

Introduction

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The Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA) was conceived in 1996 as the result of a collaboration between a theatre graduate student and Dr. William Wortman, Humanities Librarian for Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The student, whose ancestry was Cherokee and African American, was pursuing a research project concerning the work of Native women playwrights and was experiencing difficulty locating relevant resources. Dr. Wortman assisted the student in contacting a number of writers and performers, and the two began building a collection that would form the core of the NAWPA project.

The archive has seen considerable growth and change over the last 12 years, and continues to navigate the terrain of developing and promoting a collection that provides a “living archive” for writers who contribute work to the collection on an ongoing basis. The dynamic core of NAWPA continues to be the playwrights and their works, and the promotion, preservation, and attention that these works deserve in an atmosphere that is mindful of the complex issues surrounding such a collection. These issues become even more compelling considering the fact that the collection is housed and maintained in southwestern Ohio at an academic institution that is predominantly white yet takes its name from one of the indigenous groups that inhabited the area for centuries before the “United States” began to assert its sovereignty in the Northwest Territory following the American Revolution. It is also a region in which an organized, asserted Native presence has been reestablished in the last few decades after an absence of nearly 150 years. Being mindful of these issues while navigating this terrain involves identifying, constructing, and maintaining the critical connections that such an endeavor entails. These issues speak to the direction that the archive will take in the next several years, and requires the discussion, input, participation, and cooperation of many individuals within Native and non-Native communities.

The stated mission of the Archive is to

identify playwrights in North and South America, collect, preserve, and make their work more widely known, encourage performances and continued creativity, and help educate playwrights, theater companies, and audiences

about Native American theater. Recognizing the difficulty all playwrights have publishing their work, we want NAWPA to play a positive role in the production of Native drama.

The archive was organized in three components to fulfill this mission. The first is the archive itself, which is located in the Special Collections department of Miami's King Library, which currently holds materials representing over sixty works by eighteen authors. These materials include manuscripts, as well as audio- and videocassettes of performances and lectures. The cornerstone of the archive is a significant collection of historical materials related to the groundbreaking work of the Spiderwoman Theater troupe, including numerous performance photos, posters and flyers going back more than two decades, and personal material from the Spiderwoman members, mostly reflecting the development and working process of the troupe, which was founded in 1975 by three sisters of Kuna and Rappahannock heritage: Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel. Spiderwoman Theater is considered to be the longest-running women's performance group in existence. The sisters' work is grounded in feminist performance and emphasizes issues in the lives of Native women as they intersect with non-Native culture.

The second component is an online directory, located at <http://staff.lib.muohio.edu/nawpa>, which provides an extremely accessible resource interface for individuals interested in learning more about works by Native women writers. The Web site includes listings of the works the archive holds for each author, a bibliography of additional publications by those authors and links to synopses of the works, a bibliography of works by writers who are not currently represented in the collection, an "Online Exhibit" of materials from the Spiderwoman collection, information concerning NAWPA conferences and other events of interest to Native writers, bibliographies of works by Native men playwrights, and links to related Internet sites. The site also allows users to request information and assistance by e-mail.

This "electronic archive" concept facilitates the management of and accessibility to information and resources, and provides an unprecedented opportunity to create a space where many voices that have traditionally existed "outside the canon" can gain access to public spheres of recognition and contact. Such technological venues also carry with them issues of representation and accessibility, issues that are changing constantly in their impact and shape. The participation of NAWPA in this rapidly shifting "global electronic village" (which is, of course, not truly global since not everyone around the world has, or wishes to have, access to the technology or information required to participate) is predicated on the desire to share information in the most responsible and effective ways possible while respecting the rights of the authors who have trusted their work to the

archive. In conjunction with programming, this aspect is designed to ensure that these works are made visible beyond the library where they are housed.

The third component relates to programming. An inaugural conference, Women's Voices in Native American Theater, was held in February of 1997, accompanied by a performance of Spiderwoman's *Sun, Moon, and Feather*. A second conference in March of 1999 was titled Celebration of Native Women's Theater and included academic papers, performances, and a discussion of issues involving Native women's theater, including the production of the works by non-Native companies. Performances for this conference included another Spiderwoman piece, *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*; a performance by Shirley Cheechoo of her one-woman work, *Path with No Moccasins*; and a staged reading of Vera Manuel's *The Strength of Indian Women*. Since then, the archive has sponsored and/or facilitated staged readings of Diane Glancy's *Jump Kiss* and *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for a Deer Dance*, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *Ola Nā Iwi (The Bones Live)*, and JudyLee Oliva's *Spirit Line*.

