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**Cultural Renewal in Aboriginal Theatre Aesthetics**

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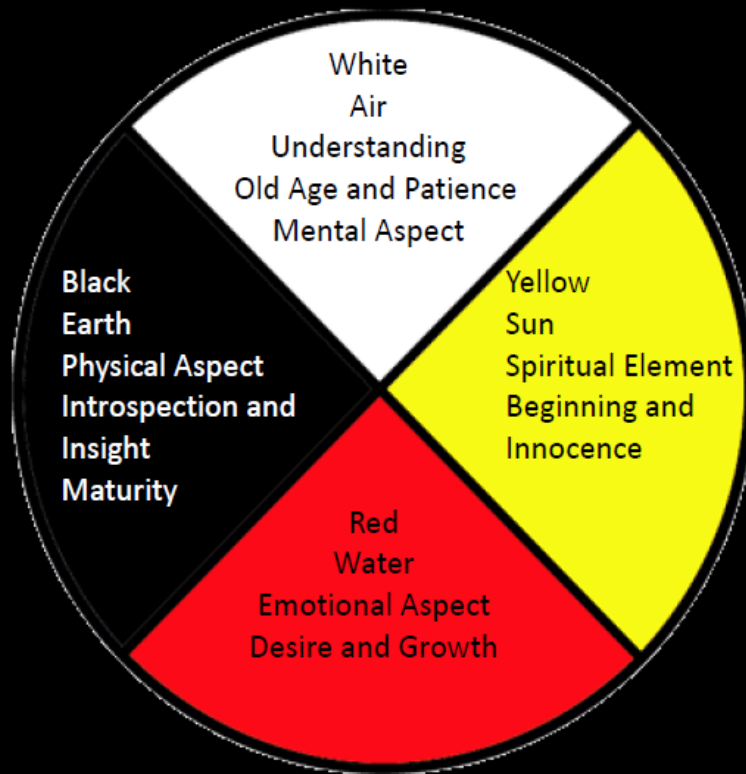
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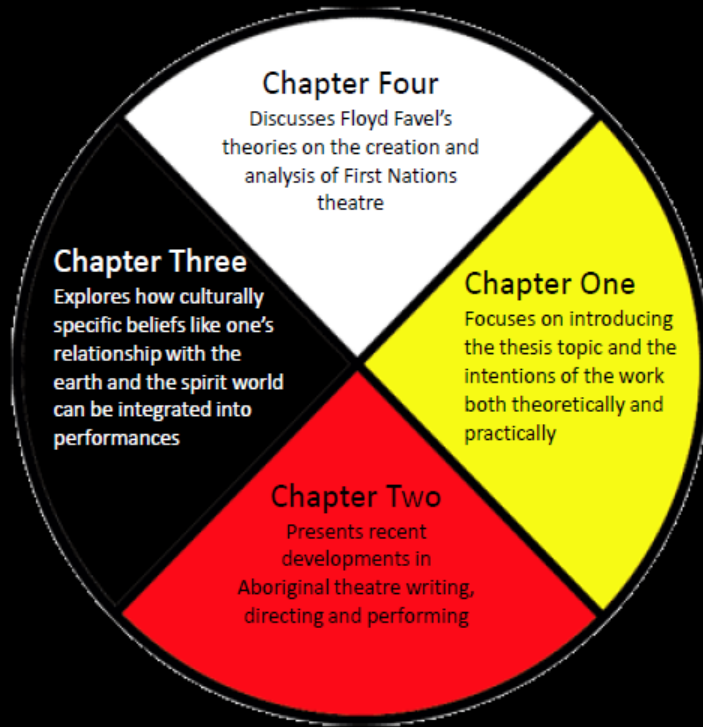
## Abstract

The goal of this research is to shed light on current developments in the field of Aboriginal Theatre Studies. This investigation encourages the reader to look again at the ways in which elements of Aboriginal culture are manifesting in contemporary theatre. Aboriginal theatre is increasingly visible in Canada and its cachet is growing with both artists and audiences. As a result, culturally specific worldviews and traditional practices are being introduced to mainstream Canadian theatre audiences. Through interviews with practicing Aboriginal artists like Floyd Favel, Yvette Nolan and Marie Clements and through an exploration of their individual theatrical processes, this research has attempted to identify how practicing Aboriginal artists consciously privilege Indigenous ways of knowing in their approaches to creating theatre for the contemporary stage.

# The Four Directions



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## Introduction

### Thesis Overview

The goal of this research is to shed light on current developments in the field of Aboriginal Theatre Studies. This investigation encourages the reader to look again at the ways in which elements of Aboriginal culture are manifesting in contemporary theatre. Aboriginal theatre is increasingly visible in Canada and its cachet is growing with both artists and audiences. As a result, culturally specific worldviews and traditional practices are being introduced to mainstream Canadian theatre audiences. Scholarship devoted to contemporary Aboriginal theatre-making in Canada is minimal, and the majority of published works consist mainly of investigations of the social representations of an “authentic” Native identity (Appleford x). In order to move beyond this initial level of understanding, I believe that it is necessary to think about and create an approach to analyzing First Nations theatre that acknowledges cultural and spiritual specificities. The real challenge for this developing field is the absence of a neutral base from which the seemingly new epistemologies proposed by Aboriginal cosmology can be apprehended by non-aboriginal scholars, or Aboriginal scholars who are detached from their culture. While it is possible for non-Native scholars to appreciate the various Aboriginal worldviews to a degree, the fundamental conceptual structures which Western scholars use to apprehend Aboriginal traditions are so very different from those traditions themselves that a great deal of sensitivity, and just as much un-learning, are required.

The two principal components of the Aboriginal worldview that run counter to the assumptions of contemporary Western cultures are a belief of reciprocity and a belief in the reality of the spirit world. Reciprocity is usually misunderstood as a relationship between discrete and independent agents that one or both agents could voluntarily abandon; rather it is the knowledge that embodiment and environment are the common and shared features of all beings.

Likewise, the spirit world is often incorrectly viewed as being predicated on belief rather than on practice and direct experience<sup>1</sup>. If something of these views can be communicated through scholarship that is both phenomenologically and emically informed—in other words, based on lived and culturally coherent experience—meaningful dialogues between both traditional and contemporary Indigenous performance as well as between Aboriginal artists and non-Aboriginal audiences may be created.

The development of contemporary Aboriginal theatre as its own discipline has been mobilized by Aboriginal artists and theoreticians such as Floyd Favel. Practicing Aboriginal theatre artists have sought out to create transformational processes that will allow for spiritual traditions to translate onto the contemporary stage. This study examines the spiritual relationships implicit in Aboriginal cultures in Canada; these relationships recognize action as it simultaneously unfolds in both the present and in the atemporal realms of the spiritual forces recognized by First Nations peoples. The Aboriginal worldview presupposes a fundamental link between humans, spiritual figures and the earth—a philosophy that artists are incorporating into their works (Maufort 13). This project will explore how theatre practitioners integrate its various manifestations into their pieces, as well as examine the significant connections between oral narratives, ritual practices and the development of contemporary theatre.

While conducting this study, I have become convinced that it is the artists' particular theatrical processes that allow the spirit world, the dream world and the world of myths and legends to become tangible onstage. To understand more about how this happens, I've explored

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<sup>1</sup> In contemporary North America, the term "belief" is almost universally used to describe religious traditions. This likely derives from Protestant Christian practice where "faith" is considered primary and religious practice, whether spontaneous or ritualized, is taken to be a secondary activity, predicated on belief. While older, religious cultures assume 'belief' on the part of their adherents, it is the act of practice that is considered primary, rather than the professing of abstract doctrines, dogmas and rules.

the philosophies and spiritual beliefs of specific Aboriginal nations and theatre practitioners. My research principally consists of two reports on live performances that I attended and subsequently analyzed. These performances provide concrete examples of contemporary work and allow me to investigate how current productions are being used to revive and further develop Aboriginal culture in Canada.

The major area of analysis for this project is “Storytelling”, a fundamental concept and activity to both traditional Aboriginal culture and to its remanifestations in contemporary theatre. The practice of storytelling can be performed anywhere at any time, and its context can be both formal and informal depending on its purposes. Storytelling can link one generation with another; it can be didactic; it can entertain; it can act as a communicative tool with the spirit world. Traditionally, storytelling was used to remind communities of their history, to renew communal relationships with other humans and with the spirit world and to share cultural or theological beliefs. Aboriginal storytelling preserves life, nourishes life—not as a duty or an obligation but in order to satisfy an elemental appetite, a way of interacting with the world.

Storytelling was the principal tool for the conservation and transmission of Aboriginal history and customs. However, within contemporary Canadian Aboriginal societies, the practices of oral traditions have a significantly diminished role. This is primarily due to religious suppression and urbanization. In his book *Native North American Religious Traditions*, scholar of Native cultures Jordan Paper provides a brief historical description that examines Aboriginal traditions pre- and post- European contact. The immediate consequences of the arrival of the Europeans were death from smallpox, measles, influenza, and other epidemic diseases. Later consequences of this contact were forced conversions to Christianity, the loss of traditions, and

the formation of reservations and residential school systems. In Canada, the reserves were put under the strict and direct control of various Christian churches. Within these communities, laws were passed forbidding Aboriginal peoples, “on pain of incarceration, to practice their religions” (Paper, *Traditions* 47). Paper further explains that missionaries would routinely call in forces such as the police or the army to terminate the practice of Aboriginal traditions.

Paper believes that the establishment of reserves and residential schools played a decisive role in the near-elimination of Aboriginal languages, culture and traditional customs from society. For decades, Aboriginal peoples across Canada and the United States stopped practicing traditional activities due to the control exerted by religious and governmental officials. The legal prohibition against practicing, or even speaking positively of, Aboriginal religions was “dropped from Canadian law in 1951, although not specifically repealed” (Paper, *Traditions* 51). Despite religious suppression and prohibition, Aboriginal traditions in Canada have “not only survived, but are undergoing a cultural renaissance that has been burgeoning over the last three decades” (Paper, *Traditions* 54). Evidence of this cultural rebirth can be found in contemporary forms of art and media currently being produced by First Nations practitioners.

Today, First Nations theatre companies such as Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto and Ondinnok in Montréal are creating original theatrical works that develop signature aesthetics reflecting the form of traditional storytelling. “Aesthetics” here refers to an Aboriginal director’s distinctive style for determining the behaviour of the actors—how they use their bodies and voices—and the form of the space and time of the performance. However, since the presentational styles of practicing artists vary widely, it is not possible to create an exact or systemic formal definition of the “Aboriginal Aesthetic.” Current theatrical developments aim to

allow scholars to move beyond a purely descriptive mode of analysis and towards an understanding of “how the sharing of song, dance, story, and performance space give form to cultural knowledge, social progress, and individual agency” (Meyer and Royer XV). By analyzing live performances, I will consider the use of Aboriginal storytelling in contemporary theatre as the source of an aesthetic choice that reflects traditional theory and cosmology.

### **A Note on Terminology Used**

“Aboriginal” as defined by the Canadian government refers to the three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada: “Indians”, both Status and non-Status, Métis and Inuit. These three sub-groups are categorized by the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. Throughout this thesis the terms Aboriginal, Native, and First Nations are used interchangeably. This is not because I am unaware of the political and social issues that surround these terms, or wish to broadly classify or generally stereotype Aboriginal peoples. Rather, I chose to use these terms because the artists and scholars who I have cited and worked with use them interchangeably. Moreover, in an attempt to honour each artist's or scholar's culture, I have tried to recognize their particular nations —Cree or Algonquin for example—by referring to them specifically. I have used the term “Indigenous” specifically when addressing Aboriginal spirituality, or philosophies that are understood and shared by numerous Aboriginal traditions in the Americas (Paper, *Traditions* 7). The choice to use these terms interchangeably is not meant to disrespect or reduce the reader's perception of cultural diversity between different nations; rather it is meant to acknowledge and include as many self-identifying people as possible.

## Principles and Values: Overview of Aboriginal Peoples' Philosophy of Life

Traditional and contemporary spiritual and philosophical beliefs of Aboriginal nations in Canada are discussed and analyzed throughout this thesis. With “over 650 First Nations communities in Canada”, cultural elements will vary depending on the particular Nation’s connections and relationships to the land and to each other (“Description of the AFN”). For example, the Spirit World is a significant yet nebulous component of this philosophy. Aboriginal peoples’ notion of time is circular and it fuses the past, present and the future into one principle; the spirit world. The idea of the spirit world reflects perspectives on death and dying which are particular to Aboriginal peoples’ holistic worldview. As time is believed to be circular, life post-death is in constant relationship with the living world and those who inhabit it. This relationship is as follows:

The process of death and dying then significantly transcends and transforms the extremely thin barriers between the natural and the spirit worlds. Significantly, Aboriginal people still retain their beliefs in the spirit world and that is how the connections are made through circles of time dissipating the conventional European notion of past, present and future being separate entities (McNab 95).

In Aboriginal thought, the real world is conjoined with the spirit world through the belief that all living entities including humans, animals and nature, are equal and in constant relationship with one another. There is no fixed description of the spirit world, as the particularities of this realm are relative and subjective, varying from person to person. What is certain, however, is the notion that the spirit world is not separate from the natural world but that both co-exist and are dependent on each another. The Aboriginal world is a polytheistic one in which the physical world is understood as being inhabited by both humans and spirits. In *Aboriginal Spirituality and Biblical Theology: Closer than you think*, John W. Friesen emphasizes the complexities of

Aboriginal theology. Friesen provides the reader with five characteristics of this worldview. He explains:

The Indigenous peoples did not elaborate a minutely delineated set of doctrines, but lived them out and passed them on in principle via the oral tradition and by example. Cajete suggests that the traditional First Nations' metaphysical belief system did not adhere to an overall, organized description. It was a way of life, not a carefully cataloged delineation of major and minor doctrines, subdoctrines and corollary beliefs. Theology was a process rather than an intellectual structure.

Secondly, the spiritual stance of First Nations peoples was premised on the idea that words and language have a quality of spirit because they can be an expression of the human [spirit]. Language as prayer and song has an energy in its own dimension and can influence other energies toward certain ends.

The third [particular] feature of Aboriginal [spirituality] was the belief that anything created with spiritual intent originated with that act a unique quality and spiritual power that should be respected. Art, therefore, as the result of a creative process, became deserving of respect.

The fourth characteristic was the perspective that the universe moves in never-ending invisible cycles of creation. Knowledge of the cycles (though partial), was used to structure and express the sacred in the communal context of traditional [Aboriginal] life.

Finally, there was in place the understanding that Nature is the true ground of spirituality. Father Creator and Mother Earth together provide for humankind, their children. The appropriate response on the part of their offspring should be the grateful acknowledgement that everything in the universe is a sacred and spiritual gift (Friesen 13).

It may be difficult for non-Aboriginal peoples to comprehend the implications of a holistic view of the universe, but "Aboriginal peoples have always believed that all phenomena, including both material and non-material elements, are connected and interconnected" (Friesen 55). Aboriginal peoples' worldview can be distinguished by its holistic perspectives, the veneration of Earth, "being" as opposed to "doing", reciprocity and the emphasis on community over individuality.

Kenneth Cohen, a Native American Spiritual specialist, describes some of the common features of Indigenous peoples' belief systems and philosophical ideas of circularity in his book,

*Honoring the Medicine.* Certain aspects of Cohen’s description vary between Nations depending on external factors such as their geographical locations and particular worldview, as “people from within the same religion may share a similar set of beliefs about spirituality, but these beliefs can neither be assumed to be universal nor exclusive” (Wilson 91). Nevertheless, Cohen encapsulates the essence of Aboriginal peoples’ polytheistic tradition. Cohen describes this philosophy as follows:

- There is a Creator or Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is the creator of all life. Because the Great Spirit formed all life out of the same elements, human beings are interconnected and related to all of nature. Harmonious relationship with nature promotes health; living out of balance with the web of life promotes illness.<sup>2</sup>
- Nature is alive. Natural phenomena exist in both the physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical and spiritual realities interpenetrate and influence each other. Human beings have the ability to become aware of and communicate with both realities.
- In varying degrees, life energy and power are in all natural phenomena and in some man-made objects. This energy is associated with wind and breath; it is the breath of life.
- A spiritual person is intimate with nature and knows the names, characteristics, and stories associated with local plants, animals, waterways, and mountains. He or she also understand and communes with “the Four Winds”, the sacred power of the directions East, South, West and North.
- Ritual gestures, objects, and “symbols” (such as the Four Winds) do not have meaning; they are meaning. To say that two related spiritual phenomena “A symbolizes or represents B” is not always accurate. The Bear does not simple represent the West; he is the West. The healer does not dance like the Eagle; she is the Eagle dancing.
- Elders are keepers and transmitters of sacred knowledge- the knowledge is generally shared through oral traditions.
- Men and women have equal but different power and responsibilities.
- Human knowledge is limited. Many things cannot be known (Cohen 37).

