

NATIVE AMERICAN THEATER: A CONCISE HISTORY

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1. Introduction

Although contemporary Native American¹ theater emerged during the second half of the 20th century, its origins draw from an extensive oral tradition which was mainly based on Indian traditional storytelling. Stories of all kinds about Native tribes and cultures were passed down from generation to generation for purposes of education, entertainment and the preservation of the Native American cultural heritage. Most of these stories were performed and dramatized by Indian storytellers for their audiences, suggesting the first literary, historical and cultural antecedents of contemporary Native American theater. When American Indian writing emerged in the 18th century, Native Americans went from telling stories to writing them down, using different literary genres, such as the novel, poetry, autobiography and short story. However, indigenous theater was absent in Native writing during this period and the multiple reasons given for this nonexistence usually reflect a long history of silencing, discrimination, oppression and displacement exercised towards the genre. Therefore, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that Native American playwrights and various indigenous theater companies started to write and produce Native plays, leading to the emergence of contemporary Native American drama. The proliferation of Native theater plays continued well into the 21st century with scholarship starting to be

prominent in the field, paving the way for the consolidation of a diverse, vibrant and evolving genre that continues to expand, making itself more available to both Native and non-Native audiences.

2. Oral Native American Traditions: The Antecedents of Contemporary Native American Theater

Since ancient times Native Americans have relied upon a diverse and vibrant oral tradition, which has often been categorized as Native American oral literature. This type of literature consisted of numerous stories, accounts, tales, myths, legends, epic narratives and songs about indigenous cultures that were orally transmitted in order to educate, entertain and preserve Native American cultural traditions. When these stories were told, they were usually accompanied by songs, dances, music, pictographs, wampum, dramatic presentations and a close and direct communication between the storyteller or performer and the audience. Native storytellers practiced their own art by giving life and voice to different tribal stories and by making use of certain theatrical elements such as distinct intonation patterns and rhythm, visual images, introductions to tales, word exaggeration, gestures and body movements, which, handed down from generation to generation bear witness to the performance and dramatization of Native American oral storytelling traditions and their similarities and closeness to theater. In this sense, the Native American art of storytelling consisted of a solo performer, who had no props or costumes, telling a story to an audience and passing down important cultural values and tribal histories through the generations.

Examples of this Native American oral literature include the ‘dream songs’ developed by the Native American cultures of southern California and southern Arizona (Bahr 1996). These songs entered the dreams of indigenous peoples and they acquired an important oral narrative sense as Native Americans used to describe their dreams through these songs, which were generally sung, danced to and accompanied by some kind of performance, such as “teasing and lovemaking” (Bahr 1994: 86).

Other examples of early Native American literature include the historical epic narrative known as *The Wallam Olum or Red Score*. Originally created by the Delaware or Leni Lenape tribe, *The Wallam Olum* consisted of 183 mnemonic pictographs painted in red on birch-bark, each accompanied by some words in the Delaware language (Vaschenko 1996). Through these mnemonic symbols, the Delaware Indians recalled their tribe’s history and preserved their traditions through the generations. Although this old manuscript was first translated into

English by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque in *The American Nations; or, Outlines of a National History; of the Ancient and Modern Nations of North and South America* (1836), several translations have been published by different authors, giving rise to a much-discussed debate about its authenticity². One of the main aspects of this debate arises from the difficult nature of writing an accurate translation of the pictographic symbols painted by the Delaware Indians. Even though some Native Americans were called to help and collaborate in these translations, certain questions remain unanswered: How was this manuscript received or acquired? Are these translations reliable? Which is the most adequate and accurate translation? Although these questions are difficult to answer even nowadays, the translations made by these authors have clearly contributed to Native American history. *The Wallam Olum* is one of the greatest Native artistic expressions that has handed down Native American history through the centuries and the interpretations and translations of its symbols have been culturally and historically influential.

Of equal importance are the Kiowa and Sioux calendars, commonly known as ‘winter counts’. They were basically spiral-shaped drawings painted on buffalo hides during the winter months, mainly intended to account for the most important events of the past year. In order to design these winter counts, the elders of the tribal community gathered annually to speak and discuss the most important events of the past year. It then became the responsibility of a person, who was usually referred to as the keeper, to draw a pictograph representing the major events of that year. Like *The Wallam Olum*, tale telling through pictographs became an important and effective means to preserve oral traditions —since all those stories were dramatized or represented— and was used to offer greater visual and vivid evidence of what Native Americans were trying to maintain and transmit over the generations.

