perceive Trickster characteristics in the behaviour of Xavier (Taylor, 1996, p. 88). As in the earlier quoted exchange between him and the Government Person, FastHorse similarly uses Xavier's character to highlight the complexities of the issues under discussion, going beyond merely implying the federal government's role in Native American oppression, but also the seeming inability of many within the Native community to engage in political debate in a serious manner. Xavier, who, as a full-blood Tejon holds Federal recognition and seniority as a tribal elder, should hold more respect than anyone at *Urban Rez*, but, despite his natural bravado and confidence, is instead reduced to little more than a comedic character. He may poke fun at the Government Person, taunting him and confusing him to provide some light relief, but ultimately, he is a mere irritation – one to be reminded of the fact that his tribe and the government are 'officially pals' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 3).

The placial conflict of *Urban Rez* is particularly well illustrated in the first scene, where the central antagonism between Max and the Government Person is established. On the Government Person's emergence from the safety of the booth to the Native American territory of the main performance arena, the other characters – representing a diverse spectrum of anti-federal sentiment – initially appear united by the desire to remove this representative of federalism from the site:

What are you doing about adequate drinking water?

WALTER

What about inter-government trauma?

HELEN

The ancestors on display in universities?

ANTOINE

How about repatriations?

TONI

Institutional racism?

XAVIER

What about honoring our treaties?

ROBIE

What are you doing to save our culture?

MAX

To protect our art?

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 4)

The Government Person is forced, to continuing shouts of 'Get out!', 'Get rid of the fed!', and 'Hit the road jack!', to physically retreat somewhat (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 5). However, when he discovers Max's 'Native Art', the bureaucrat's confidence returns and deflects attention by demanding to see Max's tribal identity card to justify his right to sell 'genuine' Indian artefacts. Unable to comply, Max defends himself by declaring his right to sell his good based on the fact that, 'These are my tribal homelands' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 6). This statement the Government Person is quick to correct by reminding him that, 'There are no federally recognised tribes in Los Angeles or Orange County' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 6). As such, Max's contravention of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act is based, literally, on locational 'grounds' as much as on ethnicity.

Finally, there is a circular nature in the construct of *Urban Rez*. Unity can indeed be detected in some respects here as establishing and reaffirming traditional bonds – the play ends with what is described as a 'Dance party ... one group together' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 87). As Neasha and Xavier put it:

NEASHA

It kills me to admit it but when you're right, you're right old man. Like it or not, we are all part of a circle.

XAVIER

That's what Urban Rez is about. Sure to poke fun at some folks and educate, but it is mostly about reminding us that the circle makes us all stronger.

(FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 86)

Perhaps, but there is also something troubling about the circularity which is observed here. A feeling of being locked in the federal government's inescapable 'loophole' (FastHorse, *Urban Rez*, 2016a, p. 8). For there is also a labyrinth of complexity of tradition and belief systems here, a constant conflict between the desire for adopting the ways of modernity while remaining truthful to ancestral tradition, which perpetually divides these people. At times, it feels that FastHorse's characters are experiencing a Sartrean existential purgatory, where hell is the inescapable presence of other people. The *Urban Rez* stands as its own little world – a microcosm somehow adrift and set apart in time; an endless carnival of souls, ghosts of the land, old and new, which they now call home and inhabit. Although Max may believe himself to be invisible, paradoxically, he is as much a visible part of the fabric of the universe as the Native visual art he produces and which instigates the crisis. At the locations of its production, the conflicts clearly will continue beyond the end of *Urban Rez*'s brief intervention.

8.2 Case Study Two: A Placial Analysis of *Native Nation*

Following the success of *Urban Rez*, Cornerstone looked to adapt its concept as a touring production, again with FastHorse as dramaturge on the community devised script and directed by Garcés. In collaboration with the University of Arizona, Gammage – acting as their main community partner – the new production would be called *Native Nation* and would perform principally in Phoenix. *Native Nation* first premiered 20 April 2019, at Two Waters, the Tribal Government Complex on the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community, before transferring to Steele Indian School Park, performing 27 and 28 April 2019. I will only be describing the performance here that took place at the Indian School.

There are significant differences in the specific concerns that resonate for Native Americans in Arizona compared to those in California, largely due to the historic demographic and geographic divergence between the two states. Therefore, any attempt to simply transfer *Urban Rez* would have proven disastrous. While many issues that featured in *Urban Rez* might be recognised by other communities, the personal resonance they held for the Nicoleño and Tongva would surely be missing, in a state where the majority of Native Americans identify as Hopi, Navajo, Pueblo, etc. As was discussed earlier, place-specific performance is not necessarily 'portable' outside of a relatively small location, as is the case with other performance forms. In fact, *Native Nation* can hardly be termed an adaptation, as *Urban Rez* was 'destroyed', as Serra might suggest, when its run ended in Los Angeles. In essence a completely independent play had to be created for Arizona, and *Native Nation* rose from the ashes of *Urban Rez* through an appropriately Phoenix-like re-birth.

Native Nation begins light-heartedly enough, with a game show entitled 'The Ultimate Indian Challenge', where contestants compete to prove their Indigeneity. However, in later scenes, the play takes a darker turn with the introduction of the character of Beatrice, a Native American teenager living with her aunt, Molly. There then appears a Mr Clark, who at first seems to be just another participant at the festival, only later revealing himself to be from Child Protective Services. He explains that he intends to remove Beatrice from Molly's care and place her in a foster home. Beatrice, we learn, has a very poor attendance and performance within the state school system, largely due to her activism in protest movements and attendance at traditional Native American gatherings with Molly. On hearing this, Beatrice goes on the run – lost amidst the transitory park surrounds. The characters of *Native Nation*, and the spectators gathered

at the event, are gradually brought on board to help find Beatrice and bring her home. Along the way, many of the characters involved in the search recount their own backstory, introducing sub-themes which combine in the performance: the legacy of the boarding school system and ill-treatment of Native American children; prejudice within the military of Native Americans, women, and members of the two-spirit community; the subsequent poor treatment of veterans when returning to civilian life; the murder and exploitations of Indigenous women; the homeless population of Phoenix, who seek a refuge in the park.

Location

Arizona has seventeen federally recognised Native American tribes within its boundaries, along with five more multistate tribes. The concerns about the legacy of boarding schools cry out loudly for dramatization in states most affected by them. Today, the former boarding school system is universally recognised for the damage it perpetrated on generations of Native American children and their families, through their forced removal, the sustained erosion of their traditional cultural heritage, and the stripping of their Indigenous identity through the implementing of policies of forced assimilation. Arguably, these policies were most pernicious in rural areas, such as the South, Mid, and Northwest states. In regions such as Arizona, the Native American boarding school experience can be seen to link most directly to the concept of 'place' and 'identity'.

Another difference in Southwest regional concerns to those found in urban localities such as Los Angeles, is the prominent military presence, and its complicated relationship in the lives of Native Americans both historically and contemporaneously. The significance of Arizona's military history is a complex one. For example, this is a place where the persecution of Native Americans during numerous 'Indian War' campaigns by the U.S. military is jarringly juxtaposed with the loyalty many Native Americans have demonstrated to the United States during more recent conflicts. The celebrated work of the Navajo code breakers of World War II, a high proportion of which hailed from Arizona and the surrounding ancestral region, occurred only sixty years from the height of the 'Apache Wars'; a conflict that claimed the lives of thousands of Native Americans at the hands of the U.S. Cavalry and which continued to smoulder as late as 1924.

Locale

The Phoenix Indian School's history dates to 1890, when the Federal Government purchased 160 acres of farmland for its site. The following year the new school was opened, and by 1935 approximately nine-hundred Native American students were in attendance (Dandekar, 2010, p. 82). Remarkably, the school was not officially closed by the federal government until 1990, and in 1991 the City of Phoenix bought the site with the intention of founding a public park (Dandekar, 2010, p. 76).

At schools such as the Phoenix Indian School, Pratt's passion to take the Native American and 'Kill the Indian in him, and save the man' seems almost concretised in the bricks and mortar of their structure. Indeed, the incumbent Indian Commissioner, Thomas Morgan, pre-empted Pratt in pragmatic sentiment at the establishment of the school in 1891, when he stated, 'it's cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them' (Lindauer, 1998). Today, traumatic memories of such institutionalised cultural genocide permeate these places with an almost physical intensity, remaining as an indelible source of resentment and pain for survivors of their régime and their descendants. They are locales of intense public debate, and the memories stirred by the persistence of what remains of the Phoenix Indian School cannot be avoided; at least, not for the city's Native American population. Indeed, most agree that the legacy of the school should not be forgotten, but how it should be remembered is another matter.

The exquisitely maintained grounds of the school had long been enjoyed by visitors for their beauty, planted to conform to the expectations of the 'City Beautiful' movement; a nineteenth-century environmental architectural philosophy representing, 'neoclassical city planning and beautification'. It is also a movement that, it must be noted, 'like boarding schools, was rooted in colonial beliefs about assimilation' (Lamp & Robinson, 2023, p. 625). Opened in 2001, and currently occupying some seventy-five acres, central to the modern park's design concept – in both the metaphoric and practical sense – is the 'Circle of Life', which was supposedly, 'inspired by the words of the Native Americans who had participated in the community workshops' (Dandekar, 2010, p. 76). Moreover, ironically and more than a little inappropriately, at the centre of the Circle of Life sit the three-remaining buildings of the Phoenix Indian School, brooding and immortal as a listed site under the National Register of Historic Places. One building now houses the Phoenix Indian School Visitor Center. The Circle of Life is formed by twenty-

four 'interpretive columns', which convey the history of the school, and, 'focus on aspects of school life' (Lamp & Robinson, 2023, p. 625).

Yet, in spite of being designed with the best public educational intentions in mind, and the eight-thousand words on the stelae that seek to provide the site's contextual history, little is mentioned of the mistreatment that its students encountered, which some have alleged as 'forced assimilation' (Trennert, 1988). The park's layout was initially conceived to highlight the site's Native American history, and was the result of, 'collaboration between city planners and some Indigenous-led organizations (Lamp & Robinson, 2023, p. 626). However, it appears the park's focus of design shifted, adopting during its planning stages a more compromising and conciliatory stance to wider public sentiment; one that celebrates the school, and in particular its grounds, overall contribution to the betterment of the lives of Phoenix's citizenry, rather than focusing on Native Americans or the troubling role it played in enforcing assimilationist policies. For example, the 'Bright Days: Parades and Festivals' column proclaims:

The school was more than an educational institution. It was a source of entertainment for students and Phoenix residents alike. For many years, Phoenix Indian School was a center of community social life. It was a tourist attraction that offered a vast amount of free entertainment, something greatly appreciated by bored, isolated Phoenicians. The school's manicured grounds, fountains and shaded walks were a stark contrast to the desert and the campus attracted a large number of visitors.

As Lamp & Robinson point out in their in-depth analysis of *The Circle of Life*, the text of 'The Skin We Shed' column is the, 'sole explicit discussion of the school's history of cultural assimilation and the only criticism of forced assimilation in the park'; and even this, 'neither places accountability on the federal government, nor fully addresses the effects of such programs on Indigenous Peoples and cultures' (Lamp & Robinson, 2023, pp. 632-33).

As much as the upbeat chronical of *The Circle of Life* might seek to pacify the school's history, its military contribution to warfare is proudly celebrated. 'The Marathon of Honour' column states proudly that: 'Phoenix Indian School had a military atmosphere for many years, and it made true military contributions in Arizona and overseas'. However, as Lamp & Robinson point out, 'The columns acknowledge the military service of the students but without the context of how the military environment functioned as a tool of assimilation; these accounts are repositioned to show the school's success rather

than student resilience' (Lamp & Robinson, 2023, pp. 633-34). Indeed, the military discipline imposed at boarding schools like this is well documented, with many of their more draconian practices more reminiscent of a military boot-camp than educational institutions: such as the imposition of military discipline, marching and drill practice, the cutting of students' hairs on arrival, and the wearing of military style uniforms (Adams, 1995, pp. 117–21). The park continues today to actively celebrate Arizona's military past, and is used by the American Indian Veterans Memorial Organization to honour the service and sacrifice of Native American servicemen and women.

