MISCONCEPTIONS CRUMBLE: THE POTENTIAL OF NATIVE-CONTROLLED THEATRE TO DECONSTRUCT NON-NATIVE AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF NATIVE PEOPLES IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

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This study seeks to determine if Native-controlled theatre could provide an opportunity for non-Natives to move past their understanding of Native Americans as static figures of the past and embrace members of Native American communities as individual, complex people. While Native-controlled theatre must first and foremost serve Native peoples, it also has the potential to help non-Natives recognize and learn from their possible misconceptions. I explore this possibility primarily through play analysis in three chapters. In chapter 1, I create a foundation for the ideology behind many non-Native Americans’ need to utilize Native American stereotypes in order to reaffirm a national identity based on a frontier utopia. I then apply the discourse to play texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to establish that non-Natives still use theatre and Native characters to reaffirm a national identity. In chapter 2, I provide a general political history of Native Americans in the twentieth century in order to argue that Native-controlled theatre not only is a political act, but that Native characters serve a very different purpose for Native peoples than they do for non-Natives. Finally, in chapter 3, I argue that despite Native and non-Native Americans need to use Native characters and stories to fulfill different purposes, Native-controlled theatre can be used to teach non-Native audience members about contemporary Native lives. I apply Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of a contact zone to two Native-written plays and found that the result could be that non-Natives learn about and from their misconceptions about Native Americans. Although the purposes behind theatrical practices continue to be some of the many factors that keep many Natives and non-Natives in direct conflict with one another, Native-controlled theatre has the ability to allow non-Natives to actually engage with and learn from Native peoples about Native lives today.
I would like to dedicate this work to any person, non-Native or Native, who has had the courage to look past a stereotype.
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identity as a non-Native who seeks to work with Native American communities, and Native theatrical communities in particular, she has taught me, guided me, laughed with me, corrected my mistakes, and, above all, accepted me. She has become my guidepost as I embark on my journey. Wa’dó to you both.

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, non-Natives in the United States have stereotyped and appropriated Native American culture, history, and imagery to serve their own purposes. Native American stereotypes can be found almost everywhere, from a sports mascot, to the wooden statue of an Indian chief found in many cigar stores, to the much-beloved movie *Dances with Wolves* (1991). The presence of these stereotypes allows non-Native Americans to place Native Americans firmly in the past. Native Americans, however, being very much present today, are striving to assert their own images in the public arena. Native-controlled theatre, where productions that treat Native characters and subject matters are written and produced by Native theatre practitioners, could serve as a method through which non-Native audience members can recognize their own misconceptions of Native peoples and accept Native Americans as contemporary, complex people.¹

When I was younger, I too bought into a romanticized stereotype of Native Americans. A stoic man, clad in buckskins, with a culture firmly rooted in the past was the image present in my imagination. As a non-Native, I would pore over books that told me how they lived in the past. I loved the Disney movie *Pocahontas*. I even bought a pair of moccasins from a tourist shop, where the footwear was mass-produced from China and allowed me to quietly embody Indian-ness in the privacy of my home. My perceptions of Native peoples as entities of the past began to slightly change when I first watched the movie *Smoke Signals* (1998) in high school. The first Native-produced, directed, and acted film to receive mainstream attention, *Smoke Signals* removed Hollywood’s Indians from the past and placed them firmly in the present. It

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¹ In this study, I use the terms “Native American” and “Native” interchangeably. When I use the terms “non-Native American” or “non-Native,” I am primarily referring to European-Americans. While European-Americans have stood to gain the most, historically speaking, in the perpetuations of Native American stereotypes and the frontier utopia, Americans from other ethnic groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, etc) have also engaged in a similar relationship to Native Americans. My research can thus be applicable to them as well.
was not, however, until I read my first Native-written play, *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* by Drew Hayden Taylor, that I recognized my own misconceptions about Native Americans. Through the power of theatre, I began to understand that Native Americans are people who lead different, complex, normal, contemporary lives and that my misconceptions of them as stereotypes of the past only furthered the colonist movements against them. As a result of my increased awareness of the misconceptions I had once held and determination to learn from my mistakes, I have experienced positive relationships with different people of Native American descent that my previous opinions would have otherwise prohibited. I believe that theatre holds the potential to give other non-Native audience members a similar experience to mine. This study explores this possibility.

Several scholars have been engaging in a conversation about why and how non-Natives use Native American stereotypes as well as Native efforts to regain control over their imagery within non-Native American psyche. Many of these scholars argue that Natives and non-Natives utilize different styles of performance in order to produce a certain outcome (whether it is to perpetuate Native American stereotypes or to discredit them). This study takes the existing literature one step further by proposing that one outcome of Native-controlled theatre is that it could give non-Natives the opportunity to recognize their misconceptions about Native Americans and then begin to move beyond them. To the best of my knowledge, no study precisely like this has been done before. Yet the existing conversation provides an imperative foundation for my research.

Native American historians Philip Deloria (*Dakota Sioux*) and Rayna Green (*Cherokee*) each discuss different aspects of non-Native American society’s reaffirmation of their identity based on the idea of a frontier utopia through Native American stereotypes found in performance
and literature. Deloria’s *Playing Indian* further details the ideology behind non-Natives’ need to use Native Americans to establish their identity. According to Deloria, non-Natives used Native Americans and the frontier to reaffirm their history and identity as a result of two major movements: one, the American Revolution, in which success hinged on the creation of a new identity, and two, the emergence of modernity. The American Revolution established the colonies as an independent nation from England; the new country needed a new identity and the frontier provided just that. As the United States proved itself to be an independent, formidable country, a national identity based on the frontier shifted from patriotic nationalism to a quest for the authentic and the real. That quest took place in the American West, the last “untamable” space in the United States. Native Americans, an important part in the American West mythology, became the savage epitome of a natural human race. By the twentieth century, creating an identity based on a perceived Native American image had become natural.²

While Philip Deloria clearly discusses the mentality behind reaffirming national identity, Rayna Green’s “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe” articulates the numerous performative means through which reaffirmation occurred. Green successfully outlines several techniques through which non-Native Americans reaffirmed their identity and history: from mere survival through the adoption of Native practices after contact to the works of James Fenimore Cooper to plays like *Metamora* to Wild West shows to playing Cowboys and Indians to the Boy Scouts to the most current phenomenon, film. As she reviews each practice, Green clearly explores the psychology behind every appropriation. In agreement with Deloria, Green believes the overarching need for literature and entertainment to reaffirm national identity came from the desire to create a uniquely-American identity. As Americans discarded and appropriated different aspects of Native culture, Native Americans became stereotyped into the

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noble savage and the blood-thirsty savage. The noble savage would aid non-Natives in their quest to penetrate and dominate the frontier, thus providing a supposed Native approval for non-Natives to enter the frontier. The blood-thirsty savage, however, gave permission for non-Natives to kill Native Americans as westward expansion continued. Furthermore, in order for the stereotypes to prevail, the real Indian had to be removed. Either physically eliminated or relocated to reservations, Native Americans had to be taken out of everyday contact with non-Natives so that actual Native Americans did not contradict the stereotyped images of Native peoples and thus invalidate American identity. As a result, many members of non-Native American communities identified with a national identity and history largely based in inaccuracies.3

Deloria and Green offer convincing arguments and research as to why non-Native Americans appropriate Native American culture, history, and imagery for their own uses. Scholar Richard Slotkin furthers their research by offering a method through which scholars can categorize non-Natives’ behavior in relation to Native Americans and Native stereotypes. In his work Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America, Slotkin defines what he calls the myth of the frontier. In agreement with Deloria and Green, Slotkin believes that the myth of the frontier justified American westward expansion. By expanding westward and laying claim to the frontier, early Americans could shed their previous colonial identity and claim a superior status than that of their former colonizers. Westward expansion, and therefore the frontier, became essential to American identity. According to Slotkin, although the myth of the frontier explains and justifies the establishment of the early United States, he argues that as the new country

expanded and developed, the Myth was called on to account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization.  

Slotkin further expands this ideology by discussing how non-Natives’ relationship with the frontier, and consequently with Native Americans, fulfills the parameters of a myth. He describes how a myth can be formed and perpetuated, defining it as a story “drawn from a society’s history that has acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.” Myths do not express that ideology in a purely factual or argumentative manner, but as a narrative. Audiences, however, tend to believe the myth they are hearing or seeing to be historically accurate instead of a narrative story, causing inaccurate renditions and beliefs. Slotkin argues that when historical events and people are translated into a myth, the complexities that surround the event and participants become simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or “heroes.” Throughout his work, Slotkin explores how the myth of the frontier came to be and how it was perpetuated in the twentieth century. By classifying many non-Native Americans’ relationship with the frontier as a myth, and thus using a particular definition of what specifically constitutes a myth, Slotkin’s research grants his readers further understanding of non-Native behavior in relation to the frontier.

Slotkin, Deloria, and Green collectively create a foundation for understanding why non-Native Americans reaffirm a national identity based on a frontier. Roger A. Hall’s *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* specifically discusses the importance theatrical performance

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5 Ibid., 5.
6 Ibid., 6, 13.
has in perpetuating the myth of the frontier. According to Hall, literature and other solitary activities lacked the sensory experience theatrical performances provided for its practitioners and audience members. During a play, theatre practitioners and audience members’ senses are bombarded – they actually see, hear, and sometimes smell the subject matter of a play. The theatrical performance consequently allows theatre practitioners and audience members to experience the play as a community. Therefore, non-Native Americans could actually see and, in a sense, through affirming by spectatorial assault, participate in creating the myth of the frontier through frontier plays. Hall explores the uses of these stock characters and the relationship of non-Natives to Native Americans as he provides in-depth analysis of frontier plays throughout the nineteenth century. Hall argues that in those plays that included Native characters,

white renegades frequently incited the indigenous peoples, or the ‘Indians’ turned out to be whites in disguise. The natives almost always attacked whites and just as invariably came to a bad end. They constituted, for the most part, objects to be shot at like moving targets in a shooting gallery or, even worse, caricatures to be laughed at.\(^7\)

These Native stock characters unfortunately typified the majority of Native performance characters in non-Native controlled plays. Hall’s analysis of these characters and their uses can be applied to any play that uses Native American stereotypes.\(^8\)

Native American stereotypes are the theoretical, explanatory tool for why many non-Native Americans have behaved in the manner in which they have in relation to the frontier and Native Americans. With non-Natives perpetuating Native American stereotypes into nearly every aspect of mainstream American life, as Philip Deloria argues, it is almost inconceivable for non-Natives to imagine a performance that contradicts their opinions of what a Native American

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\(^8\) Ibid., 2.
is. Yet non-Native theatre practitioners produce very different images of Native Americans than relatively recently emerged Native-controlled theatre. Through theatre, many Natives negotiate their identities while exploring what it means, to them, to be Native today. Consequently, the purpose of Native-controlled theatre is imperatively different than that of non-Native theatre. Famous Native American playwright Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa/Delaware), in his work “The New Native American Theatre: An Introduction,” reveals the importance of Native-controlled theatre. According to Geiogamah, Native-controlled theatre “is an enterprise that, unlike films, which require millions of dollars in financing, can be produced on much smaller budgets and can be maintained completely in Indian hands and under Indian artistic direction.”

Maintaining artistic control allows Native American theatre practitioners to freely explore and negotiate their identities. With the freedom of artistic control, however, comes responsibility. According to Geiogamah, “the American Indian theater has before it the challenge of helping Indian people to better know who they are and how their lives are being affected by all the changes occurring at the end of the twentieth century.” This examination is the most important purpose of Native-controlled theatre as Geiogamah charges Native-controlled theatre with serving, first and foremost, Native Americans.

While Geiogamah explores the great importance of Native-controlled theatre throughout its several decades of existence, Ann Haugo researches its development in the late twentieth century. In her article “Native American Theatre,” Haugo outlines a detailed historical survey of Native American theatre in the 1970s. She discusses the Native American Theatre Ensemble (1970), Spiderwoman Theatre (1975), and Native Earth Performing Arts (1982) as theatrical

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10 Ibid., 163.
endeavors rooted within the social and political movements of the 1960s and 70s. According to Haugo, the Native American Literacy Renaissance began in conjunction with era of Native American political activism known as the “Red Power Movement.” As a part of the literary movement, which was tied so closely with the political movement, Hanay Geiogamah traveled to New York City to create a Native-controlled theatre company. That the emergence of Native American theatre companies in the United States had such a political beginning is no mistake. Haugo argues that while there are undoubtedly social and political problems in Native communities (as in all communities), Native people are far from a defeated Nation and still actively resist colonization. Native theatre is merely one of the many venues through which the resistance happens […]. In a society that would have eradicated their languages (and in some cases succeeded), taken their children, and eliminated as much Native culture as possible, the mere public act of claiming one’s Native identity is a political act.11

By creating theatre, Native Americans have yet another venue through which to explore what it means to be, to them, Native today. By theatrically exploring all of the complexities of their lives, Natives invalidate stereotypes and misconceptions that have been thrust upon them by non-Natives. Both Native and non-Native audience members can witness that process every time a Native theatre company performs. With Native theatre rooted so firmly in the political realm, every Native play will always carry an important message for Native and non-Native audience members alike.12

While Haugo outlines the political nature of Native theatre, Julie Pearson-Little Thunder (Creek) discusses the cultural benefits. In “Acts of Transfer: The 1975 and 1976 Productions of Raven and Body Indian by Red Earth Performing Arts Company,” Pearson-Little Thunder applies performance theorist Diana Taylor’s discussion of acts of transfer to Native theatre. She

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12 Ibid., 337.
states that “performance may also function as an ‘act of transfer’ conveying ‘social knowledge, memory and sense of identity,’ from one group of individuals to another and one generation to the next.” Pearson-Little Thunder relates both of these concepts to the relationships between and transfer of knowledge amongst Native Americans. In her discussion of Nik Di Martino’s *Raven* (1975), for example, Pearson-Little Thunder argues that

> after this act of transfer, wherever the intertribal cast traveled – whether to Indian homes in area, longhouse ceremonies or Northwest Coast exhibition dances, the information they carried on their bodies would be recontextualized, added to, expanded upon. It would have a life outside of, and beyond the theater.¹⁴

Martino’s play provided Native Americans from different backgrounds and experiences the opportunity to not only learn new traditions, but for both the maintenance and expansion of specific cultural traditions of the Northwest Coast peoples amongst themselves. One vital act of transfer, for example, was that director Bill Miller (*Skokomish/Yakima*) taught the cast iconic Yakima dances and singing styles. The cast not only learned those practices, but audiences likewise saw either a style of performance related to a different tribal affiliation than their own or witnessed the maintenance of their own cultures. The same concept can be applied to the costumes, language used, etc. Consequently, the transmission of knowledge that Native theatre practitioners and audience members experienced during this particular production served the primary purpose of Native theatre – it was specifically for and by Natives. Yet at the same time, this play and others benefited non-Native audience members. For non-Native audience members, however, finding Native-written plays and subject matter to be accessible may prove to be difficult. By witnessing the acts of transfer in Native-written plays, Pearson-Little Thunder discovered that Hanay Geiogamah

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¹⁴ Ibid., 118.
is counting upon the repertoire and embodiment to challenge any anthropological/sociological stance of ‘objectivity’ on the part of non-Indian audience members, and to transform their stereotyped expectations of contemporary Indian life into an experiential encounter through performance.\(^\text{15}\)

While unable to become actual members of Native communities, non-Native audience members are nonetheless exposed to different Native experiences. Through Native theatre, non-Native audience members can witness how different Native artists explore the complexities of their identities, their traditions, and their lives. With such three-dimensional explorations of contemporary Native lives, non-Native audience members can thus recognize that, if they held misconceptions and stereotypes of Native Americans, those beliefs are inaccurate.\(^\text{16}\)

Although Pearson-Little Thunder recognizes the potential Native-controlled theatre holds for helping non-Native audience members to realize the inaccuracies of Native American stereotypes, there is still a dilemma. If Native American stereotypes are all that non-Natives understand to be “Native,” then how will they be able to understand the complex characters that Native-controlled theatre produces? For many non-Natives, Native Americans are nameless, faceless stereotypes. In order for non-Natives to be able to gain a nuanced understanding of different Native communities and peoples, they can no longer discuss Native Americans in the abstract. In his article “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” scholar Dwight Conquergood offers his non-Native readers his exploration of a performative ethnographer’s role with a community with which he or she does not identify. According to Conquergood, performative ethnographers “study the diversity and unity of cultural performance as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying the meaningfulness of

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 122.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 117.
life.”\textsuperscript{17} Cultural performance ethnographers, therefore, construct a lens through which their audiences view that group of people. Such lenses have the ability to either build or remove barriers between Native and non-Native Americans. Most commonly, for Native Americans, too often ethnographic research places them and their communities at a distance, thus invoking an “us” and “them” paradigm. While ethnographic performance may not completely eradicate such reactions, Native-controlled theatre can impact non-Natives by emphasizing connections made during performances. An exploration of ethnographers’ roles and experiences provide a cautionary tale for non-Natives wishing to learn from Native Americans.

Even if non-Native Americans take a performatively ethnographic stance when interacting with Native American theatrical communities, non-Native audience members will never be able to completely identify with Native Americans and thus will never be able to fully understand the characters and experiences in Native-controlled plays. Yet there is at least a partial lens through which Native-controlled theatre can be viewed by non-Native audience members. Diana Taylor’s \textit{The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas} provides some performative tools through which non-Native audience members can gain a small understanding of the complexities of contemporary Native American lives. Taylor defines the archive as

documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change […]. Archival memory works across distance, over time and space; investigators can go back to reexamine an ancient manuscript, letters find their addresses through time and place, and computer discs at time cough up lost files with the right software […]. What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied […]. What makes an object

archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified, and presented for analysis.\(^\text{18}\)

For non-Native Americans, written texts like Native-written plays would allow them to begin to recognize any misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples. Although the archive is the most familiar form of transmitting knowledge, the repertoire is more effective, but difficult, to detect. Taylor defines the repertoire as enacted embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge [...]. The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission […]. The repertoire too, then, allows scholars to trace traditions and influences.\(^\text{19}\)

For non-Native audience members watching a Native-controlled play, they can see, on the actors’ bodies and in their voices, not only the theatrical exploration of the forced cultural and physical genocide of Natives by non-Native American society, but more importantly, the reinvigoration of Native culture.

With such powerful political and cultural outcomes for Natives and non-Natives alike, Native-controlled theatre can provide an opportunity for not only non-Natives to gain a better understanding of Native lives today, but for both groups to enhance their understanding of one another. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* offers a possible foundation for helping to develop the relationship between Natives and non-Natives. Pratt coined the phrase “contact zone,” arguing that a contact zone refers “to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of


\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 10.
coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” Pratt discusses contact zones as an embodiment of imperialism – two groups of people come in contact with one another and the “dominant” group subordinates the other through interaction and knowledge. Yet Pratt recognizes the possibility contact zones offer to those who have experienced imperialism. She acknowledges that

in the domains of official culture this conjuncture is chiefly providing an occasion to renovate celebratory narratives of European superiority. The indigenous nations of the Americas are finding in the quincentennial an opportunity to assert a counterhistory, revindicate their lifeways, and consolidate present day struggles for territory and autonomy. Intellectuals are called upon to define, or redefine, their relation to the structures of knowledge and power that they produce, and that produce them.