Notions from Aboriginal peoples’ holistic worldview will be referenced throughout this thesis in an attempt to understand and explain aspects of the featured artists’ particular works.

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<sup>2</sup> Not all nations believe that there is one Creator, as Creation Stories vary from community to community.

## Chapters

Following Geraldine Manossa's work on the transformational power of traditional knowledge in Aboriginal theatre, the first chapter will begin with an exploration of storytelling as the core of contemporary Aboriginal theatre. In order to examine current practices in Aboriginal theatre aesthetics, the second part of this chapter will outline the historical developments of First Nations' theatre practices in Canada.

The greater part of this thesis focuses on the analysis of two plays that have been produced within the past year. These plays are Native Earth Performing Art's production of *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, written by Marie Clements and directed by Yvette Nolan, and Native Earth Performing Arts and Signal Theatre's co-production of *from thine eyes* written by Yvette Nolan and choreographed by Michael Greyeyes. Chapter Two will discuss Native Earth Performing Art's *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. I will investigate how accessible this piece is to both Native and non-native audiences while paying special attention to the spiritual and religious references made within it. Chapter Three will concentrate on Michael Greyeyes' *from thine eyes* as an example of a piece that does not explicitly display visual and aural elements commonly associated with Aboriginal cultures. Instead, Greyeyes explores different vehicles for Aboriginal expression. These productions are both characterized by the distinctive ways in which traditional elements such as Aboriginal dialects, song, and imagery are or are not integrated. Chapter Four will describe and provide examples of Cree theatre practitioner Floyd Favel's theory of Native Performance Culture. Native Performance Culture can be defined as an approach for creating and analyzing theatre that derives from traditional Aboriginal knowledge. This chapter will describe the primary functions of Native Performance Culture, and provide examples of possible ways

this system can be utilized in a theatre workshop. The way in which Favel employs this model as a director and as a playwright will also be explored.

### **Reciprocity: Philosophical Relationships**

According to Jordan Paper, Native theologies in Canada are “highly individualized, but all exist within general cultural parameters” (Paper, *Traditions* 57). Furthermore, within this range of cultural possibilities, there can be as many interpretations as there are individuals. Paper gives the example of how symbolism can vary from nation to nation. “All traditions have an understanding of the ‘Four Directions’, but the colors and other symbolic associations with these directions can vary considerably” (Paper, *Traditions* xiv). An almost universal notion, the concept of the Four Directions is rooted in Indigenous holism; First Nations’ peoples use a circle to describe the associative relationships between the four key elements of this worldview: “the intellectual, the spiritual, the emotional, and the physical” (Archibald 11). This philosophy emphasizes the relationships that humans have with all living entities; nature, other humans, spirits and mythological figures. Cree research methods theorist Shawn Wilson believes that Indigenous ontology and epistemology are based upon the relationships that form a mutual reality, while Indigenous axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to those relationships (Wilson 80). The formation of reciprocal relationships is a principal element in Indigenous worldviews. These relationships are created with any living entity, as well as with spirits and nature.

Virtually all religions of the world have an understanding of reciprocity, that we must “symbolically pay back for the many gifts we receive from the deities to make manifest our thankfulness” (Paper, *Traditions* 9). According to Shawn Wilson, “identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to

the land, and with future generations who will come into being on the land” (Wilson 80). In Aboriginal traditions, “it is recognized that humans are dependent on the spirit realm for every aspect of life and that gratitude is shown through symbolic gifts in turn” (Paper, *Traditions* 10). For example, whenever a spirit such as an animal, plant, stone or water is needed, especially for sacred tasks, it is asked to offer itself. Paper explains that “one speaks to it and offers a gift in return, usually tobacco” (Paper, *Traditions* 9).

Reciprocal relationships are particularly significant in Aboriginal worldviews and cannot be overlooked, as existence itself is considered reciprocal. Life is understood as circular; the circle generates the energy of all beings which in turn creates a great chain of relationships. “Humans acquire power only to the degree that they can channel and circulate energy (material and spiritual possessions)” (Sioui 12). Supremacy and admiration is bestowed upon those who successfully maintain the great circle of relations. Therefore, “rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of” (Wilson 80). In non-Aboriginal thought, reciprocity conjures the idea of relationships between discrete entities that are governed by externally imposed rules of “good behaviour”. However, in the Indigenous view, “good behaviour” is not imposed; rather it is inherent in the fact that “you, I and that rock” are not fundamentally separate. Shawn Wilson distinguishes between the relationships that one can form with another human, with the environment/land, with the cosmos and with ideas. Reciprocity in an Aboriginal worldview is significant as it creates one’s internal sense of connection to the universe. “This may include one’s personal connection to a higher being, humanity, or the environment” (Wilson 91).

## Reciprocity: Space and Time

Reciprocal relationships thus govern the specialized space and time of Aboriginal dance, music, ceremony and performance. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of dance, music and ceremony is to nourish these reciprocal relationships. This is because the space and time of Aboriginal performance is not only shared in real time with the performers and the audience, but also in spiritual time with those from the spirit world who choose to observe or participate. Ethnographer Pauline Tuttle believes that Aboriginal performance connects those involved to a higher spiritual power. Tuttle quotes traditional Lakota Hoop dancer Kevin Locke's understanding of both the "sacred space" and "intersubjective time" of his performances:

As Kevin reenacts the Lakota music, stories, and dances that have been shared with him, he stands at the confluence of the past, present, and the future as an embodiment of "what can be remembered and what is imaginable". This integration of the physical, spiritual, conceptual and temporal is reflected in his performances, which give voice to notions of complementarity and unity through movement, texture, color, symbol, and sound. As Kevin explains, this confluence unfolds in a detemporalized space created and transformed as he integrates the dreams and visions of his ancestors with those of this own (Tuttle 99).

Locke believes that Aboriginal performance discards the dominant Western society's notions of time and instead allows for relationships to form with a kind of timeless and cyclical space. Aboriginal performance can be seen as "the link between the traditions and dreams of the past, the truths of the present, and the potential actualization of those visions in the future" (Tuttle 101). Aboriginal performance thus creates a developed sense of community not only among fellow humans but also with the spirit world. Jordan Paper emphasizes the importance of community as well as one's active individuality in Aboriginal theologies. Paper explains the second part of his book entitled "Dancing for Life" as follows:

Thus, “dancing for life” can be understood to sum up Native spirituality. These religions are not ones of passivity, of sitting quietly singing pre-arranged hymns or listening to a religious professional sermonize or pray for one. Rather these are traditions of dynamic religious lives, where one actively involves all of oneself, including the body. These are religions of doing, of spontaneity, of taking active responsibility for one’s spiritual life, and of encountering the spirits with one’s entire being. And these are also traditions that are inherently this-worldly. The spiritual quest is not for another or next life; it is for this very life, not just for oneself, but life for all one’s relations: family, clan, people, and even the spirits themselves (Paper, *Traditions* 4).

Aboriginal performances possess a significant amount of spiritual worth as they create a sense of community in real time, while simultaneously forming relationships with those in the spirit world. Performances are also considered vehicles that convey traditional knowledge and practices from the performer to the spectator. For example, a performance does not need to be staged with lights or costumes to possess spiritual significance. A father teaching his son the traditional Plains’ Grass Dance, slowly performing the movements and explaining their significance, is an example of how an Aboriginal performance forms relationships with the spirit world. It is through teachings and the revisiting of one’s culture that these relationships are upheld and a continuation of cultural knowledge and beliefs persist.

In a similar way, Floyd Favel believes that storytelling reminds people of the relationships that they have with the spirit world and with nature (Favel, “Interview”). Telling stories becomes a way for those relationships to be remembered and utilized in contemporary society. The performance of a ritual or the telling of a story advocate for this Aboriginal holistic philosophy as their utterances connect the participants to the past and create relationships that will continue into the future. As Jordan Paper believes that symbolism or relationships vary from nation to nation, storytelling can be seen as a universal practice among Aboriginal people but with differing functions and techniques.

## Storytelling in Space and Time

The space and time in which both formal and informal storytelling occur is significant, as it creates communal bonding (Paper, *Traditions* 135). Storytelling contains spiritual elements as it connects both the teller and the listener to the present, past, and the spirit world, while providing a basis for continuity with future generations. It creates a time of sharing knowledge, humour, tears, songs, and dances thus “actively involving the teller and the listener in a process that permits the exchange of history and wisdom” (Manossa 132). Jordan Paper explains that storytelling is a ritual act as the telling of a myth is sacred and can only be told at certain times of the year and in a proper setting (Paper, *Traditions* xv). Living with an Anishnabe community in northern Ontario, he learned that their myths can only be told “from the first snow to the first thunderstorm” (Paper, *Traditions* xv). Rituals in North America’s Indigenous traditions are many: some of their primary goals are to heal, to give thanks, to pray or to honour in an attempt to maintain the relationships that the participants have with both living and non-living entities. Rituals differ within each nation and their performance depends on the time of year and the necessities of the community. Having rituals take place at a certain time and at a specific place affects not only the present world in which we live but the spirit world as well.

While the cultural preservation definition of storytelling is technically correct it is also necessary to examine both the formal and informal methods of storytelling which respect the specificities of time, behaviour, and space. Storytelling is a way of protecting and “interpreting truth for a specific time and place, as well as for mediating elaborate ritualistic processes. By participating in ceremonial procedures, powerful religious and moral sensibilities were evoked in the experience of the people” (Friesen 113). Friesen goes on to explain that

(a)mong some Plains [nations], when council was called and tobacco was passed among the elders, and or when the pipe was smoked, it was understood by those gathered that only the truth would be told during the proceedings. Similarly, in some [nations] when the sweetgrass ceremony was practiced it indicated that a cleansing of the mind was the desire of the participants, and the way was prepared for honest and “pure” deliberation. To those not familiar with the ritual, the sweetgrass ceremony consists of making a smudge with sweetgrass in a bowl or other vessel. Prayers are said, and then the bowl is passed from person to person with each individual “scooping” smoke from the bowl and fanning it over the face and the body. The movement much resembled the figurative washing of the face and the body (Friesen 113).

The oral tradition is a prominent feature of ritualistic practices. Rather than taking the form of generalized responses to questions and situations, this tradition consists of codified movements and sounds performed at specific times. Traditionally, storytelling is a common feature in Aboriginal rituals; the legends that are told generally “deal with religion, the origins of things, the performances of medicine men and women, and the bravery...of warriors” (Friesen 114). Some of these functions of formal storytelling help to establish spiritual connections between the living world and the spirit world which could result in a lifestyle of assured food, as well as physical and mental well-being. Storytelling emphasises the Indigenous belief that knowledge is a “living” phenomenon, as spiritual elements are perpetuated by practice and embodiment.

Friesen explores the significance of Aboriginal storytelling by analyzing several reoccurring motifs. He explains:

Among the Blackfoot, Crows, Cheyennes and Arapahos, for example, four specific motifs are used- solar, astral, animals and plants. In the first two types, the heavenly bodies play a significant role, particularly as sources of transcendental power. Animals often mediate powers to humans that are associated with their unique characteristics- speed, wisdom or cunning. They are also employed in adventuresome and comic tales related for entertainment purposes. Plants play a less dominant role, albeit among the Crows, for example, the cultivation of tobacco is connected to their origin story. For them the ritual of the Tobacco Society is a reenactment of the creation story which renews the people and their world (Friesen 114).

Stories are shared with a variety of purposes and in at least two specific settings, formal and informal. Informal stories are generally told on the spur of the moment. This could be in

response to questions, to build a sense of community or to entertain. “Formal storytelling is more directly connected to the occasion of deliberate or spiritual instruction” (Friesen 115). Some stories are so significant that their telling is limited to the celebration of specific events or ceremonies in a specific time and place with specific visual, aural and physical symbols and movements. In this case, only designated people can participate in their telling.

These two kinds of storytelling are in reality the same thing, as informal storytelling implies formal storytelling and vice versa. Theatre practitioner Floyd Favel recognizes the similarities of these two forms when analyzing the role of the audience of ritual (Favel, “Younger Brother” 5). Formal Storytelling includes a set space, time and behavior. The audience is made up of spirits who respond to the “set” quality due to previous traditional agreements. Informal Storytelling includes any space, time and broad behaviours. The audience is composed of humans who respond “spiritually” because the storytelling, even out of context, reminds them of the important Formal Storytelling activities that communicate with the spirits. Because the recipients of a story are implicitly being treated like spirits, they receive the story on all levels—entertainment, education, spiritual rectification. The same goes for the storyteller, who realizes the importance of what he/she is doing in telling the story, which is also similar to the formal rituals humans use to keep their commitments to the spirit world.

The following chart differentiates Formal and Informal Storytelling:

	Formal Storytelling	Informal Storytelling
Space	Set Space	Any space
Time	Particular Time of the year/ day	Non- particular time
Language	Formal/ pre-determined language	Pre-determined language but with the ability to alter
Audience	spirits who respond to the 'set' quality due to previous agreements and because that's their language	Audience responding spiritually- reminds them of the important formal storytelling activities that communicate with the spirits
Action	Particular, rehearsed behaviour	Spontaneous behaviour

Storytelling reflects Aboriginal peoples' polytheistic worldview and reminds the listener that the real world and the spirit worlds co-exist and are dependent on one another.

### **Storytelling and Ritual: Pan-Native Practices**

Storytelling can be considered a part of ritual, as sacred stories and myths are shared during these events. Jordan Paper believes that the most important rituals have always been “cross-cultural” (Paper, *Traditions* 131). This is to say that many nations, regardless of their geographical location, will practice or at least understand comparable ritual functions and standards. By convention, these rituals are termed “Pan-Indian” (Paper, *Traditions* 131). The term “Indian” is still commonly used and accepted in U.S. American scholarship; however, for the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “Pan-Native”.

The former Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Yvette Nolan, also used the term “Pan-Native” in an interview I conducted with her in March 2011. She considers Native Earth Performing Arts to be a Pan-Native environment, as it includes people from different nations across Canada. Nolan's understanding of how humans and spirits travel in space and

time affects the way her actors move onstage. As a member of the Algonquin nation, Nolan explained to me that her people conduct spiritual situations in a clockwise direction. While directing *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* in 2011, Nolan worked with a few actors from the Mohawk nation. She explained that these actors, contrary to her people, conducted their spiritual situations in a different manner. Nolan told me that this nation travels spiritually in a counter-clockwise direction (Nolan, “Interview”). *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is set in Los Angeles and the Native characters featured in this piece are members of the Creek nation. As Creek people share cultural similarities with the Mohawk nation, Nolan chose to choreograph the actors’ movements using the Mohawk sense of direction. When the characters are undoing something in the story, they turn in the “wrong direction” for an Algonquin (which is the right direction for a Mohawk), and when they are doing something right, as they move forward in the story, they turn in their nation’s right direction (Nolan, “Interview”). This provides an entry point into Nolan’s personal directing process as these artistic choices assist in the establishment of her specific aesthetic style. As discussed later in this thesis, it is not necessary for the integration of these cultural elements to be constantly visible during the performance. Rather, the significance rests in the various ways that artists are using contemporary theatre for outlets of traditional Aboriginal knowledge.

## **The Aboriginal Aesthetic**

Since the mid 1980’s, Cree playwright and director Tomson Highway’s particular dramaturgical style has become the expected and presumed form of Aboriginal theatre by mainstream Canadian audiences. However, Highway’s signature writing choices did not generate a clear aesthetic style that all later artists mirrored or developed (Appleford, 2005: *passim*). The aesthetic heritage of early 20th century British theatre, Actor's Equity Union regulations, the

influence of television, and middle-class audience expectations have led to a normative style of English Canadian theatre characterized by illusionistic realism, linear and representational dramaturgy and stage spaces that resemble 1950s television sound-stages. Directing in this normative aesthetic is extremely understated; rather than cultivating a signature style or auteur aesthetic in the manner of Québécois artists such as Robert Lepage or Brigitte Haentjens, mainstream English Canadian directors have traditionally relegated themselves to illustration rather than interpretation. For this reason, even though Highway's first production was recognizable due to its high degree of conformity with English Canadian normative aesthetics, the inclusion of such things as René Highway's choreographed dancing, the cyclical style of the plot and the use of Ojibwa and Cree dialects was an innovative and culturally-specific addition to the normative aesthetics of English Canadian theatre.