As well as these historic conflicts, the park also represents a public space every bit as contested and contradictory in its social function as that of The Historic State Park and Kuruvungna Springs in Los Angeles. Situated as it is in the heart of Phoenix, it represents a space of transience and societal uncertainty which seems to polarize so many of the concerns facing contemporary Native Americans. For many, the park, as it has for generations, continues to represent little more than a place to visit for relaxation – a place to enjoy some escape from the noise and bustle of city life while on a lunch break from the office. While for others, Phoenix's disenfranchised and without a place to live, the transience of the park defines their identity as the 'homeless' in the eyes of other visitors; for the disproportionate number of Native Americans who form this 'homeless' community, it is simply a place to call home. As such, the park also serves as a public place of refuge – a spot where some hide from those that might do them harm. Consequently, prominent campaigns, such as those surrounding the murder, disappearance, and sexual exploitation of Indigenous women, have a sense of immediacy and urgency in places like this. At one time or another, many such women are likely to have found themselves here, were they become, to quote FastHorse again, 'invisible in plain sight' within the park's tranquil surrounds.

Sense of Place

The sense of place which is created at the park is thus a complex one. It ranges from reflections on the past to aspirations for the future, yet the legacy of the Indian School dominates to such an extent it is hard to look past it. It is a place where the past seems to remain present; partly, it must be said, due to the ambiguity of The Circle of Life's commentary on the school, and its largely non-committal appraisal of its past whilst being almost celebratory in tone when telling of its history.

The ambiguity of sense of place is further complicated by the presence of the greenfield site, as is the case with many metropolitan parks, in the centre of the heaving city of Phoenix. It is a haven for the city's dispossessed and disenfranchised, and at times is a place of less tranquillity, and often, open conflict. This is heightened by the park's celebration of the region's military past, which also incites feelings of hostility over the treatment of veterans in civilian life. The park also reminds its visitors that, despite its greenery, this is land which was taken from its original Indigenous custodians by force, often through the intervention of military forces. It is an ironic paradox that the park should now be a place where Native Americans congregate to celebrate their people who fell in combat with the U.S. military, when the same military has been historically responsible for the violent subjugation of Native Americans.

This all creates a sense that this is a place of dispossession – a place where to be 'out-of-place' is the natural order of things. This is related to a continued sense of invisibility for Native Americans, as although supposedly well recognised more officially in states like Arizona, they remain disappointingly opaque in its big cities. This was a fact that came as a surprise even to FastHorse:

I was really shocked the level of invisibility that the indigenous people in Arizona feel. I would hear it again and again, that they are invisible, that they are not seen, that no one knows who they are.

(Latzko, 2019)

As described in the section on Cornerstone's creative practice, to get a feeling for the sense of place for the production, as with *Urban Rez*, the Cornerstone team travelled to Arizona to hold its customary Story Circles, seeking to gather as much as possible a practical understanding of the unique Native American experience across the state. Again, this meant working directly with the community and participating in their day-to-day activities. At times, members of Cornerstone's core team, including FastHorse acting in her role not only as dramaturge but also as Indigenous 'gatekeeper', volunteered in local community projects; such as when they helped, 'members of the White Mountain Apache Tribe to winterize elders' homes' (Latzko, 2019). According to FastHorse: 'Through that process, we created relationships and ended up having [the local community] participate in talking circles' (Latzko, 2019). Building this relationship with the community was fundamentally important, for as FastHorse recognised: 'We're dealing with not only a different community, but a completely different political situation,

as far as the indigenous people in Arizona versus the indigenous people in Los Angeles' (Latzko, 2019).

As with *Urban Rez*, communicating the sense of place radiating from *Native Nation*'s performance site was helped by immersing its spectators in the performance. The whole atmosphere of the play was informal, intermixed, and festive, with its focus on spectator participation. For example, just as *Urban Rez* was set among an 'Indian Fair', *Native Nation* took place within an imagined Native American 'festival'.⁵³ The script notes describe this as:

The experience is an all day festival with a marketplace, food and community performers. During the day, this script is performed twice. The festival experience is before and after the script. No part of the day is raised up as more important than another.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, 'How It Works')

The performance space – or perhaps a better term might be 'playing place' – was open, and, surrounded by the park's Circle of Life, gave spectators the opportunity to consider the informational stelae it contained alongside the production's own commentary on the history of the site (see Fig. 2). As with the bivouacs of *Urban Rez*, *Native Nation* was consciously transparent in its absence of obtrusive set that might otherwise conceal the sense of the Indian School's omnipotence. The school, reminiscent in the similar architectural effect of the Weyburn Mental Hospital, thus provided a strikingly visual reference point and 'place-making' mnemonic.

As they arrived, the spectators were divided into four 'Groups', delineated by being handed a card bearing a picture of a 'city', a 'flower', 'eyes', or 'rain', as they arrived. These cards for *Native Nation* were created by local artists with their information on the back to tie them to the theme of the Indian Fair of arts and crafts: 'The words were written in two local languages so participants had something local and authentic to take home with them' (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 'How It Works', 2019). The cards also, perhaps, gave the spectators a sense of the linguistic diversity of the place.

As the play began, there was an overwhelming sense of 'play' about the production, partly perhaps growing from FastHorse's mischievous sense of humour in her work. But also designed perhaps to remind those attending that this is a place where school children once 'played', as much as they would have been allowed to, when

⁵³ An excerpt from the show at:
https://vimeo.com/347365448/321cc5591d?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=959078

attending the school, and which still provides a much-needed urban green-space arena for sporting and other recreational activities. More darkly, it is reminiscent of the same 'game' we saw being played between Xavier and the Government Person in *Urban Rez* – the never-ending hurly-burly of wits between Native Americans and the federal government, with each side trying to raise the upper hand.

One method FastHorse adopted to convey this mischievous sense of play was to divide the play into a series of burlesque 'rounds', often performed simultaneously, so that the audience would be able to experience all the various participatory elements. Practically speaking, this also allowed the spectators to be broken into more manageably sized small groups. There were also 'Events', which, as explained in the production notes, 'include everyone on the center stage of the space' (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 'How It Works', 2019). For example:

EVENT TWO

SHEERAH

Hope your first round of activities went well. Before we move to the next one it's time for more of the Ultimate Indian Challenge! For this round we are going to play a traditional Indian game. Shoot, it's probably the most traditional pan-Indian game there is, played from Alaska to Arizona.

DENNIS DUNCAN

Lacrosse?

Sheerah tosses a basketball to the contestants.

SHEERAH

No, basketball! No matter where you are in Indian country, never schedule something against a basketball game. No one will show up. So, we've got a special Ultimate Indian Shoot Out for you.

Some kind of game that includes trivia questions to get an occasional advantage. It's meant to be silly and fun, not super serious. These trivia questions are samples that can change in content and number as needed.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 48)

As the groups of spectators rotated through the series of 'rounds' and 'events', the unique story of *Native Nation* followed them, with each group experiencing a different story. The playing place was divided in four directions about a central performance spot, north, south, east, and west, and the play further punctuated with 'Activities' – of an educational or didactic nature – occurring in each direction. For example, one activity that took the

form of an installation, is described by FastHorse in the play directions as having, 'a mural dedicated to [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women] as a backdrop. There are tables with photos of women. A tree sits next to another table with red paper dresses and markers. Other tables hold information' (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019: 14). This, it might be suggested, was designed to convey a sense of the activism for which the park is renowned; something which appears confirmed by the description of the activities, such as by the character of an artist called Ana, when she describes her 'installation':

ANA

I'm Ana. I'm an artist from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. I put this installation together for two reasons. The subject of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women is a tough one, but I made this space to focus on action, to educate ourselves and help. It is also a place to celebrate the women's lives, not just the final story as we know it now, but all the good that came before.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 14)

The performance was still further disrupted by 'Transitions', which the production notes defined as:

Free standing pieces of story, music, language, monologues, community performance, dance, art making, etc. They are dramatized as best fits each moment; monologues, in chorus, overlapping and with movement. The [*sic*] bring the group to the center or spread them out.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 'How It Works', 2019)

All of these devices can be seen to reveal the sense of the educational legacy which permeates this place – or perhaps, better defined in the theatrical context, its didacticism. This, again, was perhaps intended to remind spectators that this was once a place of historic, if prejudicially colonial, learning, and continues to be a place of information sharing, through *The Circle of Life*, and, arguably, more Indigenously sympathetic educational programmes run by the museum. For example, in 'Transition 3' of *Native Nation*, two women, situated in disparate timeframes, relate alternate monologues, drawing together the parallels between times in the school's past and the educational practices of the present:

In 1930 my grandmother ran away to Phoenix Indian School and the first thing they did was cut off her hair.

In 2018 my son's school sent a letter that said we had to prove that his braids were culturally significant or cut them off.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 47)

Placial Analysis

As with all of FastHorse's work, *Native Nation* is composed of a myriad of ideas, stories, and interpretation. There is much we could unpick from this complex play, but here, I will focus on just three main themes; the boarding school; the military; the dislocation of vulnerable women. These themes were skilfully revealed by FastHorse's intervention through the performance text of *Native Nation*. While *Urban Rez* principally focused on the character of Max and his fight against the Federal Government for Tribal Recognition, the multidimensional focus of the characters and themes found in *Native Nation* is far more nebulous, complex, and multifaceted.

The first, and most clearly defined theme, is the haunting spectre of the Residential School System. Obviously, this has a specific poignancy to this particular site of performance, and many characters refer to the issues raised by the presence of the school. I will discuss this further in the next section.

The second central theme is the phenomenon of missing Native American women, as in the example above, which is a topic of particular debate in the Arizona region:

In Arizona, 160 Indigenous women and girls were known to be missing from 1976 to 2018. Some 57% of Indigenous women and girls are killed in urban areas around Phoenix, Mesa and Scottsdale, followed by 23% in rural areas of the state, and 20% in other locations, according to a 2020 Arizona statewide study.

(Becenti, n.d.)

FastHorse neatly marries these two themes of the State School system and missing women as she begins to develop and reveal the dramatic narrative of the text.

For example, the by now customary light-hearted and informational/educational tone of Scene One is initially set by the 'Water' activity:

ACTIVITY EAST - WATER- BEFORE SCENE

Hillary has many buckets of water on one side of her and tables of information about watersheds and local water issues/actions and how people can get involved.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 20)

This activity is led by a character called Hillary (who will later become pivotal to the story in other ways), and it follows the same pattern of audience and cast participation as was established during the Indian Challenge scene preceding it:

HILLARY

To help us think about water in our own lives, I'm going to read a series of statements. If you agree with the statement, if it applies to you personally—I invite you to raise your hand. Let's try one for practice: I am right-handed. If you agree with that statement—if it's true for you—raise your hand. Well done, righties. I think we're ready. Here we go.

I know where my water comes from.
 I think about water conservation.
 I actively work to conserve water.
 I have always had access to clean, safe drinking water. I have lived in a home without running water.
 I have had to carry my own water.
 I am worried about the future of water in this region
 (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 20)

However, as Scene One develops, we are introduced to the two main characters of Beatrice and her aunt Molly who will form the focus of attention for the rest of the play. We learn of Beatrice's poor school attendance, and that this is in part due to attending protests. At this point, with the same surprise intervention into affairs as the Government Person made in *Urban Rez*, a character called Mr Clark emerges from the crowd, abruptly changing the tone of the scene as he reveals himself to be from Child Protective Services:

MR. CLARK

Because Beatrice barely got passing grades last year and is on the edge of being held back for missing too much school this year. Education is important.

MOLLY

She is getting educated in geography, earth sciences, physical fitness, and learning the ways of many Native nations including our own.

MR. CLARK

The state requires a formal education and you, as the foster guardian of Beatrice, are responsible for making sure Beatrice goes to school, not on camping trips.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 22)

Suddenly threatened with being placed in foster care, a panicked Beatrice goes on the run, becoming one of the 'missing women', and her possible decent from a stable homelife begins to becoming just another statistic to be featured in Ana's 'installation' on missing and murdered Indigenous women (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 14). The characters of *Native Nation*, and the audience, are gradually brought on board to help find her and bring her home.

The situation again becomes something of a 'game', as Mr Clark seeks Beatrice, who is in turn sought by everyone else, in a Circle of Real Life hind and seek. This is parodied in the 'Ultimate Indian Challenge':

MOLLY

She's right. It's time for the....