With this new approach to academia, contact zones shed their previous roles of supporting domination and subordination and instead promote an equal transfer of knowledge. Applicable to the relationship between Natives and non-Natives, Native-controlled theatre offers a space where these groups could learn from one another, thus becoming a contact zone based on a gesture towards equality instead of domination.

Mary Louise Pratt’s discussion of a contact zone offers hope for the improved relationship between Native and non-Native Americans. Unfortunately, as discourse reveals, Native American theatrical characters exist as confrontational, binary opposites – non-Natives need to use the Native American stereotypes found in theatre to reaffirm their national identity and Natives need to use theatre to explore their contemporary lives and issues through the characters they create. One form of theatre places Native Americans firmly in the past as two-dimensional imperialist victims or threats and the other form of theatre allows for the discussion of complex, three-dimensional people in their present and future. If Native-controlled theatre

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21 Ibid., xi.
can have such a positive influence on members of the Native community, perhaps it could allow non-Natives to move past their understanding of Native Americans as static figures of the past and accept members of Native American communities as individual, complex people.

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I explore this possibility in three chapters. In Chapter 1, I argue that theatre in the twentieth century is still used by non-Natives to reaffirm their national identity based on a frontier utopia. For this chapter, the works by Phillip Deloria, Rayna Green, Richard Slotkin, and others lay an ideological foundation behind why non-Natives have used Native stereotypes to help create an American identity as well as some of the most popular forms those stereotypes have been given. I then use works by Rosemarie K. Bank, Burl Donald Grose, Roger Hall, and others to research border plays and frontier plays as the two most popular theatrical genres that utilized the idea of the American frontier and, consequently, to establish the purpose behind using Native American stereotypes within the texts in the nineteenth century. Once film entered the picture as a means to perpetuate Native stereotypes, however, discourse seldom discusses how theatre continues to do so. Yet audiences across the continent and the globe continue to patronize theatres even after the emergence of film and television, and, regrettably, continue to encounter Native stereotypes on the stage. I demonstrate this by applying the ideology discussed in the works of Slotkin, Deloria, et al., to two twentieth century plays – Rick Besoyan’s *Little Mary Sunshine* from 1959 and Robert Schenkkan’s *The Kentucky Cycle* from 1994. Both plays utilize Native American characters as a method through which non-Native Americans can lay claim to the frontier, thus fulfilling an American identity based on the myth of the frontier.
Since I argue in chapter 1 that Native American stereotypes are alive and thriving in today’s theatre, I use chapter 2 to explore how Native communities in the twentieth century have utilized Native-controlled theatre as a means to further fight for, and gain, self-determination. First, I establish a general political history of Native Americans in the twentieth century in order to showcase the history behind the Native American self-determination movement that gained momentum in the 1950s and 60s and continues today. Then, utilizing the works of Van Gosse, George Pierre Castile, Peter Iverson (Navajo), Vine Deloria, Jr. (Yankton Sioux), and Clifford Lytle, I explore different perspectives on the self-determination movement in order to reinforce that Native communities do not have a monolithic approach to fighting for their rights. Finally, I explore how Native and non-Native theatre practitioners and academics, like Hanay Geiogamah, Julie Pearson-Little Thunder, Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), Bruce King (Haudesaunee), Ann Haugo, and others, view Native-controlled theatre as a political tool for Native communities to utilize in their fight for self-determination.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the necessary research and analysis of Native and non-Native controlled theatre for chapter 3, which argues that Native-controlled theatre offers non-Natives the opportunity to recognize their misconceptions about Native peoples and change their perceptions by engaging with Native theatre practitioners and audience members. By utilizing Dwight Conquergood’s discussion of the role of performative ethnographers, I begin the chapter by cautioning non-Natives on the challenges they face as they begin to interact with Native communities. I then argue that Diana Taylor’s concepts of the archive and the repertoire are performative tools that non-Natives can draw upon while participating as audience members in a Native-controlled theatrical production. Following my discussion of Taylor’s research, I apply Mary Louise Pratt’s investigation of contact zones and transculturation to two Native-written
plays: Hanay Geiogamah’s *Foghorn* and Sierra Adare’s (*Cherokee/Choctaw*) *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room: A Play*. By analyzing Geiogamah and Adare’s plays through the lens of a contact zone, I conclude that the plays can be used by Native theatre companies to help non-Natives realize that Native Americans are not stereotypes that live in the past, but are complex, contemporary people. Finally, I will offer recommendations on how Native-controlled theatrical productions can support a change in non-Native audience members’ perceptions of Native peoples through dialogue.

In summary, this thesis examines how notions of Native Americans have been produced and perpetuated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by non-Natives as well as to articulate how Native-controlled theatres are working to replace these stereotypes with new models for Native self-identity. Yet from such confrontational theatrical practices emerges a new possibility. Native-controlled theatre today can serve as a new space for non-Natives to confront and interact with their received notions of Native peoples while learning from different Native communities.
CHAPTER 1: BUT THEY LOOK LIKE INDIANS

Over the past four hundred years, non-Native Americans have created Native American stereotypes in countless products of popular culture. In this chapter, I will examine how non-Natives have specifically utilized theatre to perpetuate those Native American stereotypes in order to establish and reaffirm an American identity based in the frontier. I will first explore the ideology behind why non-Natives have used Native stereotypes to help create an American identity as well as some of the most popular forms those stereotypes have been given. I will then research border plays and frontier plays as the two most popular theatrical genres that utilized the idea of the American frontier and, consequently, the purpose behind using Native American stereotypes within the texts. Finally, I will examine two twentieth-century plays, *Little Mary Sunshine* by Rick Besoyan and *The Kentucky Cycle* by Robert Schenkkan, in conjunction with twentieth-century frontier ideology, to establish that non-Native controlled theatre is still being used by non-Natives as a means to perpetuate an American identity based in the frontier.

For many non-Natives, the American frontier offered a unique identity based on the concept of a frontier utopia. For non-Natives who believed their identity to be based on the frontier, literary and performative genres offered them the opportunity to reaffirm their national identity. In particular, theatre in the nineteenth century proved to be an effective method used by non-Natives. Live theatrical performances offered non-Native theatre practitioners and audience members the ability to construct their vision of the frontier and then to see their perceptions of the frontier continuously reaffirmed. Plays that dealt with the frontier increased in popularity until the invention of film. Consequently, the Western then became the preferred method for non-Natives to reaffirm their national identity based on the frontier. Although non-Native Americans did not explore their national identity based on the frontier through theatrical
performances as often as they did in film, theatrical performances in the twentieth century remained an effective and accepted vehicle through which non-Natives could reaffirm their national identity based on the frontier.

Whereas there were many non-English colonists and occupants of the North American continent, commonly-accepted discourse decreed that until July 4, 1776, Americans were English colonists and therefore had an English identity. Logically, the colonists then lived like the English, practiced English customs and traditions, and wore English clothes. Furthermore, the English government encouraged the colonists’ identity as English. By forbidding westward expansion, for example, the English attempted to convince its colonists that emigration should occur to the north or the south so that the colonists could remain useful to their “mother country” rather than move out of control’s reach. As the colonists continuously moved west, however, the English government wondered if westward expansion could occur under England’s control. The colonists became increasingly resentful of English rule and, consequently, England could not maintain control over the American colonies. When the colonists won their independence, discourse claimed that their old identity crumbled.1

New Americans, therefore, needed an identity that would validate their existence as well as elevate them above the English. According to Henry Nash Smith, author of *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth,* “one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward…”2 To the former colonists, the supposedly sparsely populated frontier offered them the opportunity to create and shape their new country and new

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2 Smith, 3.
identities. In his work, Smith further argues that the American West offered the newly-founded country a superior identity separate from England and the rest of Europe. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, author of “the Significance of the Frontier in American History,” greatly influenced Smith’s research and arguments. The ideological foundation of Smith’s work, Turner provides a detailed argument on how he felt English colonists ideologically became United States citizens through the frontier. Turner states that

the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the mocassin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American…thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.³

Early Americans then cast off their European, particularly English, identities, immersed themselves in the frontier, and slowly adapted it, and their new identity, to suit their needs. Turner thus explains the process, but fails to mention how Americans considered their new identity to be superior to their old English identity. In accordance with the philosophy of Jacques Rousseau and his fellow philosophizes of the Romantic Movement⁴, when the colonists

⁴ For further information on the Romantic Movement and its role on the creation of an American identity based on the concept of a frontier utopia, begin with Philip Deloria’s Playing Indian and then research Jacques Rousseau writings specifically.
declared their independence, they rejected England’s monarchy in favor of a democratic form of government. Many non-Native Americans believed democracy to be a utopian form of government and the frontier an entity that would only further democracy. For many Americans, the frontier provided an idealistic opportunity to pursue economic gain as equals. Roger Hall, in his work *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906*, believes many non-Native Americans interacted with the frontier in such a manner. He argues that “the frontier provided moral as well as economic opportunity. It was an unspoiled Eden – a place for second chances.”\(^5\)

Life in the United States offered Americans that Eden: a classless society with no king and all were in tune with nature. Americans not only rejected English rule, they created something better.\(^6\)

As the story goes, as non-Native Americans marched their way westward, they discovered that the frontier, their unspoiled Eden, was surprisingly already occupied. As the original occupants of an American-engineered frontier, Native Americans played a vital and complex role in the frontier utopia. As non-Natives expanded their land holdings out West, they issued two different types of death warrants to Native Americans. The first occurred when Native Americans became the primary obstacle in the Americanization process. In order for an American to live in the frontier, Native Americans had to be destroyed. Native Americans’ destruction would eliminate any obstructions prohibiting early Americans from creating their own identity within the frontier. Scholar Jeffrey Mason, in his work *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, reveals that when non-Native Americans “found their new home already occupied, they inevitably came to regard the natives as competitors and native presence as an obstacle that must be ameliorated or removed, and they adduced theological, political, or imaginative positions to justify what they came to perceive as their necessary response to this increasingly crowded

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6 Smith, 4; Turner, 82.
coexistence.” Supposedly inferior to the former colonists, and irritatingly occupying the space they wished to live in, Native Americans had to be removed. In the wake of such mentalities, Native Americans now faced physical genocide.

Existing simultaneously with the first, more physical, death warrant, the second death warrant resulted from Natives “being loved to death” in which Native Americans were replaced by characters on the stage and in popular imagination. Philip Deloria (Dakota Sioux) discusses this phenomenon in his work *Playing Indian*. According to Deloria, in their extreme desire to create a national identity that hinged on Native Americans, an unparalleled national identity crisis emerged and resulted in two related dilemmas: one, that Americans had the tendency to define themselves by what they were not and two, that Americans wanted to savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time. By “becoming Indian” or “playing Indian,” Americans could experience the savage freedom they so desperately craved while remaining members of civilized society. Yet, as Jeffrey Mason reveals, “having invented ‘America’ as a nation and as a culture, the whites took upon themselves a revision of the colonial mission – to transform their new nation into the conception they had imagined. Like everything and everyone else, the natives had to be Americanized.”

Therefore, non-Native Americans reconstructed Native Americans to be figures that helped Americans create their new identity, to occupy and embody the frontier. The result was that American-constructed Native Americans became necessary to an American identity based on a frontier utopia and actual Native Americans lost control over their imagery in the public eye.

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8 Ibid., 27.
To destroy a group of people, however, presented a challenge for a country that wanted to present itself as a utopia. From this challenge emerged, as scholar Sally Jones reveals in her work “The First but Not the Last of the ‘Vanishing Indians’: Edwin Forrest and Mythic Recreations of the Native Population,” “an almost schizophrenic view of native peoples in the new nation, as the loss of such savage majesty was bewailed, on the one hand, and the removal of the existing descendants of that legacy was condoned, on the other.” Simultaneously, they sought to preserve and destroy Native peoples. Unable to manage this schizophrenia, non-Native Americans reconstructed Native Americans into acceptable, more manageable versions.

Reconstruction of Native American history and presence within American history resulted in stereotyping Natives into two overarching categories: the noble savage and the blood-thirsty savage. Both Philip Deloria and Cherokee scholar Rayna Green, in her article “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe,” contend that the stereotypes emerged when European immigrants emulated Native Americans out of sheer necessity; as European supplies ran out in the Americas, the settlers adopted Native American customs and practices in order to survive. Using Native-influenced clothing and food-gathering practices, the settler cultivated respect for Native Americans. Yet at the same time, they feared the supposedly heathen Native populations. Thus, non-Natives developed the beginnings of dual Native American stereotypes: the noble savage who could survive in the harsh wilderness and the blood-thirsty savage who wanted nothing more than to scalp innocent Christians.

Discourse reveals that the two

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11 Native American stereotypes emerged when the very first European explorer set foot on the North American continent; numerous studies can be dedicated to the early interactions between early settlers and Native Americans. Given the specific scope of this study, I chose to provide a brief survey of the early Native stereotypes in order to give more attention to the stereotypes utilized in theatrical practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
stereotypes allowed both aspects of the frontier’s wilderness to be accounted for: the noble savage lived in Eden and the blood-thirsty savage occupied Hell.¹²

Many scholars feels that as non-Native Americans pushed into the frontier with earnest, and dealt with their interactions with Native Americans, the myth of the frontier emerged. In his book *Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Richard Slotkin defines a myth as a story “drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.”¹³ An American myth would therefore represent Americans and their accepted beliefs. Yet Slotkin’s initial definition does not reveal how a myth explains the emergence of those beliefs. Slotkin then argues that myths are also formulated “as ways of explaining problems that arise in the course of historical experience. The most important and longest-lived of these formulations develop around areas of concern that persist over long periods of time.”¹⁴ A myth, therefore, not only tells a story, but explores how that story came to be. In Slotkin’s logic, then, how non-Native Americans created an American identity, and their interactions with the frontier and Native Americans, would naturally become an American myth. Called by Slotkin “the Myth of the Frontier,” he asserts that the myth was

our [America’s] oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. According to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization. The original ideological task of the Myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies; but as the colonies expanded and developed, the Myth was called on to account for our rapid

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¹² Green, 32-33, 37, 48.
¹³ Slotkin, 5.
¹⁴ Ibid., 6.
economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes modernization.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Slotkin, the myth explained why non-Native Americans were drawn to conquer the last bit of “uncivilized” land in the United States as well as the tumultuous relationship between non-Native and Native Americans. Yet myths, especially the frontier myth, did not express ideology in a purely factual or argumentative manner, but as a narrative. Non-Native Americans, however, believed the frontier myth to be historically accurate instead of a narrative story. Scholars, including Slotkin, believe that it was logical that non-Natives had the myth of the frontier occupy, and be perpetuated by, almost every type of literature and performance entertainment that reconstructed Native American culture and history. Regardless of the Native image presented, positive or negative, discourse argues that literature and performance entertainment emerged as the primary method through which the non-Native American public related to Native Americans and, some would argue, themselves. More importantly, literature and performance entertainment became one of the only means through which the non-Native American public could re-live and reaffirm such an intricate and important aspect of American history.

For many, performance quickly became indistinguishable from reality. Rosemarie Bank, in her article “Meditations Upon Opening and Crossing Over: Transgressing the Boundaries of Historiography and Tracking the History of Nineteenth-Century American Theatre,” explores how performance was not just important, but necessary for non-Native Americans who sought to reaffirm their national identity through the myth of the frontier. Bank argues that “from the first,

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 10.
the invention of America was a performance, not just in texts and paintings, but in person.”

Complying with the age-old adage that “actions speak louder than words,” non-Native Americans could not simply proclaim that they were American. They had to show it. For non-Natives, performance became a means through which they could establish themselves as Americans. Non-Native Americans constructed Native American stereotypes in order to demonstrate, and consequently prove, how American they could truly be. For many non-Natives, performed Native American stereotypes quickly became more than just theatrical conventions; they became a necessity.

Many non-Native Americans came to depend upon their performances of Native American stereotypes and their idea of the frontier in order to reaffirm their national identity. American theatre, therefore, quickly became a space where non-Natives could perform their national identity. Jeffrey Mason asserts that when he studies

the performances of American plays, written on American subjects and produced in America by American artists and for American audiences, and enjoying long and successful runs because of the enthusiastic support of those audiences, I am studying what certain Americans wanted other Americans, and the world at large, to believe that they believed about America as such. Theatre becomes an intricate and reflexive exercise in cultural self-definition.17

Theatre itself provided an accessible method through which Americans could define themselves. The nature of theatre, specifically, fostered non-Native Americans’ ability to self-define. In his work Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906, Roger Hall argues that while literature, and the Native and non-Native characters found within its pages, certainly perpetuated Native American stereotypes as non-Natives sought to use them to reaffirm their national identity,


17 Mason, 2.
reading, no matter how entertaining, had its limitations. For one, it was a solitary activity, without the intrinsic comradeship and interaction exhibited by an Indian tribe, a company of soldiers, or a wagon train. Furthermore, it lacked the primal sounds of horses’ hooves, guns firing, and war-like yelps. It lacked the raw scents of gunsmoke and animals. Except for the occasional drawing, it lacked the visual exhilaration of scenic vistas and distinctive apparel. It lacked the reality of actual human beings engaged in live action. Theatre provided those sensory elements in a distinctive phenomenological experience, and the citizens of the East could stake their claim to a portion of the frontier simply by purchasing a ticket.¹⁸

The physical, visual, and audio interactions between performers and spectators therefore made theatrical productions important platforms for non-Natives to assert their national identity. Audience members could see, right before their eyes, the characters, the scenery, the story plots, which they believed to be truly American.¹⁹

Part of being truly American was the presence of Native Americans or, rather, what Americans believed Native Americans to be. In using theatrical productions to lay claim to the frontier, non-Native Americans then had the perfect excuse to reconstruct what they believed Native Americans to be and could then “play Indian.” Rayna Green asserts that “we forget, with respect to Americans, just how Indian they [Native Americans] really are, from their food, clothing, landscape, architecture, material culture, and most profoundly, their iconography – an iconography which shapes the rest of the world and gives it shape in turn.”²⁰ In “playing Indian,” non-Natives Americans caused themselves and others to forget that Native Americans had their own customs and traditions. With the memory of actual Native Americans faded, and sometimes completely forgotten, non-Native Americans could then “become Indian.” Costumes and disguises played an important and intricate role in transforming non-Native Americans into Natives; not only did costumes have extraordinary transformative qualities, but they provided a personal sense of liberation. Furthermore, they called into question the notion of fixed identity

¹⁸ Hall, 2.
¹⁹ Green, 48; Mason, 1.
²⁰ Green, 49.
while having the ability to reveal the “real” person underneath a mask. Costumes literally allowed non-Native Americans to become, on the stage, Native. The result was that theatrical productions laid the foundation for the Native American stereotypes that are popular today.\(^{21}\)

Plays that discussed, commented on, and perpetuated an American national identity based on the frontier did not take a singular, static form. Some scholars, such as Burl Donald Grose, in his dissertation “Here Come the Indians”: An Historical Study of the Representations of the Native American Upon the North American Stage, 1808-1969, insist that there existed a correlation between the current relationship between the federal government, American people, and Native Americans and the imagery of Native Americans on the stage. In the early, formative years of the United States, Americans still reveled in their ability to gain their freedom from England. In conjunction with the current mainstream attitude, theatrical productions utilized the noble savage character that aided Americans in their quest further into the frontier and farther away from England. As such, border plays quickly became the popular theatrical form that featured this relationship. Roger Hall argues that

> the theatre proved an exceptionally able distributor of border tales, for as Richard Slotkin notes in writing of the mythos of the frontier, ‘elements that tend to maximize conflict, suspense, irony, and moral resonance may be highlighted at the expense of other no-less-factual elements that do not so palpably serve the tale.’ What better vehicle to highlight conflict, suspense, irony, and moral resonance than dramatic presentation?\(^{22}\)

Border drama playwrights capitalized on these elements to tell exciting stories about early life on the frontier. The presence of Native characters allowed playwrights to successfully tell their stories. In these plays, the playwrights paired the eloquent, noble Native American with a rude, pidgin – English speaking brother. Played by white actors, non-Native audiences then became accustomed to seeing Native characters look similar to them. Not only were these plays the

\(^{21}\) Philip J. Deloria, 6-7; Hall, 1.