Contemporary Aboriginal artists continue to mount and develop their own artistic innovations. Only recently have more stylized choices, borrowing from various theatrical traditions as well as Aboriginal worldviews, been communicated with mainstream Canadian audiences. The shared cosmological underpinnings of the Indigenous directors currently working allows us to group their aesthetic choices together while at the same time recognizing the diversity of their expressions. Aboriginal culture remains poorly understood: the amount of scholarship devoted to contemporary Aboriginal theatre making in Canada, outside of the famous plays of Tomson Highway, is minimal.

## Chapter One Overview

While Aboriginal theatre in Canada is gaining recognition amongst artists and scholars alike, Native theatre as its own discipline is still very young and continues to transform and expand, making it difficult to pin it down with precise definitions. This chapter begins by considering storytelling as a primary feature in the shaping of contemporary Aboriginal theatre. In addition, this section examines the theoretical and philosophical explanations of the uses of storytelling by Drew Hayden Taylor and Geraldine Manossa. The section which follows that one outlines the historical development of Aboriginal theatre in Canada. Lastly, in an attempt to understand current artist advances, issues of reception within culturally specific works by both Native and non-native audiences are considered.

## Storytelling and Theatre

Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach refers to stories as vessels that convey teachings, medicines, and practices that promote social and cultural familiarity. She distinguishes between stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, from personal narratives of place, happenings and experiences (Kovach 95). Aboriginal storytelling is not only used to teach community values to children, but also to benefit the community as a whole.

Kovach's book *Indigenous Methodologies* includes a chapter that describes storytelling as an Indigenous research method. Kovach suggests that narrative forms are "the primary means for the passing of knowledge within tribal traditions, as they suit the fluidity and interpretative nature of ancestral ways of knowing" (Kovach 94). Historically, Aboriginal nations across Canada relied exclusively on generational storytelling as a means to share social and cultural beliefs. Here, generational storytelling can be defined as stories that are passed down from elders

to younger members of the family or community. These traditional stories also contained visual symbols, songs and dances. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, Indigenous theologies in Canada are “highly individualized, but all exist within general cultural parameters” (Paper, *Traditions* 57). Thus, storytelling is recognized as a common cultural practice within all nations; however, the functions and actual techniques used to communicate a myth or an individual’s story vary.

The launch of Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in 1999 is a contemporary example that demonstrates how Aboriginal peoples are providing alternative means of accessing and sharing cultural and traditional knowledge. In Doris Baltruschat’s article “Television and Canada's Aboriginal Communities Seeking Opportunities through Traditional Storytelling and Digital Technologies”, she explores how television broadcasts have the ability to “educate, entertain, and mediate debate critically through media channels” (Baltruschat). Baltruschat believes that with television and digital technologies such as APTN, the creation of alternative media from an Indigenous perspective is possible and acts as a means of cultural preservation. Television and digital technologies as described by Baltruschat can be considered as modern storytelling devices both in form and effect, since they communicate traditional and cultural knowledge to both Native and non-native communities. Contemporary modifications of traditional oral narratives as seen through television and digital technologies allow for Indigenous content to be distributed internationally. This permits cultural expansion within individual Aboriginal communities but also throughout North American Culture as a whole. The use of these mediums reveals how oral narrative practices are being maintained within today’s society.

Similarly, playwright Drew Hayden Taylor believes theatre to be a logical extension of the storytelling technique: “traditional storytelling resembles theatre in that both mediums take the audience on a journey, using voice, body and the spoken word” (Taylor 61). Presently, Aboriginal theatre companies across Canada are utilizing theatre as a means to revive oral traditional practices, primarily storytelling (which includes song and dance), in order to share their cultural knowledge with the larger society in which they now live. Another example of contemporary cultural revival can be found in Canada’s oldest professional Aboriginal theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts. It is a “not-for-profit organization dedicated to the creating, developing and producing of professional artistic expression of the Aboriginal experience in Canada” (Native Earth, “About Us”). Through theatre, oral traditional practices persist in modernized and artistic forms that reach both Native and non-Native audiences.

Indigenous oral traditions establish a sense of community and build relationships between performers and listeners. “The collective manner through which knowledge, images, symbols, actions and humour are shared from listener to listener and from storyteller to listener” contains the essence of Native performance, according to Cree artist Geraldine Manossa (Manossa129). Manossa’s work and training process comes from the storytellers of her community. She explains that it is through storytelling that she becomes introduced to characters and ideas that she can later recreate in her work. Through storytelling, the listeners “witness the movements, songs and dances of water, of trees and of various life beings” (Manossa 129). Manossa uses the example of the Cree mythological character Wasakaychak stating that she is able to embody him onstage because of the knowledge she has received from storytellers. For Manossa, storytelling provides the foundation of her understanding of theatre: she places special emphasis on its ability to create communal involvement.

As noted above, Aboriginal theatre artists like Geraldine Manossa and Floyd Favel see structural similarities between storytelling and ritual. Manossa focuses on the social similarities between ritual and storytelling—how these events bring people together and how we become connected through acts of sharing and participation. Furthermore, rituals and storytelling equally privilege the notion of time. Both call for the participants to set aside some time at a specific location and to be willing to devote a special amount of attention to the event. Take a bedtime story, for example. A bedtime story is told at night, before the listener goes to sleep, and the location is usually a bedroom. The bedtime story becomes a ritual in itself. The everyday occurrences of getting ready for bed become extraordinary as the listener grows eager to hear a story every night. The sharing of a bedtime story becomes its own “event”, as personal rules and conventions get established. For example, perhaps the listener will only be told a story once their teeth have been brushed and they are in their pyjamas. The willingness of the teller to convey the story, or of the listener to believe in what is being told, establishes a special relationship between them.

Playwright and director Floyd Favel is unable to examine Aboriginal theatre without comparing it to traditional practices. In his article entitled “Theatre: Younger Brother of Tradition” he describes theatre as a set of physical and vocal performance skills, and narrative structures presented in an idealized space for an audience. Ceremony within tradition can be understood as ways of “doing” through song, dance, and narrative structures taking place within a sacred ritual space, as presented within the context of an Aboriginal nation’s social and ritual activity. If we accept both definitions, it is quite clear upon observation of theatrical and traditional activities that they “share a heightened use of the body, voice, and narrative structures

to achieve their apotheosis within a special sacred 'space' i.e., an idealized space separate from daily life" (Favel, "Younger Brother" 5).

Floyd Favel believes that both theatre and tradition inexplicably connect us to our "higher self" in the very moment of action. He explains:

It is this connection with this "higher self" which makes them brothers. Theater comes from across the big water. It is new to our turtle island. Yet it does retain some traces of its origin in ancient Elysian mysteries. We welcomed this art form to our land as a younger brother of tradition. In the same manner our people taught the newcomers how to live on this land when they first came here. It is this connection which takes place at a metaphysical level that binds them to each other, as soul brothers (Favel, "Younger Brother" 6).

Favel acknowledges that theatrical conventions and practices are Western-based traditions but recognizes that Aboriginal performances contain a particular relationship with spiritual forces and beings. When Favel says "metaphysical" he means "includes our reciprocity with spirits"; when he says "soul brother" he means "both are in the same kind of reciprocal relationship with spirits"; when he says "higher self" he means "self-aware of one's relationship with spiritual beings and the spirit world" (Favel, "Interview"). As I will explore in Chapter Four, Favel believes that theatre and tradition speak to each other. This dialogue is explained in Favel's theory of Native Performance Culture, a theatrical process that transforms traditional and cultural elements for the contemporary stage.

## Native Theatre's Historical Journey

Historian Hayden White lays bare the mechanism through which historiography creates its own sense of validity:

Many modern historians hold that narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythic view of reality, conceptual or pseudoconceptual “content” which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought (*Content ix*).

Emma Anderson divides the historiography of Aboriginal people in Canada into three different waves of thought: the first wave, which is largely pro-missionary; the second wave which depicted Aboriginal peoples as victims; and the third wave which creates a distance from moral judgement and strives for mutual autonomy of colonizers and Native peoples (Anderson 5 Dec. 2011).

The first wave was “pro-missionary”: its attitude towards Aboriginal worldview can be described by the “demonic hypothesis” which declared that Aboriginal people were devil worshippers and in need of Christian salvation. The hypothesis was commonly utilized by Europeans in their dealings with Aboriginal cultures post-contact. Using the demonic hypothesis as an explanatory system that “did not require Christians to change their own theological view of the universe, actually reinforced Christian ideas” (Anderson 5 Dec. 2011).

Such an explanation allowed early modern Christians to solve the puzzle of the apparent efficacy or power of Aboriginal religions without suggesting that Aboriginal religions were actually true. One example of an efficacious practice which was dismissed in this way is the Shaking Tent Ritual. In this ritual, spirits are summoned by an individual with substantial spiritual power. When the spirits arrive, the tent shakes while the human figures and the spirits speak to each other. “The purpose of this ritual includes the arrival of needed animals for food

and the success of those who hunt them, the recovery of the sick, and the finding of lost people or objects” (Paper, *Traditions* 139).

Anderson describes the missionaries’ understanding of Aboriginal religions as the following:

To take Native religion seriously on its own terms would have forced the missionaries to abandon their exclusive faith for relativism, or to accord Native religions some strength and certainty. This also allowed Christians to see their roles in a positive manner – either as fighters against an entrenched demonic presence (when they were feeling militant) or as the noble liberators of these pitiful slaves of Satan (when they were feeling benevolent). This European tendency illustrates how many early European images of Native people either stress their menace (i.e. as defenders of Satan) or their pathos (as his victims) (Anderson 5 Dec. 2011).

The missionaries’ complete disregard for Aboriginal religions generated many stereotypical notions that emphasized the demonic hypothesis and other Eurocentric views of Aboriginal peoples.

During the first wave, Aboriginal people were depicted by Western scholars and artists in ways that did not accurately represent their cultures or worldviews. The play traditionally deemed Canada’s first theatrical production, *Le Theatre de Neptune en La Nouvelle France* written in 1606 by Marc Lescarbot, portrays Canada’s First Nations peoples in stereotypical ways. The characters called “Indian” or “Second Indian” demonstrate such widespread clichés as the “Noble Savage” or the “Wise Elder” which hinders the perception of realistic Aboriginal cultural elements by mainstream audiences (Kennedy 8).

In S. Elizabeth Bird’s article “Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media” she traces the historical development of Aboriginal male and female representations in contemporary media. Throughout this article Bird presents the reader with several Native stereotypes including the “Wise Elder” and the “Indian Princess”. Bird describes the “Wise Elder” stereotype as being the “purveyors of ancient wisdom and spiritual

knowledge” (Bird 76). She believes this notion to be so well-liked because of its association with cultural “authenticity”. This includes representations of the “Stoic Indian” and “one who is close with nature and wise beyond white understandings” (Bird 76). Bird states that unlike the majority of Native male images, which usually named them as “chiefs” or “warriors”, women are “generally represented either as Princess or nameless squaws” (Bird 78). Early colonists and artists have established stereotypical and misrepresenting descriptions of Aboriginal men and women that continue to appear in books, movies, plays, print and media advertisements, television shows, films and elsewhere. Arguably, the “Indian Princess” stereotype is the most common female cliché: it was most recently popularized by the 1995 Disney animated feature *Pocahontas*. Bird quotes Robert Tilton’s description of the “Indian Princess” as:

The Pocahontas/Princess myth became a crucial part in the creation of a national identity: The Indian Princess became an important, nonthreatening symbol of white American’s right to be here, because she was always willing to sacrifice her happiness, cultural identity, and even her life for the good of the nation. The prevailing view of the Princess was that she was gentle, noble, nonthreateningly erotic, virtually a white Christian, yet different, because she was tied to the native soil of America (Bird 79).

The description of this stereotype proves not only to inappropriately frame Aboriginal women, and emphasize the dominance of Western patriarchal systems, but also attempts to deflect attention from the effects of colonization.

In Yvette Nolan’s article, “Selling Myself: the Value of an Artist”, she describes certain representations of First Nations peoples that she believes mainstream audiences automatically accept. An example of this is “The quaint Indian” this is the “Dances with Wolves” Indian —“he is a non-threatening Indian, because he is placed in history, in a time that is gone. This is also presented as the Noble Savage” (Nolan 78). Nolan questions why representations such as the “functioning First Nations, the fallible First Nations, and the healing First Nations” are not the commonly accepted representations within dominant society (Nolan 98). Nolan acknowledges

that Aboriginal people were falsely represented by non-aboriginal writers and performers who attributed underdeveloped and clichéd qualities to them. Aboriginal culture has been “exploited and appropriated by non-natives either for monetary profit or for some other form of personal and/or cultural gain” for too long (Meyer and Royer xi). Nonetheless, although these stereotypes do continue to exist the impetus for a change in the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples since the mid 1980`s has grown.

Anderson’s second historiographic wave reverses the action of the first one. It re-evaluates moral standards and belief systems and completely overthrows the demonic hypothesis. Here we find texts that generally stress a superiority of Indigenous beliefs. The second wave identifies a development in the interests of non-native scholars and artists who begin to research and write about Aboriginal identity, culture and spirituality.

The main critique leveled at second-wave writing is that the authors distorted people or events in order to tell a good story or to make a political point. This ultimately led to an overemphasis on victimization. John Neihardt is an example of an author whose “interpretations served the aim of victimizing the life of Black Elk in his book *Black Elk Speaks*” (Anderson 5 Dec. 2011). Born to the Oglala Lakota nation in 1863, Black Elk developed strong relationships with the spirit world and throughout his life, experienced many visions which would lead him to be recognized as an advocate for traditional Lakota beliefs. Black Elk also fought in the Battle of Little Big Horn of 1876, and was injured in the Massacre at Wounded Knee of 1890. However, the Catholic catechist and traditional ritual leader, “Nicholas Black Elk, came to be understood by Euro-Americans as the archetypal traditionalist Native American theologian, somehow representing all the different Native American religions” ( Paper, *Deities* 110). Neihardt omitted from his book aspects of Black Elk’s story that did not serve his agenda. For example, in an

attempt to show Black Elk strictly as a traditionalist, Neihardt did not examine Black Elk's choice to convert to Christianity nor did he speak of his life post-conversion. Instead, he focused on telling a tragic story of the loss of one's culture and traditional ways of life.

In general, second-wave writers were non-native people who had a particular interest in Aboriginal culture. S. Elizabeth Bird believes that "the work of early anthropologists among Native peoples was crucial in codifying the idea of the 'Indian' as Other" (Bird 63). She explains:

Current representations of Aboriginal people are understandable only if seen as the legacy of a complex mesh of cultural elements, including formal history, literature, material artefacts, folklore, photography, cartoon, art, mass media and anthropological discourse (Bird 63).

A danger of second-wave writing is its ability to turn Aboriginal cultural elements into "kitsch". Bird believes that the public's perception of Aboriginal peoples is generally constructed in a way that misunderstands Aboriginal cultures due to the accumulation of stereotypical images in mass media, art and historical texts. In Bird's article "Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media", she explains that although anthropologists and ethnographers provided a lot of detail about Aboriginal costume, customs, myths and rituals, they gave little sense of the people *as* people. She states:

Their ethnographic descriptions became the core of museum exhibits, world fairs, Wild West shows, and early silent films, ultimately leading to current popular depictions. The anthropological convention of the timeless "ethnographic present" effectively placed Native cultures into a kind of time wrap, from which, in the white consciousness, they have not emerged. From nineteenth-century tourist displays to contemporary movies, television, and romance novels, white audiences have found pleasure in the traditional clothing, nobility, and sacred rituals that anthropologists and early photographers first portrayed (Bird 63).

Second-wave depictions denied Aboriginal people the possibility to change or the ability to adapt to modern times. This is because authors immobilized them in traditional ways in an

attempt to portray an idea of Aboriginal “Authenticity”. Representing Aboriginal peoples by and large in traditional ways only led to an increase of misrepresentations and cultural stereotypes. Although there are many critiques of cultural appropriation and misrepresentations of Aboriginal customs and traditions, the second historiographic wave has played a positive role in legitimizing Native worldviews and traditional practices.