SHEERAH, MOLLY, ANA

Ultimate Indian Challenge!

Some kind of game show music comes on.

SHEERAH

I'm your host, Sheerah. And here are your contestants...

Three contestants, Phineas Longbow, Loretta Tsosie,
 and Dennis Duncan, come forward. Dennis is white
 presenting.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, pp. 7-8)

FastHorse also utilizes this gameshow motif to explore the theme of 'wanna be' Native Americans (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019: 73). As she did in *Urban Rez* with the character of Wanda, FastHorse's introduction into *Native Nation's* gameshow the 'white presenting' Dennis Duncan – a contestant whose claim to hold Native American ancestry is spurious to say the least – again satirises the Hobbyist stereotype:

DENNIS DUNCAN

I am not currently enrolled in any tribe, but my great great great grandmother was possibly Native American. Unfortunately, we cannot prove it, but the story is a treasured one that has been carefully passed down.

SHEERAH

We honor oral history here. What is the story?

DENNIS DUNCAN

That she was possibly Native American.

SHEERAH

Thanks for sharing that.

DENNIS DUNCAN

And my recent DNA test confirmed that I am seven percent Native American. We don't know what tribe but high cheekbones run in our family so we have thought that she was possibly Cherokee.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 8)

This theme of who does, and who does not, qualify as Native American recurs throughout the play. For example, in the next scene, FastHorse returns to the theme of division between who belongs and who does not in Native American society through the story of Sequoia (Native) and Houston (non-Native), and the problems this brings to their romantic relationship. After dating for a year, Sequoia confesses:

SEQUOIA

I love you, but there is nothing you can do that will make you one of us.
 That's just a fact.

HOUSTON

I'm not trying to be one of you. I'm trying to be with you.

SEQUOIA

It's really complicated.

HOUSTON

So explain it.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, pp. 34-35)

Sequoia's 'explanation' focuses primarily on the practical implications of the situation:

SEQUOIA

It's a complicated time for my tribe. We just got the new casino and everything is changing. The tribal police are getting super strict about non-members on our land. We need to wait until things calm down.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 35)

Later, however, we learn that the true reasons are to do with the blood quantum and the implication that the union between Sequoia and Houston may prove detrimental to this. For example, when Sequoia asks her friend, Raeshawn, if her tribe's reactions towards her dating a non-tribal member is 'prejudiced' or 'racist', Raeshawn responds that:

RAESHAWN

I guess sort of but that's not our fault. It's the government forced the race thing on us. Although we agreed to blood quantum for membership. Or at least our ancestors did way back. But don't worry, you're in.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 61)

Initially, Sequoia is shocked at Raeshawn's attitude:

SEQUOIA

I can't believe you are saying this. You're going to have kids based on blood quantum?

RAESHAWN

A full blood dad means my line is good for a few more generations.
(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 62)

But we then learn that Sequoia, too, is more than aware of the long-term implications of her continued relationship with Houston:

SEQUOIA

But I may have kids with him.

RAESHAWN

That's stupid.

SEQUOIA

It's love.

RAESHAWN

Is it love to make kids that are always on the outside? Kids who can never be recognized as part of your people?

SEQUOIA

Well-

RAESHAWN

Is it love to end not just your family line, but to end one whole branch of your tribe? We are a small group of people. One good natural disaster or some hearty zombies could almost make us extinct.

SEQUOIA

Yeah, but that's not all on me.

RAESHAWN

Of course it is. It's on all of us. Our ancestors went through hell just to survive and give us this blood. Our own families have given their whole lives to strengthening our people for the future.

SEQUOIA

I know.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 62)

Various additional subplots and themes circulate around the main story of the fight to first find, and then save, Beatrice. For example, the situation that faces Native American veterans and their ambiguous place in American society. The character of Chief – a retired Marine combat veteran – attempts at one point, without too much success, to explain his position to Dennis Duncan:

CHIEF

I was called to protect my land and my people through the path of a warrior. My tribe doesn't have a way to do that anymore so I looked around and saw that the Marine Corps gave me the opportunity to follow my calling to protect my nation. My sovereign nation.

DENNIS DUNCAN

But as a Native American person you certainly can't feel "patriotic" to America.

CHIEF

No, I'm patriotic to my land and my people. Although some Native vets do feel patriotic to America and that's OK.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 17)

Essentially though, *Native Nation* is a play about Beatrice, and she is eventually found and persuaded to face the situation. But this means she must now contemplate the prospect of being taken away from her home, Molly, and the support she has found at *Native Nation*:

MR. CLARK

You did the right thing coming back, but since you are a flight risk you have to go to a secure group home until we are sure you aren't going to run again.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 102)

However, help of a sort appears in the form of Hillary, the character seen previously hosting the Native American 'Water' activity. She tells Molly that, 'my husband and I are Native. Well I am, and I was adopted out of the tribe. My birth parents were addicts too and couldn't care for me so I totally understand' (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 83). Hillary goes on to explain:

HILLARY

Anyway, we wanted to give another kid the same chances I had so we are in the process of becoming a foster-to-adopt family.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 83)

As the couple are in the final stages of being approved as foster parents, Hillary suggests that, given her Native American heritage, they should convince Mr Clark to let them foster Beatrice. Faced with this impossible choice – have Beatrice taken into care or agree to Hillary fostering her – Molly makes one last heartfelt plea to the spectators:

MOLLY

(*to crowd*) I need your help. I'm about to lose my niece. Not over abuse or neglect but because our traditional ways of learning aren't respected by the state. My niece knows more about our people and dozens of other tribes because she was with me at Standing Rock and on the Oak Flat Hike and at

the uranium mine protest in the Grand Canyon. But the state says that's not good enough. They say I have to put Beatrice in a white school that mentions Native people ONCE in their whole school career. The main rival school they play in sports has a decapitated Native man's head as their logo.

That is the kind of education that tells our children their lives are worth nothing. That is the kind of education that allows them to throw their lives away through suicide and drugs because thirteen years of education on their own land can't see them.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 103)

But there is nothing to be done; the die has been cast long ago, perhaps by generations no longer even here, and Beatrice's fate has never been in any real doubt. Molly's only chance to regain custody of Beatrice is a long and costly legal battle she is highly unlikely to win.

The play ends with fellow tribe members promising to keep watch over Beatrice for Molly in her new home, and even Hillary promising Molly to find a law firm, 'to donate their time to represent you' (FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 104). Although FastHorse paints a faint glimmer of humanity through her sympathetic characterisation of Hillary, we are left with little doubt that Beatrice will, from now on, be largely raised in accordance with the expectations of the 'colonisers' state school system; While her close connection with her ancestral past, realised through her relationship with her aunt, will eventually fade and be forgotten with the passing of time and her growth to maturity.

Ultimately, Molly can only beg to see her niece as frequently as possible, which Hillary agrees to willingly – perhaps as much to encourage her new foster daughter as an appeasement to the older woman. When asked if Beatrice accepts going with Hillary, she hesitantly responds:

BEATRICE

I guess I'm OK to go there if auntie is.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 104).

Molly remains silent. The last words are left to Beatrice, as she closes the performance with a final rally to the spectators:

BEATRICE

Wait, we can't just end like that. We made a community here. It's like attending a coming out ceremony, we are responsible to each other now. We need to finish the circle to make sure we all promise to never let any of us feel alone again.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 106)

Then the play notes read:

The several men appear on stage with rattles. They shake them together and begin a song of blessing. Cast members lead a simple circle dance around the stage. Everyone is encouraged to join in until the entire audience and cast are all blended together, dancing to the music as one people until the song ends. The music changes, dance party.

(FastHorse, *Native Nation*, 2019, p. 106)

After all the human turmoil that *Native Nation* has unleashed, and with the dreams of many lost forever, the script concludes with the ironic words: 'Festival continues'.

8.3 Case Study Three: A Placial Analysis of *Wicoun*

The third collaboration between Cornerstone, FastHorse, and Garcés, was *Wicoun*, which toured throughout South Dakota in the summer of 2023. The tour consisted of seventeen shows, performed in diverse locations ranging from a public Band Shell in central Rapid City, to a Skate Park on the Pine Ridge reservation. Outdoor locations, sports halls, and other 'discovered spaces' were also utilized, the choice of which was developed, as always, through close consultation with the community partners involved at each location. Following *Native Nation*, preparation for the production had begun in 2019 with Cornerstone and FastHorse conducting research trips to South Dakota to gather ideas, stories, and scout locations for performance. However, with the arrival of the world-wide Covid pandemic in 2020 – something which particularly affected Native Americans on reservations, where medical resources had historically been stretched to breaking point – a suspension of this activity was inevitable. Only with the loosening of lock-down restrictions could the fact-finding trips resume in 2021, moving into full rehearsals in Spring 2023.⁵⁴

The main plot of *Wicoun* revolves around Áya and Khoskalaka, two High School age siblings. Khoskalaka is working toward graduation and going to college, while Áya is working to come to terms with their sexual identity. Both are desperately trying to raise an extended family of much younger relatives and other local children. Suddenly, after being attacked, Áya develops strange 'superpowers', and is then visited by a series of Native American 'superhero' ancestors. Together with Khoskalaka, Áya travels across South Dakota on a voyage of self-discovery, as they try to understand what these superpowers and superhero ancestors mean. On the way they encounter Zombies high on meth, bigoted police, a group of protesters intent on blowing up Mount Rushmore, and an authority on comic books who might just hold the answer to their quest.

As with the other productions in the series, *Wicoun* began life from a series of research trips to South Dakota. In all, from 2019 to 2023, Cornerstone completed ten engagement trips and covered around two thousand miles in the state. This immediately marks it out as very different from the previous productions, for being a touring production it would need to contain material not just pertinent to one site, but to the

⁵⁴ A photo diary of these fact finding / story circle trips can be found on the Cornerstone website, at <https://cornerstonetheater.org/shows/wicoun/>

many different locations and communities where it would perform. In some respects, this made *Wicoun*, what Wilkie might describe as, 'Site-generic'.

However, I would argue that *Wicoun* is still a play which remains very 'place-specific' in its fundamental locational ethos, confined and defined as it is within the South Dakota region and its demographic. It does, however, make the application of placial analysis somewhat more challenging, particularly given the stated needs by the many communities Cornerstone and FastHorse met with to discuss the focus of the play. For example, one thing which became clear from the study trips conducted by Cornerstone, was the overwhelming request from those they met that the new play should, 'be about the nation, not one specific place' (London, 2023a). We should be careful not to confuse this with a rebuttal of the importance of place in the production, as those that raised this view were surely indicating the importance of embracing both the urban and rural locations, and all those that comprise the Nation – Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota. Clearly, as we will see, places in South Dakota do hold great significance in the play, such as Mount Rushmore, the reservation, and Rapid City. However, it does mean the circle of reference and concerns which the play had to encompass was spread over a broad range of sites rather than any one in particular. The other challenge is the wide variety of themes and issues which are raised in *Wicoun* – including child poverty, institutional racism, and sexual discrimination – and an attempt to analyse all of these in the brief space available here would prove impossible.

Therefore, to accommodate both of these considerations, this analysis will cover only one theme, that of identity and how this is realised in *Wicoun* in relation to place. I began this thesis with stressing the fundamental importance of place in forming Indigenous identity, and I feel it is particularly fitting that in this last case study identity and place should form the focus of the work. Identity here represents not just that of single individuals, although that is certainly a central theme of the play, but that of the Nations to which they belong, and the state of South Dakota that now represents the area of definition for their homeland. This, I believe, best serves to remain faithful to the community's desire to consider their Nation's identity first and foremost, while still allowing it to focus on specific locations of performance.

Similarly, the touring nature of *Wicoun* makes choosing a location on which to focus a placial analysis more challenging than in the previous studies of *Urban Rez* and *Native Nation*. It would, for example, have been interesting to look at the implications of

staging the production at the Indian Mission school. Similarly, the unique location of the skatepark on the Pine Ridge reservation would have proved fascinating and informative for its poignancy. However, again space prevents this, and in keeping with the city park locations of the previous case studies, and the general focus throughout this work on parks and their role in Native American dramatic endeavours, this analysis of *Wicoun* will concentrate on a city park production; specifically, that held at the Memorial Park in Rapid City. I feel that this production, with its contrasts of urban and natural resources, is particularly expedient for the purposes of my later text analysis of the play, which will focus on 'identity' in relation to place.