Similarly, the narratives of the Great Iroquois League, one of the most sophisticated social and political systems among Native American cultures, relates the founding of the Great League Confederacy through the unification of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga and Tuscarora Indians (Vaschenko 1996). Songs were sung during certain parts of this historical narrative and wampum was also used to describe, perform or represent important facts. Although widely used in treaties to declare war or make peace, in funerals, in social invitations, in festivals, and in compensation for crimes, wampum was originally used as a symbol representing memory. The beads, symbols and figures woven onto these belts conveyed different messages, recorded events and represented transactions or treaties, whilst also contributing to the development of legal and historical narratives through the oral tradition.

Finally, the narratives of the Plains Indians —which usually contain a variety of categories such as accounts of human heroes and stories of creation— should also be considered as remarkable examples of Native American oral literature. These narratives include the mythological epic poems developed by the Native Americans of the Dhegiha Confederacy, concretely the Osages (Vaschenko 1996). Many of these stories were told during winter and the storytellers made use of different and varied theatrical styles and techniques, such as singing, hand gestures and body movement (Frey 2011) that took the listeners on a journey during which traditional values and histories were evoked and preserved over the generations.

The existence of this vibrant oral literature contrasts with the traditional Western conception that Native American cultures did not have a history. This belief is grounded in the fact that Western society has come to establish the written word as the dominant form by which historical records are kept, thus classifying American Indian cultures as nonliterate societies. This, however, is far from the truth, since the presence of these oral manifestations demonstrates that Native peoples had a systematic mode of writing through which they recorded their history and preserved Native traditions. At the same time, the existence of storytelling and its performance in early Native American oral traditions and literature has been of such relevance that many critics and authors have come to agree that contemporary Native American theater comes from the tradition of storytelling. The Oneida/Chippewa playwright Bruce King states that “theater is about storytelling” (2000: 168), whereas the American scholar and professor Christy Stanlake talks about the “close connection between Native American theatre and Native storytelling” (2009: 23). In the same line, the Cherokee playwright Diane Glancy suggests that “story-telling in the oral tradition could be called an early form of theatre, a one-character play. The action or plot was the voice telling the story that was integral for survival” (personal communication, September 20, 2007). However, it seems more accurate to refer to indigenous storytelling as a one-actor play, since these stories deal with the community at large and are performed by a storyteller.

In addition, while it seems logical to think of these traditional tales and stories as early forms of Native theater because of their oral and performative dimension, the notion of considering or categorizing them as theater still remains debatable. Although many Native playwrights admit that storytelling is a central part of their work, they have never categorized or defined this art form as theater itself. As Wilson (2006: 4) points out, storytelling “has gained recognition as an art form in its own right and has developed largely separately from theater”. In addition, whereas critics and scholars agree that there are several similarities between storytelling and theater, they also see fundamental differences that keep them apart

(Wilson 2006; Borowski and Sugiera 2010). For this reason, it seems more appropriate to talk about these stories as being the first literary, historical and cultural antecedents of contemporary Native American theater. As can be seen through the diverse field of Native theater plays, storytelling has become a central element in the works of Native playwrights, whose numerous stories have come to be performed and dramatized on stage.

3. The Emergence of Native American Writing: The Dark Age of Native American Theater

When Native American writing emerged in the 18th century, Indian authors began to produce and compose a wide range of literature in English. They started to write about their own stories in a diverse and expanding literary field³, including novels, poetry, autobiographies and short stories. However, 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.

Among the multiple reasons given for this nonexistence of Native theater in early Indian writing are those related to the absence and discrimination of theater itself from the literary canon of North America. According to Dāwes, “one of the oft-cited reasons for this is the obvious problem of representing a dramatic event by simply reprinting its text—which has to leave out the performative dimensions such as stage sets, movements of bodies and objects, music, sound effects, and the spoken word” (2007: 29). Another reason for the secondary role of drama in the United States is the inheritance of the Puritan tradition in the late 16th and 17th centuries. The Puritans disapproved of theater in general and thus contributed to the discrimination against drama of every form. This unsound standing of theater as a literary genre seems to have continued into the 21st century as there are some anthologies of American literature, which scarcely contain theatrical pieces. Such is the case of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *The McMichael Anthology of American Literature*.