\(^{22}\) Hall, 19.
catalyst for national acceptance of appropriating and altering Native American identity, but they enforced multiple stereotypes. In border plays, in particular, the Native characters served to aid Americans into the frontier and away from Europe.²³

One of the most famous border plays was John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora: The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829). *Metamora* draws on the noble savage stereotype to create a successful melodrama, a popular theatrical genre in the 1800s which utilizes stock characters and familiar plot conventions to entertain audiences. The play, while it employs the usual plotline about a pair of lovers and their adversary, highlights the noble chief Metamora. Metamora fights for the survival of his people, but when the English massacre his tribe, he shoots himself and his wife in order not to be taken. Although some of the white characters oppose Metamora and his race, a few, such as the lovers, feel admiration and sympathy for the noble man. The female lover, Oceana, describes Metamora as having

> his bowstring drawn to wing a second death, a robe of fur was o’er his shoulder thrown, and o’er his long, dark hair an eagle’s plume waved in the breeze, a feathery diadem. Firmly he stood upon the jutting height, as if a sculptor’s hand had carved him there. With awe I gazed as on the cliff he turned – the grandest model of a mighty man.²⁴

Metamora’s physical characteristics are a symbol of his noble personality. Metamora’s only motivation during the entire play is to reclaim what the English had stolen from him and his tribe. In the final act of the show, Metamora dejectedly cries out for the Englishman to “give me back the happy days, the fair hunting ground, and the dominion my great forefathers bequeathed me.”²⁵ The play, and Metamora’s eloquent cries, invites audience members to feel sorrow for

²⁵ Green, 33.
the misfortune of such a noble man; that sorrow became a key feature of the relationship between whites and their depictions of the noble savage. Non-Native Americans would also feel a connection with the noble savage; they could identify with Metamora because like him, the English also tried steal American freedom. Non-Natives saw Metamora as a symbol of themselves and the struggle they had faced from England.

Discourse maintains that in the formative years of the United States, non-Native Americans needed noble savage figures like Metamora to not only guide them into the frontier, but with whom they could identify with as figures struggling for freedom. Americans needed to prove that they were justified in breaking away from England and forming their own country. The noble savage stereotype found in texts and theatrical productions did that and as such, the American frontier could become a symbol of America itself. Regardless if non-Natives believed in the symbol or not, they continued to press onward into the frontier. Every step of the way, they met some form of resistance from Native communities. As the level of Native resistance grew, and the United States more secure as a country, the popular stereotype changed from the noble savage who aided Americans to the blood-thirsty savage that despised them. Consequently, the theatrical productions of the late 1800s reflected the change in popular sentiment. Border plays were no longer the popular theatrical form; frontier plays replaced them. Roger Hall argues that frontier plays “became, in essence, a contract between the playwrights and performers, as vendors, to sell to the audience, as buyers, a segment of the frontier experience.”26 The frontier experience, during the height of the Indian Wars in the late nineteenth century, meant honest settlers fighting for their way of life against the blood-thirsty savages that stood in the way of that. Frontier plays sold that experience.

26 Hall, 3.
Frontier plays dramatized this ideology through powerful means. Often influenced by actual events and people, frontier playwrights took these stories and fictionalized them. Yet by activating all of the stories, frontier plays and their stories seemed real. Roger Hall reveals that the drama of the frontier as it was presented to eastern audiences in the late nineteenth century was certainly fictional, even when it sprang from actual events. It both perpetuated myths and provided realistic images. Theatrical presentations reinforced popular but misleading images of white settlers as victims of native populations, responding with violence only when provoked by savage atrocities. What is more, the theatre offered its images in a particularly compelling manner in that the elements it employed were so tangible – genuine heroes, horses, guns, and natives.27

Similar to border plays, audiences could identify with the characters and stories of frontier plays. Such identification was aided by the live experience created by a play. Additionally, the experience was in a format similar to the border plays. Hall asserts that “although a few of the frontier plays were comedies, and some even satirized the conventions of other frontier plays, melodramas constituted the majority of the works.”28 If the format was still the same, then audiences could still identify the play as American and its characters as Americans. Unlike border plays, however, audiences did not identify with the Native American characters. Hall maintains that “most commonly they [Native characters] were the attackers, often abducting white women, which allowed for rescues later in the plays. Frontier dramas utilized the capture – pursuit – rescue scenario over and over – often several times within the same play.”29 Hall further articulates that the Native characters in frontier plays were “for the most part, objects to be shot at like moving targets in a shooting gallery.”30 Used as target practice and attackers, Native characters in frontier plays were very difficult to identify with. Through these scenarios, and the blood-thirsty savage stereotype, audience members could see situations that were

27 Ibid., 3.
28 Ibid., 4.
29 Ibid., 7.
30 Ibid., 5.
actually occurring to them in the frontier. In the plays, however, the settlers were always successful in regaining their women, destroying the Natives, and marching onward to conquer the remaining untamed frontier. The frontier plays told American history the way many non-Native Americans wanted it to occur.

One of the most successful aspects of frontier plays that accounted for their popularity, according to Hall, “lay in their connections with individuals involved in contemporaneous events.” One of the most famous individuals of the frontier, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, was also an experienced theatre practitioner and the star in numerous frontier plays. Born in Iowa in 1846, Cody and his father traveled to the Kansas Territory when Cody was eight years old. During their travels, Cody saw for the first time the frontiersmen and Native Americans that comprised the West. From then on, Cody would identify with the frontiersmen. Cody revealed in his autobiography that as a teenager, he participated in numerous adventures stereotypical to a person who lived in the frontier. According to Cody, he fought with Native Americans, worked on a railroad crew, as a pony-express rider, rancher, and served in the Civil War. Although historians argued about the extent to which Cody actually experienced all that he claimed, Cody gained a reputation for being a notable frontiersman. It was not until Cody met dime novelist Edward Z.C. Judson, alias Ned Buntline, however, that his reputation became widespread. Dime novelists claimed that they merely wrote a legendary figure’s biography and as a result, Buffalo Bill became the most famous dime novel hero. Buntline became the man’s most famous

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31 Ibid., 227.
32 The creator of the first dime novels, Erastus Beadle, opened a publishing firm in order to sell cheap publications to the masses. Beadle focused mostly on publishing Western novels and consequently his total sales between 1860 and 1865 proved the success of dime novels; he sold five million copies during that time. Many considered Beadle’s Western novels to be the logical progression to the earlier American works by James Fenimore Cooper (famous for The Leatherstocking Tales). The scout/trapper figure created one significant similarity between Beadle’s Western novels and Cooper’s novels. A man who lived in the frontier side-by-side with Native Americans, the trapper in dime novels descended from the Hawkeye character in Cooper’s novels in appearance and temperament alike. Unlike in Cooper’s works, however, the dime novel trapper rescued heroines from the evil
biographer by publishing several articles in the *New York Weekly* that featured Buffalo Bill, thus propelling him into national stardom.\(^{33}\)

Following the success wrought by the dime novels, Buntline convinced Cody to portray himself in a stage-production called *The Scouts of the Plains* in 1872. According to Paul Reddin, author of *Wild West Shows*, acting in plays while continuing his life on the frontier taught Cody a valuable lesson: he “learned that eastern audiences would pay to see an authentic Plainsmen depict violent aspects of life on the frontier. Adding real Indians pleased patrons even more. In addition, the plays provided experience before live audiences.”\(^{34}\) Cody then understood the relationship many Americans had with frontier plays and the Native characters in them. Performing in traditional plays granted Cody with the understanding he needed to embark on his most famous endeavor, the Wild West Shows. Encouraged by fellow actor Nate Salsbury, Cody founded his Wild West Show, entitled “The Wild West, Rocky Mountain, and Prairie Exhibition” on May 17, 1883.\(^{35}\)

Theatrical performances gave Cody the opportunity to establish himself in the public eye as a man who sought to battle the West to help those who followed him settle it, thus allowing him to perfect the stage image he used in his Wild West Show. *Life on the Border: A Border Drama in Five Acts*, written by Cody in 1876, accomplishes his goals while simultaneously typifying a frontier drama. Written as a melodrama, Cody stars as the like-named romantic lead who saves the heroine and her family from both villainous white outlaws and savage Indians.

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\(^{34}\) Reddin, 56.

\(^{35}\) Moses, 22.
The heroine, named Emma Reynolds, is in love with Cody, but an evil army officer named Captain Huntley desires her. He captures her father and falsifies documents stating that Mr. Reynolds has given Emma to Huntley as his future wife. Cody seeks to save Mr. Reynolds and marry Emma, but Huntley desperately seeks to thwart his plans. Huntley first attempts to have the army capture Cody, telling them that he is a dangerous outlaw. When that does not work, the devious Huntley then deploys his savage Indian friends upon Cody. Cody kills the vicious Indians that attack him and saves Emma in the nick of time, right before Huntley forces her to marry him. Cody emerges triumphant, having conquered the evil found in the West.\textsuperscript{36}

Typical of the frontier melodramas of the time period, in the play the white outlaw Huntley and the savage Indians were the factors that stand in the way of justice prevailing in the West. The Native characters, in particular, serve not as characters with which American audiences can identify, but as entities that seek to destroy hardworking Americans as they expand and settle westward. Huntley capitalizes on the viciousness of the Native characters, offering his Indian friend War Eagle two hundred fifty dollars to kill Cody so he could marry Emma. War Eagle eagerly accepts the offer, grunting out “me buy fire water, make Injun happy. Me dance. Ugh, ugh.”\textsuperscript{37} War Eagle’s words not only confirm a stereotype that Native Americans are drunks, but that they embrace evils deeds, happy to wreak destruction and chaos on good, hardworking Americans. Consequently, many of those hardworking Americans can believe that Natives were obstacles savagely preventing them from their destinies. Jebediah Broadbrim, a peaceful Quaker and a friend of Cody’s, fights against the Native characters. He says that “by the Eternal, I am now on the warpath. I will fight it out with that copperskin in this line if it takes me all day Sunday. I will spare not the high nor the humble of the red race. My


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 52.
soul’s in arms and eager for...Oh, come west and bring your families.”^38 A devout Quaker character, willing to forsake the peace required by his beliefs in order to prevent the blood-thirsty savages from inflicting more harm on innocent whites, can reinforce to non-Native audience members the importance of destroying Native populations to serve their needs. A frontier play like *Life on the Border*, where good white men triumph over the blood-thirsty savages, reflected what many non-Native Americans at the time wanted to occur in the frontier.

It was during the height of the frontier play’s popularity, as well as that of the Wild West Show’s, that many scholars believe that “playing Indian” in its modern manifestations originated. Shari Huhndorf, in her work *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, is one such scholar. According to Huhndorf, “two simultaneous late-nineteenth-century events: the rise of industrial capitalism, with its associated notions of linear historical progress, and the completion of the military conquest of Native America”^39 firmly fixated modern Native American stereotypes within the public psyche. With, as Frederick Jackson Turner coined, the closing of the frontier in the 1890s, non-Native Americans began to feverishly document all the Native customs and traditions they could, creating another means through which the public could “play Indian.”^40 With the belief that Native Americans were almost at the point of extinction, non-Native Americans now had an archive of Native stereotypes they could refer to, a means through which they could mold Native, and consequently American, identity to best serve their purposes. As the political struggles of the twentieth century intensified, Richard Slotkin argues that “the genres of mass culture became crucial as a common site in which Americans could imagine (or observe others imagining) the basis for a new (or renewed) cultural consensus on the

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^38 Ibid., 45-46.
^40 Philip J. Deloria, 80.
meaning and direction of American society. Many non-Native Americans needed to have their national identity reaffirmed. Therefore, through the turmoil of the twentieth century, non-Natives became drawn to the performative and literary genres that would allow them to do so.

It would seem, then, that as non-Native Americans documented Native American customs and traditions to serve their own interests, frontier plays would continue to grow in popularity. This, however, was not the case and the popularity of frontier plays actually declined drastically. This declination occurred not because of audience disinterest in the subject matter, but because film, specifically the Western, became the preferred form of performance in the twentieth century that reaffirmed American national identity. The Western, a filmed historical genre set in the past, most typically portrayed life in the West between the end of the American Civil War and the “closing of the frontier” in 1890. Early Westerns’ popularity can be contributed to the general nature of film. Whereas theatrical productions like frontier plays or Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show could only be viewed one at time, the same Western film could be viewed all over the country simultaneously. Buffalo Bill and others soon realized that the Western could tell the story of the West with a powerful blend of documentation and fictionality while reaching more audiences. As a result, the transition from staged theatrical productions to the Western began in the late nineteenth century when the Wild West Shows were actually filmed. Buffalo Bill claimed to abandon all elements of fictionality and thus filmed battle re-enactments to heighten a sense of authenticity. Buffalo Bill’s theatrical endeavors left an indelible mark on the history of cinema; they provided a vocabulary of incidents and images that became standard for a Western film. The established vocabulary familiarized the early Western’s audience with the film’s look. Joy S. Kasson, in her chapter “Life-Like, Vivid, and Thrilling Pictures: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Early Cinema,” argues that in the 1890s,

41 Slotkin, 24.
at the very moment that film technology was just beginning to open the possibility of a different form of mass entertainment, the Wild West had already created a popular spectacle that combined the excitement of stage melodrama and dime novel with an illusion of authenticity, infusing the show with a hyperreality that stemmed from the spectators’ sense that they had actually witnessed the events represented before them.\textsuperscript{42}

Non-Native Americans would recognize the images, characters, and stories found in Westerns because they already existed in theatrical performances like frontier plays and the Wild West Show. Furthermore, early Westerns had a documentary-like quality due to filmmaker’s ability to utilize still-extant Western settings and people, thereby perpetuating a certain air of authenticity.\textsuperscript{43}

Rayna Green asserts that after its emergence, the Western replaced the frontier plays in memorializing Native Americans as “it is here that the Plains version of Indians virtually replaces the Algonkian version in the American imagination.”\textsuperscript{44} Since Westerns drew on the same images presented in the Wild West Shows, they also utilized similar stereotypes of Native Americans. Yet Green also reveals that while film, particularly Westerns, did little to change the forms of “playing Indian” that had emerged up to that point, filmmakers significantly did not rely on only one stereotype or form to create a specific movie. John Ford’s Western film \textit{Stagecoach} (1939), while relying heavily on the Native American stereotypes and images found in frontier plays and Wild West Shows, does not utilize only one Native American stereotype. Referring to its name, the movie explores the different passengers on a stagecoach in the West. None of the passengers are Native American, yet all feel the Native presence throughout the movie. The first Native character the audience sees is a Cheyenne brave who warns the army that a group of

\textsuperscript{44} Green, 38.
savage Apaches had been striking against whites. Drawing from the romanticized noble savage stereotype of the early nineteenth century, this brave seeks to aid the white passengers on their journey into the frontier. Although the audience sees the noble Cheyenne, John Ford, however, uses the blood-thirsty savage stereotype to a greater extent. Fear of being captured by the Apache drives the stagecoach passengers forward on their journey. During the passengers’ brief encounter with the blood-thirsty Apache, a chase on horseback, the audience can tell that murder simmered in the Natives’ eyes. Ominous drumming echoes as the Apache, with their long black hair flowing, hone in on the stagecoach. The sole intent of the Apache is to kill the stagecoach passengers; they “strike like snakes”, but the Calvary denies them that pleasure when they come swooping in to the rescue.\footnote{John Wayne, \textit{Stagecoach}, DVD, Directed by John Ford (Walter Wanger Productions, Inc., 1939).}

On the surface, Ford’s \textit{Stagecoach} seems to be the filmed version of a frontier play: Natives and non-Native Americans savagely collide in America’s attempt to expand into the frontier. The images of the West are the same and the characters embody similar characteristics. Native and non-Native Americans still conflicted with one another, but instead of the settlers and Native Americans found in the frontier plays, Westerns like \textit{Stagecoach} featured a cowboy or gunslinger character against a large group of Natives. In reality, cowboys and Native Americans seldom interacted in the manner depicted in Westerns. Despite reality, Westerns transformed the history of the West to embody the alleged fight between cowboys and Indians. Many credit director Tom Forman’s \textit{The Virginian} (1923) with sparking the transformation. In \textit{The Virginian}, a cowhand single-handedly fought and destroyed a ring of cattle-thieves. The simple plot propelled the cowhand/cowboy figure into the hero category; a hero who took on the violent frontier and won. Once established as a hero against the frontier, the cowboy quickly faced the
West’s greatest adversary: the Indian. The repeated battle between cowboy and Indian became a staple to the Western genre. Consequently, as the non-Native character depictions found in border and frontier plays faded into oblivion, American audiences believed that the Western reproduced life in the West.\textsuperscript{46}

Despite its overwhelming popularity in the early twentieth century, the Western experienced a decline during the Depression, just like any other genre that validated the myth of the frontier as an American identity. During the Depression, the American public no longer identified with the myth of the frontier; life had just been too traumatic. Philip Deloria believes that as a unifying American identity dissipated, Americans turned to individual validation in community-related tourist attractions. Those attractions signaled the emergence of informed tourism, in which state guidebooks developed the themes and images of the United States within a local setting. Rather than collectively embrace their national identity, Americans quietly accepted it on individual levels.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet after being punctured by the hardship of the Depression, patriotic optimism returned following the United States’ victory in World War II. The combination of American victory overseas and the long-term effects of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s successful New Deal program restored public faith in the federal government and allowed non-Native Americans to accept the United States’ success story once again. Roosevelt believed that the existence of the American frontier gave the United States an exceptional history in which the frontier became the site for ideological struggle. Although many non-Native Americans doubted this during the Depression, Richard Slotkin argues that non-Natives believed that their “nation’s emergence from both Depression and World War with an intact democracy and an economy many times stronger than

\textsuperscript{47} Philip J. Deloria, 132; Slotkin, 256, 281.
it had been in 1929 suggested that something in our politics, culture, and circumstances was indeed historically exceptional.”

If America was that exceptional, then American cultural products needed to reflect that. Slotkin concludes that once the public regained its ability to identify with a national identity, a renaissance of the Western occurred. For the next thirty years, the cinematic genre became, as Slotkin suggests, “pre-eminent among American mass-culture genres as a field for the making of public myths and for the symbolization of public ideology.”

The movie industry encouraged its writers to build American morale not through falsifying history, but rather from selecting episodes in which audiences could see the heroic expression of American and democratic virtues. In conjunction with the screenwriters, audiences desired popular entertainment that centered on historical events; these events functioned as an allegory of contemporary political and social events that affirmed a patriotic, national identity. The Western fit the equation demanded by both American audiences and Hollywood.