In examining the works in the archive, it is apparent that, within the diversity of the writers' experiences and styles, there are a number of similarities in the themes and structural choices the writers have made. The following discussion touches on the common thematic threads emerging from these works, examines some of the structural choices the writers have made, and considers the relationship of these threads and structures to dominant theatrical models. It is important to remember that the ideas discussed herein are ones that seem to recur in many of the scripts, but that these similarities are just that: similarities, not generalizations about the way Native women write. This collection does not presume to construct a paradigmatic model for Native women playwrights, for to do so would be inappropriate and insulting to the individuality of the writers involved. It is also important to note that the following discussion pertains to the entire NAWPA collection, not just the scripts included in this anthology (though space considerations make it impossible to mention all of the plays and authors currently represented in the archive). The quoted examples that follow are drawn from works that are not available (for reasons of length) within this published collection in order to give voice to a greater range of archive authors; works that are referenced but not directly quoted represent both archival works and some that are anthologized in this volume.

The first point of consideration is the common thematic threads that weave through the manuscripts included in the archive. Most of the scripts, not surprisingly, focus on women: their personal stories, their relationships with other women and their friends and families, and their cultural and personal identities as Native American women. Within this predominantly woman-centered focus, there appear to be four major common threads: (1) the tension between tradi-

tional ways and contemporary lifestyles, and the question of recognizing, defining, and claiming one's heritage; (2) an emphasis on intergenerational relationships; (3) the presentation and exploration of historical figures and traditional legends; and (4) the importance of anthropomorphized animals and embodied spirits.

The most common themes deal with the tension between traditional ways and contemporary lifestyles, and the question of recognizing, defining, and claiming one's heritage, as presented in plays such as *Mark of the Feather* by JudyLee Oliva. In this work, Mary and Elizabeth, cousins who are described as part white and part Chickasaw, have attended the Pottawatamie Pow Wow in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Elizabeth is gathering material for her thesis, entitled "20th Century Native American Spirituality—Cult or Culture," while Mary is searching for a deeper understanding of her heritage. Both women repeatedly use an "us-them" frame of reference. The tension inherent in their divergent views is conveyed in the following dialogue.

MARY: I'm claiming my heritage and you're denying yours.

ELIZABETH: Which is mostly white, isn't it?

MARY: I feel more red—at this moment.

ELIZABETH: You can't "feel" red or white. Not even you miss "I believe in miracles" woman.

MARY: You know, Elizabeth, you make fun of things you can't understand. I know how I felt when I heard those pow wow drums for the first time. I didn't breath [*sic*] . . . my heart stopped beating . . .

ELIZABETH: Get a stethoscope.

Elizabeth's cultural cynicism is directly at odds with Mary's desire to identify and explore what draws her to her Native blood. Her ensuing encounter with a man named Bird Runningdeer helps to guide and define her exploration, taking her farther away from her cousin's outlook.

Issues and questions involving the importance of heritage are often framed within the context of spirituality and religion specifically dealing with Native rituals and Christianity. For example, in the working draft of Marie Clements's *Urban Tattoo*, a collection of memory monologues, Rosemarie is sitting in a church, looking at the painted stars on the ceiling and saying:

Baby Jesus stars painted by an ancient French priest surrounded by Indians. This must have been his haven from us. His place to come when the brown faces engulfed him on the land. Here it was just him and his God and his painting hand and he controlled the stars here and the front door and the Good Indians could come and go as they liked as long as he was holding the

door. I sneak in here when there aren't any good Indians around (or the good priest).

Much like Elizabeth in *Mark of the Feather*, Rosemarie seems to be commenting on the struggle between a culture's traditional spirituality and the appropriation, or overwhelming, of that spirituality by outsiders. The spiritual tension created by the development of blended belief systems becomes a central focus in these works.

The second common thread, the emphasis on intergenerational relationships, is exemplified by works such as Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women*, in which four Kootenai elders prepare for the celebration feast and two-day fast that will mark the coming of age of Suzie, the granddaughter of Sousette, the elder who is considered the "peacemaker" of the group, and Diane Glancy's *Segwohi*, which foregrounds the conflict that can arise with the interaction between generational differences and cultural tension. Unlike Manuel's characters, Segwohi and his son, Peyto, are at odds over the passing on of ritual and belief. When Segwohi reminds his son that "We're here to obey the Spirit," Peyto replies that he is trying to make his own way while being pulled "one way and then another." He goes on to explain:

PEYTO: I don't hear the voices of the ancestors. I can't live what I don't see. I have to take part in the struggle I see before me. It's the real world, though it's only fragments of several worlds—and hopeless most of the time.

SEGWOHI: It's because you don't listen to the voices of the ancestors, Peyto. You can't hear them when you stay at the bar in town every night.

PEYTO: I have to have a guide who moves in *this* world—the one I see. You don't really hear me—

Other plays, such as *Bring the Children Home* by Marcie Rendon and *Emmalehua* by Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, also focus on generational relationships and the passing on or reclaiming of rituals, practices, and languages that were lost or repressed for previous generations.