This nonexistence of Native American theater in the early stages of Native literature is often matched by the visible separation between Western and indigenous theater, a separation that was absolutely harmful for Native American performance once it had been repeatedly categorized as inferior. As Dāwes points out, “indigenous theater has often been separated from Western performance by formal criteria, often hypothesizing that the former uses more ‘primitive’ or simple forms (or, in Virginia Heath’s words, ‘the low and the base’ [414]), while the latter relies on technically sophisticated equipment” (2007: 67). This categorization seems inappropriate, since there is, for example, evidence that some tribes on the

Northwest Coast produced elaborate stage effects for some of their dramatizations (Wilmett and Miller 1996).

Another reason for the absence of Native theater plays during this period revolves around colonialism itself (Däwes 2007). Most of the Native American languages, traditions, customs, rituals and ceremonies had been suppressed and prohibited from the start of European colonization. As a consequence, the development of Native American theater was silenced for more than two centuries, and Native performance and oral traditions were weakened. For this reason, it seems appropriate to pay attention to the influence of the authoritative Western perspective and its strong and forceful refusal to acknowledge the existence of Native American theater prior to European contact. This dominant influence of white colonists has made it difficult for Native American theater to develop and be acknowledged. As the indigenous writer Cat Cayuga points out, “when the first colonists arrived they considered our art forms crude and primitive. They had the idea that no form of Native Theater existed prior to the ‘discovery’. It is this attitude which has made the development of our art difficult for us. The dominant society has always used its own terms to define art” (1989-1990: 37).

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The effects of colonialism also explain the restriction or relegation of Native theatrical traditions to the fields of anthropology, religious studies and ethnology (Däwes 2007). Whereas Native theater has been addressed as ritual drama by some anthropologists and “established as different from theater (or as theater’s Other)” (Däwes 2007: 3), many indigenous performative traditions have also been explored in the realm of ethnology “either synchronically associated with exotic difference, or diachronically stored in the past and thus objectified as primitive, remote, and lost” (Däwes 2007: 3). This is why none of the Native performance traditions were explored in the domain of theater, and placing them in the realm of other disciplines definitely contributed to the silencing and displacement of Native theater until the 20th century. In fact, the only theater play possibly written by a Native American author before the 1900s is *The Indian Mail Carrier* by Go-won-go Mohawk and Charlie Charles. However, as Hunhdorf states, “only a copyright record dated 1889 remains; the script has been lost, and little is known about Go-won-go, an Indian actress of dubious origins” (2006: 294).

During the first years of the 20th century, there was no publication or production of Native American theater plays either, but there were some Native American theatrical performances on traditional storytelling, which again could be considered as being among the antecedents or predecessors of contemporary Native American theater. A clear example is Te Ata’s one-woman performances of Native American traditional stories and legends making use of Indian props, “including a drum, a bow and arrow, and a costume” (in Stanlake 2009: 2). Although Mary “Te Ata” Thompson Fisher

had her problems and difficulties as a Native American performer, her professional career went on for over 70 years, and not only did she get “to make a living as an entertainer, but also to educate audiences about the diversity across Native America by presenting accurate information about Native cultures” (Stanlake 2009: 3). Hence it was that Indian traditional storytelling came to be performed and dramatized again, and although Te Ata did not achieve the theatrical influence that would later lead to the emergence of contemporary Native American theater, her performances should not pass unnoticed in a history of the genre in the United States.

On the other hand, it was not until the 1930s that the first two Native American plays were produced. Rollie Lynn Riggs, a Native playwright of Cherokee origin, wrote *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), the play on which Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s musical *Oklahoma!* (1943) was based, and *The Cherokee Night* (1934), a theatrical piece offering a portrayal of Native life in eastern Oklahoma during the 1920s. Although the author gained nationwide popularity with his plays, he often neglected to point out his Indian heritage and “the public of his time (the 1930s and 40s) did not perceive him as Native (Däwes, personal communication, November 25, 2007). Therefore, Lynn Riggs did not achieve the literary impact that would later lead to the emergence of contemporary Native American theater around the 1970s, but he certainly paved the way for the development of a contemporary Native theater movement.

