

The Native American Women Playwrights Archive: Adding Voices

Rebecca Howard

Last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
- T.S. Eliot

The opening quote is spoken by a character in *The Fire and the Rose*, a play by Native American playwright Judy Lee Oliva (68). What better way to frame a discussion of the language of theater than through the voices of our playwrights? We have an extraordinary opportunity to begin a new millennium by exploring, listening to, encouraging, and appreciating many voices generally considered to be outside the traditional theatrical canon. This canon moved from the nineteenth into the twentieth century with a chorus that was distinctly and overwhelmingly white, male, and economically privileged. The final quarter of this century has seen an increasing range of diversity in the voices that are available to articulate the experiences of our culture. Included among these voices are a growing number of Native American women playwrights, such as Oliva, who are presenting works ripe with new ideas, rich with structural experimentation, and resonating with the sound of voices relating experiences from inside and outside the dominant cultural paradigms. Oliva's use of Eliot's words can stand as a metaphor for the ways in which our approach to discussions of voice and representation are evolving with the approach of another era.

I've been experiencing the distinct privilege of working with the Native American Women Playwrights Archive, housed in King Library at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The archive has collected original manuscripts by contemporary Native American women who have chosen a theatrical venue to express their creative voices. In addition to the manuscripts, the cornerstone of the Archive is a large volume of historical materials relating to the groundbreaking work of the Spiderwoman Theater troupe; these holdings include numerous performance photos, posters and flyers going back more than two decades, and personal material from the Spiderwoman members, mostly reflecting the working process of the group.

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The primary mission of the Archive, as stated in its brochure, 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.

NAWPA has been organized into three components to meet this mission. First is the Archive itself, which currently holds materials representing fourteen authors as well as the Spiderwoman Theater material. The second component takes the form of a Directory, consisting of a listing of all of the authors represented in the Archive, with contact information and a list of their plays. This Directory is maintained on a website, located at <<http://www.lib.muohio.edu/nawpa>>. The third component relates to Programming. An inaugural conference, "Women's Voices in Native American Theater," was held in February of 1997, accompanied by performances. The Archive's second conference titled "Celebration of Native Women's Theater," included academic papers, performances, and a loosely structured discussion of issues involving Native women's theater, such as the production of the works by non-Native companies.

In examining the works in the Archive, it is apparent that there are a number of similarities in the themes and structural choices the writers have made. In this paper I will discuss the common thematic threads emerging from these works, examine some of the structural choices the writers have made, and consider the relationship of these threads and structures to dominant theatrical models

Before continuing, it is important to note that I am presenting ideas that seem to reoccur through many of the scripts, but that these similarities are just that: they are similarities, not generalizations about the way Native women write. The plays in the Archive are wonderfully diverse in their subject matter, form, and intent. I am positioning myself in relation to these works as a graduate student who has followed a non-traditional educational path. I approach this material as a feminist, a playwright, and a woman with an ongoing interest in Native issues. I am not presuming to construct a paradigmatic model for Native women playwrights: to do so would, I feel, be inappropriate and insulting to the individuality of the writers involved.

First, I will consider 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 to other women and to their friends and families, and their cultural and personal identity as Native American

women. Within this predominantly woman-centered focus, there appear to be four major common threads: 1) the tension between traditional ways and contemporary lifestyles, and the question of recognizing, defining, and claiming one's heritage; 2) emphasis on inter-generational relationships; 3) the presentation and exploration of historical figures and traditional legends; and 4) the importance of anthropomorphized animals and embodied spirits.

By far, the most common themes among the Archive works 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 Judy Lee Oliva. In this work, Mary and Elizabeth, cousins who are both described as part white and part Chickasaw, have attended the Pottawatamie Powwow 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 question of claiming one's heritage versus co-opting another culture is conveyed in the following dialogue:

ELIZABETH. You know, you're the one who sounds white.

MARY. What do you mean?

ELIZABETH. You are calling "your people" "them" "they." You're as mystified by all those jingles and feathers and drums as every white uninformed tourist. Your whiteness is showing, cuz. And how much Indian are you?

MARY. How much white are you? It's a stupid question especially coming from you. What is the title of your thesis again? I AM Indian.

ELIZABETH. Yeah, these days you and everyone else. Its [sic] the latest fad. Being Indian is "in." Too bad the real Indians don't know that.

MARY. I get the newsletter. Our tribes' newsletter.

ELIZABETH. Everyone who is near kin to Geronimo gets an Indian newsletter. Never mind, I'm just saying. . .

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. (3-4)

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 further 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’ *Urban Tattoo*, a collection of memory monologues, Rosemarie is sitting in a church, looking at the painted stars on the ceiling, 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). (3)

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 inter-generational relationships, is exemplified by works such as Vera Manuel’s *The Strength of Indian Women*, in which four Kootnai 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. Sousette’s thirty-year-old daughter, Eva, is also involved in the preparations for her daughter’s ritual. Much of the play concerns the reminiscences of the four elder women and their experiences at the residential school that they attended when they were Suzie’s age, and constantly relates and contrasts these experiences to those of the daughter and granddaughter. It is made clear that, because of the abusive and

repressive experiences that these women had, cultural rituals that form a core component of their personal identities were forced to skip a generation. Eva did not experience the ceremony that awaits Suzie, and the importance of reclaiming this practice is one of the central themes in this work.