Location

South Dakota is a state of extreme contrasts. Its interior, delineated by its two major cities of Rapid City and Sioux Falls at opposite ends of the state, is a place of great natural beauty, seemingly endless unspoiled expanses of prairie, and an abundance of wildlife. Much of this territory is rich farming and ranching land, while other areas, such as the Badlands and Black Hills National Parks, represent wildernesses of national historic and environmental importance. Its cities are well maintained and popular hubs, both for local entertainment and for those drawn to the state by tourism. Allied to this, travel is also surprisingly easy to and from South Dakota, with several regional airports serving the state. Politically, South Dakota is deeply Republican; out of the 32 elections since 1900, the state has only voted to elect a democratic president three times. Perhaps due to this, and no doubt also to its proud military heritage, there is generally an overwhelming sense of American patriotism.

But South Dakota also sits at the centre of a remarkable confluence of events in the history of Native America and settler-colonialism. Like all Native Americans, the Lakota possess a deep affinity with the land, holding South Dakota's Black Hills as particularly sacred. It comes as little surprise to discover the vast majority of conflicts that have played out over the centuries in the region are connected to land, geography, and territorial sovereignty.

The area now known as South Dakota has been inhabited for thousands of years, with the earliest people, the Mound Builders, populating the central and south-eastern territory of the state between 500 and 800 AD (Schell, 2004, p. 16). Later, they were

gradually superseded by the Ree, or Arikara people, and later still several groups of Native American peoples from across the Great Plains came to populate the region, collectively known to colonialism as the 'Great Sioux Nation' or 'Oceti Sakowin'. The state's modern history largely begins in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, as Westward expansion rapidly grew, initially spurred by the Lewis and Clark expedition and the promises of manifest destiny. In 1858 the Yankton Sioux agreed to a treaty which ceded a large part of present-day eastern South Dakota to the federal government, followed in 1868 by the Treaty of Laramie, when the government agreed to grant the Sioux the Western region of South Dakota, including the Black Hills, to their people in perpetuity. This formed the Great Sioux Reservation. However, following the discovery of gold in the Black Hills, and the Great Sioux War of 1876, the government reneged on the treaty. The original reservation was broken into five smaller reservations, and the Sioux relocated around the region.

Today, the three dominant Native American peoples ascending from the Great Sioux Nation in South Dakota are the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota.⁵⁵ The 2010 census revealed that 8.8% of the state's population identify as Native American, which ranks it third by state for the highest population of Native Americans, after Alaska and New Mexico. The census also revealed that 93.46% of the state's population spoke English, compared to just 1.36% that speak Lakota – remarkably, a lesser percentage of Dakotans than spoke German, at 1.37% (U. S. Census Bureau, 'South Dakota', 2025). Many Native Americans work in the agricultural service industries, but many are also heavily dependent on tourism for income, which overall provides some 33,000 jobs and generates in excess of \$2 billion for the state in annual revenue (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'South Dakota', 2025).

It is impossible to talk of place in relation to Native American and federal relations in South Dakota without referring to Wounded Knee. Probably the most significant and notorious event of the 'Indian wars' waged at the end of the nineteenth century, its story has featured in countless books, films, and documentaries.⁵⁶ Although many confrontations occurred during the long and fractured convergence of the Native

⁵⁵ The distinction within these is made along linguistic grounds. Lakota and Dakota represent to major divisions within the Siouan-Catawban language family, and can be translated as 'friend' or 'ally'. Nakota appears to be an endonym, and in fact refers to the Assiniboiné people.

⁵⁶ Probably most famously recounted in Dee Brown's book *Bury My heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), and its film adaption of the same name in 2007.

American and Western civilizations, the massacre of Wounded Knee perpetrated by the U.S. Army on the Lakota people there in 1890, has long been regarded as representing the final conquest of the West and the end of Native American armed resistance. An estimated 250, or perhaps 300, Lakota men, women and children died, in comparison to only twenty-five U.S. soldiers, with thirty-nine more reported as wounded. Controversially, military veterans of Wounded Knee received twenty-one Congressional Medals of Honour. In 2001, the National Congress of American Indians passed a resolution condemning the awards, and demanded that the federal government rescind them. Previously, on the centennial of the event in 1990, Congress unanimously passed a resolution formally expressing 'deep regret' for the massacre (New York Times, 1990). In 1965, The Wounded Knee Battlefield massacre site was designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior, and although somewhat remote on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and despite there being no official visitation figures, it would appear to attract considerable visitor numbers to pay their respects each year.

Wounded Knee was a contentious episode even in its own day. Outrage from the more liberally minded eastern United States erupted, as the public discovered the truth of the massacre that had taken place, and especially as the U.S. government had consistently reassured them that the Native Americans of the plains had already been subjugated. Following this public outcry, the previous treaty's terms were reinstated, including full rations and more monetary compensation for lands taken away. However, persecution continued in less overt, but no less culturally destructive, ways against the Lakota. The heightened publicity of the events at Wounded Knee brought with it a wave of Christian missionaries, intent on 'saving' the unfortunate 'heathens', bringing with them Mission Schools and Boarding Schools, all of which covertly contributed to the programme of eradicating Indigenous identity. Also, in the wake of the massacre, open participation in practises such as the Ghost Dance, which was suggested as a contributing factor in triggering the confrontation, declined gradually for fear of continued violence. Suspicion of such Native American practices became the subject of greater scrutiny and legislation in the years following Wounded Knee. While few prosecutions were pursued, some notable practices, like the Sun Dance, were challenged for their legality. Full freedom to practice their rituals and ceremonies did not return to Native Americans until 1978 with the passing of The American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

The location of Wounded Knee is situated on the Pine Ridge reservation. The largest reservation in South Dakota, Pine Ridge is the eighth-largest reservation in the United States. Sadly, it also ranks among the poorest, and with limited access to Medicare its residents suffer higher morbidity rates than those in other rural, and even urban, locations (U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 'South Dakota', 2025). Along with disproportionately high death rates for Native Americans, cases of depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, malnutrition, and diabetes also score higher than the national average. An estimated half of the reservation's population live below the federal poverty line, with many lacking the basic amenities of electricity, telephone, running water, or sewage systems. All of this is further aggravated by unemployment rates of between 80-85% (U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 'South Dakota', 2025).

Pine Ridge, eighty years on from Wounded Knee, returned to the national political spotlight with a series of well publicised and controversial events in the 1970s. Containing the massacre site as it does, the events that transpired on the reservation were certain to stir the discontent that had lingered ever since 1890. In 1973, what began as a minor protest, exploded in to the 'Wounded Knee Incident' (U. S. Marshals Service, 'Incident at Wounded Knee', n.d.). Members of the Oglala Lakota, AIM, and other activists, many from outside the area, occupied the town of Wounded Knee in defiance of federal and state troopers, and this eventually developed into a full-scale armed standoff lasting 71 days (U. S. Marshals Service, 'Incident at Wounded Knee', n.d.). These events inspired Native Americans throughout the country to take affirmative action, and locally resulted in changes in the way the Pine Ridge reservation was run, with the gradual revival of Lakota cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, Pine Ridge continued to be the scene of violence. The annual murder rate between 1973 and 1976 averaged 56.7 per 100,000 (170 per 100,000 over the whole period). By comparison, Detroit had a rate of only 20.2 per 100,000 in 1974, and at the time was considered, 'the murder capital of the US' (Perry, 2002, p. 231-47). On 26 June 1975, the reservation was the site of yet another armed confrontation between AIM activists and the FBI, which became known as the 'Pine Ridge Shootout'.

Although such prominent political events as those at Pine Ridge captivate the news headlines, perhaps nowhere are the conflicts and controversies over land in the region more evident than in the building of Mount Rushmore. The National Memorial is built, as it was conceived, on a colossal scale; carved into the ancient granite of the South

Dakotan landscape as a defiant symbol of imperialism. The mountain, known to the Lakota as *T̥hūŋkášila Šákpe*, or 'Six Grandfathers', forms part of the Black Hill range, and is situated near Keystone, South Dakota (Native Hope, 2020). It was designed by the sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who also managed its construction between 1927 and 1941, later assisted by his son Lincoln (Mount Rushmore, 'Mount Memorial History', n.d.). The memorial park covers 1,278 acres, and the mountain has an elevation of 5,725 feet (Mount Rushmore, 'Mount Memorial History': n.d.). Since its opening in 1941, the monument has constantly attracted large numbers of enthusiastic tourists, and although the park has seen a significant drop of some half a million annual visitors over the last five years, in 2020, despite pandemic restrictions, it still welcomed some 2,074,986 visitors (National Park Service, 'Stats', n.d.). Although attendance at the monument is falling, with the South Dakota economy so heavily dependent on tourism,⁵⁷ the monument remains responsible for a hefty contribution to its continuing success, in 2023 bringing in \$389 million in visitor spending (National Parks Service, 'Visitor Spending Effects', n.d.).

The historian Doane Robinson (1856-1946) originally proposed the idea of a national monument in the Black Hills region, unashamedly to encourage tourism (Oh Ranger, n.d.).⁵⁸ Later, the Lakota acknowledged the possibilities of capitalising on the natural resources of their homelands as a means of generating much needed income, particularly with the new formation of the National Parks system. The carving ultimately came to feature the 60-foot heads of Presidents George Washington (1732–1799), Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) and Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), as recommended by Borglum.⁵⁹

However, the monument increasingly courted controversy with growing numbers of Native Americans. This was especially the case during the heightened mid-twentieth century tension of the Civil Rights and Red Power movements, with objections largely focussed on its location. For many Native Americans, Rushmore, '[epitomises] the loss of their sacred lands and the injustices they've suffered under the U.S. government' (American Experience, n.d.). Given the history of the Black Hills, it is hardly surprising the

⁵⁷ In 2023 tourist income for the state was 4.96 billion, a sizable sum, and one that partially explains the compensation offered for the Black Hills being met with derision by Native Americans (South Dakota Tourism Industry, 'Tourism', n.d.).

⁵⁸ Originally, Robinson's proposed design for the monument was a much more inclusive and diverse one, suggesting it feature a range of celebrated figures from the forging of the continent, both Native and settler-colonial – including Lewis and Clark, Sacagawea, Red Cloud, Buffalo Bill Cody, and, ironically as we will see, the Lakota chief Crazy Horse (Oh Ranger, n.d.).

⁵⁹ The four represent landmarks of United States: its birth, growth, development, and preservation, respectively (Mount Rushmore, 'Why These Four Presidents?', n.d.).

monument should prove controversial. For example, it was not until the case of 'The United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians' held before the United States Supreme Court in 1980, that the federal government finally admitted the Lakota were not properly compensated for the Black Hills. Restitution was originally proposed of \$102 million, revalued at \$1.3 billion in 2011 (Legro, 2011). However, despite this offer, the compensation has not been accepted by the Lakota. As Lakota activist Nick Tilsen explains, this compensation remains unacceptable, as the tribes involved, 'won't settle for anything less than the full return of our lands as stipulated by the treaties our nations signed and agreed upon' (Tilsen 2020).

Protests at Rushmore have been frequent. In 1972 – a year after the end of the occupation of Alcatraz Island and during the last gasps of the Red Power movement – members of the AIM led an occupation of the mountain, even re-naming it 'Mount Crazy Horse'. Lakota activist John Fire Lame Deer planted a prayer staff on top of the mountain, symbolically shrouding the presidents' faces, 'which shall remain dirty until the treaties concerning the Black Hills are fulfilled' (Glass, 1994, p. 279). Later, Greenpeace unveiled a banner over the monument in 1987 stating, 'We the people say no to acid rain' (Glass, 1994, p. 279). And on the 3 July 2020, around one-hundred activists demonstrated at a campaign rally held for President Donald Trump there, with fifteen protesters arrested (The Washington Post, 2020). Rushmore as an iconic focus for protest has also featured in many books and films. In the novel *Skins* (1995), the Lovelock Paiute author Adrian C. Louis depicts a plan of blowing up the monument with dynamite, and describes the likeness of George Washington covered with paint.⁶⁰ Most recently, Activision, the developer behind the hugely successful *Call of Duty* videogame franchise, released a media teaser campaign for their 2024 new addition featuring the Monument, and with fake images of the Presidential faces blindfolded by the words 'the truth lies' (Cox, 2024).