4. The Native American Renaissance: The Emergence of Contemporary Native American Theater

The second half of the 20th century saw the resurgence and renewal of Native American traditions that “slowly beg[an] to generate creative energy and vision for a new phase of Indian people’s journey” (Geiogamah 2000: 159). The rise of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to this reawakening of Native cultures since it appeared as a movement in which minorities demanded an end to discrimination and the right to speak for themselves. In addition, there were a series of social and political incidents that helped increase and renew Native American cultural and ethnic pride. This period of social and political upheavals is widely known as the Red Power period and includes major events such as the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay on November 1969, the so-called Trail of Broken Treaties in 1972, the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington D.C. on November 1972 and The Longest Walk across the United States in 1978.⁴

Within this context of self-expression, social and political movements in favor of Native American cultural traditions, performances and ethnic renewal, a period of

literary brilliance for Native literature emerged under the name of the Native American Renaissance, a term originally coined by Lincoln (1983) that refers mainly to the literary works following N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*. During this literary period, indigenous writers were not only telling their stories in novels, autobiographies, poetry and short stories, but also bringing their storytelling and performing traditions to the stage through the writing and production of various contemporary theater plays.

When these contemporary Native plays started to be written during the 1960s and 1970s, many of them were performed and produced for and by various Native American theater companies. Since their emergence in the 1960s, these Native drama companies have been numerous and absolutely relevant to the development of contemporary Native American theater. Besides setting present-day Native American drama on the road to success, these theater companies have also helped promote and produce numerous theatrical works by Native dramatists in the United States. According to Huntsman (2000), the first to form Native companies with indigenous actors was Arthur Junaluska in New York during the 1950s. One decade later, Jay Silverheels, George Pierre, Noble 'Kid' Chissell and others created the Indian Actor's Workshop in Los Angeles, a company intended to prepare "Indian actors for film work", while also mounting "some stage productions" (Huntsman 2000: 95). In addition, the foundation of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) during the 1960s is also considered to be one of the earliest and most significant contributions to Native American drama. The IAIA developed a theater program that established certain bases for the development of contemporary Native American theater, "sought to balance the education of students with training in both Native American and European theatrical forms, and was dedicated to developing a 'contemporary Indian Theater which has meaning to contemporary Indians'" (Haugo 2000: 235). Similarly, the Institute of American Indian Arts created an amphitheater for the performance and representation of theater plays, such as Monica Charles's *Mowitch* (1968), a theatrical piece about Indian Shakers (Heath 1995), and Bruce King's *Evening at the Warbonnet* (1989), a play dealing with political issues, especially those related to the AIM.

Several years later, in 1972, the American Indian Theater Ensemble was founded by the Kiowa/Delaware dramatist Hanay Geiogamah with the help of Ellen Stewart of La MaMa Experimental Theater Club. Later known as the Native American Theater Ensemble (NATE), this Native theater company was founded upon Geiogamah's belief that "plays for and about Indians, their past, their despairing present, their hopes and dreams and daily lives, presented by Indian artists could be of inestimable value in uniting and uplifting the 850.000 Indian

people in the United States” (in Brown 2000: 170). One of the most prolific Native playwrights and a crucial figure in the history of contemporary Native American drama, Geiogamah created the first all-Indian repertory company, which produced his first play *Body Indian* (1972). Dealing with the problem of alcoholism and self-destructiveness among Native Americans, *Body Indian* became the most highly acclaimed of Geiogamah’s theatrical pieces and was later included in the first collection of Native plays, *New Native American Drama: Three Plays* (1980). This collection also contains Geiogamah’s *Foghorn* (1973), a play dealing with Indian stereotypes, and *49* (1975), a theatrical piece that provides a blend of contemporary and traditional elements in Native American cultures. Both theater plays were performed and produced by NATE along with Robert Shorty’s and Geraldine Keams’s *Na Haaz Zaan* (1972), focusing on the Navajo myth of creation; Geiogamah’s monologues *Grandma* (1984) and *Grandpa* (1984); and Bruce King’s ghost story *Whispers from the Other Side* (1985).

By the mid-1970s, the Kuna/Rappahannock Muriel Miguel founded the Spiderwoman Theater, a feminist theater company which recruited various groups of women from different ethnic backgrounds and that mainly intended to promote and foster Native women’s contribution to Native American theater (Haugo 2000). Based on the story-weaving technique, which “combines the philosophies and styles of feminist theater with a traditional understanding of the power of storytelling and oral history” (238), Spiderwoman Theater created and produced several plays that combined traditional Native storytelling with the procedures of contemporary Western theater. Examples of these theater plays include *Women in Violence*, *The Three Sisters from Here to There* (1982), *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1991) and *Power Pipes* (1992), which mainly focused on gender issues, oppression, poverty, racism and violence.