History and legend are present in nearly all of the authors' works in one way or another, with characters often making reference to the stories and beliefs with which they were surrounded as children. This continuous presence of the past is one of the most pervasive aspects of the writings in the archive, and it goes beyond a simple "thematic similarity," often creating an aesthetic atmosphere or tone rooted in a sense of timeless connection among past, present, and future. A number of plays present historical figures or events, including Martha Kreipe de Montaña's *Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth*, a depiction of

the Thanksgiving story from the Wampanoag perspective; JudyLee Oliva's *Te Ata*, a biographical musical work that relates the story of Native performer Te Ata Fisher; and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *Paniolo Spurs*, which offers a compelling portrait of Hawai'iian ranch life in the 1920s. Kneubuhl, in particular, has written numerous works presenting the history of Hawai'i's indigenous population in conflict with non-Native colonizers. Many are commissioned works, including *The Annexation Debate*; *Trial of a Queen: 1895 Military Tribunal, January 1893*; *Ka'iulani: A Cantata for Theatre*; and *The Conversion of Ka'ahu-manu*. Retellings of Native legends appear in *Asivak's Creation Story*, by Jules Arita Koostachin, and *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, by Marie Clements.

The fourth thematic thread is the importance of anthropomorphized animals and animal and/or human spirits, who appear to assist or impede the lives of the human characters, as exemplified by Kneubuhl's *Ola Nā Iwi (The Bones Live)*. Other works employ animal spirits that help move the story along or appear as major characters in their own right. For example, in *Your Dream Was Mine*, authors Shirley and Greta Cheechoo choose a somewhat mischievous woodpecker to accompany two sisters who have become lost after wandering from their wrecked car on the way to the wedding of their youngest sister. Appearing at first only peripherally, the woodpecker becomes a major player as the sisters continue their journey.

There are often multiple thematic threads woven into the same story, and operating at different textual levels, while other scripts do not employ any of these major themes as they address contemporary issues faced by women in all walks of life. Marie Clements's *Now Look What You Made Me Do*, for example, presents a graphic and compelling portrait of women struggling with domestic violence, while Denise Mosley's *Letters* tells the stories of several women and one adolescent girl through letters and diary entries.

In a structural sense, the similarity of these works is in their diverse challenges to (or negotiation with) traditional structural tenets such as linear narrative and binary conflict. Many of the works move back and forth through time, often employing a forward strategy that is episodic in nature and temporally fluid, a structure that is evocative of an oral tradition in which narrative events may progress in a manner that more closely resembles the ways in which memories actually occur in human experience. In addition, some of the plays tend to subvert the traditional dramatic framing of conflict as binary in nature and resolved through a predictably timed climax, and this subversion serves to highlight the intensity of internalized conflict and emotionally charged social interactions.

The consideration of the plays' structural elements depends on the lens through which a play is viewed. Monique Mojica observed that the dominant Aristotelian lens presumes that "there is a conflict between creating art and creating change. From an indigenous artist's perspective, this is a conflict fabricated

from a foreign mind-set.” A revised aesthetic in American theatre must spring from a perspective that views structural analysis through a different lens, one that encompasses a variety of experiences and traditions and sees them as complimentary, not conflictual and that respects the diversity of voices within our culture. We need to use a lens that redefines what is implied by “our culture,” embracing the cultural richness of our society while still respecting the autonomy of the specific cultural influences that created the artist.

It is virtually impossible for any writer to develop her or his skills without being exposed to, and influenced by, the dominant literary canon. This does not mean that such exposure necessarily subverts that writer’s perspective; on the contrary, that writer can, in turn, comment on and influence the fabric of the canon itself. Scholarly engagement with the canon over the last couple of decades has encompassed such terms as *margins*, *borderlands*, *fringes*, and *outsider*, language that is descriptively accurate but also could serve to perpetuate a psychology of exclusion. It is crucial to recognize and name the sources of oppressive and repressive sociocultural attitudes that serve to limit full participation in the dominant power structure for those individuals and groups who possess characteristics and attributes that mark them as “other.” It may also be time to search for ways to subvert the psychology of exclusion by evolving beyond language that is, at its root, exclusionary and divisive. A more helpful vocabulary would recognize that the canon is informed, to varying degrees, by all participants who actively confront it and react to it with their contributions. The voices that are heard in the works of the NAWPA writers represent the potential for the construction of such a language.

Such a construction was begun at one of the events during the second NAWPA conference in March of 1999, an informal discussion with six of the playwrights whose works are represented in the archive: Diane Glancy, LeAnne Howe, Victoria Kneubuhl, Monique Mojica, JudyLee Oliva, and Marcie Rendon. The issues brought up in this discussion continued to resurface throughout the weekend and point to the complex intersections of, and bridges between, Native and non-Native perspectives, desires, goals, needs, emotions, and representations. The conversation that was begun at the conference also spoke to the differences and commonalities within and among Native communities and individuals and between writers who are creating from varying perspectives for varying reasons.