Standing only fifteen miles away in Indigenous opposition, is The Crazy Horse Memorial. Initiated in 1940, after eighty-five years of what can only be described as steady activity, it is still under construction. Officially intended to commemorate the life of the famed Native American warrior, it also clearly represents a monumental response to Mount Rushmore. Even though far from finished – to date only the head of the statue has been completed – it has proven a strong tourist competitor to Rushmore, attracting

⁶⁰ In 2002, *Skins* was later made into a feature film of the same name, directed by the Cheyenne and Arapaho director Chris Eyre and with a screenplay by Louis, in 2002.

more than a million visitors a year (Crazy Horse Memorial, 'Future Vision: A Look to the Future', n.d.). The tourist basecamp at the foot of the sculpture boasts many attractions, including a museum, gift shop, eateries, and even regular helicopter flights up the mountain, all of which generate considerable revenue and employment from tourism each year.

Polish-American sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski (1908-1982), who had previously worked on Mount Rushmore, was commissioned by the Oglala Lakota chief Henry Standing Bear (Mato Naji) in 1939 to build the monument (Crazy Horse Memorial, 'Chief Henry Standing Bear', n.d.). In the spring of 1940, Ziolkowski spent three weeks at Pine Ridge, investigating logistics and researching the history of Crazy Horse and the Lakota people. Eventually, the vision for the monument became one of paying tribute to the enigmatic and indomitable spirit of the Native American warrior leader. Ziolkowski designed the statue's hand, for example, to extend over the land in an open gesture, referencing Crazy Horse's remark, 'My lands are where my dead lie buried' (Crazy Horse Memorial, 'Crazy Horse', n.d.).

But the monument, like Rushmore, is not without its fair share of critics. For example, given that it is the creation of non-Indigenous sculptor, albeit at the urging of Standing Bear, and that monumental sculpture of his kind is far removed from the subtlety of traditional Native America art, it might be suggested that the Crazy Horse Memorial is somewhat removed from being a Native American work. John Fire Lane Deer has suggested that the statue is at odds with Crazy Horse's spirit: 'The whole idea of making a beautiful wild mountain into a statue of him is a pollution of the landscape. It is against the spirit of Crazy Horse' (Lane Deer & Erdoes, 1972, p. 96). While the Lakota activist Russell Means goes further, emotively commenting in an interview:

Imagine going to the holy land in Israel, whether you're a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim, and start carving up the mountain of Zion. It's an insult to our entire being. It's bad enough getting four white faces carved in up there, the shrine of hypocrisy.

(Roberts, 2012)

Besides these controversial endeavours aimed at capitalising on the tourist trade, the region boasts other attractions. The recent success of TV shows such as *Deadwood*, *Fargo*, and *Yellowstone*, have also increased interest in visiting the Northwest region for a new generation of tourists. Similarly, interest in the prehistoric world and 'dino-tourism' is being heavily exploited by the tourist industry. The phenomenal potential of this

'dinomania', in part due to the success of films like the *Jurassic Park* franchise, can be seen at Glen Rose, Texas, which in 2012 attracted \$23 million in tourist revenue, which Bill Huckaby, the former director of the Glen Rose Convention and Visitors Bureau, pointed out: 'The dinosaurs are what drive us ... You can't develop a town of 2,000 into this kind of tourism revenue unless you've got something really special to promote' (Ross, 2012). South Dakota has a long history of such enterprises, with its first Dinosaur Park opening just outside Rapid City in 1936. Similarly, the state exploits the craze at attractions such as the Mammoth Museum in Hot Springs, and The Badlands National Park, which is internationally famous for its paleological significance. The park saw 1,046,400 visitors in 2023, up from pre-pandemic figures in 2019 which were 970,998 (National Park Service, 'Stats', n.d.). Moreover, increased interest in the 'staycation' amongst American homegrown tourists, something which the Covid 19 pandemic and eco-tourism instigated, has only added to many rediscovering the convenience of travelling less far for their summer vacations.

Locale

For the last performance of *Wicoun* in Rapid City, the community chose the Band Shell in the local Memorial Park as its venue. It is located adjacent to The Monument, previously called the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center, a sprawling, multi-use venue, and the largest of its kind in the region. The Monument serves today as a focal point for a diverse array of presentations, including state agricultural shows, football and basketball games, expos, and concert events. In the 1970s, it even saw Elvis Presley perform there on his comeback tour. In contrast, The Bandshell, as the name suggests, was conceived to host considerably more modest musical entertainment, its design, by architect Fred Thurston, being approved in 1989 (Tobin, 1989, p. 17). It has also been used by many creatives prior to the arrival of *Wicoun*, and since the 1990s has hosted regular recitals by The Rapid City Municipal Band.

Epitomising the spirit of the state in many ways, the Memorial Park is a fascinating collection of contrasts. Running through it is the crystalline Rapid Creek, which can be traced all the way to its origins in the Black Hills. Rapid Creek, for which Rapid City is named, snakes its way through strategically constructed underpasses to outmanoeuvre the highways that feed the city, is a constant trickling reminder of the conflicts between nature and modernity. Tranquil now, it has been a feature of the natural landscape

capable of demonstrating its displeasure at man's encroachment. Once a commercial and residential development, much of the area that is now the park was obliterated in 1972 through flash flooding of the creek, killing 238 and destroying some 1,335 homes (WCCO News, 2022). The green space of the Memorial Park owes its existence today to fears any redevelopment of the creek's floodplain might suffer a similar fate.

While this restful tranquillity may attract the park's visitors, this is tempered by the park also being the location of the Black Hills Veterans Memorial. South Dakota has a long and distinguished military history, including being one of the central locations for pilot and gunnery training during WWII, when part of the Badlands National Park was sequestered for this. The region is also littered with the siloes, now mostly decommissioned, that once housed much of the USA's nuclear arsenal. As was the case with the Steele Indian School location for *Native Nation* in Phoenix, the Veterans Memorial displays several prominent monuments to significant U.S. military conflicts; the Gulf War, the Cold War, and of course, the two World Wars. There is even a section of the Berlin Wall on display, the reasons for which the informational signs are somewhat sketchy, but would appear to relate to the nearby Ellsworth Air Force Base's role in the Berlin Air Lift (Kelsy, 2023). Noticeably, there is far less information or recognition of the 'Indian Wars' of the nineteenth century, and the more dubious exploits of the U.S. Cavalry in particular. Dale Lamphere sculpture *Legacy* (1990) does contain some Native American figures, but conveys little of their troubled history.

The Memorial Park for many is a calming place of transience. Most people simply walk through it on the way to work, mothers push strollers about on the way to and from nursery, while others relax in its green surrounds and enjoy a brief escape from the bustle of the city. There is even fishing allowed, by permit, in the Memorial Pond. However, as is the case with metropolitan green spaces around the world, the park is also a hub for many of the disenfranchised from society: the homeless, the addicted, and those suffering with mental illness.

While some effort to try and help these people is attempted by charitable organisations, it is clear that this is something which requires more resources than those of a handful of well-meaning individual charities and philanthropic individuals can provide. Less, however, appears to be being attempted by the local authorities in Rapid City. Mostly, the destitute in the park are left to their own devices, wandering like souls lost amid a strange and unsettling assortment of well-maintained natural beauty and

declamatory monuments to the achievements of the U. S. armed forces. The Bandshell in particular – given its twenty-four-hour accessibility and convenient refuge from the natural elements – is a gathering place for this homeless community, and on the several visits I paid to it prior to attending the performance of *Wicoun* there, was almost always the site of turbulent, and at times confrontational, activity.

Sense of Place

Rapid City has an almost cosmopolitan feel, at least for the short-stay visitor, and certainly is more avant-garde than one would expect from a metropolis in the Northwest. Expensive restaurants, luxury hotels – the city's biggest, the Alex Johnson, is a part of the Hilton chain – and lush residential suburbs make it a very desirable, if costly for the region as a whole, place to live. Additionally, access to the year-round recreational playgrounds found in the Black Hills, hundreds of miles of hiking trails, and state of the art leisure and sporting facilities around the city, make it a Mecca for the actively inclined. Something of the city's solid republican politics is literally displayed on every street corner, where life-size bronze statues have been places of every elected president to date (Visit Rapid City, 'The Story Behind...', 2024).

Walking around Rapid City you get a sense of the identity paradoxes that exist across the state. Poverty in otherwise affluent cities is always felt more strongly, displayed more visibly, than in rural areas. Cities like Rapid City, offering greater financial opportunities than its surrounding reservations, see an influx of younger Native Americans looking to attend college or find work. They bring with them a sense of vitality and drive often lacking elsewhere in the state, particularly in towns found on the plains, and perhaps accounts for the city's cosmopolitanism. Comic bookstores, youth centres, skate parks, graffiti alleys, and clubs and associations aimed at the young abound in the city, and there exists a freedom to be oneself which again is often absent elsewhere.

But along with those coming to the city chasing dreams of a better life, there are many that discover the inevitable disillusionment of reality. It is in Rapid City's public parks that these contrasts are most clearly witnessed, and where you detect strongest the feelings of disenfranchisement felt by the poor and dispossessed Native Americans that must reside there. Many rough sleepers can be found in the Memorial Park, and although during the day the park is inviting enough, with a general air of safety about it, at night, and in the early hours of the morning, for those lucky enough to have the choice, it is a place most would be wise to avoid. In January 2024, a young man was shot dead in the park's playground.

As mentioned above, there is a sense that efforts are being made to help the people in the park, for example, by providing free food to its Native Americans homeless community. For many years a group of volunteers, led by Lakota community activist Lloyd Big Crow, Sr., have handed out meals at the Band Shell. However, in 2023, at the

very time *Wicoun* was in production there, the city's officials had decided to enforce a permit requirement to pay a \$100 'event fee' on those providing the meals. According to the then Rapid City Mayor, Steve Allender, the homeless feeding program had led to, 'intimidation, begging and erratic, drunken behaviour and driving visitors from that park' (Allender quoted in Dodge, 2023, A1). But, as Dodge writes: 'It's more than just providing food. Big Crow's group works on building a sense of purpose and self-worth among the people they meet' (Dodge, 2023, A5).

Placial Analysis

Place, Identity, and Design

As with the previous Native American productions in Los Angeles and Phoenix, much of the sense of place needed to be communicated through *Wicoun*'s design in collaboration with the words crafted by FastHorse. However, as explained above, unlike the design for the previous productions, *Wicoun* needed to appear at home in multiple locations. Given the limitations on budget and permanent support crew, the design also needed to be simple and light enough to be transported across South Dakota in small vans, and constructed quickly by the cast and a few local helpers. Originally, as I mentioned earlier, *Wicoun* was conceived to be a much more complex production than could finally be realised. At the start, when it was still Cornerstone's intention to tour *Native Nation*, the South Dakota productions were planned to occur in the same sort of Native American 'fair' or 'festival' setting as before, with as much community collaboration in realising this as possible – not only to facilitate greater community involvement, but to minimise expenses and logistical resources. However, due to lingering safety concerns in the wake of the pandemic, this proved impossible at many of the performance locations, and again, particularly on reservations. Indeed, at one point, Covid halted production due to an outbreak amongst the crew. This meant that much more of the production design had to incorporate elements that were originally to be provided in situ, such as the participation of local children from the schools visited as additional characters in the story.

The main set designer on *Wicoun* was Nephelie Andonyadis. A veteran of working with Cornerstone, her first production with the company was *Sid Arthur* (1995), after which she worked on many projects in multiple design roles, including prior to *Wicoun* the Los Angeles based production *A Jordan Downs Illumination* (2019) (PBS Works, n.d.). However, a non-Native herself, to gain as much input from the local community as possible, Andonyadis was joined by local Lakota artist Matthew Uses Knife, and the contemporary Lakota graffiti artist Derek 'Focus' Smith. As Andonyadis explained of the collaborative design process for *Wicoun*: 'It was me designing something and bringing materials and asking people to join in co-creation, so they could make a piece that was their own' (Andonyadis quoted in London, 2023c). Uses Knife and Smith brought a visual vitality which reflected that inherent to the Indigenous people of the region, and one

which revealed the unique identity of the diverse performance locations. As London notes:

This vibrant stylistic profusion is visible everywhere in these Native communities; on streets, in galleries, at outdoor fairs, alleyways, and powwows, you'll see drawings, prints, paintings, photographs, quilts, beadwork, regalia, sculpture.