By the 1980s, the Colorado sisters of Mexican-Indian ancestry created the Coatlicue Theater Company. After praising Spiderwoman Theater for “having inspired them to perform together” (Haugo 2000: 242), Elvira and Hortensia Colorado wrote and produced different theater plays that bridged and linked both traditional and contemporary stories. “With a process similar to Spiderwoman’s storyweaving”, Haugo explains, “Coatlicue Theatre Company weaves traditional stories, such as the origin story which begins *1992: Blood Speaks*, with contemporary stories of who we are as urban Indian women surviving in New York City” (2000: 243). These plays include *1992: Blood Speaks*, which deals with the significant role that Christianity played in the oppression of Native Americans, and *A Traditional Kind of Woman: Too Much, Not ’Nuff*, a play that centers on the stories and experiences of Native women as they struggle with issues such as alcoholism, violence and rape.

In the 1990s several other Native American theater companies emerged in response to the needs of individual playwrights. Such is the case of the Red Eagle Soaring Theatre Group, which was founded in Seattle in 1990 and aimed particularly at “[educating] Indian youth on contemporary issues, such as AIDS” (Heath 1995: 220). This company created and performed Kenneth Jackson’s *Story Circles*, a one-act play centered around a group of Native American high-school students, which was first performed in Vancouver, Canada. Another example is the Red Path Theater Company in Chicago, which was founded around 1995 and produced plays mainly focused on contemporary American Indian urban life such as Two Rivers’s *Old Indian Tricks*, *Shattered Dream*, *Shunka Cheslie* and *Forked Tongues* (Heath 1995).

Besides the emergence of these Native theater companies, festivals of Native American plays also started to take place. The Native Voices Festival was first held at Illinois State University in 1994 under the leadership of Randy Reinholz and Jean Bruce Scott, and it became the resident theatre company at the Autry in Los Angeles in 1999. In an attempt to produce plays by Native American writers, both Randy and Jean managed to gather several Native playwrights and organized staged readings at ISU. In the following years, they were able to host festivals developing and producing plays by Native American writers from both the United States and Canada. In addition, one of the most important initiatives in Native American theater was the creation in 1996 of Project Hoop (Honoring Our Origins and People Through Native American Theater), which emerged as “a national, multi-disciplinary initiative to advance Native theater artistically, academically, and professionally” (“Project HOOP”, para. 2). Although it was originally funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Project Hoop is currently funded by the US Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and aims particularly at “establish[ing] Native theater as an integrated subject of study and creative development in tribal colleges, Native communities, K-12 schools, and mainstream institutions, based on Native perspectives, traditions, views of spirituality, histories, cultures, languages, communities, and lands” (“Project HOOP”, para. 2). It is safe to say, then, that Project Hoop stands out as the living proof of the great effort to revive, establish and promote indigenous drama in the United States.

The emergence of all these Native American theater companies, the celebration of festivals and initiatives in Native American drama helped promote the great proliferation of Native plays⁵ across the United States. As Dāwes confirms “there are currently over 250 published and far over 600 unpublished plays by some 250 Native American and First Nations playwrights and theatre groups on the North American market” (2013: 13). It might be added that most of these theater plays have been included in collections and anthologies thus proving the abundance of

contemporary Native American drama plays since its emergence in the Native American Renaissance. Among such works, Hanay Geiogamah's *New Native American Drama: Three Plays* (1980) stands as the first collection of Native theater plays; The Institute of American Indian Art provides three plays written by its own students in *Gathering Our Own: A Collection of IALA Student Playwrights* (Dickerson et al. 1996); and Diane Glancy's *War Cries: Plays by Diane Glancy* (1997) offers nine plays, which combine both a vision of contemporary life and traditional aspects that connect Indians with their past. In addition, some of the theater plays produced by Native American women started to be collected under the creation of the Native American Women Playwright's Archive. This archive was founded in 1996 at Miami University of Ohio's King Library in order to gather and collect original materials and manuscripts by Native American women playwrights, while also containing "a large volume of historical materials relating to the groundbreaking work of the Spiderwoman Theater troupe" (Howard 1999: 109). Besides this archive and the aforementioned collections, two volumes of anthologies appeared in 1999: *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*, which includes five theatrical pieces by Native American authors, one play by a Native Hawaiian dramatist and another play by a First Nation playwright; and *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays*, which contains eleven plays by Native American dramatists.

