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PERFORMING SOVEREIGNTY: COLONIAL CRITIQUE AND COMMUNITY SURVIVAL IN AMERICAN INDIAN THEATRE

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ABSTRACT
The American Indian viewpoint of drama serves as a powerful means of delivering potent social and political messages. It is presumed that Indigenous playwrights mostly use the stage for entertainment; however, contemporary Indigenous playwrights chiefly use this platform for resilient acts of entertainment that, on closer inspection, offer sharp critiques of the problems before them. This paper attends to the works by Lynn Riggs, Hanay Geiogamah, and William S. Yellow Robe Jr. to get at the increasingly pertinent social and political messages of their plays. The issues raised by their works are truly significant and well-deserving of serious attention. The plays engage a number of pressing subjects: land dispossession, poverty, urban life, internalized racism, and critiques of the pretenders who impersonate Native identity. At the same time, what I find quite striking about the sociopolitical themes these three playwrights explore is that each of them approaches the subjects from a really different angle.
KEYWORDS: *American Indian drama, survivance, decolonial performance, tribal sovereignty, performative resistance.*

INTRODUCTION

Theatre has historically served as a venue for cultural narratives, collective memory, and sociopolitical conflict. Jenkins and Wapp state that " through them may be seen the workings of Indian ways, consciousness, values, traditions, stories, and conventions"(12). For Indigenous communities confronting systemic erasure, theatre is more than art; it is a platform for performing nationhood and critiquing the colonial structures that seek to undermine it. American Indian theatre not only challenges previous ethnographic portrayals that depicted Indigenous culture as a fading relic but also advocates for a dynamic existence, asserting and performing its resilience in the face of resistance. Instead, these works advocate for the dynamic existence, rather than the passive survival, of Indigenous cultures. The present paper looks at how Native playwrights Lynn Riggs, Hanay Geiogamah, and William S. Yellow Robe Jr. use the theatre as a means of political expression. Their platforms could not be more different. They express in the theatre their varied agendas on such contentions as the displacement of Cherokee land and urban relocation. And they make us think hard about the identity hybrids that we are all now expected to celebrate.

But Riggs, Geiogamah, and Yellow Robe all want to show how brutal colonialism is and how to sustain Indigenous culture. The playwrights examined here use different artistic strategies to explore that recent history in their plays—those strategies include lyrical nostalgia, Brechtian defamiliarization, and emotional realism. The influence the different strategies have on the political "flavor" of the plays is discussed as well. This paper uses a comparative lens too and highlights connections with *Bhartiya* postcolonial tribal theatres.

Historical and Theoretical Framework

American Indian drama entered the modern literary field in the early twentieth century with Lynn Riggs, whose success on Broadway concealed politically nuanced Indigenous writing. With the 1960s Red Power movement, Native theatre became a recognized weapon of Indigenous activism (Vizenor). Hanay Geiogamah's American Indian Theatre Ensemble foregrounded theatre as a decolonial tool, while subsequent Dramatists like William S. Yellow Robe Jr. have intensified the engagement of theatre with identity politics, horizontal violence, and survivance.

This study interprets Native drama through the context of survivance, as described by Gerald Vizenor. Vizenor eschews the indigenous victimhood narratives imposed by colonial powers and instead emphasizes indigenous storytelling, agency, and presence. The real purpose of the exercise, for Vizenor, is to tell a story of indigenous survival and agency. It's not just about the dangers that colonial power has historically posed to indigenous ways of life. When combined with decolonial performance studies, which understand performance as a mode of unlearning colonial ways of knowing, survivance allows us to see Native drama as a performative assertion of sovereignty. In this space, what I call the theater of sovereignty, Indigenous dramatists reorder the colonial hierarchy of visibility and voice. They do so with complex characters, innovative staging, and a thoroughly subverted Western narrative structure.

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Lynn Riggs: Land, Loss, and Cherokee Memory

Plays written by Lynn Riggs have a combination of poetic realism and folk theatricality that is centered on the Oklahoma landscape. The Oklahoma land doesn't just serve as the stage for Riggs's plays but it inhabits a distinctive emotional character that profoundly influences and shapes memory, conflict, and personality. Regional speech patterns, idiomatic dialogue, and the rhythms of Cherokee steep his plays in an authentic oral tradition. They don't make political statements, but they do critique settler colonialism with deadly subtleness by evoking themes of dispossession, migration, and the slow collapse of native cultural structures.

The dramaturgy of Riggs is not just a method of delivering a story, but one that infuses ballads, hymns, and types of interludes, which may be called stylized, with a sense of ceremony undergirding everyday life. The focus is not on individual acts of heroism but on ensemble pieces, where community dynamics become the order of the day. Even the most serious themes he deals with are underscored by humor and irony, which prevent sentimentality while allowing tenderness. Ultimately, his hybrid style—if we must label it—marries naturalistic interaction among characters with symbolic, pageant-like form, giving him the freedom to reflect both his Cherokee and Anglo heritage in works that straddle cultures. Yet, despite cultural duality, he seems to be an author whose plays can and should be claimed by Anglophonic theatre.