The conflict that can arise with the interaction between generational differences and cultural tension is also evident in Diane Glancy's *Segwohi*. 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:

We're here to make our own way on this open prairie - we're supposed to stand while being pulled one way and then another - the job, the white world, the Indian's. I'm ordered around by everyone - do this. Do that. My wives nag and curse. Where is the peace you talk about? I don't know where I'm going - but I know it's not back here on the "old place" - buried in my thought of "what was" while the world goes on - sometimes I just hang on - *nothing* more. 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 - (12)

Other plays, such as *Bring the Children Home*, by Marcie Rendon; *Emmalehua*, by Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl; and *Teach Me the Ways of the Sacred Circle*, by Valerie Dudoward, also focus on generational relationships, and the passing on or reclaiming of rituals, practices, and language that were lost or repressed for previous generations.

Three works which present historical figures or events are *Harvest Ceremony*, a depiction of the Thanksgiving story from the Wampanoag perspective, written by Martha Kreipe de Montañó; *Paniolo Spurs*, by Kneubuhl, which gives a compelling portrait of Hawai'ian ranch life in the 1920's; and *Te Ata*, a biographical musical work by Oliva that relates the story of Native performer Te Ata Fisher. Re-tellings of Native legends appear in *Asivak's Creation Story*, by Jules Arita Koostachin and *The Girl Who Swam Forever*, by Marie Clements. History and legend are present in nearly all of the 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 goes beyond a simple “thematic similarity,” often creating an aesthetic atmosphere or tone grounded in a sense of timeless connection between past, present, and future.

The final thematic thread to be considered here is the importance of anthropomorphized animals, animal spirits, and/or human spirits appearing to assist or impede the lives of the human characters. One of the most fascinating examples of this is in Kneubuhl’s *Ola Na Iwi (The Bones Live)*. The story concerns Kawehi, a young Hawai’ian woman who has removed a skeleton from a German museum. The bones belong to an unknown Native Hawai’an woman, and were uncovered in the anthropological frenzy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when they were delivered to Germany for study. Kawehi becomes obsessed with the need to repatriate the bones to Hawai’ian soil, and is aided by a mysterious woman who helps orchestrate this process. At one point, Kawehi talks with Nanea, the woman who has come to mean so much to the effort. She expresses her concern that things are going wrong, and questions whether she has the authority to have taken matters into her own hands. Nanea reassures her that she has “the highest authority,” that is, the permission of the original owner of the bones. She urges Kawehi to remember what happened in the museum storeroom, when she had tricked the curator into leaving the room for a moment:

KAWEHI. Yes, I’m all alone and I’m thinking how dark and cold it is all of a sudden. I look around me at the rows and rows of gray steel storage shelves. Aisle after aisle of bones and bones and the words rushing out of nowhere: *Kupunakane, kupunawahine, na hulu mamo, he lei hiwahiwa*, and I feel so lonely, and sad, so isolated in all this chill and gray with the sharp smell of metal and cold, shiny concrete floors. And I’m thinking, how can this be? How can this be real? I look over at one shelf all by itself with one and only one box on it, and there you are standing next to it with your arms opened to me, weeping.

NANEA. Yes.

KAWEHI. And when you put it like that, how could I ever refuse?

NANEA. There was a time when I would have expected more: ritual, veneration and ceremony. But time goes by and we learn to ask for less. Just a quiet place cool and dry and smelling of the earth, just a peaceful place to lie, undisturbed, in my own native land. What human right denies us this final resting place?

Other works employ animal spirits to assist 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 gotten lost wandering from their wrecked car on the way to the wedding of the youngest sister. Appearing at first only peripherally, the woodpecker becomes a major player as the sisters continue their journey.

These four main thematic threads do not exist isolated from one another; there are often many threads woven into the same story, operating at different textual levels. There are also scripts which do not employ any of these major themes, and address contemporary issues faced by women in all walks of life. *Now Look What You Made Me Do*, by Marie Clements, 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 diversity: many of the authors are clearly challenging traditional structural tenets such as linear narrative and a bi-polar conflict. Many of the works move back and forth through time, often employing a forward strategy that is episodic in nature and temporally fluid. In considering structural elements in the works of Native writers, it is important to keep in mind the lens through which that consideration is being viewed. The dominant Aristotelian lens presumes, as Monique Mojica states, 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 mindset . . ." (Stanlake 11) It may not be an overstatement to suggest that any new aesthetic in American theater must spring from a perspective that views structural analysis through a completely different lens, one that encompasses a variety of experiences and traditions as complimentary, not conflictual, and one which respects the diversity of voice that exists in our culture. In fact, we need to use a lens that redefines "our culture," embracing the cultural richness that is available throughout our society, while still respecting the autonomy of the specific cultural influences that created the artist.

In the twenty-first century, it will be virtually impossible for any writer to develop her/his skills without being exposed to, and influenced by, the ever-present dominant canon. This does not mean that such exposure necessarily subverts that writer's perspective: on the contrary, that writer can, in turn, comment upon and influence the fabric of the canon itself. Over the last few decades, the discussion of confronting the canon has encompassed such terms as "margins," "borderlands," "fringes," and "outsider." Perhaps it is time to evolve beyond language that is, at its root, exclusionary and divisive. A more helpful vocabulary may be one that recognizes 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. Their differences and similarities speak volumes about the possibilities that exist to blend "last year's language" with "next year's words." So we return to the opening quote of this paper, which serves to underscore this notion: T.S. Eliot is not at odds with Judy Lee Oliva. On the contrary, Oliva's use of Eliot's words adds dimension to both works, simultaneously expanding and exploding the canon, elucidating multiple voices.

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