An important piece of theatre that epitomizes second-wave perception is George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, written in 1970. The text symbolically assumed the role of the first distinctively English-Canadian play (Kennedy 228). This position was given to *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* as Ryga was considered to be the first Canadian to concentrate solely on Canadian issues. The acclaim Ryga received was due in part to the exposure he gave to social and political issues that Aboriginal peoples face in Canada. Ryga revealed the effects that European contact, urbanization, and forced conversion had on Aboriginal peoples. The native characters in this text are depicted as victims. However, at the time Ryga, as a committed socialist, felt it was necessary to show this more accurate and concerned representation of Aboriginal people in order to stimulate critical thought in mainstream audiences. Ryga’s work continues to be widely performed and has been integral to the overall development of theatre in Canada.

Third-wave writers distance themselves from moral judgments and aspire towards establishing mutual autonomy. Examples of this third-wave outlook appeared in theatre in the 1980s when Aboriginal people began to depict themselves onstage. In 1980, the first Indigenous Theatre Celebration was held in Toronto, bringing together Indigenous artists from all over the world (Canadian Encyclopaedia). In 1982, Native Earth Performing Arts was established in Toronto under the artistic direction of Tomson Highway: in 1986 the company received mainstream recognition with their production of *The Rez Sisters*. Written by Highway and

directed by Larry Lewis, *The Rez Sisters* “marked the first critically recognized First Nations play produced by First Nations theatre practitioners” (Canadian Encyclopaedia). With the arrival of a festival and a theatre company devoted to the creation and exposure of Aboriginal theatre, Native artists began to generate their own works that they believed would better reflect their artistic goals and interests. With more programs and funding accessible to Aboriginal artists the number of Aboriginal practitioners increased.

### **Aboriginal Theatre as Cultural Hybrid**

The majority of published scholarship refers to Aboriginal theatre as a “cultural hybrid”, implying a merger of visual, physical and aural elements associated with Aboriginal cultures, and Western theatrical practices (Appleford, 2005: *passim*). This limits Aboriginal theatre to a strictly thematic category when in reality Aboriginal performance and storytelling is embedded with significant spiritual relationships. An example used to show Aboriginal Theatre as “cultural hybrid” is the integration of Aboriginal dialects into predominantly English language scripts. The argument is that: “[English] is not the language of their ancestors; on the contrary, it represents the imperial power that has suppressed their sense of nation and selfhood” (Maufort 15). Usually, Aboriginal plays include whole passages in the playwright’s particular Native dialect. This enables the playwright to express cultural differences: “the native tongue is perceived as less rigid and fixed than the English language” (Maufort 15). Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* are examples of two plays that borrow from the form of mainstream English Canadian drama while also evolving a new genre of Native playwriting. Tomson Highway’s cyclical dramaturgical style and all-native casts have played a decisive role in initiating the development of Aboriginal theatre in Canada. His works are significant from a playwright’s perspective, as the content of his plays include Aboriginal mythological characters,

Native dialects and imagery. Indeed it can be argued that Highway's contribution to Canadian theatre studies is principally in a dramaturgical sense as his writing brought Aboriginal worldviews and cultural elements to the stage.

A major area in which Native dramaturgy differs from its Western counterpart is its lack of conflict. Drew Hayden Taylor explains that the lack of conflict in Aboriginal dramaturgy originates from traditional elements of storytelling. When passing on oral traditions within communities there was "no need to incorporate major conflict, as aggressive conflicts were actively discouraged within the family or social group as to not create hostility" (Taylor 65). In *The Rez Sisters*, Tomson Highway opposes the concept of Western theatre's protagonist and antagonist by having all eight characters hold equal importance. The women often speak in unison to demonstrate their equality within the plot. The form that Highway chooses also contrasts with "Western dramaturgy as Highway writes with a cyclical structure as opposed to a linear timeline" (Kennedy 221). This cyclical structure is illustrated by the way in which the play's first and last scenes mirror each other.

Highway's cyclical writing style is situated in what Huron scholar Georges Sioui refers to as the "Sacred Circle of Life". The understanding that all beings, "material and immaterial, are equal and interdependent, permeat[es] the entire Amerindian vision of life and the universe" (Sioui 8). Highway materializes this philosophy most effectively through the interweaving of the mythological figure Nanabush, a spirit, into the real world of the human characters. The character of Nanabush is omniscient and omnipresent but does not speak during the play, reflecting the principal loss of culture in Aboriginal communities across Canada, the decline of Aboriginal dialects.

Highway's use of language is noteworthy, as it alternates from English to Cree throughout. René Highway choreographed himself in the role of the unspeaking spirit, Nanabush, in the original production of *The Rez Sisters* at Native Earth Performing Arts in 1990. His choreography is considered an element within normative staging, as he did not develop a new signature performance aesthetic. He describes the audience's reaction to the use of language:

First of all, they'd never seen all those Native people onstage, talking that way, sometimes in Cree, and then just the messages that are sent across to the audience, just blows them away; people just couldn't believe what these women were saying (Preston 143).

Having the characters speak in Native dialects onstage was a revolutionary move. The exposure of a Native dialect on a mainstream stage presented audiences with culturally specific elements that they had not yet experienced from Canadian theatre. However, twenty-five years later, the incorporation of Native languages has become an accepted aspect of Aboriginal theatre. Highway is also responsible for popularizing the Aboriginal cultural hero Nanabush. It was Nanabush who "put the earth and the animals into their present form, many prominent features of the landscape being attributed to his actions" (Highway x). For mainstream English audiences, Nanabush's purpose is to entertain, not necessarily to teach or enlighten them. Nanabush performs traditional songs and dances throughout the play. The incorporation of these culturally-specific acts was intended to heighten public consciousness of contemporary Aboriginal life and traditions; it was also intended to relate most directly to the form and behaviour seen in 'formal' instances of storytelling.

## Expectation and Reception

Philip J. Deloria's book *Indians in Unexpected Places* explores common representations of Aboriginal peoples and examines their origins, for "they created and continue to reproduce social, political, legal and economic relations that are misrepresenting" (Deloria 4). Rob Appleford's "Seeing the Full Frame" specifically looks at theatre reception and how preconceived cultural notions affect the reception of First Nations theatre by both native and non-native theatre audiences.

Deloria suggests that "broad cultural expectations are the product and the tool of domination and that they are an inheritance that haunts each and every one of us", both Native and non-native (Deloria 4). He believes that exploring the sources of these expectations requires our attention, but so too do anomalies. Deloria questions the histories of expectation that distinguish "that which seems right and natural from that which seems simply bizarre" (Deloria 5). He suggests how easy it is to pigeonhole an anomalous event as something that does not fit a certain norm. Contemporary Aboriginal theatre practitioners frequently experience this problem when producing new works. For example, in Michael Greyeyes' article "Notions of Indian-ness" published by the Canada Dance Festival, he describes a situation where his work did not meet the audience's expectation of being authentically "Native". He explains:

In 1999 I performed one of my own creations, a contemporary native dance/theatre work, at the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) World Congress in Norway. A gentleman in the audience from Eastern Europe pleaded afterwards that, although he liked the piece, "Next time, could you bring something really 'Native?'" (Greyeyes).

Greyeyes began to question what exactly "Native" dance was and how mainstream audiences frame the work of modern Aboriginal dance artists (Greyeyes). Greyeyes is aware that practicing Aboriginal artists are currently operating under "broad public perceptions and expectations about

the cultural authenticity of their voices as creators” (Greyeyes). Audiences, therefore, are expecting to see Aboriginal people onstage performing traditional songs and dances. It is anomalous and therefore unacceptable for them to be performing in any other way.

Deloria asserts that expectations and anomalies are mutually constitutive— they make each other. To “assert that a person or an event is anomalous cannot help but serve to create and to reinforce other expectations” (Deloria 5). Naming Greyeyes’ performance as an unanticipated anomaly demonstrates that there are expected categories for what should constitute contemporary Aboriginal theatre. Some of the expectations which create these categories may include characters in traditional regalia; headpieces and moccasins, the incorporation of traditional Aboriginal songs and dances, and the speaking of Aboriginal dialects. However, as artists continue to create works that challenge these consensual categories, it can only be hoped that audience expectations will begin to change.

Defining an expectation is not an easy task, for expectations are indeterminate things. They almost always invariably contain judgments pertaining to race, class, and gender. They “take shape in a range of forms, from mass-produced images and literature, to drama, to local folklore and social behaviors” (Deloria 7). Deloria associates expectations with stereotypes. As mentioned above some of these stereotypes include the “Noble Savage” or the “Wise Elder”. He believes that the idea of the stereotype is an important tool for understanding the relation between representations— “that is, images, texts, music and performances— and the concrete exercise of power” (Deloria 8). Deloria outlines the original meaning of the word stereotype:

Originally a word from the printing industry, *stereotype* referred to a printing plate capable of reproducing copies undistinguished by individual difference. Transferred to human beings, one assumes that it originally meant the idea that all Indians, for example, were exactly alike— just like any given page in every book in a print run. Over time, of course, meanings have been imposed onto the stereotype's sameness: "all Indians are exactly alike... in being savage warriors" (a negative stereotype); or "all Indians are exactly alike... in being people who live in harmony with nature" (a positive one) (Deloria 8).

Stereotypes also help to shape social events and happenings. This reflects first-wave historiographic thinkers who believed that all Native people were savages in need of Christian conversion. Since there was assumed to be no variation among Aboriginal peoples, "church and federal officials were able to formulate coherent policies across the country and put them into operation" (Deloria 8). Stereotypes have played a significant part in shaping audiences' expectations and reception in Native performances. One of the primary goals of this research is to distinguish between what is considered to be the expected or "authentic" style of contemporary Aboriginal theatre and the unexpected, which resists popular categorizations of art.

In an interview I conducted with Yvette Nolan in March 2011, I asked if she ever felt the need to consciously alter the incorporation of traditional languages, songs, dances or images in order to render her work more accessible to mainstream audiences. She frankly answered "No" (Nolan, "Interview"). Nolan believes that the theatre she creates should begin with what those at Native Earth Performing Arts believe in and experience. She does not think that it is her job to educate the audience or to interpret symbols for them. Similarly, Michael Greyeyes is more concerned with creating art and is less concerned with how it is going to be received. In an interview conducted by The Globe and Mail, Greyeyes stated that he is not interested in staging ethnicity. He believes that "Indian-ness" as a concept is evolving and expanding. Although he does not explain himself at length, for Greyeyes, "Indian-ness" is based on "Indigenous

principles like the storytelling tradition” (Citron, “Michael Greyeyes”).

In “Seeing the Full Frame”, the introduction to the anthology *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre*, editor Rob Appleford addresses the difficulties in reception by both Native and non-native audiences. He emphasizes the importance of seeing the “full frame”: this refers to how the performance is seen and critically analyzed. In order to see the “full frame” Appleford suggests the “denaturalizing of the audience’s gaze” (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) in order to “foreground the cultural and political premises” that determine the play’s fictional world (Appleford x). This requires the audience to consider how the performance reflects aspects of Aboriginal culture and community. It becomes the role of the spectator to create their own entry point for analysis in hopes of both recognizing artistic expression and forming critical interpretations.

Appleford investigates the “third site of crisis” in criticism of Aboriginal theatre in light of Homi K Bhabha’s notion of “the third space” (Appleford xi). Here he challenges non-native audiences to consider Aboriginal theatre not as being either seen or not seen—in the sense of being “truly” understood by a “clear-eyed” audience—“but rather as creating a volatile hybrid space where cultural signs from several traditions are mediated and combined” (Appleford xi). Regardless of whether or not spectators recognize, for example, the specific dialect being spoken or the meaning behind the symbol of the Four Directions projected onstage, they may be able to identify with the shifting relationships between Aboriginal storytelling, mainstream pop culture references, historical events, and the bond of familial relationships. There are risks of miscommunications when translating between cultures, but this should not prevent Aboriginal artists from expressing themselves through theatre. One can only hope that the spectator is able to be open-minded about watching, studying, and understanding the complexities and myriad

possibilities of Aboriginal theatre performances.

## **Chapter One Conclusion**

Although Aboriginal culture and identity have been misrepresented and incorrectly described by non-native scholars and artists, Aboriginal peoples are persistently working to correct these errors. Through theatre, Aboriginal artists are sharing their traditions, spiritual beliefs and artistic processes with audiences across Canada. As Aboriginal performances are beginning to be recognized by practitioners and scholars as links to the spirit world, theatre is allocated a higher spiritual significance. The following chapters aim to move beyond strictly descriptive performance analyses and engage in the mystical consciousness that Aboriginal artists attempt to achieve through performance.

## Chapter Two Overview

This chapter focuses on Native Earth Performing Arts' production *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. In March 2011, I was able to meet and interview *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*'s director Yvette Nolan. Nolan's thoughts on her specific directing process and on contemporary First Nations theatre in general are considered throughout this chapter.

### *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* Plot Synopsis

*Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* was produced at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto from March 10<sup>th</sup> to March 27<sup>th</sup> 2011. The play is set in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. It tells the story of three sisters who are separated after the death of their mother and struggle to reconnect with their Aboriginal roots. Jessie, the eldest, is a doctor; the middle child Miranda is an aspiring actress; and the youngest, Janey, is homeless and convinced that she has killed her baby—whom she may never actually have had. As the play progresses the audience is introduced to the displacement of communities, the legacy of the residential schools and the forced sterilization programs run by the Indian Health Services and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Although the sisters lead different lives, each feels the pull of their ancestral culture and their paths eventually cross. Each of the sisters is linked to a different non-Aboriginal man who has an interest in Native American culture. For Jessie, the prominent man is her doctor husband, with whom she operates an inner-city clinic; for Janey the man is a detective; and Miranda gets involved with a low-budget Western movie director.

The fourth female character is The Lone Woman, a popular spiritual figure in Gabrielino and Tongva history. In 1835, a missionary ship visited the lands of the Gabrielino and Tongva nations near San Nicolas to take them to Santa Barbara. As the ship began to sail, a young mother looked for her baby—whom she thought had been carried aboard by a relative. She

realized her baby was not there and begged the sailors to stop the ship, but they would not. She dived off and swam to the island but she did not find her baby. “She cried for days, she sang and she remembered. After living alone on the island for eighteen years, the woman was found” (Carmelo, *Tombs* “Program Notes”). In Santa Barbara the “local natives did not understand her language, but her dialect grew and expanded through hand gestures, songs, and sentences within the six short weeks before she became ill and died” (Carmelo, *Tombs* “Program Notes”). The story of Juana Maria, better known to history as the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, is revisited by Marie Clements in this play. The character of The Lone Woman is an explicit symbol of Aboriginal spirituality as she speaks in Gabrielino, denotes the transformed spirit of the sisters’ deceased mother, and makes herself visible only to Aboriginal characters. Her role is noteworthy, as her presence represents the sisters’ only connection with their traditional culture.

### **Storytelling Devices in *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian***

In his article “Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada”, Drew Hayden Taylor considers theatre to be an extension of the practice of storytelling. In addition to storytelling being used for didactic means or to preserve cultural and historical traditions within a community, Taylor also believes that storytelling includes “metaphorical, philosophical, psychological implications” that reflect Aboriginal peoples’ holistic philosophy and suggests the co-existence of real time and space with the spiritual time and space that is recognized during performances (Taylor 61).

Jordan Paper’s book *Native North American Religious Traditions* describes some of the functions and uses of the telling of myths during performances or communal gatherings:

In most presentations of Native religions, the focus tends to be on myths. But none of these myths are ever presented as told. First, of course, they must be translated, and the acts of translation necessarily brings in major changes, as translation is not just from one language to another, but from one conceptual system to another. The actual telling of a myth can take a long time. Myth telling has many functions including education and entertainment. In order that myths be remembered, there is considerable repetition. But this repetition also exists for emphasis. And there is the storyteller`s mode of expression, which lovingly crafts words (Paper, *Traditions* xiv).

This brief description of the way a myth can be told, and of its purposes within a community relates directly to the dramaturgical style of *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. The similarities can be seen in what Paper refers to as “translation from one conceptual system to another”, “repetition” and “the storyteller`s mode of expression”. These three elements manifest themselves in *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, linking its dramaturgical structure and performance aesthetics to storytelling.