(London, 2023c)

The colourful designs were particularly effective when the play performed against the street art around Racing Magpie, a popular Lakota arts centre in Rapid City. Here, reminiscent of the same effect found at the launch of *Urban Rez* in Indian Alley, the murals and graffiti that adorn the arts centre's surrounding alleyways permit an artistic outlet to visually express the campaign its local Native American community are fighting for self-determinacy.

The show at Racing Magpie was one of the few when something of the communal 'fair' atmosphere that had formed such an important part in the previous productions, was able to be realised. London, who attended the performance, describes this when he writes:

Tables of local arts and crafts – jewelry, paintings, printed shirts, and tote bags – add to the feel of an urban art fair. The condenser on Papa's Frybread Wagon, the food truck parked on one side of Racing Magpie, keeps running through much of the performance.

(London, 2023c)

All of this design allowed the places of performance to contribute a high level of 'performativity' to the production, which at times proved challenging for the performers when competing to speak 'with' the land's own voice:

The actors need extra projection to get the sound out, and it's harder to read the audience as city sounds drown their laughter. The wind is noisy too. Rural outdoor drama one day, street performance the next.

(London, 2023c)

The painted backdrop for *Wicoun* was largely conceived by Uses Knife. The final set consisted of two tent-like booths either side of the performance playing place, linked by a half curtain which also provided a backdrop (see Fig. 3). This design not only offered a visual stimulus for the action, but also allowed for the play's actors to enter and exit, and conceal some key costume changes that needed to be performed, such as the transformation scene with the character of Áya at the end of the play. The entry and exit booths were brightly painted by Uses Knife and Smith, and it was Uses Knife who painted

the large panorama that covered the half curtain depicting the Black Hills. As we have seen, the conflict over the Black Hills continues to be an issue of controversy for many, and as a Lakota person, Uses Knife felt an overriding sense that the Black Hills should form the main focus of the set, because, 'he instinctively knew there needed to be a backdrop of the Black Hills, the heart of Lakota culture and site of its creation myth' (London, 2023c). Andonyadis, in particular, was clearly inspired by this, confessing, 'I learned so much about the mountains from the way he chose to paint them' (London, 2023c). In contrast to the more traditional painting style of Uses Knife, Smith's design introduced a quality of urban street art design to the set, creating what he considers to be 'transformative art'. Again, Andonyadis was clearly also inspired as a visual artist by Smith's work, and that she, 'learned a lot from the way Focus paints, [that it is] all about representation and literally changing the environment and transforming the walls within which people in the community live' (London, 2023c). This was clearly significant for a play that was intended to intervene into the conversation in diverse locations about the role of Native Americans in society, and a striking visual statement on their ability to comment and transform the situation by direct performance action in place. Andonyadis, Uses Knife, and Smith's co-design brought this complex sense of both the urban and reservation existence which Native Americans in South Dakota must work hard to navigate in their everyday lives.

Place, Identity, and Characterisation

It is, of course, through FastHorse's characterisation of *Wicoun's* dramatis personae that the theme of identity relative to place is most fully realised. The conflict between the cultural conflicts facing young tribal members in South Dakota is first explored when we meet Khoskalaka. FastHorse describes him as:

Teen Lakota man (or woman, Wiwaste). Cousin brother to Áya. He is trying to instil Lakota values to the many kids they are raising together, and to graduate high school, but it's hard. High achieving personality who feels responsible for everyone.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 'Character List', 2023)

In Khoskalaka's case, his transformational growth will be achieved by going to college. Unknown to Áya, he has earned a four-year scholarship to a college if he successfully graduates high school, but, as this college is several states away, Khoskalaka struggles to tell Áya this because it means he will not be able help with the children anymore. Given

Áya's lack of self-belief and confidence at the start of the play, his fears are perhaps well-founded.

Although the college course is not revealed to us, it seems evident that Khoskalaka's passion lies storytelling, and the creation of comic books in particular – abilities which draw together the traditional Indigenous forms of storytelling found in pictorial art and oral traditions. In the bedtime stories Khoskalaka writes for the children he and Áya care for, he blends together traditional Lakota characters with modern superheroes, and sometimes monsters. We might say Khoskalaka is something of a 'place-maker', as the stories he tells appear to come to life and form reality. For example, when he tells the story of the Meth Zombies, and the battle of an Elder Superhero to save the young people of the reservation from succumbing to the allure of 'Methicine' (FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 4)

Also, Khoskalaka's situation is used to reflect on the conflict faced by many young Native Americans over whether to stay in their homelands and ancestral cultural heritage, or to move away to seek the better prospects that might be found in less impoverished areas of the country. At one point, Khoskalaka recounts the experiences of a friend who also faced this dilemma, with less than optimal results:

KHOSKALAKA

[...] We are going to be the first people in our family to graduate from high school. I know Lala dropped out to do that relocation, job training thing in Saint Paul, but we are gonna stick it out.

ÁYA

Was that when he became a plumber?

KHOSKALAKA

No, that was the second time in Denver. In Saint Paul he learned house painting.

ÁYA

Right. Then Portland for the electrical training.

KHOSKALAKA

No one took advantage of the relocation program like him.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, pp. 13-14)

Place, Identity, and Superheroes

One theme for the play that came as a surprise was the interest in superheroes by those in the communities which Cornerstone visited. 'They hear one request over and over, from people of all ages: *They want to see superheroes*. Superheroes superheroes superheroes' (London, 2023a).

Several large comic stores are situated in South Dakota, which might account for this, along with the fact that the Marvel Comic Universe films were at their height of popularity at the time of the workshops. As FastHorse explains: 'At every single story circle someone brought up superheroes. It got to the point where Michael and I would just give each other the look. "Okay...?"' (London, 2023a). This presented a problem for the production, as portraying superheroes on stage, and with extremely limited technical resources, would require a superhuman feat in itself. After brainstorming this, Garcés remembers them coming up with something of a plan: the superheroes might, Garcés suggested, display, 'a very rough-magic theatricality that could be overt and seen by the audience. It would be playful, but we didn't have to limit ourselves' (London, 2023a). Their superpowers, when seen on stage, would be, according to Garcés, 'fun, intelligible, and have their own kind of magic' (London, 2023a). Their superhero 'magic' could be realised, as London remembers, in many imaginative ways:

[Cornerstone] might use puppets, which allow for characters to fly through the air, or stage a scene where one character's normal movements—in contrast to the others' lugubrious slow-motion—creates a sense of hyper speed.

(London, 2023a)

Superheroes are interesting characters from the standpoint of identity. In one respect, some of the characters that appear in *Wicoun* represent more of archetypes than three-dimensional characters – something reminiscent of the caricature figures in *Urban Rez*. Of course, superheroes are often depicted initially as composed of just their superpowers: For example, 'Superman' appears as such because of his strength and speed in comparison to human men. Some characters, like Wóohitike in *Wicoun*, who similarly possesses super strength along with super bravery, reveal very little about themselves beyond their extreme abilities. Others, however, are much more complex, and much more recognisable as those from Native American culture.

For example, the superhero character of Wówačhiŋthąŋka, which FastHorse describes as 'representing perseverance', is perhaps the most visible embodiment of the

quest for change, as his superpower is, 'changing into different animal forms' (FastHorse, Wicoun, 'Characters', 2023). He is by far the superhero we learn the most about, recounting his 'origin story' at one point. This, acted out as a shadow puppet show in the play, provides much more of the type of 'human' backstory we are familiar with of characters from the Marvel Comic Universe:

WÓWAČHINTĤANKE

As a child, I was different. I could not control what kind of animal I was. It scared people, even my own family. I ran away to live with my sister, the one who loved me no matter what form I took. We became a family to everyone who needed a place to be safe.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 40)

In fact, his 'origin story' mirrors Áya, including being attacked, and not being able to tell his loved ones about what had happened. It is then that his transformation powers become apparent:

WÓWAČHINTĤANKE

My heart was darkened by it. When my most beloved one tried to talk to me about what happened, I became a badger and turned on them. They kept trying until I turned into a mountain lion and was so fierce and mean that I scared them away.

A person tries to care for Wówachinthanke, but he pushes them away. They keep trying and keep getting pushed away.

Finally Wówachinthanke "wins" and hurts the other person enough that they stop trying.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 40)

Meth Zombies

Identity it somewhat satirised in Khoskalaka's story. Sadly, addiction is, of course, something which afflicts many Native American communities both on South Dakota's reservations and in its cities, and it was inevitable that the spectre of this would feature in a play that was derived from those places. As we saw in the analysis of the location of the Memorial Park, drug taking is commonplace there. At one point in the play, Áya and Khoskalaka, breaking the fourth wall, turn to the audience and proclaim:

ÁYA

Oh, I know the zombie catch phrase...

KHOSKALAKA AND ÁYA

Meth, we're on it!

They laugh again.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 4)

Adding to the locational accuracy, 'Meth, we're on it!' was a reference to South Dakota's controversial 2019 publicity campaign which featured the slogan (Zaveri, 2019). This is further lampooned by 'A "Meth, We're On It" zombie dance' as a preamble to the Zombie bedtime story (FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023: 8). It is suggested, by Aya, that this is linked to a loss by modern Native Americans of their past understanding; in other words, the increasing focus on modern identity:

ÁYA

Look, if the Lakota or Dakota or Nakota I'm sure, had the answer to meth, we would have used it long ago and everything would be different.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 4)

The story that follows is a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking the Zombie 'methicine'. Two teens, Cheyenne and Jessie, appear. Even though it is night and Zombies are about, Cheyenne informs Jessie he is going to grandmother's house, with somewhat Hansel and Gretel overtones (FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023: 8). But after encountering the Zombies, it is Jessie that is tempted, and the teens are saved from taking their medicine only by the appearance of an Elder Superhero (FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023: 9). But here, the Elder Superhero shows compassion and understanding rather than outright condemnation, as she attempts to persuade the Zombies into submission by offering them cookies:

Everyone is charmed. Even the
 Zombies have calmed. Elder
 Superhero talks gently to them.

ELDER SUPERHERO

Why don't you give me that methicine and I'll walk you home. I've got some nice cookies here in my bag.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 11)

Sadly though, the meth proves stronger than the Elder Superhero's magic cookies. But again, rather than condemning the Zombies, she reminds the teens that they are victims too, ones robbed of their identity by the spectre of modern-day drug use:

ELDER SUPERHERO

They do. Remember, all zombies were just people once. People we loved. And still do. But that methicine is strong. It kills more than it gives. We don't give up on them just because they didn't take the cookie the first time. Next time they may. If it's not too late. Now let me walk you to your unci.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 12)

The story which the Native American people of South Dakota wanted to tell was one of re-establishing their ever-decreasing sense of cultural and personal identity; a process of self-exploration that must start by looking within themselves and to their cultural past for guidance to the future.

From the earlier analysis of the place that is South Dakota, it is clear that it is one which today, and historically, has been at the focus point of change resulting from the inevitable conflict when the past and modernity meet. In the past, this represented the benefits, and the ills, brought to Native Americans along with Western expansion. Certainly, the modern world has brought opportunities to many modern Native Americans unthinkable to their ancestors and even recent familiar generations. But along with this the unwelcome trouble of addition, racial prejudice, and sexual hatred have followed in the bandwagon. Above all, perhaps, this is due to the uncertainty in, and loss of, traditional understanding of Native American cultural identity, which had held together community society for millennia.

Nevertheless, the conclusion of *Wicoun* is more optimistic, more hopeful, more inspiring than that of *Urban Rez* or *Native Nation*. Áya is transfigured into a demi-god, Khoskalaka is freed to follow his dreams, Chris has realised his quest to understand the superheroes, and even the superheroes have rediscovered their purpose in helping humans find their spiritual centre. The crescendo to all this is a final 'boom!' as the Blow-Up the Faces protestors realise their goal in bringing down Mount Rushmore.

FastHorse's overwhelming goal in the play was to inspire people to find their super-strength, and to understand their identity connected to this, whatever that might be. As she has the character of Chris explain this:

CHRIS

Everyone has the potential to be a hero or a villain. It's all in how you chose to use your powers.