Lynn Riggs's plays express social critique through poetic subtlety rather than direct protest. Riggs's best-known work *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) reflects Cherokee conceptions of land where territory is intimately bound to identity and memory (Fixico 88). The play's pastoral setting and lyricism mask colonial violence, yet Riggs embeds subtle commentary on land appropriation in Oklahoma territory, presenting the settler's desire for possession as an act of disruption of older Indigenous continuities.

The Cherokee Night is more overtly political than Riggs's earlier work. It shows how allotment and assimilation policies are affecting the Cherokees. With the characters in this play struggling with alcoholism and alienation, fighting to remember and restore their lost rituals, one might be tempted to think of them as the kind of "tragic" figures American Indians are so often made out to be. But Riggs portrays his characters as political agents, acting against a vicious colonial system. His work stood out in an era when theatre preferred either romanticized American Indians or wholly assimilated characters. Riggs challenges mainstream narratives by revealing how identity cannot be separated from land—once land is fragmented, so too is community. The emotional cost of colonial modernity thus becomes Riggs's primary political intervention. In contrast to Riggs's laudatory *Green Grow the Lilacs*, *The Cherokee Night* delivers a scathing critique of the ways in which colonialism has totally devastated both Cherokee identity and community. Its form, almost expressionistic in its fragmentation, mirrors the lead characters' almost shattered lives, making this one of Riggs's most politically charged works.

For scholars in *Bharat*, the land-centric drama of Riggs has deep meaning because it resonates with the struggles of indigenous communities like those in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and the Northeast, who face dislocation due to industrial expansion. Riggs's poetic stagecraft makes a powerful connection to the tribal understanding of land as a relative that is alive, not as property—something for which many in today's world might show little respect. In this, Riggs's drama conveys a communal eco-politics that anticipates global conversations around Indigenous ecological resistance movements.

Hanay Geiogamah: Brecht in Red Power Theatre

Hanay Geiogamah's plays are overtly political and grounded in the activism of the Red Power movement. The theatre of this man adopts a raw, documentary-like realism that portrays the harsh social realities faced by urban and reservation-based American Indians. It puts on stage the dismal historical and contemporary conditions of American Indians, alcoholism, dislocation, and internalized despair. Stylistically, Geiogamah rejects romantic or folkloric representations of Indigenous people and instead employs Brechtian techniques, direct address, episodic structure, minimal props, and ironic humor to break the illusion of theatre and force the audience to confront the systemic nature of colonial oppression. The damaging effects of federal relocation policies and assimilation programs are the main target of Geiogamah's writing. He uses dark humor and deliberately uncomfortable scenes as tools for political consciousness-raising. The real work of reclamation, though, takes place in the theatre as a collective experience shared by the audience and actors. Cultural reclamation comes in various forms: through chanting, group interaction, and even collective movement. It is the regained collective experience that makes a work of art truly functional. The play exists as a claim for Indigenous space in as many ways as possible.

The work of Hanay Geiogamah represents a radical tonal and functional shift in Native drama. In 1971, Geiogamah founded the American Indian Theatre Ensemble to create theatrical performances that reflected the experiences of Native people, critiqued the misconceptions and stereotypes that colonizers had of them, and sought to build a politically conscious Native citizenry(Brown 2). The plays that he wrote, *Body Indian* (1972) and *Foghorn* (1973), form the foundations of what could be called Native activist theatre.

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Body Indian depicts Buddy, a Native man whose welfare cheque is literally stolen as he lies unconscious on a mattress. Brutal scenes of poverty, alcohol dependency, and despair on the urban periphery reflect the consequences of government relocation programs. Geiogamah consciously avoids sentimentalizing his characters. Instead, he uses crucial Brechtian strategies such as disjointed dialogue, audience address, and episodic structure to force spectators into critical awareness. The audience sees not an individual failing, but a community cannibalized by capitalism and colonialism. *Foghorn*, meanwhile, addresses forced Native relocation and the myth of assimilation. Characters speak of broken promises by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Humour coexists with pain: a signature strategy whereby Geiogamah overturns the colonial expectation that Native people must be noble or tragic. Instead, he insists on Indigenous complexity as a marker of survivance. Theatre here becomes a political classroom that denaturalizes colonial violence through defamiliarization.

A fruitful comparison can be made between *Bhartiya* political theatre and the work of Geiogamah. Like the street plays of Badal Sircar and *Jana Natya Manch*, Geiogamah's work employs minimal sets and direct audience engagement to critique state violence. If a work of art is to have any social value, it must offer activism in some form. Performance is the form in which Geiogamah works. And the kind of performance he insists upon makes theatre a place of sorts where Indigenous issues can be taken seriously.