The “translation” of the myth in *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is twofold. First, it is in the language itself; originally told in Gabriéino but now translated into a predominantly English text. Second is the way in which Métis playwright Marie Clements modifies the story of *The Lone Women* into a style that lends itself to a theatrical representation. The passage from Jordan Paper quoted above alludes to the fact that if one does not speak a Native language and does not hear the story in a traditional setting it is not the same, or is not complete. Although elements may be lost in translations from any language to another, contemporary works by Aboriginal artists are generally written in English in order to reach a wider range of spectators. If the majority of the piece were written in an Aboriginal dialect then it would become less accessible to mainstream audiences. In addition, Clements’ piece is not the re-telling of *The Lone Woman*’s personal story but is an original piece that contains elements of her life.

Clements' artistic process began when she came across the myth of The Lone Woman while visiting a museum in Los Angeles. During a telephone interview I conducted with her on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011, she explained that The Lone Woman is a popular legend in L.A. and stands as an "emblem for strength and perseverance of nations" (Clements, "Interview"). At the museum, Clements visited an exhibit that consisted of "vanished people" (Clements, "Tombs Program Notes"). Entering this exhibit she learned that the "vanished people" referred to were, in fact, Native Americans. Clements' experience at this museum led her to think about what it means to "vanish" and who it is that perceives Aboriginal peoples and their cultures that way.

The Lone Woman's story is not literally explained within the plot of the play. Instead, Clements chooses to include historical and cultural information in the program notes, one of which states that: "... the local natives did not understand her language, but her dialect grew and expanded through hand gestures, songs, and sentences" (Carmello, *Tombs* "Program Notes"). This excerpt emphasizes the significance that traditional storytelling devices, including song and dance, have in the preservation of historical and cultural knowledge. Clements has chosen to integrate these traditional tools into her play as a way to revisit and honour the storytelling tradition while maintaining its original form and spirit.

Discovering The Lone Woman's story led Clements to write about such issues as motherhood, reincarnation and the fear of Native cultures and histories "vanishing". The piece also parallels Paper's description of the functions of storytelling in its educational and entertainment capacities (Paper, *Traditions* xiv). *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is educational to the extent that the audience is presented with the historical facts of forced sterilization, the consequences of the residential school systems and of general racial discrimination against Aboriginal peoples. The story is also entertaining in its inclusion of songs, a mythological

character and an emotionally-compelling and controversial plot. Marie Clements successfully translates elements from the myth of The Lone Woman from one conceptual system (oral tradition) to another (theatre).

What Paper refers to as “modes of expression” can be seen in the manner that Clements’ story is told. *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is the sharing of a personal narrative that includes Gabrieleno songs and dialects, and the interpenetration of the spirit world with the living world. The story is revealed in an episodic manner as it follows the adult life of each sister. As the story develops the sisters’ paths cross. This is demonstrated during a scene in which Janey visits a clinic. Although the doctor who treats Janey is her sister Jessie, both remain unaware that they are siblings. Aboriginal storytelling is also considered episodic, as it can contain “occasional inconsistencies such as the sudden, unexplained appearance or disappearance of a character, an odd change of scene, or an abrupt ending” (Song xx). These tendencies are intentional: they are meant to “pull listeners out of the rational world and open them to the possibility that things are not always as they seem” (Song xx). In *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, a screen is used to underscore the episodic nature of storytelling; it presents translations of the Creek dialect, displays images and assists in establishing scene changes.

A predominant theme in this piece is the constant presence of Aboriginal cosmology; the spirit world and the living world exist simultaneously. Indeed, Clements claims she deliberately employed First Nations cosmology as a dramatic technique in this play (Clements, “Interview”). The appearance of The Lone Woman in both the real world and the spirit world presents the co-existence of these two distinct yet related times and places. This notion of co-existing time is privileged in traditional storytelling as it allows for the participants to maintain their relationships with those in both the real and the spirit worlds.

According to Jordan Paper, repetition is used in the telling of myths in order to facilitate recall and to create emphasis. In *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* the repetition of a dream by each sister leads them back to their Aboriginal roots and to each other. The dream is the memory of the journey with their mother on a bus “with a skinny gray dog on the side,” from Oklahoma to California (*Tombs of the Vanishing Indian Performance*). Each of them in turn recounts the same incident, the words changing only slightly according to each character’s perspective. The memory of this dream is the link that connects the sisters to their past and to their culture. Through translation, repetition, and modes of expression, playwright Marie Clements and director Yvette Nolan have succeeded in producing a play that shares similarities with traditional categories of storytelling technique.

### **Music as Storytelling**

Another traditional aspect of oral storytelling that is employed in *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is music. Jennifer Kreisberg of the Tuscarora nation is a musician who has worked with Marie Clement and Yvette Nolan on numerous productions including the National Art Centre’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and Tarragon Theatre’s *The Only Good Indian*. In order to maintain cultural integrity, Kreisberg researches the cultural practices and languages specific to the nation she is working with. Nolan explains how for *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* Kreisberg learned the Gabrielino and Creek dialects in order to create original musical pieces to help tell this story (Nolan, “Interview”). In the interview conducted with Yvette Nolan on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, she explained that singing and dancing are expected during her rehearsals, as they are some of Aboriginal peoples’ original storytelling tools (Nolan, “Interview”). Singing and dancing are traditionally vital aspects in the cultural practices of many First Nations’ communities. Nolan explains that traditional knowledge is preserved and transferred through songs and dances. It

therefore seems natural for her to create a rehearsal process and performance style that incorporates as many of these tools as possible. For Nolan, the incorporation of song and dance is an essential part of the overall whole of her productions.

*Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* also includes contemporary music by mainstream Aboriginal artists. Some of the pre-show music included “That’s the Way You Fall in Love” by Buffy Sainte-Marie and “Half Breed” by Cher. These songs were popular in the late 1970s which is also the time frame that the play takes place, and are examples of the possible presuppositions that audience members could have of what “Native” music entails. Cher’s “Half Breed” is an example of a stereotypical perception of Aboriginal women. I cannot hear this song without associating it with an overexposed three-minute music video of Cher in an extremely unauthentic white headdress and beaded bikini top sitting on top of an Appaloosa horse. However, after being introduced to the character of Miranda, dressed in a particularly stereotypical “Indian Princess” costume for her role in a low budget Hollywood movie, I realized that this choice was perhaps made to emphasize the idea of how Native Americans were seen by non-natives during the 1970s.

Michelle St- John’s character, The Lone Woman, sings throughout the performance. The Lone Woman resides in a cut-out box hanging above stage right throughout the majority of the play, overseeing the lives of the three sisters. An original piece of music written by Kriesberg frames the piece in a similar manner to the theme song of a television show: its performance and repetition are cues to the beginning and ending of the story. The piece is sung by The Lone Woman at the beginning of the play and by all four of the women characters at the end, symbolizing their reunification. The incorporation of traditional music acts as a storytelling tool that unites the otherwise estranged family members. The song comes to signify reunification as it

is the only time in which all three sisters are together onstage with the mother figure after her death. They are not together in the real world, but rather come together in a non-naturalistic and spiritual way. As Aboriginal spirituality is not one of salvation, the spirit world can be contacted at any time through honouring and maintaining relationships with spiritual figures or beliefs. Therefore as the sisters remember this song and choose to sing it, they are able to connect with the spirit of their mother, and each other, in a way that is unbounded by ordinary reality and linear time.

### **Storytelling as Knowledge Transfer**

Playwright Marie Clements and director Yvette Nolan transfer knowledge through this piece, transmitting both denotative and connotative information about Native American history, culture, and familial struggles from storyteller to listener. It is not necessary for the listener of the story to be Aboriginal, as the performance, regardless of its content, can be explored and analyzed in each spectator's imagination. Marie Clements does not believe that the meanings or themes of her plays will be lost on non-Aboriginal spectators, because the worldviews that are commonly accepted by Aboriginal peoples may become theatrical for those who do not practice or share these beliefs. An example of Aboriginal spirituality is presented in the relationship that Janey has with The Lone Woman. Janey is the character who is most detached from her culture on a physical level but who communicates the most with the mother figure on a spiritual level. The scenes between these women are direct examples of how the living and the spirit worlds co-exist, while the presence of a spiritual character demonstrates the polytheistic worldview of First Nations peoples. They are spoken in both Gabriellino and English, while a translation of the dialect is projected onto a screen up center stage. A common occurrence is the disappearance of The Lone Woman before characters other than the sisters, such as the American detective or the

doctors, enter the scene. The Lone Woman is able to leave her position in the spirit world to descend into the living world to help guide and protect the sisters. These visits from the spirit world clearly demonstrate Indigenous philosophies that unproblematically combine the living and the spirit worlds.

The notion of the interrelation of actual time with the past, the future and the spirit world is embedded within traditional Aboriginal philosophy. The presence of spiritual forces that Clements and Nolan recognize and incorporate into their work concentrates on time and lineage, denoting the existence of all times at once (Nolan, "Interview"). Nolan created a specific gesture for what she believes to represent this concept. In rehearsals as well as in performances, the characters execute this gesture: standing tall with the left hand reaching forward and the right hand reaching back. Nolan believes that this position connects everyone who came before and everyone who comes after (Nolan, "Interview"). This stylized action is an example of an Indigenous perception of time that has been modified and embodied for the stage. Nolan's symbol is performed by The Lone Woman to demonstrate her existence in a space that accesses both the living and spirit world.

Aboriginal cosmology depicted by Marie Clements may become a dramatic technique when received by audiences experiencing it for the first time. Clements wrote *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* in an attempt to transmit an Aboriginal worldview and to allow the audience to see and experience this different cosmology. For example, an Aboriginal audience member who is familiar with their tradition may have less of a problem accepting the appearances of The Lone Woman from the spirit world into the living world. It is not as much as a leap for Aboriginal artists to put spirits onstage, because, as Nolan explains touching her hand to her chest, "they are always here" (Nolan, "Interview").

## Creating a play's Fictional World

As discussed in the previous chapter, Rob Appleford's theories in "Seeing the Full Frame" address potential difficulties in the reception of Aboriginal theatre. One of his suggested analytical tools requires the spectators to consider how "what is seen" onstage shapes the fictional world of the piece. The fictional world of Aboriginal theatre includes both the physical space of the performance and the spiritual realms which unite real time with the time and place of the spirit or mystical world. This introduces an alternative meaning to Aboriginal theatre as "hybrid", since analysis no longer rests on simply identifying the fusion of Western theatre practices with elements of Native culture. Alternatively, seeing hybridity as a merger of real time and space with spiritual time and space allows for a more nuanced analysis. Analyzing a piece of contemporary Aboriginal theatre does require the spectator to acknowledge the potential of being exposed to several worldviews or cultural perspectives simultaneously because the sharing of culturally inspired beliefs and philosophies are a part of traditional Aboriginal storytelling and theatre.

In her article "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play", theoretician Elinor Fuchs proposes key questions to ask when critiquing a play. The article introduces the reader to the importance of seeing and understanding the specific "world of the play" (Fuchs 20). Some of these elements include the notion of time, social norms, and the language that is spoken. Fuchs explains that everyone's reading of this world will be fundamentally subjective and that meaning will be constructed in many different ways.

In an article entitled "Conversion and Identity Iroquois Christianity in Seventeenth-Century New France", Allen Greer suggests looking at the work done by Latin American theorists who have analyzed conversion not as a "discrete unidirectional event, but as a problem

to be unravelled in all its ambiguity, instability, and local specificity” (Greer 177). This notion of an event becoming ambiguous when taken out of its specific context is similar to Elinor Fuchs’ insistence on analyzing the specificities of each play’s fictional world. Greer suggests eliminating the category “religion” and to stop treating “Christianity” and “Iroquois religion” as monolithic entities defined by belief. “Creation myths, rituals of propitiation, theories of transubstantiation, and procedures for achieving mystical ecstasy do not necessarily form a seamless unitary package” (Greer 177). Greer states:

We need to give separate attention to the heterogeneous assemblage of phenomena implied by the heading “religion” and try to examine them, as much as possible, within a specific social context, rather than as manifestations of a free-floating abstraction. In this connection, the term “local religion”, originally proposed by Europeanists, and applied to studies of Latin American colonial religion, helpfully focuses attention on performance rather than belief, on specific settings among people with particular experiences and traditions rather than on theological systems with pretensions to universality (Greer 177-8).

Although this article explores Iroquois Catholicism in the colonial society of New France, I believe that connections can be made to the ways in which we approach the co-existing times found in *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. The idea of looking at spiritual and religious situations from “specific settings among people with particular experiences and traditions” can be directly applied to the work of playwrights and directors as they create fictional worlds that are specific to each play. Greer supports my earlier suggestions of Aboriginal spirituality being one of direct experience, as he looks at what is done rather than at what is believed. Theatre is thus an optimal way to present Aboriginal worldviews and spirituality, since it is an art form founded on performance and action.

Similarly, Jordan Paper distinguishes between pan-Native spiritual traditions and situations that are specific to each nation. The fictional world of *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*

is one that constantly interacts with the spirit world and maintains a deep relationship with a mythical character, The Lone Woman. Although it is common in most Aboriginal nations to create and maintain relationships with spiritual figures, the character referred to in this piece is specific to the Gabrielino nation of Los Angeles and is not commonly recognizable by contemporary Aboriginal or non-aboriginal audiences. However, as explained by Paper, the idea behind sustaining a relationship with a spiritual figure will be recognized by all nations. In the following excerpt Paper discusses some of the roles and functions of what he refers to as “Ancestral” and “Other Spirits of the Dead”. He explains their reappearance in the real world:

Thus, the family and clan dead in the North American horticulture-hunting (or sea mammal hunting-fishing) traditions are spiritually potent yet not deities. They can be reached by prayers and rituals, and they can appear in dreams. They can influence the fortunes of the living members of the clan but only subtly. There is vagueness and ambiguity in these concepts, which is a problem for Euro-Americans trying to understand it, but this is not, of course, a problem for the members of these communities (Paper *Traditions* 73).

Paper’s description is applicable to Marie Clements’ character of The Lone Woman. For example, The Lone Woman speaks to Janey and gives her guidance while she is being interrogated by the detective but she cannot speak or act on Janey’s behalf. Paper also mentions the ambiguity in the purposes and manifestation of spiritual figures. In this case, the figure of The Lone Woman is not one that is universally recognized by mainstream audiences, no matter their heritage. Instead non-native people, or Native people who are detached from their culture, could perhaps interpret this spirit-figure as a guardian angel, or as their own mother. This is an example of what makes contemporary Aboriginal theatre a venue for a multitude of interpretations. Even if the spectator is unfamiliar with the specific cultural symbol or figure presented onstage they will be able to identify with the bond of spiritual or familial relationships. In addition to this, the spectators will have a direct experience of the meaningfulness of the

performance that will in and of itself make them more open to Aboriginal worldviews.

## Pan-Native Theological References

As a director in a pan-Native theatre company it is essential for Yvette Nolan's artistic processes to acknowledge the thoughts and worldviews of all nations involved. For example, in his book *theatre & interculturalism* Ric Knowles explains how Nolan's initial workshops for the play *Death of a Chief* began with negotiations among the company members about the ceremonial elements of ritual performance in their various cultural traditions. Nolan explains this process:

When you put people in a room together, you end up with a discussion of what those traditions are, and who they've learned them from, and what they bring into the room. All of those people bring all of their traditions to the room and then we have a negotiation, and we agree on the things that we can agree on, and it works just like it says in the stories that it works, in that we sit and discuss it until we figure out what everyone can live with (Knowles 66).

Although there are many Aboriginal traditions in Canada, all have had varying degrees of contact with each other. As explained by Jordan Paper, Indigenous spirituality is different from the "interrelated monotheistic traditions" such as Christianity, as "these polytheistic traditions do not have a concept of absolute truth" (Paper, *Traditions* 7). Although there are differences between the traditions, there are also important commonalities. For this reason, Native traditionalists are often comfortable with and accepting of the rituals of other Native cultures (Paper, *Traditions* 7). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Native artists are able to create Pan-Native artistic practices that are acceptable to a variety of nations. Preserving and incorporating traditional performance techniques and cultural elements are priorities to practicing Aboriginal theatre artists. The means in which they are able to do both are expanding, and vary from artist to artist. Nolan believes that each process creates the company's own ritual. "The newly created

rituals are respectful but negotiated ones used to forge diasporic urban identities across First Nations” (Knowles 67).