Yet the Western, although immensely popular, was not the only performative genre that dealt with Americans’ relationship to the frontier and, by extension, with Native American characters. Theatre productions continued to be an important method through which non-Native Americans continued to explore their national identity. Burl Donald Grose, in his dissertation, offers one of the few examinations of theatre productions that utilize Native American stereotypes during the twentieth century. Grose reveals that during the period 1933-1969 North American playwrights used the Indian as a character in all forms of drama, yet with few exceptions the image of the Indian did not advance beyond the concepts of the previous century. White culture in

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48 Slotkin, 491.
49 Ibid., 278.
North America appears unwilling to advance the Indian image into the twentieth century and seeks to retain the Indians in a mythic past.\textsuperscript{51}

Therefore, Native characters continued to be stereotypes rather than complex, contemporary characters. Furthermore, like the theatrical productions of the nineteenth century, playwrights that dealt with Americans’ relationship with the frontier did not have their works and Native characters follow a singular, static form, but rather were influenced by popular sentiment. Yet the works no longer appeared to be border or frontier plays. Grose categorizes the scripts of this period into five groups:

1) musical comedy; 2) historical and pageant scripts; 3) scripts utilizing the Indian as a mythic personage; 4) sociological scripts dealing with the Indian; and 5) the angry Indian. Not surprisingly, the scripts of this period reflect the growing self-awareness of the Native American from the early assimilationists who felt estranged from the land, through the rejectionists of White society, to the revisionists who tell of the evils of White society.\textsuperscript{52}

Popular Native stereotypes were used by playwrights and audience members alike to portray these experiences. Grose’s examination of plays during this period of time concludes that American audiences were beginning to elevate the noble savage stereotype above its primary function of guiding Americans into the frontier, but to a status superior than that of the Americans themselves. Yet the Native American stereotypes remain similar – the noble savage and the blood-thirsty savage – indicating that American playwrights and audience members used still needed the frontier to reaffirm their national identity. Such a need meant that non-Natives would not allow Native American theatrical characters to grow beyond the stereotypes.

Non-Native Americans used those stereotypes, like any other time, depending on their need in the moment. Following the regained confidence in America after World War II, popular entertainment that centered on historical events was made to function as allegories of

\textsuperscript{51} Grose, 274-275.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 235.
contemporary political and social concerns, issues, and events. In particular, the tumultuous 1960s, with the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and the rise of civil rights movements, allowed Americans to either reaffirm their national identity or to question it. For many Americans, the 1960s were a time in which they could proudly explore their national identity.

According to Richard Slotkin,

the Indian-war metaphor became increasingly prominent in the rhetoric of counterinsurgency after 1961, in part because of the parallels between these two kinds of fighting – both of which took place in a ‘wilderness’ setting against a racially and culturally alien enemy. But the real power and relevance of the Indian-war metaphor are rooted in its appropriateness as an expression of the New Frontier’s basic assumptions about the relation between “primitive” and “advanced” peoples: that the natives (“savages”) of “fledgling” or “less developed” nations lacked anything like the equivalent of the political culture of a Western nation-state.53

With this mentality, non-Native Americans could continue to re-enact their history of westward expansion into the frontier through territorial acquisitions in Vietnam and other countries. The frontier was not closed – far from it, in fact – and the new frontier even included Natives. The basic equation of frontier conflict, complete with fortresses to provide shelter from the outside savagery, was alive and thriving and non-Native Americans could then, therefore, continue to feel American.54

One theatrical work, Little Mary Sunshine, indicates that not only did theatre perpetuate Native American stereotypes, but that non-Native playwrights and audience members still use them to reaffirm their pride in an American national identity. Little Mary Sunshine, written in 1959 and first produced in 1962, is a musical melodrama that takes place in the Rocky Mountains in the early twentieth century. The plot centers on Mary Sunshine, owner of the Colorado Inn, and Captain “Big Jim” Warrington, a Forest Ranger whose regiment periodically

53 Slotkin, 493.
54 Ibid., 269.
is stationed at the Inn. The Rangers are supposed to protect the surrounding areas from an unknown wild savage who has been causing problems, but receive help from a friendly Native named Chief Brown Bear, Chief of the Kadota Indians. In true melodramatic form, *Little Mary Sunshine* employs a number of entertaining plot twists and turns. Chief Brown Bear raised the white Mary Sunshine, but his son Yellow Feather, an evil savage, lusted after Mary. Believed to be dead, Yellow Feather no longer poses a problem to the lovely Mary. Chief Brown Bear, however, needs a son so the Kadota tribe could continue. He decides to adopt Corporal Billy Jester, one of the Forest Rangers, to replace the son he lost. Meanwhile, Captain Jim and Mary’s love continues to blossom even though she faces the loss of her inn because she cannot pay her mortgage. Their love is put to the test, however, when Mary is captured by the supposedly-dead Yellow Feather, who is, in fact, the wild savage the Rangers are after. He ties her to a tree, but just in the nick of time, Captain Jim comes to her rescue. For his bravery, Mary is allowed to keep her inn, which she promptly gives to Chief Brown Bear because it was the land of his people. A crew of Forest Rangers and nearby boarding school ladies provide plenty of laughs to keep the audience entertained through the twists and turns of this production.  

Although set in the twentieth century, *Little Mary Sunshine* still utilized all of the melodramatic conventions that allowed Americans to reaffirm their national identity through the frontier and Native American stereotypes. Burl Donald agreed, arguing that “the portrait of the Native American put forth in *Little Mary Sunshine* is a collective of nearly the entire history of the stage Indian reduced to cartoon size: noble savage and last of tribe, red devil, comic Indian, tomahawks, vile food, scalps, potential rape, bad grammar, and cigar store Indian.”  

Non-Native Americans could still relive westward expansion through the Yellow Feather character.

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56 Grose, 243.
He is pure evil, capturing the helpless Mary Sunshine, lusting after her, and declaring “Me want you, Merry Sunshine. Me have you – now.”57 It is right that Captain Jim, one of the Forest Rangers, rescues her and vanquishes the evil Yellow Feather. Yellow Feather no longer is a problem for Mary Sunshine and the Rangers, thus no longer prohibiting westward expansion. Yet at the same time, the friendly Chief Brown Bear helps the Rangers capture his evil son, even adopting the white man Billy Jester to replace the son he lost. Billy Jester is the perfect example of “playing Indian” for audience members. Billy even sings a song about his new identity, called “Me A Heap Big Injun.” In the song, Billy educates the audience members about what it is like to be an Indian, revealing that “When I was but a lad of five/I dreamed that I would be/An Injun Brave who lived inside a tepee./My dreams have all come true at last/Though I am over five./And I will be the finest Brave alive;/I’ve always been a Pale Face, born and bred./But since I made the change is my face red:/It’s gotta be said - /That - /Me a heap big Injun.”58 Billy allowed many non-Native audience members to believe that they could become Indians as well. At a time when many non-Native Americans reveled in their national identity, they could not only relive the creation of that identity through Billy Jester, but could also justify the United States’ current existence as a superpower through the extermination of Yellow Feather and the consequent westward expansion.

Yet for many Americans, post-World War II was not a time to regale in an American identity, but rather a time to seriously question it. Many felt that during the decades-long Cold War in the United States, “playing Indian” once again shifted to address national anxieties focused on a perceived lack of personal identity. Richard Slotkin discusses such sentiments, arguing that for many, “Indians figured as the archetypal victims of White America’s bigotry and

57 Besoyan, 62.
58 Ibid., 51.
imperialism. Proponents of the so-called ‘counterculture’ paid homage to the values they found in various Native American societies. Those non-Native Americans who disagreed with U.S. activities could then identify themselves with a noble savage stereotype and thus, similar to the relationship early Americans had with Metamora, believe that they were not the same as their oppressors, but rather they were similar to a noble race of people. Performances during the later half of the twentieth century reflected this desire; as Slotkin argues, performances ‘[…] suggested that Native American culture might be a morally superior alternative to ‘civilization.’ […] Popularizations of the new ethnography suggested that by studying native societies we might discover alternative models of development.’ Non-Native Americans who strove to bring attention to the injustices Native Americans witnessed, as well as sought to live like them, could thus cast off their previously corrupt identity and create a better one through performative means.

Robert Schenkkan’s *The Kentucky Cycle* is a play that reflects such a desire. Written in 1993, *The Kentucky Cycle* is actually comprised of nine one-act plays that chart the Rowen family from 1775 to 1975. In the first play, titled *Masters of Trade*, Michael Rowen trades poxed blankets and guns with Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee man, for fur pelts and a plot of land in Kentucky. Killing another trader in the process, Rowen ensures that the land is his. In the second play, *Courtship of Morning Star*, Michael Rowen steals a young Cherokee woman, Morning Star. He marries her against her will, rapes her, and, when she runs away, cuts the tendon in her leg so she can walk, but not run. Morning Star then bears him a son and Michael names him Patrick. In the third play, *The Homecoming*, Patrick is now a young man wanting to marry. Michael has a hateful relationship with his son and wife. The audience finds out that

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59 Slotkin, 629.
60 Ibid., 629.
61 Philip J. Deloria, 129.
Morning Star had given birth to a baby girl and Michael left the baby in the mountains to die.

Patrick constantly wants his father’s approval and when Michael threatens to not give Patrick his land upon his death, Patrick, at Morning Star’s prompting, kills Michael. Before his death, however, Michael brings home a slave woman named Sallie whom Patrick inherits. In *Ties That Bind*, Patrick has two grown sons, Zeke and Zach, but has gone into debt from when he purchased more land. To pay his debts, Patrick sells Jessie, Sallie’s son, even though Sallie reveals that Jessie was Patrick’s half-brother because Michael raped her. Patrick, however, will do anything to keep the Rowen land and sells Jessie anyway. By the fifth play, *God’s Great Supper*, it is 1861 already and Patrick is an old man. His son Zeke has a son named Jed. The Rowen’s are at risk of losing their land to a nearby family who sided with the Union in the Civil War. They devise a plot to keep the land, but their neighbor’s young son Randall overhears it. After a showdown between the two families in which the Rowen family keeps their land through devious means, Zeke kills Randall to ensure the Rowens can keep their land and no one knows of their devious ways. In the sixth play, *Tall Tales*, Jed decides to sell the mineral rights to his land to a slick-talking city man named JT. Mary Anne, Jed’s teenage daughter, takes a fancy to JT and JT reveals that he actually got a bargain for the mineral rights, that there are thousands of dollars worth of coal under the Rowen’s property. He gives Mary Anne the contract back and leaves town, but Jed does not believe her. In *Fire in the Hole*, the Rowen’s had lost their land to the coal company and Tommy Jackson, Mary Anne’s husband, now works in the mines. No one in the town is happy with the way that the coal company treats them and, with the help of Cassius Briggs (one of the slave Sallie’s descendents) and Abe Steinman (a union organizer), the coal miners go on strike. But Tommy tries to cheat them and Mary Anne leaves him, changing her name back to Rowen as well as their son Joshua’s last name. By the time Joshua Rowen is a
grown man, in *Which Side Are You On?*, the year is 1954 and he is the president of the miner’s union. The union is negotiating contracts and it is not going well. Joshua’s son Scott returns from serving in the military and decides to help his father with the contract negotiations. The workers decide to strike and Scott, striking alongside them, is killed in a collapsing mine. The ninth and final play, *The War on Poverty*, features Joshua as a ghost of his former self, devastated by the loss of his son. As he bemoans his loss in the wilderness, he is visited by Franklin Briggs, the latest descent of Sallie Briggs. As the two men reminisce about the way things used to be, they discover a mummified baby in a hole, with a beautiful piece of buckskin covering her. Joshua buries the baby and the ghost of Morning Star erupts from the ground alongside all of the people who suffered over the Rowen’s fight to keep their land. The Rowens are at peace now.⁶²

_The Kentucky Cycle_, while not outwardly appearing to utilize Native American stereotypes, still uses them to express some non-Native Americans’ discontent with their society and history. Through his work, Schenkkan places blame on white Americans and their greed for the current state of America. He creates the Native characters in his work to demonstrate that greed and did not give them any further character development than that. Morning Star is nothing more than a white man’s victim. Michael Rowen cripples her people with small pox and drives them from the land. He rapes her, cuts her tendons so she cannot run away, and leaves their daughter in the forest to die. Yet Morning Star and her people are the only thing that allowed Michael Rowen to gain his piece of the frontier and keep it. From that moment on, Michael and his descendents seem cursed, always striving to hold onto their land and to gain more, but always through devious means that come back to haunt them. As the generations come and go, mention of the Rowen’s Native ancestry fades until it is no longer mentioned. Yet

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at the very end, the little Native baby girl is found, buried, and the ghost of Morning Star bursts through the ground. That is the only mention of Native Americans in the twentieth century and the discovery of the baby girl and the presence of Morning Star as a ghost, both of whom died two hundred years before, firmly situates Native Americans as entities of the past rather than people of the present. For non-Native Americans, *The Kentucky Cycle* could allow them to utilize Native American characters to demonstrate the result of American greed, with the characters firmly placed in the past and stereotyped as victims who still helped Americans gain access to the frontier.63

*Little Mary Sunshine* and *The Kentucky Cycle* are just two examples of theatrical works in the twentieth century that could allow non-Native Americans to reaffirm a national identity based on the frontier. Innumerable theatrical productions throughout the century have accomplished similar feats and continue to do so. Consequently, theatre continued to be an effective vehicle for non-Natives who sought to reaffirm their national identity through Native American stereotypes within a fabricated frontier. While theatrical productions that utilized Native American stereotypes served non-Native communities, their fabrication of the frontier and its supposed Native inhabitants had, and continue to have, devastating effects on Native American communities.

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63 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2: WHERE ARE THE FEATHERS?

The twentieth century has witnessed a reinvigoration of Native American communities, traditions, and practices. In this chapter, I will explore how Native communities in the twentieth century have utilized Native-controlled theatre as a means to further fight for, and gain, self-determination. First I will establish a general political history of Native Americans in the twentieth century in order to showcase the history behind the Native American self-determination movement that gained momentum in the 1950s and 60s and continues today. I will then explore different perspectives on the self-determination movement in order to reinforce that Native communities do not have a monolithic approach to fighting for their rights. Finally, I will explore how Native theatre practitioners view Native-controlled theatre as a political tool for Native communities to utilize in their fight for self-determination.

Theatre has often been used to perpetuate oppressive ideology and stereotypes that, while serving some populations, negatively impact other communities. As demonstrated, non-Native theatre practitioners that utilize stereotypical Native American characters have benefited from those plays. Yet for Native Americans, the use of these stereotypes has only furthered the ideological colonization of their communities. Although many Native communities fought against physical and ideological colonization for centuries, by the beginning of the twentieth century it appeared to non-Natives that the colonizing efforts were near completion. Native Americans, however, in the second half of the twentieth century have collectively renewed and increased their efforts to regain self-determination over their political, social, and cultural lives. Native-controlled theatre in the later half of the twentieth century has become one vehicle through which many Native communities have fought for self-determination.
Throughout U.S. history, the federal government’s Native American policies fluctuated between assimilation and recognizing Native Americans’ right to tribal sovereignty. *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) and the Dawes Act (1887) best symbolized the two conflicting polices. By the early 1800s, U.S. government officials needed to legally describe their relationship with the country’s Native inhabitants. In *Worcester v. Georgia*, Justice Marshall ruled that each Native nation had its own political sovereignty. While succeeding federal legislation and court decisions often impacted Native Americans as a collective group, *Worcester v. Georgia* recognized the sovereignty of every tribe in the United States.\(^1\) Marshall’s ruling became the root of tribal sovereignty and Native Americans utilized the ruling in the twentieth century. In complete contrast, the 1887 General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) sought to legally assimilate Natives through allotting reservation land on an individual rather than a tribal basis. As the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century drew to a close and Native Americans shoved onto reservation land, the federal government had to decide upon a different Native American policy than outright warfare. By allotting land, non-Natives illogically believed that the reservations would eventually disappear and, no longer able to draw support from a land base, Native Americans as a group of people would be wiped out. Once isolated through allotment, the federal government used education as its best assimilation tool against Native populations. From the late 1880s until the 1960s, Native assimilation was the primary goal for the federal government.\(^2\)

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1. There are currently over 500 federally-recognized tribes in the United States.
Yet the 1920s marked an interesting transition point in Native American history. Native Americans slowly recovered from the traumatic loss of their lands, cultures, and populations and the 1920s thus witnessed the blending of the old with the new customs created by allotment and assimilation. In addition to blending customs, the 1920s allowed a new economic possibility for Native Americans: the growth of tourism and the business it generated. Many Native Americans also began to travel off the reservations in search of jobs. While some seasonal jobs let Natives return to the reservations on a regular basis, most travelers formed communities within larger cities in response to job opportunities. The “urban Indian” developed with the early migration. For Native Americans, however, the 1920s were most noted for the Citizenship Act. In 1924, the Citizenship Act granted all Native Americans their wrongfully-withheld U.S. citizenship. Although the act rectified a humiliating situation, it did very little to better aid Natives.  

As the 1920s drew to a close and the 1930s began, John Collier entered the Native American political scene. In the 1930s, Collier, part of WWI’s disillusioned “Lost Generation,” was attracted to Native cultures and he believed in preserving them. As Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Collier sought to radically change federal Native American policies. He extensively re-examined Native policy and his practices formed the period between assimilation and termination. He was perhaps most famous for introducing the Indian Reorganization Act. The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA or Wheeler-Howard Act) included four titles that discussed Native self-government, education, land, and a Court of Indian Affairs. Collier designed the proposed act to give increased control to Native Americans and decrease control held by the U.S. federal government. Yet the IRA’s final version was considerably diminished from the original

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bill and concentrated on economic and political improvement within tribes. The IRA outlawed allotment and returned surplus lands to Natives. It gave Native Americans control of land sales or leasing, and allowed the formation of tribal governments. However, previous allotments remained intact and tribal courts were refused. As a result, Collier’s original intent to give control back to Native Americans failed. The IRA, however, helped some Native Americans to regain a certain amount of control over their own lives while providing the foundation for self-determination. The IRA, for example, left a serious question in many Native Americans’ minds: should they form a tribal government? Vine Deloria (Yankton Sioux), in his vital foundational work entitled *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, reveals that “under the provisions of this act reservation people were enabled to organize for purposes of self-government. These reservations are not known as tribes. Often the remnants of larger historical tribal groups that were located on different pieces of land, they became under IRA officially recognized as ‘tribes.’”

The process thus took several Native communities and, through the separation of those communities by reservations, created several smaller tribes. For many Natives, a formal tribal government forever altered their culture, yet to qualify for IRA protection, the formation of a tribal government was imperative. Many chose not to organize because they felt the federal government had no authority to tell sovereign nations how to govern themselves. To those who decided to organize into tribal governments, that organization later proved vital to realizing self-determination; those tribes who resisted organization provided an important foundation for the self-determination movement.