5. The Twenty-first Century: The Path towards the Consolidation of Contemporary Native American Theater

The publication of Native American theater plays continued progressively into the 21st century and several playwrights saw their works published in anthologies and collections of Native American theater plays. In 2003 the first anthology of Native women's plays was published under the name of *Keepers of the Morning Star: An Anthology of Native Women's Theater*. It was published through Project HOOP and it contained various theatrical pieces by Native women in the United States and Canada. This work was followed by another anthology, entitled *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English* (2003), which was the first collection to be published in Canada, including Native Canadian theater plays and some theatrical pieces by Native American playwrights and theater companies. In 2009, the second volume of *Staging Coyote's Dream* was published, including seven plays by Native Canadian playwrights and one theatrical piece by Spiderwoman Theater's founder, Muriel Miguel, and another theater play published by her daughter, Murielle Borst.

The contributions of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive also brought out some anthologies during the 2000s. *Footpaths and Bridges: Voices from the Native American Women Playwrights Archive* was published in 2008, appearing as the second collection of Native plays by indigenous women in the United States and Canada—including a theater play by a Native Hawaiian dramatist as well—and designed to display samples of the archive's holdings. The NAWPA 2007 conference "Honoring Spiderwoman Theater/Celebrating Native American Theater" also made possible the publication of another anthology entitled *Performing Worlds into Being: Native American Women's Theater* (2009), containing several theater plays, interviews, production histories and academic articles.

While the publication of these anthologies is from every point of view praiseworthy, it also laid bare the first discrepancies of opinion as to the geographical, political and cultural boundaries of the genre. As can be observed, some anthologies on Native American theater include First Nations drama, but exclude Native drama from Hawaii. This seems to suggest that there are no cultural boundaries between the United States and Canada when dealing with indigenous experiences through Native theater. However, the case seems to be different for Hawaii, a state whose Native drama is usually excluded from American Indian theater for cultural, political and sociological reasons. Although it seems to be difficult to reach an agreement about this controversy, the mapping of contemporary Native American theater should be refined, since whether to include Native drama from Canada and to exclude indigenous theater from the 50th state of the union continues to be debatable. In this respect, one should take into consideration that both Native Americans and Native Hawaiians experience a similar social, economic and political status in the United States (Iyall Smith 2006), whilst also sharing and dealing with similar issues and concerns through their Native theater plays.

Several authors saw their works published not only in these anthologies but also in individual collections of Native American theater plays. Such is the case of William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.'s *Where the Pavement Ends: Five Native American Plays* (2001), which combines stories of the hard lives and experiences of Native Americans in Fort Peck Indian Reservation with comic relief, in matters dealing with Native identity, tradition and oppression. Similarly, E. Donald Two-Rivers's *Brief-Case Warriors: Stories for the Stage* (2001) offers a series of theater plays focusing on the contemporary lives of urban Indians who are especially concerned with their survival, with alcohol problems and discrimination. Occasionally alternating between prose and poetry, Diane Glancy's *American Gypsy: Six Native American Plays* (2002) contains different theater plays with a great poetic sense that include traditional and contemporary stories about Native Americans, whilst being mainly concerned with themes of gender, acculturation, survival, generational relationships and the tensions and

confrontations between Native American traditional values and white American values, customs and religious beliefs. Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl’s *Hawai’i Nei: Island Plays* (2002) brings together three plays dealing with issues concerning her Native cultural heritage, while providing insights into Hawaii’s culture, history and contemporary life. Equally important to note is Bruce King’s *Evening at the Warbonnet and Other Plays* (2006), an individual collection of plays that includes great moral content and a sense that the characters are struggling between good and evil. In addition, King offers a combination of traditional and contemporary elements such as humor, music, debate, histories and experiences, which take the reader on an impressive journey through Native cultures.

This abundance of primary sources is even made more accessible through Alexander Street Press’s *North American Indian Drama*, a collection of digital theater plays which contains more than 250 plays by both Native American and First Nations playwrights. The collection starts in the 1930s with Rollie Lynn Riggs’s first Native American theater plays to be published and produced in the United States, and progresses through the 20th century including contemporary playwrights and theater companies.