## Windigo as Pan-Native

In Emma Anderson’s “Thy God Has Not Come to Our Country”, the first chapter from her book *The Betrayal of Faith the Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert*, she recounts the detailed and complex process of “becoming Innu” (Anderson 11). Anderson’s chapter explores the religious and social practices of the Innu people by exploring their epistemological approaches to reality. She introduces Innu creation stories, traditional education, and notions of death and the afterlife. Some of these traditional stories involve the Windigo, a frightening cannibalistic figure. The Windigo is an example of a figure that exists in the traditions of many nations across Canada and can therefore be referred to as a Pan-Native figure. Not only is the Windigo commonly known within Aboriginal communities, but it is also recognizable by Western audiences (Ruffo 166). In Ojibwa writer Armand Garnet Ruffo’s article “A Windigo Tale: Contemporizing and Mythologizing the Residential School Experience” he describes the Windigo as understood by Ashishnaabe nations in saying:

Within the oral tradition of the Anishnaabe numerous stories about the Windigo exist, most having to do with encounters between Windigoes and humans or with other deities, like Nanbush (Ruffo 166).

As the Windigo is a pan-Native character, for the purposes of this research, the following analysis will consist primarily of knowledge from the Innu nation, for whom the Windigo is a reoccurring character in traditional stories. A consistent theme in these stories is the “taming” of the Windigo through Innu values of respectful and community-oriented behaviour (Anderson 38). In these narratives the Innu people fear that the Windigo will take on the guise of a family

member and that they will be consumed as food to save the Windigo from famine. Nowhere can the strength of the Innu distinction between “us” and “them” be seen in starker relief than in their cultural attitudes to cannibalism (Anderson 39).

In *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*, the character Jessie reflects Anderson’s descriptions of a Windigo. Her actions throughout the play shape her to echo the qualities of a Windigo as seen in traditional Innu narratives. After the death of her mother and separation from her sisters, she was raised by a white family and became a doctor. Jessie and her non-native husband, who is also a doctor, run an inner-city clinic for women. Throughout the play Jessie tries very hard to forget about her Creek heritage but is constantly reminded by her husband that she will always be one of “them”. His comments force Jessie to further distance herself from her culture in hopes of validating her non-native upbringing. After working in the clinic for a couple of months, a patient of her husband asks to have her “womb returned.” Jessie is horrified to discover that her husband has been sterilizing Native women as part of a government initiative under the guise of a temporary contraceptive. Although Jessie is unaware of it at the time, the audience knows that this patient is her biological sister, Janey.

Innu narratives attempt to “tame” the Windigo by convincing them to accept their worldview. Jessie represents a sort of “reverse Windigo” as her “taming” is seen through her willingness to fully accept the Western worldview and to ignore her own culture. Her cultural enlightenment occurs at the end of the play after realizing that she had been a promoter of the forced sterilization programs run by the Indian Health Services. Jessie finally acknowledges that she was wrong to neglect and be ashamed of her Creek roots. Unable to live with her own guilt, Jessie kills herself and hopes to be reunited with her mother and sisters in the spirit world.

## Chapter two Conclusion

Through a personal process that relates oral traditions and spiritual situations with contemporary life, Marie Clements can be seen to include elements of traditional storytelling in the dramaturgical structure of *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. Marie Clements and Yvette Nolan attempt to establish that cultural revival through theatre can be achieved without compromising the integration of traditional elements such as Aboriginal dialects, song, and imagery. Through Clements' particular processes of translation, repetition and modes of expression, the piece is accessible to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences who are willing to accept the conventions of this particular fictional world.

## Chapter Three Overview

In Chapter One, I discussed S. Elizabeth Bird and Rob Appleford's theories of representation and reception, demonstrating that there are many preconceived and stereotypical notions associated with Aboriginal peoples. In this chapter, I will analyze the discourse and aesthetic choices that govern *from thine eyes*, choreographed by Michael Greyeyes and written by Yvette Nolan, in order to elucidate how Aboriginal cultural elements are being employed. This piece is significant, as it is presented in a style that mainstream audiences would not necessarily interpret as being obviously "Native" in that there are no directly illustrative cultural elements. Nevertheless, examination of the way in which *from thine eyes* was created, the way in which it was performed and its possible effects on the audience reveals its creators' preoccupation with Aboriginal cosmology and values. This chapter examines various production elements such as space, choreography, costumes and music in order to examine the particular style of this piece.

### *from thine eyes* Plot Synopsis

*from thine eyes* was co-produced by Signal Theatre and Native Earth Performing Arts. It ran at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto from September 22<sup>nd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> 2011. *from thine eyes* is a contemporary dance-theatre piece that is divided into four scenes. Each of these scenes contains the reoccurring theme of death and explores how different people deal with moving on from this life to the next. The major characters are a murderous junkie, an abusive husband, a couple who lost their child and a doctor who works with AIDS patients. Although this piece contains seemingly morbid narratives, the presence of the spirit world provides a hopeful atmosphere. It reflects Aboriginal peoples' belief that the spirits of the dead return "home" to the spirit world. "In this way, death is celebrated as an essential part of the process of life for Indigenous people

rather than an end to things” (McNab 96).

This piece does not have a unifying storyline, but rather explores the spiritual journey of four different people. The dramaturgical decision to separate this piece into four distinct scenes can be interpreted to reflect Aboriginal peoples’ philosophical relationship with the number four.

Scholar Georges Sioui explains:

Four is the sacred number in America: there are four sacred directions, four sacred colours, four races of humans,... as well as four ages of human life (childhood, adulthood, old age, then childhood again), four seasons, and four times of day which are also sacred. Thus the circle operates in cycles of four movements each (10).

The number of scenes and primary characters in *from thine eyes* could be considered examples of how artists Yvette Nolan and Michael Greyeyes integrate culturally specific elements into this piece without overtly displaying its cultural significance.

The first scene is between a drug addict and a priest whom he first robs, then murders. The second scene demonstrates the horrifying life of a woman trapped in an abusive marriage. The husband repeatedly recites the standardized wedding vows as the woman revisits the acts of violence he has inflicted on her. The third scene introduces a husband and a wife whose daughter has passed away. The mother is delusional; she speaks to her deceased baby Gabrielle and forces her husband to celebrate her fictitious birthdays. As the wife tells imaginary stories of Gabrielle at the ages of 3, 9, and 17, the husband tries to get her to acknowledge their loss. Towards the end of the scene, the daughter appears to dance and play with her parents. The final scene takes place in a hospital. There are four characters in this scene; one is a doctor. During this scene the doctor continues to perform the movement of washing her hands. She does so in an attempt to rid her memory of all of the sadness and pain she has experienced in her life. Each character is forced to confront the difficult issues in their lives so that they can begin their next journey. The

six performers; Michael Caldwell, Luke Garwood, Ceinwen Gobert, Sean Ling, Shannon Litzenberger and Claudia Moore were all carefully chosen by Greyeyes. None are Aboriginal.

## Reception

Issues of reception and culturally specific representations are unavoidable when considering *from thine eyes*, as its cast consists of non-Aboriginal performers, but is advertised and co-produced by a Native theatre company. This company, Native Earth Performing Arts, has a mandate to provide a base for professional Native performers, writers, technicians and other artists (Native Earth, “About Us”). Associating *from thine eyes* with Native Earth Performing Arts may establish expectations of “authenticity” in the minds of its future spectators. Knowledge of this theatre company’s mandate, or experience of their previous works, could generate expectations as to how the piece will be presented. Native Earth Performing Arts’ website stresses its responsibilities to supply Native artists with as many professional opportunities as possible. Therefore, it could be presumed by the spectators that *from thine eyes* will consist of an all-native cast, or include culturally-specific performative elements such as dialects, songs or images. However, in *from thine eyes* Michael Greyeyes contests the use of the visual and aural elements that are commonly associated with Aboriginal theatre productions. In particular he avoids the incorporation of Aboriginal dialects, songs and imagery—all choices made in the early productions of the plays of Tomson Highway that were decisive in establishing audience expectations when viewing works by First Nations artists. The goal of this chapter is to consider what happens when such characteristics are not incorporated into a performance.

In order to do so, it is useful to consider some potential difficulties with art reception, especially when considering culturally-specific works. Often enough, spectators and critics produce categorized or clichéd analyses that do not justifiably reflect the particulars of each piece of art. *from thine eyes* is a prime example of a piece that cannot be categorized with reference to the accepted norms of contemporary Aboriginal theatre productions as established by Tomson Highway seeing that its form and presentational style exclude explicit visual and aural references to Aboriginal culture. Principal aspects of the Cree worldview, such as one's relationship to the earth and one's journey to the spirit world, are present in this piece; however, they are not presented in a style that mainstream audiences would necessarily interpret as being aesthetically "Native".

## Space

*from thine eyes* was produced at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Ontario. The venue has three different seating levels (floor, orchestra and mezzanine) and holds approximately 150 people. The stage itself was a frontal/proscenium configuration situated on the ground floor. From my seat on the floor level I could smell, very strongly, the aroma of fresh paint. The stage floor was covered with a thick beige canvas tarpaulin that had an "earthy" look to it. This "tarp" evoked the earth, creating the illusion of soil and rugged terrain. The choreography further supported this metaphor. Moments of the choreography had the performers move as though they were walking in quicksand, slow and heavy, while at other times they were on their hands and knees gripping onto, or digging into what is imagined to be the ground. I feel this was significant as I believe that the characters are meant to have particularly significant relationships with "the Earth" throughout the piece. The tarpaulin lay unevenly upon the stage, as there were objects protruding from beneath it. These oddly-shaped objects were placed upstage left and center

stage. After the show began, the tarpaulin was lifted to reveal chairs and benches which would later be manipulated by the actors to help establish each scene's location.

There were also smaller objects—primarily bones— scattered across the stage floor. To begin the show, the actors entered in a blackout whispering “there is nobody here” (*from thine eyes* Performance). They appeared to have entered a sort of limbo. All six actors spread out across the stage and bent down to collect the bones. The bones were then placed at the front of the stage so that the audience could see what the characters had sought out. The act of bringing the bones down center stage suggests an offering to the audience. I perceived the characters' offering of the bones as an invitation to the audience to share their journey. The introduction ended with the actors walking upstage removing the tarpaulin as they went, as two male actors begin the first scene. Interestingly, after the earthy tarpaulin was removed, the remaining scenes had more naturalistic sets, with select pieces of furniture and the incorporation of flats to represent particular environments. In *from thine eyes*' program notes, Greyeyes explains that the creation of this piece originated from questions about how one begins one's journey to the “Land of the Dead” (*from thine eyes* “Program Notes”). I think the tarpaulin can be considered to be the “Land of the Dead” which the characters have either reached or which they are en route to. The four other scenes, which contain more naturalistic settings, can be seen as reflections of their lives in the real world, while the sequences on the tarp can be seen as their lives in, or their way to, the spirit world.

## **The Spirit World**

The communal attention paid to bones at the beginning of this piece is comparable to various Indigenous death rituals, but is most similar to the one found in the Huron-Wendat nation. In Erik Seeman's book *The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead*, the reader is given a

compact description of the death ritual that was performed by the Wendat nation. Every 10 to 15 years, they would prepare the bones of the deceased so that their souls could start the journey to the spirit world. The bodies of all those who had not died violent deaths were removed from their temporary tombs and buried in a communal area.

Going even further than Jordan Paper's recognition of the possibility of Pan-Native rituals, Erik Seeman acknowledges similarities between the death rituals of the Wendat nation and French settlers. Seeman refers to these similarities as "Deathways" which can be described as a term that compares deathbed scenes, burial practices, funerals, mourning rituals, and commemoration of the dead between the Wendat and the French (Seeman 2). Aboriginal death rituals are considered Pan-Native, as each nation deeply respects the deceased and wishes to maintain relationships with them as they enter the spirit world. Seeman's book also explores the importance of human remains in the Wendat worldview. He explains that as Wendats conceived it, when a person died, his or her "two souls stayed with the corpse until the Feast of the Dead, at which point one soul separated from the bones and went to Aataentsic's village in the sky. The other soul remained in or near the ossuary unless it was reanimated in a newborn Wendat child" (Seeman 9). As explored in the introduction of this thesis, the spirit world is not considered separate from the natural world. Instead, it is believed that both co-exist and are dependent on one another. Aboriginal peoples' notion of circular time also plays a significant role in understanding the spirit world, as it is believed that after death, one's spirit remains in constant relationship with the living world. Moreover, "the process of death and dying are considerably altered if there is no linear notion of time" (McNab 98). In Aboriginal philosophy, the real world is connected with the spirit world through the belief that all living entities, including humans, animals and nature, are equal and in constant relationship with one another. The spirit world is

recognizable by all Aboriginal nations although its physical form and spiritual functions vary according to both particular traditions and personal perspectives. For example, in an interview I conducted with Floyd Favel in February of 2012, I asked him how he perceived the spirit world and he responded: “It’s whatever you want it to be” (Favel, “Interview”). His answer represents the ultimate in personally-determined spirituality.

Michael Greyeyes’ choice to choreograph what can be described as an “offering of bones” could be interpreted as a link between real time and space with spiritual time and space. It is possible that through choreography, Greyeyes attempts to make the beliefs and practices surrounding Aboriginal notions of death and the afterlife tangible onstage. Seeman continues to explain how for the Wendat nation, some material objects possessed spiritual power: the “bereaved gave the dead gifts to be brought to the afterlife”, and they offered presents to friends and ritual specialists as “tokens of the reciprocal ties that bound a community together” (Seeman 3). Within the real space and time of Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, *from thine eyes* could be interpreted as an event wherein connections with both the audience and the spirit world can be formed.

What I am suggesting here is supported by Lakota Hoop dancer Kevin Locke’s idea of space and time of Aboriginal performances, mentioned in the introduction. Locke believes that Aboriginal performance manifests itself in both the real time and space of the performers and the audience, but also in a spiritual time perceived by beings from the spirit world. It is possible for *from thine eyes* to be considered an event that fulfills Locke’s perception of both the “sacred space” and the “intersubjective time” of performance. This is not to say that *from thine eyes* should be considered a sacred ceremony, or be described as overtly spiritual. Rather, due to its source question “How does a journey to the spirit world begin?”, it is possible that the

presentation of this piece can attract and maintain relationships between people who ask the same question and those from the spirit world. As described by Locke, it is possible for the presentation of contemporary Aboriginal dance and theatre to connect those involved to a higher spiritual power in ways unrelated to the support of traditional obligations and commitments. The audiences of rituals and theatre are similar as both include the presence of humans and spirits. However, the creation and presentation of theatre is far less fixed than a pre-arranged ritual. Artists like Kevin Locke and Floyd Favel believe that theatre can attract and connect with spiritual figures through the particularities of how the piece is created and performed.

### **The Earth**

The tarpaulin that lay across the stage floor at the beginning of *from thine eyes* can be understood to symbolize the Earth. This beige canvas piece was eventually removed but the same material was used to cover the upstage area. Set designer Jackie Chau created a 3-foot tall riser and it formed what appeared to be a small hill, or clump of rough earth located upstage centre. This was an area where the performers would return to when they were not actively performing. Scattered on top of this riser were bones, similar to the ones that covered the tarpaulin at the beginning of the piece. The performers would get down on all fours and gather the bones into piles. They would then freeze in silent, twisted positions so that the audience could focus on the current scene. As the show progressed, I began to consider that this space represented a transitional “Land of the Dead”; somewhere in between this world and the spirit world. This was a clear aesthetic decision on Chau’s part and I found it to be an effective way of demonstrating the characters’ journey in a medium other than dance.

The textured details of the tarpaulin allow me to associate it to the Earth visually, but I would also stress its potential correlations to the Earth in terms of Aboriginal philosophy. In the

choreography, the characters seem to develop a significant relationship to the Earth as represented by the upstage tarpaulin which they constantly return to and physically interact with in various ways. Within Aboriginal worldviews, the most vital relationship one must create, maintain and respect is with the Earth. Referring to “The Sacred Circle of Life” Georges Sioui explains the importance of maintaining reciprocal relationships with both the natural and living worlds. He states:

Every expression of life, material or immaterial, demands of the Amerindian respect and the spontaneous recognition of an order that, while incomprehensible to the human mind, is infinitely perfect. This order is called the Great Mystery. To the traditional Amerindian, life finds its meaning in the implicit and admiring recognition of the existence, role, and power of all the forms of life that compose the circle. Amerindians, by nature, strive to respect the sacred character of the relations that exist among all forms of life (Sioui 9).