(FastHorse, *Wicoun*, 2023, p. 61)

Conclusion – Future Places: Towards a Place-Specific Native American Performance Form

My aim in this thesis has been to illustrate how place-based productions might inspire the aspirations of today's contemporary Native American performance practitioners, by offering an alternative to the mainstream and commercial theatre buildings that have so far dominated the genre. I also looked to describe how place can actively influence, manipulate, and disrupt the intentions of its human collaborators through 'performativity', and how place-based productions can represent cultural interventions into the social and political melee of the Native American experience in the regional United States. Overall, my aim was to illustrate the potential that place-based Native American plays might offer to realise the 'strikingly unique' new ethnic form of theatre the likes of Lloyd Kiva New envisioned during the pioneering days of the Native American Renaissance.

As we saw in chapter one, for Indigenous communities in the United States, land, location, and environment occupy a unique position in establishing their relationship to the past and understanding their place in the present. Communally, place is a direct link to ancestral belief systems and spiritual heritage, and the epicentre of the drive for cultural recognition and the fight to regain Native American sovereignty. On an individual level, it is central to forming identity. This land-based cultural synergy was reflected in early location-based performances, such as the ceremonies that can still be seen at places like the Talos Pueblo. Centuries later, the first true theatrical endeavours, discussed in chapter two, such as those of pageant organisers, folklorists, and the creators of the symphonic drama movement, continued to focus on location: creating performances that uniquely emerged from the locations of their inspiration. Intriguingly, by investigating these productions we see a glimpse perhaps of an alternative form the early contemporary Native American theatre could have become had it taken a more place-based course from the outset.

Of course, many early Native American themed productions were far from representing a model for a 'strikingly unique' contemporary Native American style of performance. Indeed, many of the plays discussed earlier, although featuring Native American characters, cannot be described as Indigenous theatre. The inclusion of Native American characters in historical pageants and dramas, for example as we saw in *The Lost*

Colony, was often born of a desire for historical accuracy by their white creators rather than out of interest in Native American issues. Consequently, during the later twentieth century, many of these performances became increasingly problematic for Native American performance scholars, practitioners, and even large sectors of the public. Plays like *Unto These Hills*, created at times that were very different in their social attitudes towards Native America – times where Indigenous self-determinacy, or even social recognition, remained far-off dreams – with their representation of Indigeneity and their historical distortion designed to suit the expectations of white audiences, came to grind against more progressive modern ways of thinking. Much early work became virtually taboo for consideration by serious Native American theatre practitioners, particularly during the militant self-determinacy of the Native American Renaissance era, where it represented nothing short of antithetical thinking. As a result, the founding figures of the early contemporary Native American theatre focused their attention away from such 'outdoor' theatre practices, which might have counterproductively been viewed as 'primitive' or 'amateur', favouring a course of Indigenising the 'sophisticated' mainstream theatre instead. Their means of achieving this would be through the widespread adoption of a sophisticated syncretic theatrical approach: a process that could best be achieved within the network of already established theatre buildings.

But, while acknowledging again their shortcomings, I believe today, as attitudes and goals have changed for Native Americans, many of these early theatrical endeavours now offer insight on how place might be successfully allied with Indigenous theatre. This seems particularly true when considering Native American artists that explored avenues outside of theatre buildings, and who, through their performances, were able to extricate themselves from the confines of the commercial mainstage. In so doing, they achieved a level of artistic freedom and personal autonomy likely unobtainable within it. For example, although some performers, such as Te Ata, continued to perform on occasion in theatres, under the banner of 'folklorist', even when they did, their performances likely remained freer from the preconceived notions of audiences than when being, what Mary Alice Nelson described, as an 'Injun in the flesh parade' in derogatory Indian Plays.

Of course, most intriguing were Te Ata's true locational performances, such as at Bear Mountain, or before her wealthy patrons in their New York apartments and state occasions in Washington. During these, 'performative' contributions by place must have occurred that would have been excluded in more traditional theatre environments.

Perhaps there was a sudden breeze that touched the faces of those gathered around the campfire on Bear Mountain, and which just happened to coincide with a line from her story of the Great Spirit. Perhaps, in the Rose Room at the White House, there was the steady tick of a clock, relentlessly marking Western time as Te Ata recounted a moment from a creation story. Perhaps the ever-present rumble of streetcars outside Mrs Roosevelt's Manhattan apartment was heard as Te Ata told of her peoples' migration from their ancestral lands. The significance of these events, if they occurred, or a million others that might have briefly existed only to be instantly lost in time, surely contributed to a unique and deeply individualised experience for all present. Perhaps, freed from the artificiality of theatre-space, the real places at which Te Ata performed sounded for a moment a placial voice as equal and audible as her own.

Above all, the metaphorical 'out of place' of a living, breathing representative of a race pushed to the point of extinction, physically performing in the homes of those collectively responsible for the situation, must have been of acute socio-political poignancy. As such, the ground-breaking performative acts Te Ata and others engaged in were not so much in the material of their work, but simply in their continued physical existence in space and time, while using their talents as 'Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance' (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Like the Native American re-enactors of the 'Indian Village' at the World's Fair of 1892, while obviously not an ideal situation, it may be wrong to consider those that worked within the dominant white society as 'victims' of exploitation due to the colonial fascination with Indigenous people:

The Indian people who worked at the fair recognized that they were on society's margins. They were trying to shift that position and move into a space where they could at the very least support themselves and their families. ... They were in the curious position of many Indian people of their era, being both exploited ... and active agents at the same time.

(Beck, 2019, p. 132-34)

Rather, today we should perhaps consider the work of artists like Nicolai, Te Ata, and Spotted Elk as in fact performing proactive acts of, what Gerald Vizenor would come to describe as 'Survivance', which, 'creates a sense of Native presence over absence nihility and victimry' (Vizenor, 2008, p.1).

While large-scale productions like the symphonic dramas are harder to justify, this is largely due to their lack of Indigenous input at the time of their conception rather than a fundamental problem with their locational construct. Even in productions like these,

positives can be found for which they are rarely given credit. For example, most obviously their ability to attract large regional audiences to see Native American work, as is evident from the continued attendance figures at pageants and symphonic dramas. Their ability to ally 'cultural tourism' to successfully secure an audience is something which many more Native American communities could use to realise, and fund, their artistic endeavours in the future.

For example, although the term 'cultural tourism' has obtained negative connotations, it still remains very much a reality, and often a financial necessity, for many rural communities, and is a phenomenon that is only predicted to grow. This is particularly the case with National Parks, which, as we have seen, are often important in supporting the local economy of Native communities: 'When examined critically, the experience of many parks over the past few years fit a pattern of exponential growth in park visitors' (National Parks Conservation Association, 2022). Therefore, although recognising that some danger exists from the environmental impact of excessive public visitation, Native American dramatic performances which utilise 'cultural tourism', if well managed and conducted intelligently, could potentially prove highly successful. According to Meethan, for example, to be a 'cultural tourist' means, 'to go beyond idle leisure and to return enriched with knowledge of other places and other peoples even if this involves gazing at, or collecting in some way, the commodified essences of otherness' (Meethan, 2001, p. 128). While Richards suggests:

Cultural tourism is arguably a "good" form of tourism for the destination, which avoids many of the pitfalls of conventional tourism while offering additional benefits in the form of high-spending tourists who are keen to support culture.

(Richards, 2007, p. 2)

Productions like *Unto These Hills*, and perhaps more so the 'Oconaluftee Indian Village' which functions around it, undoubtedly bring considerable homegrown Indigenous revenue to a region of the United States that has historically suffered from a crippling lack of federal and state economic investment. As Thompson points out:

The Mountainside Theater, like the Oconaluftee Village, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, or the Qualla Arts Co-op, have all served their community as institutions of Cherokee culture while also being commercial endeavors.

(Thompson, 2009, p. 306)

Even in the 1950s when the show began, while Native American performers may not have featured artistically, many families benefited from the labour needed to construct, staff,

and publicise *Unto These Hills*. It is important to remember the turbulent times faced by Native Americans in the mid-twentieth century, when incomes were low and alternatives to working on 'The Drama' might have involved relocation to distant urban areas or working on low paying civil and state construction projects. More recently, Native Americans have been involved in the running of *Unto These Hills*, and it is now an event that provides employment to many Native American artists, often helping launch successful careers in the wider entertainment industry. Today, productions like these are no longer seen as taboo to contemporary Native American artists, but rather as exciting artistic opportunities. For example, Larissa FastHorse, who herself found employment as a choreographer on the production for six seasons, considers there to be just as much value in productions like *Unto These Hills* as in her own work: 'it's all theater; it's all storytelling; it's all sharing, experiences – life, space. I don't see any, I see zero difference as far as worth, or intention' (personal communication, 2 June 2023).

Although the institutions behind productions like the symphonic dramas may resist change, other opportunities exist to capitalise on them. For example, after several failed attempts to update *Unto These Hills*, largely due to resistance from its established audience base, the CHA changed tack and decided instead to co-produce new works alongside it. John Tissue, the CHA's executive director, said at the time of this move in 2012:

We will run [*Unto These Hills*] forever, but we want to have a season at Mountainside Theater and have multiple offerings. We know most of our regional folks have seen 'Unto These Hills' a million times, but this will be a reason to draw them back into the theater to see some new stuff. The idea is for every year to have something new.

(McKie, 2012)

That year, FastHorse's *Cherokee Family Reunion* played at the Mountainside Theatre as a pre-show to *Unto These Hills* (McKie, 2012).

In chapter three, I looked to expose how much of the foundational work by early Native American theatrical professionals in contrast focused on utilizing conventional theatre environments. Again, the body of Native American theatre work that resulted from this approach is considerable and important, proving highly effective in creating a strong ethnic representation and the widespread Indigenisation of the existing euro-American theatre mainstream. When questioning the decisions of those that first approached the creation of a contemporary Native American theatre, we must also be

sensitive to the practical situation they were facing at the time. The performative and cultural landscape today differs greatly from that which New, Geiogamah, and their contemporaries encountered when they attempted to construct a contemporary Native American theatre from scratch. When exploring their options in the 1960s and 1970s, Native American practitioners had little opportunity to practically consider utilising location-based approaches which might have been feasible elsewhere. Although avant-garde theatre existed marginally in the United States at the time, the main stylistic influence was from the theatre that dominated its mainstages: i.e., the theatre traditions showcased on Broadway and its imports from Europe, ones that had been championed by colonialism for centuries. Although the experimental tide was turning in the direction of 'theatre of place' in other parts of the world, aside from isolated pockets of activity by companies like Cornerstone, it would not rise to anything approaching prominence until at least the millennium in the United States. Indeed, it remains surprisingly obscure to this day.

It would also be fair to say that plays like Riggs's *The Cherokee Night* or Geiogamah's 49 certainly did speak, through the skill of their writing, 'of' and 'for' the land. Yet, to my mind, the difficulty with this work is that while playwrights like Riggs and Geiogamah undeniably give a *literary* voice to place, as this derives from the central viewpoint of their individual understanding of it, and despite their obvious Indigenous sensitivity, it is often an *artificial* voice in monotone. Any sense of 'theatre-place' an audience might perceive by this literary constructivism is inevitably one lacking the shades, inflections, and subtle intonations conveyed by a *real location*. Although Stanlake suggests that in Native American plays the land, 'carries the same value as characters do', in the theatre, it often speaks as one of the play's dramatis personae rather than offering a true reflection of its own complex personality. In other words, place plays the part that has been written for it. Rarely, if ever, is the multidimensional shading of place witnessed on stage. Indeed, I might go further by suggesting it to be impossible for 'theatre-place' to contribute in a similar way as a place experienced by those attending, say, the Pueblo's Deer Dance at Taos or Te Ata's sunset chantways on Bear Mountain. On those occasions, far from merely being convenient locations and backdrops for more important events, place represents the very foundation of the stories Native Americans creatively strive to tell, through the active role place plays in a narrative's co-authorship.

Ideally, a venue chosen for a Native American dramatic production would be one in tune with the cultural, sacred, and geo-political concerns of the Native American community. It should be a location where place is not excluded, distanced, or otherwise barred by the 'formal structures' within a traditional theatre's walls. As London observes about the nature of Native American place-based performance: "This isn't the kind of theatre that keeps life out behind four walls. It's theatre whose very essence is to let life in' (London, 2023c). Above all, perhaps, an ideal venue should not be one where the values, expectations, and 'rules' surrounding colonial 'theatre-going', exclude the freedom of Native Americans to engage with the material being presented in line with their own cultural and social practices. The best venues would be those where the performative, symbolic, and spiritual presence of place is permitted to permeate all aspects of an Indigenous performance, as it does in many other Indigenous cultural practices where content and place form an inseparable synthesis.