The tiny beginnings of self-determination that began in the 1930s only flourished with the outbreak of World War II. Native Americans’ experiences in WWII drastically altered

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5 Olson, 116; Margaret Connell Szasz, *Education and the American Indian: the Road to Self-Determination since 1928* (New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 41; Iverson, *We Are Still Here*, 92; Robbins, 106.
Native participation in the fight for social and political change. After serving in the military, Native veterans felt empowered to confront problems and they sought other veterans to help with their efforts. Natives also established, and benefited from, the National Congress of American Indians. A channel for Native American veterans, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), organized in 1944, addressed Native American concerns and needs. The NCAI’s role was crucial in preparation for the fight against termination and the beginnings of self-determination.6

Just as Native Americans began to actively seek tribal improvement and increased independence, federal government officials pursued a legalized policy of termination and relocation. Although termination was not put into practice until the early 1950s, its conception came immediately following World War II. The federal government sought to reduce domestic spending during World War II’s last year in order to concentrate its efforts almost solely on defeating the Axis powers and then on winning the Cold War. The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) budget did not escape from the federal budget slash. O.K. Armstrong, Congressional member and then-editor of Reader’s Digest, initially spelled out the theory behind the termination policy. Armstrong believed the reservation system to be outdated and that Native Americans were ready to become “full-fledged” Americans. Armstrong’s beliefs, however, required the termination of federal trust responsibility and the removal of that could be disastrous for Native communities. Termination’s main component was the federal government’s removal, including the BIA, from Native lives; as the federal government began to remove itself from the

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picture, state governments would assume control. The thought of state governments intervening in tribal affairs became an incentive for many Natives to fight for self-determination.\(^7\)

With House Concurrent Resolution 108’s passage in 1953, Congress officially declared termination a legal policy and course of action. The resolution passed amongst a host of minor, yet more publicized bills. Upon receiving a favorable report from the Indian affairs subcommittee and the Interior committee, Congress moved the resolution moved easily through the channels. Once the federal government laid the legal foundation for termination, laws furthering the policy flooded federal and state governments. Two weeks after passing H.C.R. 108, for example, Congress began the process of approving House Resolution 1063. The bill, a pre-cursor to Public Law 280, authorized the extension of state jurisdiction to include reservations; the state could to amend its constitution to assume civil and criminal jurisdiction over reservations and tribal governments would be subordinate to state jurisdiction. House Resolution 1063 continued to remove the federal government’s control over Native lives. Public Law 280 allowed the state and federal governments to take over criminal and civil jurisdiction on reservations, beginning with California, Nebraska, Minnesota, Oregon, and Wisconsin. In addition, the states were authorized to supply government services to Native Americans. The intent of P.L. 280 was that it would further the BIA’s decentralization. January of 1954 marked the climax of termination as Congress received a flood of termination bills.\(^8\)

Relocation took its place beside termination as the second goal of federal Indian policy in the 1950s. While simultaneously terminating tribal status, the federal government encouraged Native Americans to move to the cities to seek employment. Consequently, the relocation

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program only reinforced termination; it aided the decentralizing of federal authority over Native Americans by forcing states to create their own relocation assistance programs. The relocation program’s two primary goals were vocational training and employment assistance for Native Americans. The result of termination and relocation was the harsh continuation of Native assimilation into mainstream society. The federal government dissolved over one hundred tribal nations between 1953 and 1958 and relocated thousands off the reservations, separating those individuals from their previous cultural centers. The self-determination movement emerged in response to the federal government’s termination and relocation policy in the 1950s and 60s.9

Although undeniably repressed, Native American tribes held inherent sovereign status and Native peoples dual citizenship (U.S. and their specific tribe). That sovereign status allowed Native Americans to fight for self-determination. Yet Natives and non-Natives alike disagreed on the execution and ideology of the self-determination movement. One point of contention existed because Native Americans and their struggle for self-determination in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with other groups’ fight for rights in the United States. In the introduction of The Movements of the New Left 1950-1975: A Brief History with Documents, Van Gosse examines the collective body of human rights activists in the United States during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Gosse argues that “what linked these movements was the importance they placed on the dignity of each individual and the right of every American to full citizenship.”10 Calling the movements the “New Left,” Gosse includes Native Americans’ efforts. By doing so, he recognized their unequal status as United States citizens. Gosse, however, neglected to acknowledge tribes’ status as sovereign nations and by extension, Native Americans’ dual citizenship.

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9 Fixico, 145, 147; Rawls, 46; Robbins, 99.  
In his examination of New Left discourse, Gosse explores the relationships between U.S. groups fighting for rights post-World War II as well as the legislation that emerged as a result of their struggles. Gosse argues that numerous groups (African-Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, women, and homosexuals) emerged as powerful political and social entities through activism and by fighting for such similar objectives; they united as the underserved who demanded equal footing. He states that besides their common commitment to extending democracy to all, the multiple movements of the New Left were linked in other fundamental ways as well. To a remarkable degree, they learned from one another, adapting similar strategies of confronting authority, exposing injustice, and provoking change.\textsuperscript{11}

Native Americans unquestionably utilized similar tactics as their contemporaries to fight for their rights. In fish-ins, for example, Natives would literally fish in areas that the U.S. government said they could not. Their argument was that they were sovereign and the U.S. government could not tell them where they could and could not fish. The fish-ins represented a necessary and creative tactical adaptation from the Southern lunch counter tactic used by African Americans. In comparison, the federal legislation that emerged from similar fighting strategies intended to benefit everyone who fought during this time period. Gosse, for example, believes that the two main pieces of legislation of the period, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, “together marked a revolutionary change in extending full citizenship to all Americans. That revolution remains firmly in place. Equal treatment before the law and in all public activities, from business to education, is enforceable and enforced.”\textsuperscript{12} For Gosse, the legislation united those who fought for their rights into a singular group. While Native Americans drew on the practices of other groups in the United States that fought for civil rights as well as benefitting from general legislation, by placing Native American solely within the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 36.
New Left, Gosse virtually ignores the importance tribal sovereignty held for members of Native communities and their fight for self-determination.¹³

Native Americans indisputably utilized methods from other groups fighting for their rights in the United States, yet most agreed that Native populations indeed fought for self-determination as dual citizens rather than for civil rights as solely U.S. citizens. Yet some scholars, like George Pierre Castile, argue that while Native Americans fought for self-determination, the federal government desired the same outcome. In his book *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975,* Castile asserts that his “introduction is intended to set the scene for the later chapters – which discuss the emergence of self-determination – by sketching in the policy of termination, to which the new policy was a counterpoint.”¹⁴ By terming self-determination a “policy,” Castile places the self-determination movement as a federally-endorsed program rather than a struggle by Native Americans against the federal government. Castile analyzes federal legislation and policy-makers pertaining to Native Americans to construct his argument.

Castile concludes that while Native Americans indeed sought self-determination, the political and social atmosphere of the country at the time fostered a healthy, working relationship between Native Americans and federal government officials. Castile contends that two large-scale domestic policy tides crested during the Johnson years; neither had to do with Indians directly, but both were critical for what was to become of Indian affairs. The first was the general shift in the politics of things ethnic in America. In the civil rights struggle African American had created a new political force to which the Johnson administration and Congress responded with major legislation. That favorable political background – in which sensitivity to any

ethnic group’s situation was the better part of political valor – created an increasingly positive new context for Indian Affairs.¹⁵

Castile believes that federal officials, already favoring sensitivity to other ethnic groups, actively sought to include Native Americans in their new policies. According to Castile, President Lyndon Johnson himself adopted several policies that promoted Native American self-determination. He created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) as a part of his War on Poverty and Castile believed that the office, which worked with underserved communities to provide them with federal funding, became a key component to the emergence of self-determination as a new direction in federal Native policy.¹⁶ Furthermore, in his Presidential Policy Statement (1966), Johnson shaped the concept of “self-determination without termination,” thus “once termination fears were dispelled, the actions called for in the rest of the report were various forms of restructuring tending toward self-determination.”¹⁷ Johnson’s argent words support Castile’s argument that federal officials endorsed self-determination as a federal policy. Therefore, Castile’s analysis of federal documents and policies leads his readers to believe that the U.S. federal government fully supported, and aided, Native Americans’ quest for self-determination. In doing so, the federal government maintained its position as a controlling entity.

Many Native Americans, however, would argue that they fought for self-determination as sovereign, powerful entities. Peter Iverson (Navajo), in “We Are Still Here”: American Indians in the Twentieth Century, positions twentieth century Native Americans, and by extension the self-determination movement, as sovereign people who sought inherent rights. Iverson contends that the variety of Native experiences demanded that the “outcomes form one of the important

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.
¹⁶ Ibid., 25.
¹⁷ Ibid., 54.
themes of this book and show that Indian history must be presented as a national and as a regional and as a local story."¹⁸ Native participation in the self-determination movement must be discussed as complex and comprehensively as possible in order to give credit to all approaches. Iverson then argues that Native Americans, as they recovered from the genocide and assimilation they had experienced at the hands of U.S. federal government officials, as well as non-Native America, realized their lack of political, social, and cultural rights. Those shared experiences united Native Americans, as individuals and as tribes, and many began to fight for the rightful sovereignty of all nations.

Iverson asserts that returning Native WWII veterans provided the impetus for change in Native communities. He states that

> the war experience also underlined the responsibility the veterans felt for working for constructive social and political change. Across the United States they returned to the problems that needed addressing and that they felt more empowered to confront. In this recognition, they were joined by other Natives whose lives and perspectives had also been altered during the war years.²⁹

Those Native veterans thus united, both individually and through organizations, to create change. The early organizations provided a powerful and necessary foundation for later Native groups that fought for self-determination. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was one such group. The organization initially began when Native veterans fought to retain the rights they had in the military, but as civilians. Yet following World War II, the purpose of the NCAI and other Native organizations quickly evolved to fight against the federal policy of termination. Iverson’s research reveals that

> the drive toward terminating federal trust responsibility for Indians caused immediate harm and sometimes lasting damage, to certain Indian communities. However, the threat of federal withdrawal helped galvanize the beginnings of the modern Native American movement toward self-determination. Indian individuals

¹⁸ Iverson, *We Are Still Here*, 2.
²⁹ Ibid., 109.
and groups responded forcefully to reaffirm their rights and to find new means to realize them.\textsuperscript{20}

Rather than through federal support and endorsement, Iverson emphasizes that the self-determination movement emerged from the fight against termination and quickly united many Native Americans as they struggled to gain rights both as U.S. citizens and sovereign nations. The federal government was not a strong ally, but an opponent and oppressor to overcome.

Those Natives seeking to regain their full rights utilized many different fighting tactics. In his study of self-determination, Iverson explores Native American activists’ use of the federal system against itself. He argues that many Native Americans soon realized the power the federal court systems held for them in their quest for self-determination. Iverson states that by the end of the 1950s it had become evident that the courts presented one of the key arenas in the evolving battle for Indian rights. The acquisition of legal counsel inspired tribes to test the judicial waters in trying to determine just when and where their rights could be affirmed or clarified. And larger tribes such as the Navajos began to develop their own court systems, in part as a response to the potential of assumed state jurisdiction over Native lands. The establishment of tribal courts, in turn, provided the possibility of greater self-determination.\textsuperscript{21}

By working within the federal court system, Native Americans could then develop the organizational, research, and legal skills needed to work with U.S. Congress as they used the federal system against the government itself. This course of action would not be an easy one. Yet it appeared that one specific victory came when Congress passed the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968. Although on the surface the act seemingly began to solve Native rights issues, Iverson reveals that the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 reflected the desire of congressional representatives to restrict the power tribal governments could exercise over their members. It reaffirmed the applicability of much of the bill of Rights to those persons, including free speech. However, the interpretation of the act opened the

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 138.
door to a flood of lawsuits against different tribes, contesting tribal authority and sovereignty in a variety of realms.\textsuperscript{22}

The Indian Civil Rights Act, while it gave the appearance of returning control to Native communities, actually undermined those communities’ authority. As Native Americans continued to fight against such legislation, their efforts began to be rewarded with the Indian Self-Determination Act and the Indian Education Assistance Act of 1975. These two federal acts placed education and economics more under the control of tribal governments instead of the federal government. Although Iverson admits that not every Native American believed self-determination would result from U.S. legislation and court cases, he did claim that even the militant Native activists, such as members of the American Indian Movement, drew experience and inspiration for their later, more public protests from the early protests that had roots from prior treaties, agreements, and judicial decisions. Fighting within the legal system in place, Iverson argues, catapulted Native Americans towards self-determination.\textsuperscript{23}

Vine Deloria and Clifford M. Lytle, on the other hand, disagree with Native scholars like Peter Iverson. Deloria and Lytle believe that by fighting within the U.S. legal system, Native Americans fought for self-government rather than nationhood. The co-authors articulate that nationhood implies a process of decision making that is free and uninhibited within the community, a community in fact that is almost completely insulated from external factors as it considers its possible options. Self-government, on the other hand, implies a recognition by the superior political power that some measure of local decision making is necessary but that this process must be monitored very carefully so that its products are compatible with the goals and policies of the larger political power.\textsuperscript{24}

Scholars like Deloria and Lytle firmly believe that activists like Iverson, who sought to fight for self-determination within the federal court system, actually fought for self-government instead of

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 146-148, 160, 167.
nationhood. Furthermore, Deloria and Lytle argue that the results of the Native American self-determination movement verified that most Native Americans fought for self-government rather than nationhood. Therefore, self-government would hinder rather than aid Native Americans’ fight for tribal sovereignty in the self-determination movement.

Deloria and Lytle acknowledge that the Native American self-determination movement grew as a response to the federal government’s termination policy. Yet termination and the fight for nationhood were actually intertwined. The pair contend that

real self-determination, if anyone cared to think about it, was indeed termination, but under conditions established by Indians instead of Congress. Nevertheless self-determination was passed off in the language of the poverty wars to mean that the government should provide funds and transfer the responsibility for administering the programs to the tribes […]

Thus, federal support and legislation during that time did not actually promote and support self-determination. The federal government’s actions merely transferred some responsibility for Native programs to Native communities themselves. Although Deloria and Lytle do not approve of the federal government’s particular policy of termination, they argue that for Native Americans to achieve true nationhood, every tribe had to terminate its status as federal wards and assume full responsibility for running their own government and its programs. Yet, the scholars believe, Native Americans sacrificed their sovereignty by receiving funding at the expense of achieving self-determination.

Education emerged as one manner through which tribes could administer funding. The Indian Self-Determination Act and the Indian Education Assistance Act of 1975 provided, as Deloria and Lytle articulate, the perfect example of how education and its funding shaped the self-determination movement. They reveal that while tribes gained funding for education as well as regained control over their youth’s education, the federal government did not completely

25 Ibid., 216-217.
relinquish its role in Native education. Such legislation, Deloria and Lytle argue, allowed the self-determination movement and Native activists to place “too much blame on the federal government and spoke not at all to the Indian community of its own responsibilities in governing and managing. Self-determination was regarded as something of substance, which Congress might bestow on Indians, not a goal, which Indians might achieve for themselves.” Such legislation and its effects actually hindered Native Americans’ quest for self-determination. Native communities, therefore, should take self-determination for themselves, on their terms, rather than wait for it to be given to them by the federal government.27

It should not be surprising that Native Americans did not agree on one approach to gaining self-determination. Native Americans are complex, diverse people who do not think in monolithic terms and to expect such reduces them to stereotypes. Native Americans, like other communities, would never be able to completely agree what was the best means to pursue self-determination on an individual, tribal, and/or intertribal level. Yet most agreed that needed to be attained. Rebecca Robbins (Standing Rock Sioux), in her article “Self-Determination and Subordination: The Past, Present, and Future of American Indian Governance,” argues that

Native North America can at last be accorded its fundamental human right to self-determination. […] Only from this position – free from a dominating power unilaterally precluding certain of their options for its own reasons – can any nation ‘freely determine its political, social, economic destiny,’ and hence the nature of its mode of governance.28

Most Natives, regardless of how they attained it, sought to cast off colonial oppression and gain self-determination. Those who fought for self-determination saw it as vital to their physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being. In their fight for self-determination, Native communities fought for the ability to be recognized as sovereign equals, to define their lives, cultures, and

26 Ibid., 231.
27 Ibid., 220.
28 Robbins, 110.
communities themselves, and to conduct their lives as they saw fit. No longer would they accept non-Natives telling them how to act and believe. As Vine Deloria states in *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*

the primary goal and need of Indians today is not for someone to feel sorry for us and claim descent from Pocahontas to make us feel better. Nor do we need to be classified as semi-white and have programs and policies made to bleach us further. Nor do we need further studies to see if we are feasible. We need a new policy by Congress acknowledging our right to live in peace, free from arbitrary harassment. We need the public at large to drop the myths in which it has clothed us for so long. We need fewer and fewer ‘experts’ on Indians. What we need is a cultural leave-us-along agreement, in spirit and in fact.29

Native peoples needed, and still need today, the ability to decide for themselves how their lives should be conducted. After hundreds of years of physical and cultural genocide, Native Americans quite literally needed time to recover, regroup, and regain control over their lives. Regardless of how it was attained, Natives who fought in the self-determination movement sought to make that happen.30

Although the self-determination movement was not fought in a monolithic manner, one of the movement’s results was the reinvigoration of different Native cultures. According to Joane Nagel, author of *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*, reinvigorating culture and “the search for meaning in native traditions and the collective effort to strengthen and rebuild tribal cultures was a major goal of American Indian ethnic renewal in the late twentieth century. Not only individuals but groups of Indian people have attempted to renew or reconstruct their native heritage.”31 Reclaiming their heritage thus became an important component of self-determination; it meant that Native cultures were just as

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29 Vine Deloria, *Custer Died For Your Sins*, 27.
31 Nagel, 192.
valid as non-Native cultures in the U.S. Just as with the self-determination movement itself, Natives often disagreed on which was the best method to reinvigorate their cultures. Consequently, these negotiations and explorations took innumerable paths. Yet cultural revitalization, according to Kiowa/Delaware playwright Hanay Geiogamah, “which had seen the development of the contemporary powwow movement, tribal fairs, arts and crafts enterprises, and other culture-related activities, merged with the political and economic resurgence to forge a powerful and invigorating sense of momentum, of dedication, and an awareness of self-responsibility and renewed acknowledgement of the eternal value of tradition.”

The reinvigoration of Native cultures thus quickly became a method through which many Natives gained some measure of self-determination. Consequently, regardless of the form it took, cultural revitalization became a political component of the self-determination movement and Native Americans lives.