In Aboriginal theologies, one’s relationship with nature is of particular importance. The uttermost respect is given to animals and plants as they play a decisive role in the existence and survival of humans (Sioui 9). Traditionally, the food required for survival either grew directly from the soil or the waters, or else consisted of herbivores and omnivores who ate plant life and who were eaten in turn. It is believed that the “Earth nurses and feeds us as do our mothers, who themselves in turn are dependent on Earth” (Paper, *Deities* 20). Aboriginal scholars and philosophers believe that humans are symbolically born from the Earth. The functions of the Earth according to Aboriginal philosophies are most prominent in creation stories. All nations have their own creation story, “a specific account of how the world was made and how it came to be filled with humans and animals” (Seeman 6). Although the characters, metaphors and images in creation stories vary from nation to nation, an emphasis on the spirit of the Earth is always present. Georges Sioui explains:

More concretely, all Amerindians refer to the Earth as their mother, composed like them of body, mind and spirit. The spirit that governs the earth and materially produces life is feminine. To the Wendat, the earth was created by a woman named Aataentsic, who came from a celestial world. The Great turtle took her onto his back and ordered the animals to spread there a small amount of earth brought up from the bottom of the sea (Sioui 14).

The Earth has always assisted in the existence and protection of human beings. *from thine eyes'* set designer Jackie Chau created a venue where these philosophical beliefs could be physically produced. The moments in the choreography that have each character return to this upstage area illustrates the final stages of their individual spiritual journeys. They are completing their own "Sacred Circle of Life" as they complete a full circle and return back to the Earth who originally gave them life. The Pan-Native belief is that one should treat the Earth the same as one treats one's mother, emphasizing its ability to give and preserve life.

### **Bodies Moving in Space and Time**

The primary visual focus in *from thine eyes* is the body moving through space. In this piece the human body is the principal tool of expression for the production's themes and plots. The use of the body is also important on a cultural level. As *Greyeyes* does not explicitly incorporate elements of "Nativity" into the signs or symbols that are seen onstage, any cultural references are incorporated through the bodies of the performers. Therefore, it is the body doing an action that becomes recognizable as a Native symbol. Nolan and *Greyeyes* both assert that their creative processes are influenced by their personal cultural beliefs and worldviews. This approach is similar to Cree theatre practitioner Floyd Favel's theory of Native Performance Culture. Favel believes that the "rhythms of the land, the movements, the postures, and the sounds need to come onto the stage, not in their pure ritual form, but through a theatrical process" (Favel, "Poetry, Remnants and Ruins" 32). Favel's theories of Native Performance Culture suggest that tradition, process and theatre are all in equal relationship with each other,

and demonstrate how they work together to develop techniques, methods and exercises based on Aboriginal ritual and social structures. Native Performance Culture is not just a theoretical concept, but a notion that ignites a cultural spark in the bodies of the actors.

It can therefore be argued that the Cree elements of Greyeyes' piece can be most clearly perceived in the particular uses of the performer's body. Greyeyes takes elements of storytelling, traditional powwow dances and movements of animals—the bear and the bird—and incorporates them into his choreography. Greyeyes creates physical means through which he can transform traditional cultural elements onto the stage. Briefly in each scene, the character who is attempting to commence his/her journey to the spirit world performs a sequence of movements that represents a physical struggle with their body. These moments of internal struggle make the characters look as though they are trying to open their bodies so that their souls can escape. This interrupts the otherwise fluid choreography of the scenes.

Very briefly in the introduction scene, the six performers modify their bodies into the figure of a bird. They begin moving their heads, arms, and legs as though personifying this animal. While watching this transition, I could not help but think about the trickster figure. The trickster figure, known for example to Ojibwas as Nanabush and as Weesageechak to Cree nations, is an important figure in Aboriginal mythology. The trickster goes by “many names and takes on many guises, one of the most popular being that of the raven” (Highway XII). The trickster is essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, whose didactic purpose is to teach about the nature and the meaning of existence in this world. I thought about Nanabush after reading what Michael Greyeyes wrote in the program notes. He explained how the concept of *from thine eyes* emerged through the work he did on a Cree language opera called Pimootewin or The Journey (*from thine eyes* “Program Notes”). Pimootewin's main plot follows the trickster as he travels to

the land of the dead. After working on this piece Greyeyes began to question how a journey of this nature begins. After connecting this moment of choreography to the presence of the Trickster figure, I wondered if this piece would continue to present the audience with references to other mythological or cultural symbols. However, this was the only instance in which the choreography could be explicitly associated with a commonly recognizable Aboriginal mythological figure.

In the second scene, the story concerning the wife and her abusive husband, the two performers embody bears. The incorporation of bear-like movements was influenced by the reciting of Daniel David Moses' poem "Song of the Bear's Breakfast". The movements were executed by the husband and the wife and called for both of them to move around the stage on their hands and feet. A special "Thank You" is given to Daniel David Moses in the program notes for allowing his poem to be quoted. Apart from this mention, there are no descriptions of Moses' background as a First Nations playwright or of any potential cultural or symbolic references to the bear's relationship with Aboriginal worldviews. Instead, the reciting of the poem becomes an allegory comparing the anger and violence of the abusive husband with that of a bear that is yearning to feast after a winter's hibernation. I believe that the comparison between the abusive husband and the bear can be received by audiences whether they know that Daniel David Moses is a First Nations writer or not. In general, Greyeyes' choreography and Chau's set design remain impartial to the incorporation of overtly Aboriginal signs and symbols. The bodies of the performers were not excessively used as mediums to inscribe cultural messages or teachings, since they were used primarily as storytelling devices.

## Costumes in *from thine eyes*

The characters in *from thine eyes* are dressed in neutral-coloured clothing, generally with baggy bottoms and spandex tops that allow them to execute the choreography comfortably. The priest and the doctor were the only characters who put on pieces of clothing that reflected their occupations, such as a black robe and a white lab coat. The audience is presented with characters who are not dressed in ways that hold specific references to Aboriginal culture. This choice encourages the spectators to move beyond any preconceived notions of how Aboriginal people look and allows them to focus on the performance itself.

## Music in *from thine eyes*

*from thine eyes* does not contain any traditional, or contemporary, pieces of music by First Nations artists. In the program notes the following is mentioned:

The music in Site 1 contains a sample of “Ich bin der Welt abhanden Gekommen,” from Ruckertlieder, music by Gustav Mahler. Performed by Thomas Hampson, baritone, Wolfram Rieger, piano. Live Recording: 18 Aug 2005, Salzburger Festspiele. Site 2 contains a sample of Es ist Vollbracht,” Aria from St. John’s Passion, BWV 245, composed by J.S. Bach. Performed by Stephanie Blythe, contralto, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, John Nelson, conductor (*from thine eyes* “Program Notes”)

All other music heard throughout the show is composed by Miquelon Rodriguez. These original pieces include a number of different sound effects. Before the first scene begins, the sounds of rain, typing, muffled cries, and men’s voices are heard. These sounds helped the audience to envision what the young man in this scene may be experiencing as he walks towards the church. Before the second scene, sounds of a man and woman fighting are heard; the man is clearly winning. The third story begins with the sound of a car crashing, implying that this is perhaps how the couple’s child has passed away. As the fourth scene begins, sounds typically heard in a hospital, such as muffled announcements and heart monitors are being played. The sound effects

are used during the transitions from one scene to the next in order to establish the physical location and atmosphere of the upcoming events.

The pieces of incidental music written by Miquelon Rodriguez are all instrumental and have quick tempos. The songs sound similar to those of “house” or “techno” music. Each song has a strong bass line, but also contains passages of classical music or sound effects as mentioned above. Having a different song play in each scene creates a feeling of discontinuity for the piece as a whole. The music is jarring and does not contain a melodic flow, making it difficult at times to emphasize with what is happening onstage.

Typically, it is the sound of the drum that is most commonly associated with Aboriginal performances. I believe that this association comes from popular knowledge of the Powwow. Powwow gatherings are an important part of Aboriginal life, “centering on drumming, dance, song, community, and celebration of Aboriginal identity and history” (Crawford 767). While styles of dress and dancing vary broadly from region to region, some dances and styles are held in common. A variety of dances can be seen at a Powwow, including the TwoStep, Round Dance, and Grass Dance, as well as performative dances such as the Spear and Hoop Dance (Crawford 768). Contemporary Powwows are similar to Aboriginal theatre performances insofar as they are both characterized as events that could potentially create and maintain relationships with the spirit world. Similar to contemporary Aboriginal theatre, the dances and competitions of contemporary powwows are not overtly religious, and gatherings are open to all. Powwows are described as:

... generally not directed by a spiritual practitioner, nor is a powwow a sacred ceremony. However, powwows still play an important role in contemporary Native American spirituality. Powwows are places where Native American people can affirm their ties to community, celebrate and rediscover their Native identity, and reconnect with traditional Native culture. For many Native people, carefully making their regalia, practicing, and participating in powwows is a spiritual activity...Children are taught about the values of

traditional culture and about respecting elders and community, and they are encouraged to take pride in their indigenous heritage. For many individuals, dancing works as a space for prayer and contemplation, for reflection and personal expression. In it, physical expression can be both personal fulfillment and prayerful worship. There is no prescribed dogma of what dances must mean or symbolize for individual dancers. For some dancing may be a purely secular, competitive endeavor. For others it is a profoundly spiritual one, and a central part of their religious and spiritual life. It is up to the individuals to determine the meaning and role that dancing will have in their lives (Crawford 769).

The drum is the musical accompaniment to almost every traditional Aboriginal dance. Traditionally, the beat of the drum is considered an echo of the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Drumming, or dancing to the beat of the drum, “places an individual in rhythm with the earth. As you move, you step into the proper beat and harmony of all of creation” (Crawford 769). Drumming and dancing thus can be experienced as a spiritual practice and also as an entertaining event for the community. It becomes a community event, as many people could drum at a time, while others can dance and watch.

The music in *from thine eyes* lacks the entertaining and communal feel that Aboriginal drumming offers, and instead is replaced with the dissociation produced by techno. The music is cold and its strong beats are at times overwhelming, distracting the audience from the choreography. Similar to the other theatrical elements in this piece such as set and costumes, the music is not used to reflect or indicate Aboriginal culture. There is no direct correlation between techno music and Aboriginal drumming, which only reinforces Greyeyes’ decision to not stage an “authentic” Aboriginal identity. In juxtaposition to communal feeling induced by traditional Aboriginal drumming, the incorporation of techno music evokes alienation, the “alone together” experience of the rave, nightclub or even simply of contemporary urban life. The reception of techno music would likely be the same by both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal audiences.

## Chapter Three Conclusion

Moving beyond mere social representations of contemporary First Nations' life, Greyeyes has successfully created an abstract performance that is an extension of his personal Cree belief system. In attempting to show spectators that he can create art in ways that cause one to re-evaluate preconceived notions of "Nativity", Greyeyes' *from thine eyes* is an effective example of contemporary Aboriginal performance that links tradition and modernity. While each Aboriginal production and practitioner borrows from various theatrical traditions as well as Aboriginal worldviews, they do not follow any one model that can be labeled "authentically Aboriginal". In hopes of preserving traditional ceremonies and spiritual situations, contemporary Aboriginal theatre artists are creating transformation processes that allow cultural traditions to become theatrical.

## Chapter Four Overview

This chapter examines Floyd Favel's theory "Native Performance Culture" as an approach to theatre-making that is based on traditional Aboriginal principles. As one of the last students of the late theatre director Jerzy Grotowski<sup>3</sup>, Favel's thinking embraces not only his traditional culture but also the avant-garde European theatre of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. His artistic perspectives have also been influenced by his observation of the work of Japan's Tadashi Suzuki, Russia's Anatoly Vasiliev, and Butoh master-performer Natsu Nakajima, as well as by his long-term work as a performer with the Danish Indigenous theatre company Tukak Teatret. Favel's concept of Native Performance Culture is echoed across the country by Aboriginal theatre artists who are engaged in both the creation of new performances and in processes of theorization and self-reflection. Native Performance Culture resists systematic description as a complete method, as its definition and uses are dependent on the individual artist's experience and his or her relationship with traditional culture. This chapter describes some potential functions of Native Performance Culture and provides examples of how this method has been used in theatre training workshops and by directors.

### Native Performance Culture

Cree actor, director, playwright and theoretician Floyd Favel is from the Poundmaker community in Saskatchewan. Favel explains that his work has been significantly influenced by Jerzy Grotowski's teachings and methods. Jerzy Grotowski is "arguably one of the most influential figures in the development of experimental theatre and actor training techniques of the past thirty years" (Wolford 191). Grotowski came out of and made significant contributions to a

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<sup>3</sup> Favel was a participant at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski in 1986 and 1987, where he worked with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini on the first version of the creative opus entitled 'Downstairs Action'. Source: Mario Biagini, personal communication to Daniel Mroz, April 30, 2012.

European tradition of theatre practice called “The Great Reform”, or in Polish, the “Wielka Reforma”. This term was coined between the two World Wars by Polish director Leon Schiller for the cluster of artists working in Eastern Europe who contributed to the evolution of theatrical modernism and in particular to the theatre of the director. The fruits of this period were mostly lost to Western Europe and North America due to fascism, communism, the Second World War and the Cold War (Schino 192 & 261). The particular lineage in which Floyd Favel studied in runs from Stanislavsky to Meyerhold. An actor and director named Yuri Zavadsky worked under both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold and in later life he taught Grotowski, who in turn taught Favel. While the aesthetics of the Great Reform have evolved considerably over the course of the 20th century, they are all characterized by the requirement that a theatrical performance be meaningful not simply due to the semantic meanings communicated by the spoken text but that it be viscerally meaningful due to the credibility of the actions of the performers as orchestrated by the director.

Perhaps the most significant tool that Favel learnt from Grotowski was the necessity to ground his work in his own culture. Favel regularly refers to a story that he believes to be representative of the core ideas of his theoretical approach. This story helps to distinguish Native Performance Culture as more than just a “mix” or “hybrid” of various theatrical approaches and rather allows it to be understood as both traditionally Aboriginal and influenced by Grotowski and the tradition of the Great Reform. Favel uses the story to describe the distinction between action and gesture, and to underline the centrality to theatre of the notion of being watched. Favel extracts the following excerpt from Charles Eastman’s *Indian Boyhood*:

...He sat on one side of the teepee and she on the other. "One evening, she had just lowered a kettle of fat to cool, and as she looked into the hot fat she saw the face of an Ojibway scout looking down at them through the smoke-hole. She said nothing, nor did she betray herself in anyway. After a little she said to her husband in a natural voice: 'Marpeetopha, someone is looking at us through the smoke hole, and I think it is an enemy's scout.' Then Marpeetopah (Four-skies) took up his bow and arrows and began to straighten and dry them for the next day's hunt, talking and laughing meanwhile. Suddenly he turned and sent an arrow upward, killing the Ojibway, who fell dead at their door" (Eastman 130)

Favel learnt from Grotowski that it is only from within one's own culture that an infinite amount of information can be accessed and drawn upon (James 6). Favel's distinction between action and gesture is particularly interesting as he identifies how both are located within the real world and also within traditional storytelling techniques. In 2002 Deborah James interviewed Floyd Favel on behalf of Canada's National Arts Centre English Theatre. When asked about his experiences working with Jerzy Grotowski, Favel explained:

I also accept his view of theatre as offering a kind of modern equivalent to tribal religious ceremonies. In many ways the theatre is a secularized rite/ritual. We live in a world that has very few common rituals; theatre is the most universal act we have to bridge cultures and societies. And while it can serve a ritualistic function, theatre is also about performing. It's something done to be shown. Ritual is done for spiritual reasons, for the Gods and the benefit of humanity (James 6).

Since working with Grotowski, Favel has been "developing a unique approach to Native theatre based on the sources of his Plains Cree culture" (Forsythe). His work consists primarily of researching Indigenous performative practices which include dance, song and other traditional customs. In his article "The artificial tree: native performance culture research 1991-1996" Favel explains how at that time, in the late 1990s, there were "no practical models to guide our diverse and contradictory Native Nations, save the visionary words and intuitions of certain Native artists of the past and present" (Favel, "Artificial Tree" 69). With the increasing number of Native theatre practitioners and scholars appearing in the 1990's, Favel wondered if it would be

possible to create a method or acting training system that was based on performance practices specific to Aboriginal cultures.