William S. Yellow Robe Jr.: Internal Wounds and Community Repair

William S. Yellow Robe Jr.'s plays are known for their layered realism, sensuously built around realistic dialogue, concentrated on the contemporary Native community's inner life, particularly that of reservation life. His drama uncovers the invisible wounds left by colonization—such as internalized racism and identity crisis, domestic violence, inter-generational trauma, and conflict between full-blood and mixed-blood tribal members. He states:

> 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. (Pulitano 20)

Stylistically, Yellow Robe uses magic realism and fragmented time structures that allow past and present to collide on stage, dramatizing history not just as a sequence of events but as a series of unresolved conflicts and colonized minds that must be confronted in the theatre as a necessary space for truth-telling and healing. Far from using Native characters as types, he creates in them a wide space for complexity and moral ambiguity and plays off the stereotypes, both romantic and tragic, that Native people have been trapped in for far too long. Humor, used especially as dark or ironic comedy, serves as a survival mechanism across his plays. He adds a new dimension of political intensity to American Indian drama. His plays examine internal community tensions produced by colonialism, particularly around mixed-blood identities, gender violence, and intergenerational trauma. *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* (1996) uses a dynamic structure to interrogate racialized hierarchies within Native communities (Piatote 127). The play deals with African-Native heritage families, linking them to the legacy of colonial military presence. Postcolonial fissures are turned inwards as characters shame one another over "authenticity."

In like manner, *Sneaky* and *The Star Quilter* take on shame, sexual violence, and abandonment. Yellow Robe refuses to frame Native shame, sexual violence, and abandonment as Native pathologies. He shows how colonialism restructures Native kinship and produces internal fractures. He often weaves elements of magical realism into stark realism, showing how trauma soaks ordinary existence.

Yellow Robe shows, politically, how the colonial oppressions are internalized and how the communities work to self-heal through confrontation. He regards theatre as both a mirror and a medicine. It inflicts the necessary painful conversations but also suggests possible pathways to a better, more equitable future. His dramaturgy, while steeped in the traditions of his tribe, strikes a universal postcolonial chord. *Bhartiya* tribal writers such as Mahasweta Devi, who expose the internal violence of poor, almost stateless communities while blaming a top-down hierarchy of larger exploitative systems, show thematic affinities with Yellow Robe's dramatic interventions.

Native Drama as Resistance: From Spectacle to Sovereignty

The combined work of Riggs, Geiogamah, and Yellow Robe signifies a turning point for American Indian drama. It persists beyond mere cultural representation and instead shifts to an overt embrace of political sovereignty. Riggs crafts a form of lyricism that is deeply grounded in the land as he stakes memory as his favored mode. Geiogamah peopled the theatre with an interpretation of Red Power as an empowering force. Yellow Robe digs generously into these shallow depths of recovery and healing with his characters, for playgoers to recognize the shared breathing scenes as communal spaces that are devoid of judgment. The three of them combine forces simply not to reproduce victims but to enact empowerment. In addition, these plays question typical Euro-American classifications of theatre by combining humor, ceremony, audience engagement, and non-linear narratives. By fusing ritual with art, they enact Indigenous ways of knowing that stand in direct opposition to Western dramatic realism. Thus, formal resistance also becomes a kind of political resistance.

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***Bhartiya* Contextual Resonance**

American Indian drama from a *Bhartiya* perspective shows a number of striking similarities. Like many American Indians, the tribal communities in *Bharat* today contend with many of the same issues: land dispossession, environmental degradation from mining, forced internal migration, and assimilation. Plays written by *Bhartiya* tribal theatre groups from Jharkhand dramatize in the same way that Geiogamah does the issues of forced internal displacement. Riggs's grief for a lost homeland mirrors the Adivasi performances that invoke sacred sites as forms of resistance. Yellow Robe's concentration on what is within resonates with *Bhartiya* tribal writers, who make narrative art about the oppression and the patriarchy that they live with. The narratives they craft place the cause of that oppression as external to them, and the superior force responsible is identified as colonialism. That makes their narratives a kind of art with which to accuse.

CONCLUSION

Drama by American Indians exposes the necro-politics of settler-colonial power and reflects a politics of survival. It may be written in many different ways, but it is always a political act that makes a community conscious of the need to avert disappearance and the fate of the disappearing Indian. Poetics understood as 'the art of remembrance' elicits a lyric theatre of Cherokee homelands. Our playwrights are revolutionaries, using theatre as the deconstructive space where urban poverty is demystified and imminent dangers are revealed. Psychodramas insist on the slender line that separates the sane from the insane when internal community wounds are not healed. Regardless of being traditional, modern, or postmodern, these plays retain a moment that shatters myth at the center of the American theatre stage.

Lynn Riggs positions Cherokee identity within the land and unpacks how a failure to recognize land rights disrupts cultural and community connections. Hanay Geiogamah, raised by the Red Power movement, works with decolonial critique and infuses absurdist humor into his plays, using funny and collectively performed moments to unsettle colonial authority. William S. Yellow Robe Jr. turns his gaze inward in the plays he has written, confronting himself, his family, the characters in his plays, and by extension, all Native people, with some tough truths about the intergenerational trauma, internalized racism, and gender violence that plague Native communities and that he envisions Native theatre as a space where those communal pathologies can be confronted, as well as a space where the Natives can reflect on that communal experience as a way of imagining themselves into a better future.

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