Especially in the wake of this diversity and proliferation of Native American theater plays came a considerable body of scholarship in the field that started to be noticed at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, the first book of essays on Native American theater appeared in 2000 and it was published and co-edited by Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby under the name of *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*. Besides serving as an overview of the genre and offering different analyses, articles and interviews by several Native and non-Native critics and authors, this book represents the first step towards the development of Native American theater as a field of study. The collection was followed by Birgit Däwes’s *Native North American Theater in a Global Age: Sites of Identity Construction and Transdifference* (2007), a monograph that addresses the most relevant theoretical aspects of contemporary Native North American theater, including an historical overview of the genre, its categorization and definition, the controversies about its geographical, political and cultural boundaries, while also providing in-depth analyses of 25 plays by playwrights, both Native American and First Nations. Two years later, a revealing theoretical work on the genre was developed through the critical examination of Native American dramaturgy in Christy Stanlake’s *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective* (2009). The author provides a critical methodology for contemporary Native American theater by focusing on four distinctive elements of Native theater plays: platiality, based on Native philosophies of place and identity; storying, defined as “the action of telling Native American stories” and as “a

discourse that encompasses concepts about language from Native American intellectual traditions” (2009: 118); tribalogy, based on LeAnn Howe’s theory, which refers to the space where the stories of Native Americans have helped influence or explain how America was created (Howe 1999: 118); and survivance, grounded in Gerald Vizenor’s theory, which refers to “the ability to resist defined categories than can easily turn into stereotypical representations” (Stanlake 2009: 30).

In addition, since the last years of the first decade of this century several publications about Native American performance have started to appear. Besides including contemporary Native American theater as a genre, Native performance appears to be a growing field of research that also includes indigenous dance, performance art, film, video and multimedia. Such is the case of S.E. Wilmer’s edited volume *Native American Performance and Representation* (2009), which came out as a comprehensive study of Native American performance both historically and in the contemporary world as a result of the papers presented at the 23rd American Indian Workshop on the theme of “Ritual and Performance”. In 2010, Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby edited a new book entitled *American Indian Performing Arts: Critical Directions*, a volume of essays on Native American performing arts that provides an analysis of Native American theater, dance and music performances through the perspectives of different indigenous writers and critics as well as recent established scholars. Following the same line in the study of Native American performance, Hanay Geiogamah’s new book *Ceremony, Spirituality and Ritual in Native American Performance* (2011) approaches Native American theater as ceremonial performance and examines the elements of myth, spirituality and ceremony and the way they are integrated into dramatic performances. In addition, the Native playwright introduces and establishes the difference between contemporary theater, involving those drama plays that follow the forms of traditional Western drama, and traditional theater, which he later refers to as “ceremonial American Indian theater” (Geiogamah 2011: 3), including those theater plays that contain music, dance, costumes, stories and masks that make up a ceremonial performance. Whereas this latter categorization certainly reflects the religious or ceremonial character of Native American performance, it might be an obstacle to the production of indigenous plays as it may bar outsiders from producing such material for fear of infringing on certain rules. This has also hampered the development of Native American theater down through history and it certainly explains the counter-productive effect of reserving emerging Native American drama for indigenous companies and audiences; this measure both stimulated and restricted the wider dissemination of the dramatic output.

More recently, contemporary Native American theater has again been approached as a genre that continues to evolve and to be explored from different perspectives such as historiography, cultural memory; likewise it has had to meet challenges like funding, training and networking, sites of reception, the problems of representation, cultural transmissibility and the transnational promotion of the genre. To this purpose, Birgit Däwes's edited volume *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History* (2013) serves as an excellent source of information on this matter. It is a valuable collection of essays in the field that offers a comprehensive outline of Native North American theater, including surveys of major developments of the genre, contributions of different playwrights who provide their visions and experiences, and different critical perspectives, methodologies and histories of the genre developed by different writers and scholars from the United States, Canada and Europe.

Another exploration of contemporary indigenous theater from different perspectives is offered by Birgit Däwes's and Marc Maufort's edited collection, *Enacting Nature: Ecocritical Perspectives on Indigenous Performance* (2014). It is the first account of the impact of ecocriticism on indigenous theater, an issue that is especially welcome given that Native cultures have always been very close to nature. Although the book also includes essays on ecocritical issues expressed through indigenous dance and film, it mainly aims at exploring the relationship between indigenous theater and the environment, bringing together different analyses of Native plays from North America, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. At the same time, this collaborative volume supposes a step forward in the transnational promotion of indigenous North American drama and makes apparent the need to survey indigenous Native theater across the hemisphere, and at the same time discover clear links between indigenous cultures in different countries around the world.

These scholarly works, then, cover a wide range of issues and perspectives on contemporary Native American theater, reflecting the interest generated by the field and demonstrating how American Indian drama has moved from specific cultural communities into larger and more generalized audiences. At the same time, this significant amount of scholarship also provides a variety of styles that have helped shape contemporary American Indian drama itself, while certainly opening up the path for more voices, perspectives and angles in the years to come.