At the height of the self-determination movement, Native American-controlled theatre emerged as a method through which different Native communities explored their identities, traditions, and cultures. Some scholars, such as Sally Ann Heath in her dissertation entitled “The Development of Native American Theatre Companies in the Continental United States,” have called this theatrical movement “a theater of transformation” since theatre, by nature, is transformative and Native communities sought to transform their lives during this time period. Others, such as Julie Pearson-Little Thunder (Creek) in her dissertation entitled “Native Emergence Theater, 1975-1985, and the Enactment of Indian Theatrical Space by Red Earth Performing Arts Company, Daystar Dance Company and American Indian Theater Company of

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Oklahoma,” believe that theatre of this period is best titled “Native Emergence Theater.” She uses this term to highlight the sense of newness and possibility that Native-controlled theatre offered Native peoples. Regardless of what the theatrical movement’s name was, the ability to examine their lives and cultures through theatre was an act of self-determination during a time when Natives fought for that ability. Ann Haugo, in her article “Native American Drama,” contends that “in a society that would have eradicated their languages (and in some cases succeeded), taken their children, and eliminated as much Native culture as possible, the mere public act of claiming one’s Native identity is a political act.” Native-controlled theatre did just that for many Native people. For those people, theatre offered the ability to employ self-determination. Cherokee theatre practitioner Qwo-Li Driskill, in his article “Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization, and Healing,” agrees with Haugo’s claim. Driskill argues that “theatre aids in decolonization because through it we can learn what decolonization and healing feel like. Native theatre helps us understand our histories, tell our stories and imagine our futures.” As a powerful decolonization tool, Native-controlled theatre offered Native communities a means through which to explore their colonization while providing a powerful weapon to better fight for self-determination. The theatre presented, as theatre practitioner Bruce King (Haudesaunee) argues, “a forum for our voice.” Yet until the self-determination movement, it was difficult for Native Americans to use theatre, as well as many other methods, to express their voices. Native theatre practitioners emerged during the self-determination movement to correct the shortage of Native-written scripts, Native-run theatre

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companies, and Native control over how their communities were depicted in theatrical spaces. Consequently, some Native theatre practitioners decided to rectify the situation and created not only their own plays, but their own theatre companies. Most agreed that Hanay Geiogamah and his theatre company, the Native American Theatre Ensemble, propelled Native-controlled theatre companies into Native American and theatre communities alike.  

Geiogamah attended the University of Oklahoma, where he majored in journalism, and then Indiana University, Bloomington. During his time in college, Geiogamah developed a deep interest in theatre and began to write one-act plays. Those plays went unproduced for a long time because Geiogamah felt he needed Native actors to portray his characters, but did not know any Native actors at the time. Geiogamah’s vision for a Native-controlled theatre company then developed into a two-fold vision. He not only wanted to bring Native artists together to do theatre, but to do theatre that would relate to the lives of the Native artists and audiences. He quickly turned to earlier Native theatre companies like Arthur Juna’s American Indian Repertory Company, but very little information about them was available. He thus researched different minority theatre companies in existence to learn how those companies served their different populations.

That changed, however, when the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) selected Geiogamah to intern as an aid in the 1970 U.S. Senate. Geiogamah was assigned to Senator Edward Kennedy’s office, where part of his responsibilities included writing a proposal for an endeavor that would benefit Native American national identity. Geiogamah decided to draft a

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38 Haugo, 337-338; Heath, 179.
proposal to begin a Native-controlled theatre company. He presented his proposal to NIYC and, with the blessing of the council, submitted the proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts. The National Endowment gave Geiogamah the funds to implement his proposal, with the advisement that Geiogamah find an already-existent theatre company with which to partner. Café LaMama, a minority theatre company in New York, partnered with Geiogamah and, in 1972, he founded the American Indian Theatre Ensemble (later called the Native American Theatre Ensemble). Geiogamah used the funding to hire sixteen Native men and women as fulltime company members to create a strong foundation for the theatre company and soon the company began producing plays.39

The Native American Theatre Ensemble was not the first Native American theatre company, nor was it the last. Yet upon its conception, Native American theatre in the United States began to grown in strength, thus creating an artistic space where Native Americans could control their stories. Consequently, Native-controlled theatre began to hold an increased level of importance for Native communities. Geiogamah reveals, in his article entitled “The New American Indian Theatre: An Introduction,” the importance he believes that Native-controlled theatre held for Native communities. Geiogamah argues that “it [Native theatre] is an enterprise that, unlike films, which require millions of dollars in financing, can be produced on much smaller budgets and can be maintained completely in Indian hands and under Indian artistic direction.”40 Theatre offered Geiogamah, and others, the ability to regain and maintain control over how they explored their lives and images. With the freedom of artistic control, however, comes responsibility. According to Geiogamah, “the American Indian theater has before it the challenge of helping Indian people to better know who they are and how their lives are being

affected by all the changes occurring at the end of the twentieth century.”\(^{41}\) This examination is the most important purpose of Native-controlled theatre as it charges itself with the importance of serving, first and foremost, Native Americans. Bruce King agrees with Geiogamah’s assessment. In his article “Emergence and Discovery: Native American Theater Comes of Age,” King argues that Native-controlled theatre “empowers us to confront and examine the present, to look at who we are today so that we may better understand ourselves.”\(^{42}\) Theatre thus served Native communities while simultaneously bequeathing responsibility on its participants to fully explore and embrace their lives.

Native-controlled theatre granted Native Americans the ability to not only revive and maintain different cultural traditions, but to explore the issues that faced their communities. Julie Pearson-Little Thunder (Creek), in her article “Acts of Transfer: The 1975 and 1976 Productions of Raven and Body Indian by Red Earth Performing Arts Company,” discusses some of the cultural benefits of Native-controlled theatre. Pearson-Little Thunder applies performance theorist Diana Taylor’s discussion of “acts of transfer” to Native theatre. She states that “as Taylor emphasizes, performance may also function as an ‘act of transfer’ conveying ‘social knowledge, memory and sense of identity,’ from one group of individuals to another and one generation to the next.”\(^{43}\) Theatre thus could be a site where cultural education could occur. Pearson-Little Thunder relates both of these concepts to the relationships between and transfer of knowledge amongst Native Americans in theatrical spaces. In her discussion of Nik Di Martino’s Raven (1975), Pearson-Little Thunder argues that after this act of transfer, wherever the intertribal cast traveled – whether to Indian homes in area, longhouse ceremonies or Northwest Coast exhibition dances, the

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 163.
\(^{42}\) King, 167.
information they carried on their bodies would be recontextualized, added to, expanded upon. It would have a life outside of, and beyond the theater.\textsuperscript{44}

Martino’s play provided Native Americans from different backgrounds and experiences the opportunity to not only learn new traditions, but for both the maintenance and expansion of specific cultural traditions of the Northwest Coast peoples amongst themselves. One vital act of transfer, for example, was that director Bill Miller (Skokomish/Yakima) taught the cast iconic Yakima dances and singing styles. The cast not only learned those practices, but Native audiences likewise saw either a style of performance related to a different tribal affiliation than their own or witnessed the maintenance of their own traditions. The same concept could be applied to the costumes, language used, etc. Although Native theatre drew on traditional practices for some of its material, writes Pearson-Little Thunder, it is not in the business of doing ritual on stage: to use “theatre” and “ceremony” interchangeably, she argues, does “a disservice to tribal cultures, and reinforces imperial constructions of Indians as ‘naïve’ or ‘primitive.’”\textsuperscript{45}

Consequently, Native theatre preserved and discussed various Native traditions rather than enacted ceremonies on stage. Thus, the transmission of knowledge that Native theatre practitioners and audience members experienced during this particular production served the primary purpose of Native theatre – it was specifically for and by Natives.

Although Native theatre certainly offered a space where different Native traditions and customs could be explored, documented, and discussed, Native theatre did not exist solely for these purposes. Di Martino, while directing Raven, experienced some concerns about utilizing such specific Northwest traditions. According to Julie Pearson-Little Thunder, “despite his [Di Martino’s] admiration for Northwest Coast cultures, and his desire to transfer to the audience a

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{45} Julie Pearson-Little Thunder, “Native Emergence Theater,” 18-19.
sense of Native social relations […]], his purpose in writing *Raven* was to deliver a theatrically exciting, Indian-themed play, not to convey Northwest Coast collective knowledges, histories, memories, or emotions […].’’

The primary goals of many Native theatre companies were to simultaneously present material based in tradition alongside contemporary issues that faced Native communities, particularly urban Native communities. Those issues included, but were not limited to, alcoholism and family dynamics. When the Red Earth Performing Arts Company performed Hanay Geiogamah’s *Body Indian*, for example, it was a play that heavily explored the issues and complexes behind alcoholism in Native communities. Thus, as Julie Pearson-Little Thunder reveals,

… the play’s dialogue and situations hit close to home. As a result, actors were conscious of simultaneously being inside and outside the story. They brought their own memories and issues to the play with alcoholism, and channeled them into the rehearsal process. Playing characters trapped in alcohol addiction empowered the actors, allowing them to mine the script for personal and group healing even as they exploited its comedy.

Similar to the situation created by *Body Indian*, Native-controlled theatre therefore offered members of different Native communities the ability to explore different issues and identities in a safe and empowering space.

Regardless of what was shared in Native theatrical productions, the most important aspect of Native-controlled theatre has been its ability to serve Native communities in whatever manner that particular community needed. As Julie Pearson-Little Thunder describes, “the ability of Native theater to transmit alternative traditions, histories, and memories, and share different ways of knowing by means of performance, is one of its great strengths.’’

Consequently, Native theatre became another space where Native Americans could gather, be in

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48 Heath, 153.
one another’s company, and participate in something specifically Native. Theatre became a space where Native Americans could gather, reclaim their stories, imagery, and traditions, and enjoy being Native. In an interview, Assiniboine playwright William S. Yellow Robe stated that “there is still a fight for freedom. Unfortunately, everybody believes that everybody was put into the melting pot, but the Native people never melted. The tribes never melted and that’s what my plays are saying.”

Yellow Robe’s passionate statement reveals the imperative importance that Native-controlled theatre held for Native communities. Not only did Native-controlled theatre serve as a method for Native Americans to regain self-determination, but it exposed to non-Natives that efforts to colonize Native Americans did not fully succeed. Through the power of theatre, many Native Americans effectively told their stories, reclaimed their identities, and served their communities – in the manner they chose.

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CHAPTER 3: THE POSSIBILITY OF RAPPROCHEMENT

Based on my explorations of non-Natives who utilize Native American stereotypes in their plays and Native-controlled theatre, it would seem impossible that participation in theatre would encourage non-Natives to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples and begin to learn about contemporary Native lives from Native Americans themselves. As I demonstrate in this chapter, however, that does not have to be the case. Native-controlled theatre has the potential for non-Native audience members to cast aside their perceptions of Native Americans as entities of the past and gain a nuanced understanding of Native lives and issues today. I will first explore the role of an ethnographer in order to caution non-Natives against many mistakes their predecessors have made when working with Native peoples. Then I will discuss the use of Diana Taylor’s concepts of the archive and the repertoire to establish the tools non-Natives can utilize while participating as audience members in a Native-controlled theatrical production. Following my discussion of Taylor’s research, I will apply Mary Louise Pratt’s investigation of contact zones and transculturation to two Native-written plays. Finally, I will offer recommendations on how Native-controlled theatrical productions can support non-Native audience members’ change in perception of Native peoples through dialogue.

When utilizing Native characters, stories, histories, and imageries, the goals of Native and non-Native theatre practitioners and audience members drastically conflict with one another. The result has been, and continues to be, the struggle between cultural imperialism and cultural self-determination. In her article “Cultural Imperialism and the Marketing of Native America,” Choctaw scholar Laurie Anne Whitt passionately argues that when the spiritual knowledge, rituals, and objects of historically subordinated cultures are transformed into commodities, economic and political power merge to produce cultural imperialism. A form of oppression exerted by a dominant society upon other cultures, and typically a source of economic profit, cultural
imperialism secures and deepens the subordinated status of those cultures. In the case of indigenous cultures, it undermines their integrity and distinctiveness, assimilating them to the dominant culture by seizing and processing vital cultural resources, then remaking them in the image and marketplaces of the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{1}

As I articulated in Chapter 1, non-Native controlled theatre has been a powerful method through which non-Native Americans have transformed Native cultures, histories, and imageries into commodities to be used to suit their purposes. It is also the case that Native-controlled theatre practitioners harnessed theatre as a powerful method to produce and disseminate notions of identity. It would appear, therefore, that the stories told by both types of theatre could cause Natives and non-Natives to remain in constant opposition with one another. Yet with such powerful political and cultural outcomes for Natives and non-Natives alike, Native-controlled theatre can provide an opportunity for not only non-Natives to begin to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples, but for both groups to begin to engage, perhaps for the first time, in a dialogue with one another.

As already established, many non-Native Americans have a reputation of often not behaving in a respectful manner towards Native peoples. For many non-Natives, Native Americans are nameless, faceless stereotypes. In order for non-Natives to be able to gain a nuanced understanding of different Native communities and peoples, they can no longer discuss Native Americans in the abstract. Many associate ethnographers with being the primary group of people to engage in any activity with members of different communities and an exploration of their roles and experiences provide a cautionary tale for non-Natives wishing to learn from Native Americans. In his article “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” scholar Dwight Conquergood offers his non-Native readers his

\textsuperscript{1}Laurie Anne Whitt, “Cultural Imperialism and the Marketing of Native America,” In \textit{Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues}, ed. Duane Champagne (California, AltaMira Press, 1999), 171.
exploration of a performative ethnographer’s role with a community with which he or she does not identify. According to Conquergood, performative ethnographers “study the diversity and unity of cultural performance as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying the meaningfulness of life.” Cultural performance ethnographers, therefore, construct a lens through which their audiences view that group of people. Such lenses have the ability to either build or remove barriers between Native and non-Native Americans. Conquergood, however, advocates that performance removes barriers that ethnographers may create with their academic work. He states that “when one keeps intellectual, aesthetic, or any other kind of distance from the other, ethnographers worry that other people will be held at an ethical and moral remove as well.” The ethnographic written word allows its readers to make a particular community, and its members, distant and strange. Performance has the ability to allow people to connect on deeper, more emotional levels than the solitary activity of reading. Most commonly, for Native Americans, too often ethnographic research places them and their communities at a distance, thus invoking an “us” and “them” paradigm. While ethnographic performance may not completely eradicate such reactions, Native-controlled theatre can impact non-Natives by emphasizing connections made during performances. Although non-Natives will never understand what it is like to be a member of a particular Native community, Conquergood’s arguments provide hope that performance can serve as a means for non-Natives to begin to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native Americans.

Performance offers potential foundational theatrical interactions between Natives and non-Natives. Yet while Conquergood outlines some of the positive outcomes of performative

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3 Ibid., 399.
ethnographic practices, he articulates others that prove problematic to any community and Native communities in particular. Conquergood believes that “when working with minority peoples and disenfranchised subcultures, such as refugees, one is frequently propelled into the role of advocate. The ethnographer, an uninvited stranger who depends upon the patient courtesies and openhanded hospitality of the community, is compelled by the laws of reciprocity and human decency to intervene, if he can, in a crisis.” While any person, particularly an ethnographer, should not disregard a request for help made by a community, Conquergood’s language might be interpreted as a rule that an ethnographer must shoulder the sole responsibility of helping the community that cannot help itself. Such an attitude and approach is, as Bonnie and Eduardo Duran reveal in their work *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, highly offensive to Native communities. The scholars argue that “one important barrier encountered while attempting to conduct research in the Native American community is the residual feelings still fresh in most Native American memories for the colonizing techniques of the anthropologists and other well-meaning albeit arrogant social scientists.” Helping those who supposedly cannot help themselves was, and still is, a colonizing technique utilized by overeager ethnographers and, for Natives, detrimental to their efforts to regain self-determination. Yet Conquergood does not formally acknowledge, at least in this work, that this kind of thinking can be detrimental. He states that “the one question I almost never get, however, is the ‘white guilt’ accusation, ‘What right do you, a middle-class white man, have to perform these narratives?’” As Native stories and histories have been appropriated for centuries by non-Natives, Conquergood’s statement gives us pause. While Conquergood certainly has the right to perform, from his perspective,

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4 Ibid., 399-400.
6 Conquergood, 401.
what he witnesses or what he is given permission to perform by the particular community, his performances cannot be the only performances of that community. His relative silence on the subject may invite the conclusion that there is no problem with someone who does not identify with a community performing their stories and histories. Yet my research strongly suggests that it is problematic, particularly for Native communities. In most cases, it undermines their fight for self-determination. Despite some of Conquergood’s lack of attention to necessary subject matters, his work is clearly valuable in laying out the problems of any ethnographic project.

Although non-Natives face many challenges, this does not mean that they should not interact with, and learn from, members of different Native communities. Yet anyone who seeks to learn from and engage with Native Americans should be conscientious of the dangers some of their behavior could cause. Conquergood discusses some of the ethical pitfalls he has noticed occur when people who do not belong to a particular community seek to learn from and interact with that community. Labeling them “the Custodian’s Rip-Off,” “the Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” and “the Curator’s Exhibitionism,” Conquergood provides in-depth analysis of these three pitfalls with and in which ethnographers engage. Conquergood defines the “Custodian’s Rip-Off” as “a strong attraction toward the other coupled with extreme detachment results in acquisitiveness instead of genuine inquiry, plunder more than performance.” The result is selfishness; the ethnographer merely acquires aspects of a community’s culture that serve him or her rather than actively learning about the community. Yet even those who do seek to actively learn about a community can quickly find themselves experiencing another pitfall. With the “Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” eager ethnographers “get sucked into the quicksand belief of ‘Aren’t all people just alike?’” Although not as transparently immoral as ‘The Custodian’s Rip-Off,’ this

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7 Ibid., 402.
performance stance is unethical because it trivializes [...] it trivializes the lives and experiences of the ethnographic subjects. The unfortunate result is that the ethnographers generalize the community, causing its members to lose their unique distinctiveness. Consequently, ethnographers believe that they can identify with members of the community. Yet the last pitfall that Conquergood articulates contrasts with the previous two. The “Curator’s Exhibitionism” ethnographer is committed to portraying the difference of the community. Conquergood argues that “this is the ‘Wild Kingdom’ approach to performance that grows out of fascination with the exotic, primitive, culturally remote. The performer wants to astonish rather than understand. […] Instead of bringing us into genuine contact (and risk) with the lives of strangers, performances in this mode bring back museum exhibits, mute and staring.” Consequently, ethnographers exoticize members of the community and put them on display for the general public rather than learning about the community, from the community. An ethnographer, or any person wishing to work with and learn from a community with which they do not identify, must be conscientious of each dangerous pitfall. For Native Americans, their communities have experienced all of the catastrophic results that ethnographers have wrought when they let themselves become caught up in one or more of these pitfalls. Consequently, anyone wishing to work with Native communities, theatrical or not, must be extremely cautious that he or she does not embrace the “Custodian’s Rip-Off,” “the Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” or “the Curator’s Exhibitionism.”

With so many cautions crowding the brain, it may seem impossible for non-Natives to have any relationship with Native Americans, even less so in a performance space since performance has been such a powerful vehicle for appropriation. Yet performance has the

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8 Ibid., 404.
9 Ibid., 405.
potential to become an even more powerful means through which non-Natives can begin to acknowledge that Native Americans are not two-dimensional characters that serve their purposes, but complex, diverse, contemporary people. In order for this to occur, it would seem that non-Natives must have some knowledge of Native American issues and be educated about Native performance. Yet Julie Pearson-Little Thunder (Creek) reveals that playwright Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa/Delaware) “is counting upon the repertoire and embodiment [found in Native-controlled performance] to challenge any anthropological/sociological stance of “objectivity” on the part of non-Indian audience members, and to transform their stereotyped expectations of contemporary Indian life into an experiential encounter through performance.”\(^{10}\)

Geiogamah believes Native-controlled theatre to be a means through which non-Natives can actually learn about Native peoples, issues, and performance from Natives themselves. He charges the archive and the repertoire to be the teacher. As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, in her work *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, discusses, the archive and the repertoire provide the performative tools through which non-Native audience members can gain a small understanding of the complexities of contemporary Native American lives. Taylor defines the archive as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change […]. Archival memory works across distance, over time and space; investigators can go back to reexamine an ancient manuscript, letters find their addresses through time and place, and computer discs at time cough up lost files with the right software […]. What makes an object archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified, and presented for analysis.\(^{11}\)

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For non-Native Americans, written texts like Native-written plays would offer a means to utilize the archive to gain a nuanced, although solitary, understanding of Native peoples. Yet while the archive is the most familiar form of transmitting knowledge, the repertoire is just as complex, but more difficult to detect. Taylor defines the repertoire as

enacted embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge [...] The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission [...] The repertoire too, then, allows scholars to trace traditions and influences.12

Performance, according to Taylor, is a vital means through which the repertoire flourishes.