The primary thread that emerged from the discussion was the question of production and reception: who the authors feel they are writing for and whether or how a potential production is shaped by the author’s desire to present her material to a specific audience for a specific purpose. Once again, the range of responses to this issue is quite varied and intensely personal.

Vera Manuel spoke passionately about her intense desire and need to write

for a specific community. Her play, *Strength of Indian Women*, was, she explains, written to facilitate a healing process on both an individual and community level. She observed, "My whole life I've been really working closely with my people, with the struggles that I see my people going through, generational grief things that people are struggling with." She explained that after she wrote her first play, *Song of the Circle*, she "saw how powerful it was for healing, for people to be able to see their experiences, and what a powerful tool it was." Manuel expressed concern about how her plays are produced because, for her, the process of writing is "such a sacred experience that I am really concerned about where my words are going to end up, what's going to happen to them, because it was a sacred ceremony that brought them and they are connected to ancestors, to the ancestor's stories." She also noted that, even though she "always dreamed about writing a play . . . that's universal," she's aware that she is not willing to make accommodations that have been suggested to her as "necessary" if she is to get into "mainstream" theatre. She said, "I think of my audience, I think of my responsibility to my people . . . I think there's too many of our stories that need to be told as yet, that need to be written by us, from our experience. There's a lot to think about."

Other authors spoke of writing for a more universal audience. JudyLee Oliva remarked, "I have these big, huge visions of what I'd like to see onstage for all people, not just Native people, but I want my plays to speak to all people, so the reason why I'm writing right now is just to realize that vision onstage." Similarly, LeAnne Howe believes that, in the process of creating, "The question of audience is not important, it's about what I'm doing as an artist. What I'm doing with my community, who I call on to do it with; it's all got to be separate, you know?" Monique Mojica pointed out that, even though the question of audience "comes in somewhere down the road . . . in the process of creating, it doesn't come into it."

In seeing their work move from the initial creation of the text to a performance, most of the authors acknowledged that they had, at some point, encountered difficulties in the production or reception of their work. These difficulties seemed to center on the problem of people unable (or unwilling) to understand or "translate" a perspective that seemed clear to the individual doing the writing. Marcie Rendon described a children's play that she had written in which, at the end, the character of the grandmother "goes into the Spirit world." As it was directed, the grandmother simply died, causing many in the young audience to leave the theatre in tears. She realized that "it was one of those [experiences] where in my mind it was clear what I was thinking, and I thought it was clear on paper, but that's not how it got interpreted by the people who were reading it. And so one of the things I learned was, like when stuff is so internalized that you don't even think about it, that if I was going to put my stuff out there I had to think more clearly about how I was putting it out there or what needed to be explained. And then there's stuff that I refuse to explain." Even though authors

of many genres struggle with interpretations of their work that are in conflict with their intent, some NAWPA authors felt that a common element in their work that has often been misunderstood by non-Native audiences, directors, and performers is the concept of a coexistent spiritual reality. Monique Mojica expressed her opinion that, “that characteristic, the awareness of more than one world, more than one reality, is something that is specific to Native women.” Commenting on the broader issues of understanding and reception, Vera Manuel stated, “I feel like white people have to work harder to understand—why should we have to [keep] defining ourselves in the white context? Why don’t they work harder to understand it . . . because it’s not just our responsibility to de-colonize, it’s also other people’s responsibility.”

The immediate impact of the weekend’s discussions was the reaffirmation of the playwrights in structuring the direction of the archive. A subsequent meeting with the NAWPA Advisory Board in November of that same year (which included Marie Clements, LeAnne Howe, Monique Mojica, and JudyLee Oliva) confirmed the sentiment that the archive is important, unique, and necessary and work needs to continue in order to ensure that the collection gets the attention and respect that it deserves and will not become another example of Native works being relegated to a dusty box in an obscure corner of a museum (or library). Every aspect of the archive is continually scrutinized, reviewed, and revised as needed to reflect the vital nature of a collection that is such a cogent example of the vibrant (and sometimes contentious) intersection of the personal and the political. The Advisory Board has considered everything from the preservation and accessibility of the materials to the implications of the name.

The archive provides a compelling example of collaboration between Native and non-Native people who share a common interest in creating a space in which the voices of traditionally marginalized people can become an assumed, respected, and appreciated component of a larger cultural discourse. The archive will continue to be a dynamic and visible collection of works from a dynamic and diverse group of Native American, First Nation, and Pacific Islander women. Everyone involved in NAWPA has traveled a unique path in the world, and all of these paths have intersected within an organization that is a community where the voices of Native women playwrights are given visibility, respect, and the opportunity for dialogue as playwrights, women, and indigenous people. This anthology represents one step in that journey.

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