Contemporary Native American theater has been promoted not only by the availability of plays in publication and scholarship in the field, but also by various institutions. Such is the case of New York City's Public Theater, an institution that has been active in this promotion through the celebration of an annual Native

Theater Festival in which the works of Native playwrights, actors, directors and musicians are highlighted as part of the Native Theater Initiative initiated in 2007. Similarly, OCK Theatre Company has also been presenting an annual Native American Play Festival since its foundation in 2010, offering Native playwrights the opportunity to submit new plays, from which some are chosen for staged readings and one is produced and given a two week run. In addition, Native Voices at the Autry, America's leading Native theater company devoted exclusively to developing the work of both emergent and established Native playwrights, continues to offer an annual venue for the stage, production and performance of Native American plays.

Moreover there are other initiatives emerging to promote Native American theater. A good example can be found in a group of American Indian writers, performers and directors who have started to work on the creation and development of two organizations designed to promote and advance Native American theater: the American Indian Theater and Performing Arts National Alliance and The American Indian Playwrights Guild. Although neither organization has been fully functional yet—mainly through the lack of volunteers and funding—the first steps have been taken. There is evidence that “these two organizations will also create leverage for fundraising in an effort to provide critical support to American Indian artists and theater and performing arts organizations” (Project HOOP, in Geigomah 2013: 339). This situation suggests that one of the biggest challenges facing contemporary Native American theater nowadays is the lack of funding for the promotion and production of Native plays, which at the same time, may also betray a lack of support and commitment from the indigenous community itself. However, the abundance of primary sources, the growing field of scholarship and the efforts made by several institutions and organizations to promote this genre advocate greater visibility for Native American theater, which continues to grow and expand, while constantly exploring, addressing and providing new themes and forms of expression.

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6. Conclusions

Although Native American theater is a relatively new genre in the United States, the history of its development is extensive, complex and continuously expanding. Although, as pointed out in this paper, Native American theater emerged as a genre in the second half of the 20th century, its origins go much further back in time. Its beginnings are usually traced back to traditional Native storytelling and its performance, since most of the stories passed down through over the generations relied upon a dramatic presentation that can certainly be seen as constituting the first antecedents of the contemporary scene. During the

emergence of Native writing in the 18th century, theater became less and less present in the proliferation of Native American literary works, the result of multiple factors of silencing, oppression and displacement, which have certainly made it difficult for Native theater to develop and be recognized. In spite of those hard beginnings, contemporary Native American theater has a long and impressive history of indigenous theater companies and a vast number of theatrical plays, which have spurred considerable scholarship during the last two decades that continues to grow and explore this new field of research. Both Native and non-Native authors and scholars have contributed with their different perspectives, approaches and methodologies to the development of a literary genre, which has become one of the newest and most vibrant genres in the American literary landscape. However, this does not mean that the Native theater scene is trouble-free: obviously the lack of funding and support from different sources continues to be a serious limiting factor on the production of indigenous theater plays. In spite of this situation, the consolidation of the Native voices with the US stage remains a great potential as contemporary Native American theater gradually becomes a part of America’s multicultural literature.

Notes

1. While there are many different opinions on which terminology may be the most appropriate, the terms Native American, American Indian, Indian and indigenous will be used interchangeably in order to refer more broadly to indigenous peoples of the United States. However, whenever possible the specific tribal names will be used.

2. According to Ordaz Romay (2006), after Rafinesque’s first translation in 1836, the American ethnologist Daniel Garrison Brinton published his own translation in *The Lenape and Their Legends, With a Complete Text and Symbols of the Walam Olum, a New Translation and an Inquiry into its Authenticity* in 1884. More recently, David McCutchen published his translation in *The Red Record: Wallam Olum* in 1993.

3. For a sampling of literary works written by Native Americans since the beginnings up to the late 1970s, see Ruoff (1996: 145-154).

4. For a more detailed study on Native American social and political upheavals during the 1960s and 1970s, see Nagel (1997).

5. Most of these theater plays were compiled by authors such as Haugo (2000) in her “Contemporary Native Theater: Bibliography and Resource Material”, which was based on an earlier version of this bibliography in *Native Playwrights’ Newsletter* 6 (Fall 1994): 68-75. More recently, Däwes (2007) also offered a long list of drama plays by Native Americans in the bibliography section of her book, *Native North American Theater in a Global Age*. Finally, for access to digital collections, see Alexander Street Press’s *North American Indian Drama*.

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