Thus, the act of performance allows its practitioners and its viewers to take the repertoire seriously as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge. Through the repertoire, Native theatrical performers and audiences have a space to explore their cultures, histories, traditions, and identities – these experiences are marked in the scripted words of the performance and on the bodies of the performers. For non-Native audience members watching a Native-controlled play, they can see, in the script and on the actors’ bodies, the theatrical exploration of the forced cultural and physical genocide of Natives by non-Natives. More importantly, however, non-Natives witness the reinvigoration of Native cultures through Native-controlled theatre.13

Yet any non-Native could research Native-controlled theatre or read Native-written plays. The most powerful, perception-altering activity non-Native Americans can engage in is to take up Conquergood’s invitation to cease discussing Native Americans as removed entities. With such powerful political and cultural outcomes for Natives and non-Natives alike, Native-

12 Ibid., 10.
controlled theatre can provide an opportunity for non-Natives to come into actual physical and spacial contact with different Native communities. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* offers a possible foundation for non-Natives to interact with Native peoples in a Native-controlled space. Pratt coined the phrase “contact zone,” arguing that a contact zone refers “to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” A contact zone would literally be the physical space where colonialism and imperialism occurred. In conjunction with the phrase “contact zone,” Pratt discusses transculturation as a process that results from a contact zone. According to Pratt, “ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” Pratt asserts that a contact zone and transculturation are an embodiment of imperialism – two groups of people come in contact with one another and the “dominant” group subordinates the other through interaction and knowledge. Contact zones and transculturation appear to be terms a scholar could use to describe the interactions, past and present, between Native and non-Native Americans. Yet Pratt recognizes the possibility contact zones and transculturation offer to those who have experienced imperialism. She acknowledges that in the domains of official culture this conjuncture is chiefly providing an occasion to renovate celebratory narratives of European superiority. The indigenous nations of the Americas are finding in the quincentennial an opportunity to assert a counterhistory, revindicate their lifeways, and consolidate present day struggles for territory and autonomy. Intellectuals are called upon to define, or redefine,

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15 Ibid., 6.
their relation to the structures of knowledge and power that they produce, and that produce them.\textsuperscript{16}

With this new approach to academia, contact zones and transculturation shed their previous roles of supporting domination and subordination and instead promote an equal transfer of knowledge. Applicable to the relationship between Natives and non-Natives, Native-controlled theatre offers a space where non-Natives can learn about, and from, Native Americans, thus becoming a contact zone and a place of transculturation based on equality instead of domination.

Native-controlled theatre has the possibility of becoming a contact zone and a place of transculturation for non-Native audience members. In order for Native-controlled theatre to be successful as a contact zone and a place of transculturation, non-Natives must be audience members for a Native-controlled play. In order for Natives and non-Natives to interact as respected equals, non-Natives must not only recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples, but the role they play in perpetuating those misconceptions. Although Native theatre primarily serves Native communities, many Native playwrights acknowledge its potential to impact non-Native audiences. According to Hanay Geiogamah, in his article entitled “The New American Indian Theatre: An Introduction,” in judging a Native play, “readers and viewers should keep in mind that the most important function of the Indian dramatist is to communicate with his own people […] Even though some of the new Indian theater works entail use of esoteric idiom and allusion, there is no reason why the plays should not be accessible to all audiences.”\textsuperscript{17} Native-controlled plays, therefore, speak primarily to Native communities but are not closed to non-Natives. Their subject matters and characters, while different from what many non-Natives know, are still dealt with in a manner that non-Natives can relate to. Furthermore,

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., xi.

as William S. Yellow Robe (*Assiniboine*) reveals in a 1998 interview, he believes that theatre, particularly Native-controlled theatre, has the ability to impact audiences to the extent that they want to change their lives. He argues that “[…] theater was designed for a community effort, and through that ritual of the community getting together to do the play you can share things, you can share love, you can share torment, you can share joy or despair and eventually, hopefully, you can motivate an audience to open their eyes and to look at their lives […]” Native-controlled theatre, therefore, has the power to cause non-Natives to open their eyes and recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Natives peoples. While any Native-written and produced play has that ability, the subject matter explored in two specific plays, Hanay Geiogamah’s *Foghorn* and Sierra Adare’s (*Cherokee/Choctaw*) *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room: A Play*, provide an excellent opportunity for non-Natives to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native communities by merely participating in the productions as audience members.  

Written by Kiowa/Delaware playwright Hanay Geiogamah, *Foghorn* first premiered on October 18, 1973. The play opens with white conquerors moving slowly to the sounds of electronic music. The characters, ranging from Spanish conquistadors to U.S. federal government officials, reveal their hatred of Native Americans through derogatory language like “Injuns” and “Vermin” while forcing them to live on reservations. The first scene fades into the second as the scene becomes the Alcatraz Occupation of 1969. The Native characters proudly reclaim not only Alcatraz Prison, but the entire United States from their colonial oppressors. Yet

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19 As of the time of writing, I have not been able to obtain reviews of these performances in production in order to gauge how Native and Non-Native audiences may have received the narratives I will discuss in the space of the theatre. However, Julie Pearson-Little Thunder has done much to articulate the range of such responses to Native performances of plays like *Raven* and *Body Indian*, including negative non-Native responses to discomfiting images of Native characters and situations. (See Pearson-Little Thunder, “Acts of Transfer,” 114-125.)
scene two quickly transitions into scene three, where a Catholic nun, filled with righteous indignation, yells to her Native congregation that it is good that the Church found them, for otherwise their souls surely would have burned in hell. As she concludes her speech, the Native congregants rush the stage and the lights fade to black as the sounds of an explosion fills the theatre. As the lights brighten, a white teacher pushes her Native pupils onstage. She proceeds to tell them how she will make them into Indians that Americans can be proud of, that she will cut their hair and make them stop speaking their Native languages. She teaches them to say “hello,” a supposedly civilized greeting, and when a young girl first says it, the teacher proclaims her to be on the path to civilization and shows her off to the other pupils.20

In scene 5, Pocahontas runs onstage with her handmaidens, describing her recent sexual encounter with John Smith. She appears to be a silly woman, simultaneously shy of, but eager for, sex with the strange newcomer. Yet in the act of his conquest, Smith quickly goes flaccid. The laughter continues as the scene changes from Pocahontas to the Lone Ranger and Tonto. The Lone Ranger does not like having to rely so much on Tonto; he fears it makes him look stupid to receive so much help from his illiterate Indian friend. So he devises a plan where Tonto gets shot and while he, the Lone Ranger, tries to save his friend, Tonto’s helpfulness quickly proves to be his undoing and kills him. As the Lone Ranger asks Tonto what he thinks of this new plan, Tonto quickly pulls out a knife and cuts the Lone Ranger’s throat. The actors quickly transition into scene 7, where the First Lady of the United States gives a dedication speech – a reservation has just been turned into a national park because the President and Secretary of the Interior want to preserve the natural landscape and the Indians apparently do not get much use out of their reservation. As she tells her Native audience this story, one audience

member asks for a picture. She poses and sparks fly out of the camera as the man takes the picture. She screams, frightened, and the lights fade out. The lights go up on a telephone booth outside of the Washington Memorial in D.C. A spy, dressed in a blanket and braided wig, enters the booth and reveals to his Washington superiors that a group of Native Americans plan to blow up the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They decide to pay off the Natives with $60,000 and the spy negotiates his fee at $250,000. As the spy proclaims, Native Americans are, after all, money hungry and will accept the offer. The lights go down as the spy steps out of the telephone booth and is showered with money. The lights go up on scene 10, where the ensemble sings a song called “Pass that Peace Pipe.” The song urges all Natives to not be angry at broken treaties, but instead to bury the hatchet. As each broken treaty in the song is named, the lights go up on a girl holding a large roll of toilet paper. After she reads each treaty, written on the toilet paper, the buffalo standing next to her takes the toilet paper and wipes his behind with it. The play transitions into scene 10, where the audience sees a Wild West Show. The announcer loudly shouts that his audience will see actual reenactments of the battles with the wild aborigines of the great United States. After the Natives are all shot down, a video image of the Battle of Wounded Knee appears behind them. The video image slowly moves to images of the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. The dead Natives slowly rise and the scene becomes one of a courtroom. As the narrator tells the audience that the Native characters must move back to their families and their land, each performer proclaims their tribal heritage. The narrator adopts the voice of a Spanish conquistador, filling the space as he ends the play by proclaiming “I am…NOT GUILTY!”

Geiogamah’s plot, characters, and text blatantly charges non-Native audience members to not only recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples, but misconceptions

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21 Ibid., 82.
they hold about their ancestors’ roles in Native histories. The characters of Pocahontas and Tonto, in particular, explore Native American stereotypes. Pocahontas is the typical Indian princess stereotype. She is silly, eager to meet the white man, and even more eager to have sex with him. Her purpose is to fulfill every white man’s sexual, exotic fantasy. Yet when she giggles that John Smith becomes flaccid in her presence, every male colonizer’s worst nightmare becomes true. Indian princesses were supposed to make a man virile and strong, not limp and weak. Therefore, Pocahontas defies her stereotype. Likewise, Tonto is the brave, stoic noble savage. He serves the Lone Ranger quietly, nobly, even as the Lone Ranger prattles on about Tonto outshining him. During this entire disturbing speech, Tonto does not break his stereotype. Yet when the Lone Ranger asks Tonto what the noble man thinks of his new plan, Tonto’s response is to quickly slit the Lone Ranger’s throat. Until that time, Tonto behaved like his stereotype demanded. But the noble savage was supposed to help the white man, not kill him. Both Pocahontas and Tonto become unfamiliar to audience members who believe in those stereotypes. That unfamiliarity, that alienation from what they believe to be true, leads the audience member to question the validity of the stereotypes.

_Foghorn_ also can cause its non-Native audience members to question the nature of historical relationships that their ancestors held with Native peoples. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, when federal government officials endorsed, and some would argue continues to endorse, the cultural genocide of Native Americans, Christianity and education played a major role in achieving that genocide. Through the implementation of Christianity and a supposedly superior Western education, Native Americans would theoretically lose their identity and become like “all” other Americans. Yet in this play, audience members see Natives treat non-
Natives in the same manner in which they have been treated. The narrator proudly proclaims that we, the Native Americans, reclaim this land, known as America, in the name of all American Indians, by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, who as a majority wrongfully claim it as theirs, and hereby pledge that we shall give to the majority inhabitants of this country a portion of the land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian people – for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea! We will further guide the majority inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our way of life – in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers from their savage and unhappy state. By treating non-Natives in a similar manner to the way they have been treated, the Native narrator’s speech reveals the mentality that many non-Natives have held about Native peoples. Furthermore, audience members see a nun and a teacher attack Native cultures, traditions, persons, and souls. They see the federal government continue to take land from Native peoples and attempt to bribe Native activists while pocketing a larger sum for themselves. At the end of the play, the audience hears the voice of a Spanish conquistador filling the theatre, exclaiming excitedly about the “indios” he has “discovered.” The narrator then claims that he is not guilty. By doing so, the narrator speaks to any non-Native audience member who thinks “the messages of this play do not apply to me, I have done nothing wrong.” By recognizing that non-Native Americans sought the physical and cultural genocide of Native Americans, and now engage in cultural imperialism where Native cultures become fair game for economic and cultural gain, the narrator charges non-Native audience members to accept responsibility for any part they or their ancestors played in Native American genocide in the United States.

While *Foghorn* confronts stereotypes of the past, it also deals with stereotypes of the present. As I demonstrated in chapter 1, many non-Natives need to believe that Native

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22 Ibid., 55-56.
Americans are entities of the past rather than contemporary, complex, diverse, normal people who live in the present. *Foghorn* employs numerous visual and audio textual references that can help non-Natives realize that Native Americans are contemporary people. In the author’s note, Geiogamah states that “the stage can be decorated to reflect a mixture of the prison yard on Alcatraz Island during the 1969-1971 occupation; the terrain around Wounded Knee, South Dakota, during the 1973 incident; a composite Indian reservation; and various national monuments across the United States, such as Mount Rushmore and the Jefferson Memorial.”

Rather than a stereotypical tipi or wigwam, the scenery reflects the struggles that Native peoples face, and embrace, in today’s world. The music between scene changes also reflects such a purpose. Rather than use traditional flute or drum music, Geiogamah pens that the play should open with a progressive electronic sound. He then states that between most scene changes, the audience should hear the sounds of drilling, as if the subject matter is drilling cracks and holes into the façade of Native American stereotypes much in the same manner that non-Natives damaged Native cultures and peoples. Between the last two scenes, however, the drilling quickly turns into gunfire as the scene changes from the Battle of Wounded Knee to the Siege of Wounded Knee in 1973. As the gunfire settles, the audience hears the Drum play the American Indian Movement (AIM) song. The combination of the gunfire and AIM song reveals to the audience that Native communities are not dead, but alive, thriving, and fighting back. Entities of the past would not be able to do so. Through hearing and seeing such a thought-provoking play, as well as having those thoughts reinforced through artistic choices, non-Native audience members come in contact with not only Native subject matters, but their own misconceptions that Native peoples are two-dimensional stereotypes meant only to serve non-Natives.

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23 Ibid., 49.
Perhaps less blatantly political in nature, but equally as important, are the messages found in Sierra Adare’s captivating play *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room: A Play*. The premise of the play is that there is an Indian Writers Critique Group meeting in the library’s Andrew Jackson Reading Room. There are six authors, Catlin Benge (*Cherokee*), Anna Morse (*Muscogee Creek*), Ben Waterman (*Onondaga*), Ginny Oakes (*Mohawk*), Lisa Southerland, and Mariam Hardgate. In the first scene, Anna and Catlin stand outside of the reading room. They remark how highly ironic it is that there will be a critique group for Indian writers in a room named after a man who tried to remove all Native Nations past the Mississippi River. Yet they hope to have the writers present become Jackson’s greatest fear – educated Natives. As the pair laughs, the scene transitions into scene two. In scene two, all of the writers gather, introduce themselves to one another, and introduce their works. Catlin introduces herself first. She intends to collect Cherokee families’ oral histories, including her own, and partner them with “historical facts” so her readers will understand that what her people teach as their history really happened. Anna introduces herself next, stating that she is going to be writing poetry that expresses the holocaust her people faced. Lisa, the white academic, does not understand that the term “holocaust” can apply to experiences Native peoples have undergone. She says that she will be using federal government documents to write history from the Native American’s perspective. The Native characters are skeptical of her ability to do that, but when they voice their concerns, Lisa becomes defensive. After this brief moment of awkwardness, Mariam introduces herself. A hippy wannabee, Mariam attended a powwow the following year and felt that she could then identify as a Native. She plans on using her story to write inspirational essays. Ginny is disgusted by Mariam’s plans and reveals that she intends to write a romance novel. She wants to use the “white woman-savage hunk” plotline for as much as it is worth, all the while slipping in
accounts of how Mohawk people really lived in colonial times. Anna makes a joke that Ginny should include the proverbial Indian princess, causing Catlin to vehemently protest. Mariam does not understand why the concept of a Cherokee princess is so offensive, her grandfather having told her that her lineage included such a person. Catlin tries to educate Mariam about Cherokee governing roles and the Dawes Act (responsible for the controversial blood quantum requirement), but Mariam and Lisa does not believe her. Ben then interjects, saying that he is going to write a science fiction book with Native characters. The scene concludes with everyone agreeing to meet back in the Andrew Jackson Reading Room in one week with writing samples.  

Scene 3 occurs one week later, with the characters reconvening as previously discussed. Ben discusses his writing sample first, revealing that his characters are in search of a new planet to live. His writing, based loosely on a story from Seneca history, then comes to life as his characters act out his sample. Scene 4 begins when Ben says he wants to hear Ginny’s romance novel. Ginny loosely bases her romance novel on captivity narratives. As her characters allow a passionate scene to unfold, they also interject the historical Mohawk events they are experiencing. Lisa, in scene 5, talks about her writing next. She intends to use the documents of federal government official Richard Van Dermark to detail all of the atrocities the Natives committed against the colonists. She does not know which tribe Van Dermark referred to, so she intends to just pick one. As she describes his speech, Ben interjects, saying that Van Dermark’s speech sounds like it has been appropriated from a famous Onondaga orator named Canastego. He finds a book that reveals the similarities between the speeches and his reading of it is acted

out by its characters. Lisa, however, does not believe him and intends to keep Van Dermark’s speech in her work. Anna then suggests that Catlin read her writing sample next, thus transitioning to scene 6. Catlin reminds everyone that she is using Cherokee oral histories to discuss Cherokee aid in the war of 1812, or the Red Stick War. Her stories come to life as her characters discuss how they partnered with the U.S. government against the Muscogee Creeks, who used the opportunity to attack the Cherokee. Lisa then suggests she would like to hear what Mariam wrote. In scene 7, Mariam reads an inspiration essay that reveals how she discovered she should identify as Native rather than white. After she finishes reading her essay, the Native characters take offense to the Euro-centric language she uses to describe her experience. One section Mariam reads details that “‘we came out of a wilderness of sand and forsaken desert to this wilderness of trees and water and fierce beasts that we might live as wild and free as Nature intended,’ they chant to my Indian soul.”25 Despite Ginny and Catlin’s protests that they personally do not think like this, nor does anyone they know, Mariam does not understand the problem. Furthermore, she claims that “after all, we’re just one big happy Indian family underneath it all, now aren’t we?”26 With extreme self-restraint, Anna retorts with “well, we aren’t the lost tribe of Israel, you know.”27 Soon after that interaction, Catlin suggests that, in scene 8, Anna discuss her work. Inspired by the discussion of blood quantum the group had had the previous week, she wrote a poem that discussed the mixture of cultures and traditions she grew up with. The play ends with scene 9, where some time has passed since everyone read their writing samples. The audience finds out that while Catlin’s work has been rejected because oral histories are supposedly not reliable enough, Lisa’s work has been picked up by a publishing company with the condition that she add Indian-raid massacres to her history. Ginny’s romance

25 Ibid., 305.
26 Ibid., 306.
27 Ibid., 306.
novel is going to be published and the Native women remark on the irony that fiction readers will learn Native history told from a Native perspective while nonfiction readers will not. The women then disappear into the reading room and the play ends.\(^{28}\)

Through her characters and plot, Adare accomplishes what her Native characters strive to do. Her characters seek to educate their readers about contemporary Native lives as well as their histories. Yet they want to do so in a manner that is subtle. Adare achieves the same effect. In her author’s note, Adare says that she wrote this play “to be a bridge between Native and American cultural perceptions. […] I also wanted to create a vehicle for teaching American Indian history and its connection to current issues facing indigenous people today that would turn the learning experience into something more enjoyable and entertaining than reading textbooks and listening to lectures.”\(^{29}\) Through her play, audience members can learn about different Native histories, such as the Cherokee effort in the War of 1812, or Red Stick War, and the history behind blood quantum requirements. They understand Cherokee women went to war and one woman actually had the final word on whether or not the tribe should engage in acts of war. Unlike many accounts given of Native histories, these accounts are told, through her characters, by Adare, a Native woman. Although telling their various histories is very important, Adare also educates her audiences on contemporary Native lives. They learn about the difficulties many Natives of mixed tribal ancestry experience through Anna’s moving poem; that many have to justify their identity and piece their various, often fragmented traditions together. The audience learns that Natives do not walk around in beads and feathers, but everyday street clothes with perhaps a touch of something that reveals their identity (Ben’s turtle necklace against his jeans and button-opened shirt is an excellent example). Furthermore, her Native characters make fun

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 263-316.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 266.
of the stereotypes, often imitating the Hollywood Indian greeting “how,” then bursting into laughter. By making fun of their stereotypes, Adare’s Native characters break them.