Of course, as we saw in chapter six, the choice and utilisation of 'site-specific' performance locations needs to be more than just 'unusual' ones, merely ad hoc places of interest chosen for little more than aesthetic curiosity. To be successful, the creators of *The Weyburn Project* and those behind the work of *Brith Gof*, centred their site-specific practice fundamentally around a chosen site's significance to its surrounding community. Most importantly, the defining characteristic of site-specific practice is that it involves local communities intimately in preparation, design, and the final realisation of performance as much as possible. Thus, applied at the artistic epicentre of a production, the specificity that real places contribute through their own silent, and not so silent, commentary to a performance text through Irwin's 'performativity', influences every aspect of the paradigm elements that compose a performance.

However, although site-specific events such as *The Weyburn Project* clearly resonate with their local demographic, it is debatable if they attain the same degree of sensitivity that Native American place-based theatre productions have the potential to evoke in the tribal communities from which they emerge. This is because Modern Western communities, diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-faith, and with a high degree of locational transience, rarely possess the unity of platial communal recognition compared to Indigenous communities. Created in Native American communities, where more of this unity still exists, site-specific productions move beyond the significance of mere sites and embrace the full multidimensional and metaphysical realms of Indigenous place. As such,

the result is to move site-specific events to a more place-based, resonating, and impassioned place-specific mode of communal performance.

FastHorse and Cornerstone's work would seem to epitomise this through their place-based, place-specific approach. This work appears to come closer to truly speaking 'with' the land than perhaps any of the other examples we have seen. The living places chosen for their plays reveal themselves to be those that hold the most significance for the local Indigenous communities involved, and represent a far cry from the clichéd and romanticised 'landscapes' of rolling prairies and misty mountains promoted so vigorously by the colonial project, from the earliest days of the Indian Plays to the present era of Disney's *Peter Pan* or *Pocahontas*. Neither do they solely focus on far off, though no doubt significant, places of 'pan-Indian' concern – massacre sites, occupations, and ATF sieges – which were the focus of so many Native American plays constructed during the Native American Renaissance for the Red Power mobilisation of the American mainstage. Localisation is evident in Cornerstone's cultural interventions at otherwise overlooked local locations. For example, *Urban Rez*'s bivouacs beneath the North Broadway Viaduct, which draw attention to Los Angeles's metropolitan encroachment hovering over Native American ways of living, or *Native Nation*'s use of The Steele Indian School and The Circle of Life as the backdrop and delineating perimeter for the production, highlighting how the state school system continues today to encircle Native Americans as did the boarding school system in the past; *Wicoun*'s requisition of the homeless void of the Monument Band Shell, with the lingering smell of its soon to be evicted soup kitchen. It is often these localised, 'off the map', and less obvious places that prove the most poignant for contemporary Native American communities, and particularly for those whose lives straddle both the urban and rural landscapes.

Here, with its central focus on the needs of the communities with which it works, Cornerstone does appear to be functioning effectively as a 'interactive theatre' of 'social intervention' (Somers, 2008). The way this is achieved, as I hope the above case studies have shown, is by revealing through place-based performance the local concerns of Native Americans literally *in situ*: or, with perhaps more than a nod to Basso, what we might term *contemporary place-making*. In other words, this work functions as a land-based mnemonic for storytelling and education, employed to make visible important social concerns and topics of contention. For example, the land-based issues faced by Native Americans, such as poverty, cultural discrimination, and homelessness, are plain

to see every day in public parks across the United States, but rarely do they continue to rise to a level at which we notice, immunised as we are through familiarity. But through the intervention of performances like *Urban Rez*, *Native Nation*, and *Wicoun*, such forgotten stories of contemporary Native American lives are once again heard, seen, and maybe even *felt* anew by their spectators.

Additionally, as I explained in chapter five, the use of alternative venues bestows a liberating effect on Native American performance by removing the 'codified' registers previously imposed upon it by the inherent architectural determinism of the classic theatre environment. Such codes connected to 'going to the theatre', institutionalised through centuries of conformity by Euro-American theatregoers, often appear inherently at odds with the less formalised functioning of attendees at Native American performances. Escaping the confines of proscenium arch theatres allows place the chance to perform an act of liberation for the Native American participants at Cornerstone's shows, freeing them to participate in, and contribute to, the narrative: something which would be hard, if not nigh impossible to achieve, in conventional theatre venues. This is a phenomenon FastHorse is particularly passionate about. Responding to criticism about the unorthodox behaviour of American audiences at the 2023 New York production of *The Thanksgiving Play*, she observed:

I saw some wild performances where there was lots of audience interaction with my characters and our actors had a ball. My number one rule in theater is "be a human" and that means all humans. The ones who need to go to the bathroom, the ones who laugh loudly, the ones who have life complications and get there late, the ones who unexpectedly need a cough drop, the ones who need a nap, and especially the ones who are so moved by the work that they need to respond immediately in ways that are meaningful to them. Be you.

(FastHorse 2023)

The restrictions of Western cultural conformity FastHorse witnessed that were imposed on audiences on Broadway were in stark contrast to the freedom she experienced in audiences attending Cornerstone's place-based productions, something she suggested perhaps when she posted on Instagram during the tour: '[the tour of *Wicoun*] is the perfect follow up to Broadway. It is pure theater in the best way' (FastHorse, 3 June 2023).

Ultimately, Cornerstone and FastHorse's Native American place-based plays represent encounters with Native American land that reveal how its respective communities identify with it. Freed from the cultural muting of the conventional theatre,

these works shout FastHorse's plea to 'be you', as they seek to allow the sense of place found at these locations the unrestrained freedom to contribute to the act of self-determining its own identity. To further this, there is little idealisation of these places of performance through elaborate set designs, and no dressing-up of the performance sites to provide aesthetically pleasing back-drops for sentiment or nostalgia. For example, the simplicity in the design of *Urban Rez* by Scrofano provided as little intrusion as possible, rejecting unnecessary physical structures that might add unwanted invisibility to the events depicted, or that could safely cloak the performance in the past. The production clearly remained located amid its urbanised contemporary location, with its concrete flyovers and city skyline shimmering in a soundscape formed from 'the haze of ambient downtown noise – construction, helicopters, trucks in and out of the intermodal facility, the Metro Gold Line whizzing by atop the wall every few minutes' (Scrofano, 2016). Urbanised performance places like this, as much as any other, still represent ancestral land, and as such serve to realise the cultural identity of, and what it means to be, Native American in the contemporary United States of today. A reality that demands to be recognised if wider society is to learn about, empathise with, and change the 'status quo' of the invisibility that persists for so many Native Americans.

Cornerstone and FastHorse's place-based Indigenous plays reveal a far more metaphorical indication of the fundamental nature of place than just those social and political concerns that might be easily defined: they serve to expose a 'sense of place', of 'meaningful location', that is ever-present but unseen, buried beneath our feet, and echoing from the depths of Kelly's 'reservoirs of human content'. Some timeless platial communication that no amount of urbanisation, settler city-planning, or federal cultural eradication can extinguish from the land. Though many philosophers have tried, the concept of place, it seems, remains one largely beyond practical definition. And perhaps its metaphysical embodiment in performance is a more suitable method to debate its performativity in our day-to-day lives. Do as we may with it, the land always remains; the 'place-keeping' continues after the brief theatrical intervention, as do the stories, the memory of their telling, and perhaps, just possibly, some greater understanding by those that have participated and born witness to the event.

I believe that what we see emerge in the fusion of the early contemporary Native American theatre with this newer place-based performance is indeed the creation of a 'strikingly unique' new form of performance. It is one that reaches far beyond the mere

aesthetics of scenography, and, in some respects, surpasses even the higher aspirations of dedicated site-specific practitioners such as Irwin and Pearson. Such Native American performance, when performed within the place-based context, clearly denotes a far greater divergence from the traditional forms of such theatre, and certainly the role of location cannot be described as a mere 'nuance'. It is obvious that the productions themselves are to a large extent less important than the process of their creation. Their legacy is their ability to bring communities together through the act of creation, and to reveal to them the issues and concerns of most importance to them. Sometimes these can prove as much of a revelation to the community themselves as to those coming to those communities. This is theatre that represents a manifestation of performance art that touches back to a once prevalent, yet now almost totally lost, mode of theatrical practice; one that drew from the community and communal belief systems for its content and understanding. As Scrofano has written of working on *Urban Rez*: 'In my humble observations throughout this process – place, land and relationship *are the ground of cognition* for native consciousness' (Scrofano, 2016).

Under these circumstances, previous terminology becomes unsuitable to describe the type of theatrical experience encountered in Native American place-based performance. Arguably, Native American performance, when intimately connected to its locational context, is definable as a unique form of theatrical experience, better described, in Garcés's terms, as one 'place-specific'. As a genre, this suits well to describe productions that attempt to forge the synergy of ceremonial and ritual practices with theatrical entertainment, socio-political activism, and environmental pedagogy, largely through the auspices of the performativity inherent in the locations at which they are performed. Likewise, while a new term seems required, a more place-based mode of analysis beyond the literary tools used to date also appears called for. Placial analysis looks to provide this through a methodology that situates place from the outset as its means of understanding a performance text.

The work I have presented here is of course only a sampling of what is a vast topic, and one which I hope will be pursued by other researchers in the future. The opportunity, for example, exists for much practice-based research, which I hope will be conducted by Native American members of the academy, and among Native American communities, into the practical application of place-specific theatre as an active force of change in regional society. In turn, as more place-specific work is produced, more opportunities

will exist for research to apply placial analysis, which I hope will also form the basis of continued methodological investigation. The key to this, and indeed, for the future of the type of work Larissa FastHorse and Cornerstone Theater create, is one of funding. Often, this work struggles against bureaucracy in this regard, not fitting comfortably within funding expectations and compartmentalised thinking. As FastHorse explained to me about the challenges when approaching funding for *Wicoun*:

The first couple of years of funding for [*Wicoun*] for instance, we were trapped, because funders were saying – because, you know, we’re paying all these people, we’re feeding these people, we’re housing these people, we’re, you know, we’re taking care of their families, we’re doing childcare, we’re doing so many things. It takes a lot of money. So, art funders were saying to us, “oh no, that’s, that’s community work, that’s social justice work, that’s social work, we don’t fund that.” Social justice places were saying, “oh, you’re doing art, we don’t fund that.”

(Personal communication, 2 June, 2023)

In some small way, I hope my work here may be used to urge change in the thinking and strategy of arts funding bodies, which overwhelmingly at present favour productions in theatre and textual analysis in the academic realm. By celebrating the success of Cornerstone and FastHorse’s work, it is my hope that funders may consider alternative performance forms such as this as a viable proposition for creating new and exciting theater experiences. Moreover, I urge Native American communities, interested in pursuing performance as a means of community engagement and activism, to consider the processes described here. The opportunities these offer communities for homegrown performances, freed from the demands of centralised theatre funding bodies, to come together as they have always done – perhaps with a little help from outside agencies like Cornerstone – to present self-determined performance work is profound. In the final analysis, place-specific work functions as a cultural intervention, bringing together communities in the simple act of collaborative performance, and serves as an active force of change for all those concerned – be they performer or spectator. As FastHorse encapsulates the fundament ethos of place-specific Indigenous theatre:

That’s really the experience. We all get to show up and belong somewhere and create our own community for a moment. That’s what I am hoping this experience does; it invites you to feel invested in, and a part of, and in control of something, and to have it change you.

(Clemenco, 2016)

Appendix 1: Illustrations



Fig. 1: *Urban Rez*, Kuruvungna Springs, Los Angeles, CA (Photo Credit: James Cheeks III, 2016)



Fig. 2: *Native Nation*, Steele Indian School Park, Phoenix, AZ (Photo Credit: Cornerstone Theater Company, 2019)



Fig. 3: *Wicoun*, Placerville Camp, Black Hills National Forest, SD (Photo Credit: Larissa FastHorse, 2023)

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