Adare also teaches her non-Native audience members about non-Native relationships with Native communities. Through the characters of Lisa and Mariam, non-Native audience members learn not only the most stereotypical roles non-Natives have assumed when interacting with Native peoples, but those characters serve as a warning of what not to do when any non-Native wants to develop relationships with Native Americans. Lisa is the academic who only trusts what has been written down. According to Lisa’s behavior, the only Native history to be believed is that which has been found in federal documents and, consequently, in history books written based on those documents. The issue that results from many of those books is that because they have been written by non-Natives, based on documents that favor non-Natives, Native perspectives of those histories are no longer considered valid. They may not come in forms that non-Natives understand, like oral histories, or they may not portray non-Natives in very flattering lights. Native accounts and perspectives on their histories, cultures, and traditions are just as important, if not more than, non-Native accounts and through Lisa’s narrow-mindedness, non-Native audience members have the opportunity to understand that. Adare also addresses the issue of the New-Age Wannabee. Mariam, a woman who has only European ancestry, feels that just because she admires what she thinks is Native, she can identify as such. She enters the reading room wearing a fake buckskin shirt, lots of turquoise, Apache boots, and feathers in her braided hair. She chooses to write inspirational essays, to inspire her readers to shed their impure white identities and adopt a nobler one. Yet the essay she reads to her fellow authors is riddled with Eurocentric language. Through her made-up belief of what exactly an Indian is, Mariam’s behavior is outrageous. Yet it is undeniable that other non-Natives have
behaved just as outrageously. From Mariam’s character, non-Native audience members can learn that Native Americans, their histories, cultures, traditions, and most importantly their persons, are not entities that can be claimed. By utilizing stereotypes of the roles many non-Natives assume when interaction with Native communities, Adare consequently creates an opportunity for her non-Native audience members to recognize similar roles they may have taken. Through *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room: A Play*, similar to Geiogamah’s *Foghorn*, non-Native audience members come in contact with not only issues that many Natives face today, but their histories from their many perspectives.

Although being an audience member of a Native-controlled theatrical production can help non-Natives recognize the misconceptions they hold about Native peoples, it may not cause some non-Natives to engage with interact with Native Americans as complex, contemporary people rather than as stereotypes of the past. In his work *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual*, theatre practitioner Michael Rohd articulates the typical process theatre audience members experience. Rohd states that

> you, the audience, follow a main character through the story. You get involved with a protagonist. You care about him or her. You go on a journey and watch the protagonist deal with trials, tribulations, and triumphs. If it’s a good play, as the conflict(s) build(s) around the protagonist, you are pulled forward in your seat, actually pulled toward the stage, as you wait for a resolution you hope will be satisfying. You watch. You wait. You care…and choices are made. Action is taken, or not, and the play comes to its conclusion. You are released. You know the ritual. The curtain falls, literally or figuratively, and you share your appreciation for the event with polite applause, and you leave. The story is over and most of the time […] your need to think and to take action has been soothed. The experience ends passively and you leave having witnessed others take action for you.\(^{30}\)

For non-Native audience members of a Native-controlled play, like Geiogamah’s *Foghorn* or Adare’s *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room*, the performance may move them or

cause them to question their beliefs about Native peoples. It may spark conversations between non-Native audience members over coffee after the show or even conversations several weeks later. It may even cause them to interact with different Native communities in the hopes of learning from them. Yet many non-Native audience members risk being unmoved by the messages of the show. Whether the routine of daily life takes precedent or through fear of confrontation and change, many non-Natives continue to believe Native Americans to nameless, faceless characters. They allow Native Americans to become forgotten.

To impact as many non-Natives as possible, Native-controlled theatre can also become a contact zone and a place of transculturation by supporting and endorsing talk-back sessions that allow non-Natives to actually engage in conversations with Native peoples. Diana Taylor argues that “it is also important to emphasize that transculturation makes room for a reciprocal, two-way exchange through contact.”

Performance by nature encourages its audience members to come together to have conversations. The subject matter of the play, like Foghorn or Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room, can spark a need to converse. For Natives and non-Natives, those conversations could range from the issues explored in the play to why the different people interact with one another in the manner in which they do. Dwight Conquergood argues that performance “is a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them. [...] At the same time, the conspicuous artifice of performance is a vivid reminder that each voice has its own integrity.”

For all participating members, the ability for Native and non-Native audience members and theatre practitioners to meet one another on an equal playing field is imperative. Yet we cannot simply rely that dialogue will not occur naturally. Incorporating a dialogic talk-back session after a

31 Taylor, 105.
32 Conquergood, 409.
performance of *Foghorn* or *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room* would ensure that non-Natives are given the opportunity to actually interact with the Native theatre practitioners and audience members of the particular production. For Natives, it ensures that their voices, which for so many centuries have been appropriated and stifled by non-Natives, are heard equally. For non-Natives, it gives them the chance to continue to learn about Native lives today while being in an environment that lets them safely ask questions to continue to clarify their misconceptions. Although Native-controlled theatre will not “fix” relationships that many Natives and non-Natives have with one another, it is a powerful way that allows non-Natives to actually talk with Native Americans.

Native-controlled theatre has seemingly limitless positive effects. For Native Americans and their different communities, it is a space where they can negotiate and explore their own identities, stories, histories, and issues. It is a practice that it meant to primarily serve them. Yet for non-Native Americans, Native-controlled theatre offers them the possibility to recognize any misconception they may hold about Native peoples and then engage with the Native theatre practitioners and audience members to begin to learn from them instead of about them. Native-controlled theatre, for any person involved with it, is a space for hope and change.
Since its inception, theatre has been a vehicle for different groups of people to explore, and often times construct, their identities. Native and non-Native Americans’ explorations of their identities through performance frequently place these respective groups of people at odds with one another. In particular, non-Native Americans often seek to stereotype and appropriate Native American culture, history, and imagery to serve their own purposes. The American frontier offered non-Natives a unique identity based on the concept of a frontier utopia. For non-Natives who believed their identity to be based on the frontier, literary and performative genres offered them the opportunity to reaffirm their national identity. In particular, theatre proved to be an effective method used by non-Natives. Live theatrical performances offered non-Native theatre practitioners and audience members the ability to construct their vision of the frontier and then to see their perceptions of the frontier continuously reaffirmed. Although most discourse to date has only explored this concept with theatre in the nineteenth century, theatrical performances in the twentieth century remained an effective and accepted vehicle through which non-Natives could reaffirm their national identity based on the frontier. Rick Besoyan’s *Little Mary Sunshine* and Robert Schenkkan’s *The Kentucky Cycle* are just two examples of theatrical works in the twentieth century that could allow non-Native Americans to reaffirm a national identity based on the frontier. Innumerable theatrical productions throughout the century have accomplished similar feats and continue to do so. Consequently, theatre continues to be an effective vehicle for non-Natives who sought to reaffirm their national identity through Native American stereotypes within a fabricated frontier.¹

For Native Americans, the use of these stereotypes has only furthered the ideological colonization of their communities. Yet many Native individuals and communities have renewed and increased their efforts to regain self-determination over their political, social, and cultural lives. Native-controlled theatre has become one vehicle through which many Native communities have fought for self-determination. Regardless of what was shared in Native theatrical productions, the most important aspect of Native-controlled theatre has been its ability to serve Native communities in whatever manner that particular community needs. Consequently, Native theatre became another space where Native Americans could gather, be in one another’s company, and participate in something specifically Native. It is where Native Americans could gather, reclaim their stories, imagery, and traditions, and enjoy being Native. Through the power of theatre, many Native Americans have effectively told their stories, reclaimed their identities, and served their communities – in the manner they have chosen.  

Not only did Native-controlled theatre serve as a method for Native Americans to regain self-determination, but it exposed to non-Natives that efforts to colonize Native Americans did not fully succeed. With such powerful political and cultural outcomes for Natives and non-Natives alike, Native-controlled theatre offers non-Natives the opportunity to recognize their misconceptions about Native peoples and change their perceptions by engaging with Native theatre practitioners and audience members. Dwight Conquergood’s discussion of the role of performative ethnographers cautions non-Natives on the challenges they face as they begin to...
interact with Native communities. If non-Natives take heed of these cautions, Native-controlled theatre can become, as Mary Louise Pratt coined it, a contact zone and place of transculturation. Through the lens of a contact zone, plays like Hanay Geiogamah’s *Foghorn* and Sierra Adare’s *Takeover of the Andrew Jackson Reading Room: A Play*, as well as any other, can be used by Native theatre companies to help non-Natives realize that Native Americans are not stereotypes that live in the past, but are complex, contemporary, diverse people. If non-Natives do not actively engage with Native peoples in order to learn from their mistakes, there is a danger that Native stereotypes will never change. Native-controlled theatre can provide an opportunity for not only non-Natives to begin to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native peoples, but for both groups to engage in a dialogue with one another.³

To my knowledge, when I began this study there was no existing conversation in discourse that proposed a method for non-Natives to begin to recognize the misconceptions they may hold about Native Americans and then learn from Native peoples in order to move beyond the accepted stereotypes. Although my thesis suggests that Native-controlled theatre can be such a method, it does not offer a quick fix for the relationships that many Native and non-Native Americans have with one another. Given the complexity of human nature, there will never be one. My thesis does, however, offer a simple start for encouraging dialogue between Native and non-Native people. The next step could be when Natives and non-Natives actually begin to create theatre together. Yet dialogical-based performance, being a relatively new theatrical practice in the United States, may seem good in theory, difficult in execution. More and more

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theatre companies, however, are utilizing this practice. Theatre practitioner Michael Rohd, in his book *Theatre for Community, Conflict, & Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual*, provides an essential guide for those seeking to engage in dialogical performance. Rohd describes his process as having three specific parts: “(1) the training of the actual group, (2) the performance workshops the group leads in the community, and (3) the ongoing practice sessions that the group uses to stay dynamic and continue to grow.”

For any community, but Native and non-Native communities in particular, this process ensures that while a dialogical performance may start out small, the participants can sustain their momentum and reach out to others over time.

The training of the actual group lays the foundation for future dialogue and Rohd offers very specific directions on how he believes this can be successfully accomplished. Also to be done in three parts, the training consists of warm-ups, bridge work, and creating activating scenes. All parts are guided by a facilitator whose job is to guide the process, but not force his or her own agenda on the project. Therefore, before any work can be done participatory ground rules must be created in order for all participants to feel respected and safe as well as to ensure that the group accomplished what it wants to accomplish. Whether the facilitator brings his or her own set of rules and the participants add to them or take some away or the participants create their own, grounds rules are a necessity. Rohd suggests that the facilitator mention the following rules for group discussion.

- Confidentiality: Everything said in the room stays in the room. We will be sharing stories, opinions, and looking silly together. We do that knowing it stays here.
- Nonjudgment: We agree to disagree. We listen to everyone and respect differences of all sorts. This is a safe place to be heard […]

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- **Respect:** We show respect in the way we talk to each other, listen to each other, take care of each other, and treat each other in every regard. This is very important from Day 1.
- **Openness:** Share what you can. Everyone gets as much out of this as they are willing to put in, not in terms of secrets or private stories, but of who you are and the degree to which you bring what is special in you to the group process.
- **Honesty:** When you choose to share, do so truthfully. Don’t create stories to make an impression.
- **Right to pass:** You have the right to not participate in any activity if it makes you uncomfortable, and to do so without being interrogated as to why. Don’t use this rule to step out just because you don’t feel like playing; use your right to pass when you think the activity may be unsafe for you. You do always have that option. Take care of yourself.
- **Anonymity:** At some point in our process, I’ll give everyone a chance down a question or issue they would like the group to address. They may not want to ‘claim’ the question so here is a chance to put it out there anonymously. All paper ends up in the middle, and we go through them one at a time.⁵

These ground rules ensure that Native and non-Native participants feel safe enough to open up with one another, to challenge each other’s views and opinions without fear of reciprocity, to truly have a conversation with one another. The ability to converse is imperative to the goals of dialogical performance and without it, Natives and non-Natives do not have the ability to begin to heal.⁶

Once the grounds rules are in place and agreed upon, it is time to begin the training process. Warm-ups must come first; Rohd asserts that

the purpose of warm-ups is threefold: to get a group of people playing together in a safe space, to energize that space, and to create a sense of comfort in the collective doing of specific and structured activities. […] These activities have nothing to do with “issues.” In fact, one could argue they aren’t even “theatre.” They simply aim to get people out of their seats and interacting in a different way and to prepare them to participate as the work gets deeper, more focused, and more “theatrical.” It’s all about creating moments where participation is impossible to resist, moving forward into the process you have set up, and having fun along the way.⁷

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⁵ Ibid., 130-131.
⁶ Ibid., 5.
⁷ Ibid., 4.
For Natives and non-Natives, warm-ups would be particularly important because it would temporarily allow the participants to lose themselves in the moments of play. It would guarantee that even if the participants entered the space on unequal terms, they would become equal fairly quickly. All would be participating in the same activities, concentrating on the same people, laughing at the same silliness. A community, and consequently a communal bond, begins to form in these moments and for two such diverse and often conflicting groups of people like Native and non-Native Americans, creating a common community in theatrical spaces where differences are respected, but not destructive, is vital for the dialogical performance to accomplish anything.

Rohd states that bridgework is the second part in the training process. According to Rohd, bridgework is

the link between the warm-ups and the activating material. Their goal is to theatricalize the space; that is, to take advantage of the energy generated during the warm-ups and to begin focusing on imagination and issues. Bridge activities use image work, improvisation, and discussion to create pretend worlds, explore group perceptions, and start to identify core issues for dialogue. These activities are varied and, unlike warm-ups, many can be replayed with entirely different aims and experiences.⁸

Bridgework, while still embracing the relaxed nature of warm-ups, allows Native and non-Native participants to begin to identify the issues they feel need to be addressed in their performance piece(s). Bridgework allows the participants to continue to build their trust in one another, even as they discuss difficult issues and topics. The space quietly becomes increasingly safer during these activities. For the Native and non-Native participants, not feeling safe and secure in these activities will prove detrimental to the goals of the performance. Bridgework helps to cement those feelings of safety and security. Bridgework is also when dialogue becomes introduced to the process. Rohd argues that “it establishes an atmosphere that is theatrical, nurturing, and all

⁸ Ibid., 49.
about dialogue; it takes forethought and creative energy to incorporate and integrate it. Use it.”

The dialogue that Native and non-Native participants will engage in once they feel safe to do so is the key to the process. Bridgework allows that conversation to begin to take place.

The conversations that began with bridgework continue with the third part of the training process – creating activating scenes. Rohd defines an activating scene as one that

grabs everyone in the room. It is a scene that you create with your group. People need to care about it, recognize it, and be pulled into the drama of it. Most important, people must want to effect change in what they see. They need to see a clear opportunity to get involved and to explore options. An activating scene does not show what to do. It does not have a message. It asks what can be done.

For Native and non-Native participants, activating scenes give them the opportunity to performatively further explore the conversations they began to have with the bridgework.

Furthermore, the activating scenes allow the participants to communicate their conversations and struggles with a larger audience. Rohd argues that “the scenes pull the audience (of participants) into the story. They bring you forward to the edge of your seat, and they freeze. They end, or stop, unsatisfactorily. You, the audience, are left with a strong desire – a need – to change what is happening, and you get that chance.” Native and non-Native audience members, through watching a dialogical performance, may feel compelled by the issues discussed to examine them within their own lives and with each other. Consequently, the dialogue does not end with the participants or the audience members, but travels through the surrounding Native and non-Native communities. Such dialogue that exists through performance provides a powerful tool for Natives and non-Natives to begin to work with one another and to heal their relationships.

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9 Ibid., 49-50.
10 Ibid., 50.
11 Ibid., 97.
12 Ibid., 98.
At this time, dialogical theatre between Native and non-Native communities only has one known predecessor, the Dentalium Project. From 2001 to 2003, Dell ‘Arte International, a commedia dell ‘arte-based theatre company in Blue Lake, California, partnered with Blue Lake residents and members of the Blue Lake Rancheria Nation to create a dialogical performance. The project began when the Blue Lake Rancheria, a sovereign Native nation near Blue Lake California, decided to build a casino to help the nation’s financial future. The residents of Blue Lake feared negative effects of the casino and were upset that the Rancheria did not consult them. Dell’ Arte approached both sides about engaging in civic dialogue through theatre in order to understand all sides of the controversy. Dell’ Arte wanted to answer an important community question: how can the residents of Blue Lake and Rancheria members begin to build the necessary bridges between the two toward a healthier whole community? From this question stemmed the Dentalium Project. The Dentalium Project consists of three elements: a series of more than 40 interviews with a wide variety of residents, followed by five community dialogues facilitated by the Cascadia Forum of Arcata; a live radio play with music set in the future on the tenth Anniversary of the casino, inspired by the themes which emerged from the interviews and dialogues; and a documentary video shown in the community and aiming for broadcast on public television. Feeling at their deepest core that serious issues and social critiques were best presented with humor, Dell’ Arte decided on a comedy with music, for maximum popular attraction. Several results stemmed from the Dentalium Project. First, the community initiated its own dialogues after the project, furthering communication between the Blue Lake residents and the Rancheria members. Furthermore, Marlene Smith, a Rancheria member, ran for city council and won. She was able to open lines of communication between Blue Lake residents and Rancheria residents. Finally, Dell’ Arte, as a theatre company, gained further understanding for
the delicate issue of creating a play where the subject matters were ethnically different—
especially in civic engagement theatre where that group (in this case Native Americans) not only
contributed to the final products, but lived right next door. While the Dentalium Project proved
successful, none like it have been written about since. Considering the success of the Dentalium
Project, and the guidelines provided by Michael Rohd, dialogical theatre becomes a necessary
contact zone and space of transculturation where Natives and non-Natives alike can come
together and truly communicate with, and perhaps learn from, each other.13

Many non-Native Americans have based on their national identity on a frontier utopia. In
the process, they have stereotyped and subjugated Native peoples. The result is a twofold
catastrophe: non-Natives have constructed an identity based on inaccuracies and, in the public
eye, Native Americans are not allowed to be themselves. Native-controlled theatre most
importantly offers Natives the ability to explore their identities on their terms; however, it also
allows non-Natives to learn about, and from, their mistakes. Perhaps, then, non-Native
Americans may no longer need to reaffirm a national identity based on the appropriation of
Native American culture, history, and stereotypes. Rather, non-Natives could find a national
identity based on the achievements and history of the United States as a collective whole.


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