In an interview conducted by Greg Doran for *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Favel was asked to describe how he perceived the relationships between classical Greek mythology and Native writings. Favel answers:

The relationship, I think, is still ambiguous. I think as Natives we are under the impression and we are always told in our theatre training that theatre descended from Greek ritual and drama and Christian ritual and therefore in our search to connect with our own experience we connect with the ancient Greek drama or the Middle Ages' passion plays. In a way it is looking for our own roots, but my feeling now at this point, at this stage, is, rather than doing that, why not look directly at your own myths, at your own history, at your own dramatic and performative elements, as opposed to using something outside to look inside. So my feeling is that it is a stage in searching for our own roots, our own connections. It's a stage, but I think we can by-pass that stage. It's just a way station (Doran)

Favel's approach uses traditional Aboriginal knowledge as practical theatrical training in a process that facilitates the creation of theatre and dance performances. It is based on Aboriginal concepts of time, space, humour, position of body, placement of voice and breath (Forsythe). Initial collaborative training with this method involved several artists including Muriel Miguel, Monique Mojica, Maariu Olsen, Pura Fé, and Sadie Buck (Brunette 137). However, "over the last two decades, the movement in Native theatre has evolved in different ways and the original theatre artists involved in these early investigations have since gone on to develop their own techniques and approaches to creating Native theatre" (Brunette 137). Due to this diversity there is no single definitive description of First Nations theatre in Canada or systematic epistemological approach to its analysis. In Tomson Highway's article "On Native Mythology" he defines Native theatre as "theatre that is written, performed and produced by Native people themselves and theatre that speaks out on the culture and lives of this country's Native people"

(Highway, “On Native Mythology” 1). This general definition privileges First Nations peoples’ ability to make their own artistic choices but does not offer any explanations of how to create or analyze the art. Native Performance Culture is perhaps the first documented theory and method consciously created from and specific to Aboriginal culture(s).

## Process

Native Performance Culture can be considered a Pan-Native practice, as it can be employed by any First Nations artist who chooses to revisit their culture for artistic inspiration. Examples discussed earlier in this study showed how directors like Yvette Nolan work with casts of Natives from various nations but are still able to create new and artistic processes which attempt to integrate the cultural beliefs and practices of all nations involved. Native theologies in Canada are highly individualized, as noted previously, but all “exist within general cultural parameters” (Paper, *Traditions* 57). Therefore, every artist’s process will vary depending on their relationships with their culture, with the cast, and with the piece they are working on, but will nevertheless be recognizable to those familiar with Native culture(s). Favel explains:

If you were to ask a Cree person, “what is life?” they may very well answer you with this statement: “Life is Movement”. We believe that all life on earth is in constant movement, the Sun, the Earth, the Moon, the Wind, the Trees, our Cells, our Blood, our Heart. One of our words for Death, is “Poni Waskawewin”, meaning “Cessation of Movement”. This is how much the idea of movement informs our perception of Life. (Favel, “Waskawewin”)

As elucidated by Favel, and as perceived by the Cree nation, movement is a vital element in their worldview. This idea of constant movement resonates in Favel’s theories. In an interview I conducted with Favel in February 2012, he emphasized that the most important aspect of Native Performance Culture is the “process”. This process is personal to each artist. The particular development of techniques, methods and exercises is generally shaped by the playwright or the

director and is then negotiated amongst the cast and crew. Favel suggests studying and examining Aboriginal “dances, songs, weaving, myths and ceremonies and, from there, identifying theatrical principles and using these principles as starting points for contemporary works” (Favel, “Poetry, Remnants, and Ruins” 34). This process then becomes the structural base from which to create a performance, develop a script or construct a set. The director’s and designers’ decisions influence and cultivate the mind of each person in different ways, helping, for example, to guide the creation of each actor’s particular character. The process goes on silently and tacitly inside each person’s head varying with their own understandings or connections to the particular cultural starting point. This approach differs from other forms of theatre, as its process and result is dependent on the relationship that each participant has with his or her culture. Theoretically, it is in honouring particular cultural beliefs and relationships that this method may attain its goals and fulfil its functions.

When Favel first began to envision Native Performance Culture as a distinct model he created a formula:  $Tr+Me=Th(2)$ . This formula means “tradition plus method equals theatre doubled” (Favel, “Poetry, Remnants, and Ruins” 34). He believed it necessary that he and his colleagues document their thoughts, “to write essays, and to present their ideas clearly, so the next generation can have something to build upon” (Favel, “Poetry, Remnants, and Ruins” 34). In an interview with Favel in February 2012 he discussed this formula and his then-recent aversion to its linearity which he had come to feel was unhelpfully unidirectional. Favel found it to be too constricting, as artists’ individual processes vary too much to fit within one singular model. Instead, Favel produced several formulas to differentiate between the various artistic processes employed by First Nations artists. The formulas are explained as:

Formulas	Definitions of Abbreviations
TR → THE = AT	<p>Tradition directly to the performance stage, without a theatrical process, is an “Artificial Tree” (facsimile of tradition)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tradition refers to culturally specific elements (the offering of tobacco or the presence of a mythological figure)</li> </ul>
TR × ME = TH(2)	<p>Tradition x Methodology = Theatre Doubled (meaning theatre expanded by the contact with tradition) (Artaudian idea)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theatre Doubled refers to the potential significance theatre attains when it is paired up with spiritual elements or principles</li> </ul>
TR × PR = TH(2)	<p>Tradition x Process = Theatre Doubled</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process refers to how the artists transform the traditional elements to the stage</li> </ul>
TR/PR/TH(2)	<p>Tradition/Process/Theatre Doubled</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Process explicitly reveals which Traditional elements were employed in order to emphasize the spiritual undertones of the piece</li> </ul>
TH/PR/TR	<p>Theatre/ Process/ Tradition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tradition, Process and Theatre are all in equal relationship with each other, and they work together and influence each other</li> </ul>

According to Favel, these relationships contain the evolving and fluctuating nature of Native Performance Culture. The value of each artist’s variables will vary and differ depending on the

individual's knowledge and relationship to their own culture. Favel, like many other artists, has been inspired by Artaud's evocative and passionate metaphors. He was attracted to Artaud's concepts of ritual in *The Theatre and its Double*, as they explored the possibility that ritualistic and traditional elements drawn from a variety of cultures might transform theatrical performances. I will not go into further detail on Artaud's theories, but acknowledge that Favel's approach has been shaped by *The Theatre and its Double*.

In Favel's article "The artificial tree: native performance culture research 1991-1996", he uses the Round Dance spirit as an example of a cultural starting point:

After some years a process has become clear, a process that reduces Native songs and dances to bare essentials, a process that links us to, and leads us from, the sources of this country, our life and the ancestors. Through this process of reductionism we are able to isolate the basic building blocks of the song and dance, and these become the starting points for a creative and vital action. This does not differ in principle from other performance traditions; the main difference is that the reference points are from Native cultures and originate in this land. The artistic source is not transplanted and colonial, and from a Greco-Roman source.

This way of working with dances and songs through reducing them to their skeleton, is exemplified for me when one learns how to play the hand drums in a Plains Cree Round Dance style. The rhythm of the dancing and singing was explained to me in the image/action of "a duck bobbing in the lake water." This image, I understand now, is the basic DNA of the dance step, the voice, the drumming. This image is the technical and spiritual core of the dance and song. Let's say we use the Round Dance spirit; we can also call it, the soul of the dance. This is revealed in the image of a duck bobbing in the lake water.

Through practice, one searches for this rhythm, this Round Dance spirit. The spirit of the dance and singing is actually contained in the spaces between the waves of the water and the movement of the duck, between the drum beats and steps between the dancers. Through precision and firm precise guidelines, the performer can then approach the mysterious aspects of his or herself in relationship to an image, a classical or contemporary text, or a memory. The drumming and the singing also begin to stir up impulses and embers deep within the body of the actor. This stirs up the Spirit and develops the vigour and life force of the performer (Favel, "Artificial Tree" 71).

According to Favel, the primary objective of the transformation process is to move away from putting rituals directly onstage. He believes that "putting the generic physical activity and ritual

objects of a ritual onstage (the prayer, the sweetgrass, the actual dance) is a misguided attempt at developing a Native aesthetic and only trivializes traditional actions which have a profound important purpose to our Nations” (Favel, “Artificial Tree” 71). Therefore, Favel believes that it is in considering *how* the elements are transformed and integrated onstage that a potential definition of an “Aboriginal aesthetic” can be formed and analyzed.

Each artist’s particular process can be related to theorist Elinor Fuchs’ idea of seeing and understanding the specific world of a play as mentioned in Chapter Two of this study. The process includes deciding how traditional elements can be modified or recreated for the stage in order to generate each piece’s particular notions of time and space, social norms, spoken language and physical movements (Fuchs 20). Favel describes Native Performance Culture as the “development of techniques, methods and exercises based on Aboriginal ritual and social structures” (Favel, “Poetry, Remnants, and Ruins” 34). Basically, this means researching Aboriginal life, specifically one’s worldview and spirituality, to identify elements which could be considered starting points for the creation of contemporary theatre. The intentions embedded within each process are also what permit relationships with the spirit world to be maintained and culturally-specific situations or characters to appear onstage. Thus, it is the responsibility of each production team to understand and learn from traditional practices in order to create their own artistic processes.

### **Applying Native Performance Culture**

There have only been two published investigations of the use of Native Performance Culture: The *O mushkego Cree Water Stories* created by Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica, Candace Brunette, and Erika Iserhoff, and a course taught by Favel at Brandon University in the summer of 2001. The following section extracts elements from these situations in an attempt to supply the

reader with specific examples of how Native Performance Culture has been applied as an actor training system, a dramaturgical model or a directorial process.

Candace Brunette, from the James Bay Cree community of Northern Ontario, describes her experiences with Native Performance Culture in her MA thesis entitled “Returning Home Through Stories: a Decolonizing Approach to Omushkego Cree Theatre Through the Methodological Practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC)”. One of the primary goals in Brunette’s thesis is to demonstrate how NPC breaks away from familiar Anglo- Euro-American theatre practices and models, and instead focuses on creating theatrical techniques that reflect Aboriginal culture and worldview (Brunette 15). Revisiting traditional Aboriginal practices and customs such as the storytelling technique or a traditional dance is the principal focus of Native Performance Culture. It is in recognizing the theatrical potential of these various elements that Favel believes a culturally specific method can be practiced and documented. As a student and collaborator of Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel, Brunette explains that Favel has developed a large repertoire of pedagogical approaches to teaching Native theatre. This consists primarily of the sharing of myths and stories and the development of different techniques inspired by his Plains Cree culture such as

the use of the Plains Cree tipi structure, pictographic scores, and round dance principles, as Indigenous entry points into teaching Aboriginal students how to access embodied presence, how to move through space, and how to develop story creations based on the sources of Aboriginal cultures (Brunette 148).

This is the essence of Native Performance Culture—one’s Aboriginal culture remains readily available to be explored and transformed for the stage. In her thesis, Brunette gives examples of the type of exercises that were executed during the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. Favel and Mojica as the co-directors and mentors encouraged Iserhoff and Brunette to find their own Omushkego Creation Story. With difficulties finding and choosing one particular Cree creation

story, the collaborative team explored the legend of the mythological figure E-hep<sup>4</sup> through the dramatic qualities of traditional Cree shadow storytelling techniques. The cultural practice of shadow storytelling was shared with the artists by Cree Elders “involved in the community consultation process. In conversations with Cree Elders, they spoke about how during the long winter nights, parents would often tell stories using the shadows of their hands against the prospector tent walls” (Brunette 142). As a result, the collaborative team was led to revisit *the way* Cree people tell stories through stage design and script development. According to Mojica:

the way we tell stories is at the heart of NPC. It is about shape and rhythm of our stories. NPC is about honouring Indigenous forms of orating... How do we tell a story? Those stories have a different shape, they may start in the middle, and go back several thousands of years, and then jump into a prophecy, and then go back to where the character was in the middle and take four days to tell. They may take two weeks to tell. How do we orate? What are our structures? [Therefore NPC] is not the content of our stories wrought and squished and hammered into a European structure ‘Mojica, personal interview, 2009’ (Brunette 146).

Curious to find out more about the specific exercises employed in this project, I asked Favel to give further examples of the creation and rehearsal processes. Favel explained:

The main thing I did was more a process. I isolated and identified certain cultural images and actions in the James Bay Cree Culture. I asked, what is the central image of the people of this area? and the image that came up was the white square tent, and this I placed directly on stage. Taking the traditional tent directly to the stage, the theatrical bridge was the addition of lights and instead of a full tent, I used half a tent, so then this tent could be used for shadow puppets, theatre and costume changes, etc... Second thing I did was to search for theatrical elements within the culture, I found the string game, Matowwiginigan-Mysterious string game....and I found the use of hand shadow storytelling existing within their culture. Thirdly, I used the way of walking on snowshoes and the snowshoes itself, to create a movement motif throughout the production (Favel, “update” May 4 2012).

Brunette, Iserhoff, Favel and Mojica presented a workshop performance with a replicated “prospector tent as the main structure for the stage. With the help of lighting, they used the prospector tent walls to tell the legend of E-hep through shadows” (Brunette 147). For this

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<sup>4</sup> The giant spider who lowered the first humans to this world from the world above.

workshop, the artists focused on finding instances of ‘narrative and action’ in shadow storytelling and the string game, and ‘images’ when taking the traditional structure of the tent and placing it onstage. These two principles were the starting points for “*The Omushkego Cree Water Projects*” and became the structural base from which the artists were able to develop a script, set and performance.

Similarly, in his article “Waskawewin”, Favel explains how knowledge of traditional dances help students’ or practitioners to learn about embodied awareness, movement patterns in the body and theatrical presence specific to Aboriginal culture (Brunette 149). Favel’s use of the Plains Cree Round Dance as a way to teach embodied awareness is an example of how he has returned to specific sources of Aboriginal culture to create theatrical techniques. Brunette explains:

In order to fully appreciate the ways that Favel has used Plains Cree round dance, one must first be familiar with round dance singing and drumming. Round dance is a Plains Cree social dance often performed during winter community socials and/or at Pow Wows. The round dance drum beat is a unique quick triple beat where the third beat is nearly silent found in the subtle echo (also known as scratch) of the drum. The movement of the third beat is usually held by the silent breath of the singers and the energetic bodies of the dancers as people dance around in the circle. As a Plains Cree man, Favel was greatly inspired by round dance so he investigated the movement in the body to help train Aboriginal bodies for stage performance. By isolating the round dance third beat, Favel has helped Aboriginal students better understand movement through round dance by reducing the dance to a core technical principle. Obviously, this technique is best understood in a holistically embodied and experiential sense rather than this simple written explanation. While this investigation of energy and movement in the body can be explored in other forms of Indigenous dance in the context of Native theatre training, this is just one example of how NPC practitioners use Native social life as a departure point to create techniques that train performers in better understanding energy in the body (Brunette 149).

The Plains Cree Round Dance is not traditionally recognized as a “theatrical device”. However, according to Favel, it is useful to study traditional dances in the hope of recognizing elements that could become theatrical. It is through the creative process of each artist that the chosen

cultural elements, like isolated movements or gestures from The Plains Cree Round Dance, can become recognized as theatrical techniques.

The second example of the application of Native Performance Culture used Plains Native Pictographs as the starting point for an actor training method. In 2001, Professor James Forsythe invited Floyd Favel to the Drama program of the Summer Institute for Indigenous Humanities at Brandon University, to teach a course entitled "Native Performance Culture". In his article "The Plains Cree Grotowski", Forsythe documents the creation and progress of this course while providing examples of how the system was employed. In the following section I describe some of the exercises explored during this intensive course.

Favel's initial plan for the course was to research "narrative action, image and gesture in Plains Indian sign language", to explore "narrative action in Plains Indian pictographic language" and study "action and image in Native languages: Cree, Dakotah, Ojibway, and Saulteaux" (Forsythe). Favel believes that Aboriginal peoples have "different points of reference in the use of our body and voice than do Europeans, so therefore that must show itself in our performances" (Forsythe). His intention for this course was to create a contemporary approach to actor training by utilizing and isolating performance principles inherent in First Nations storytelling, sign language, and pictographic and oral language(s) (Forsythe).

The students in this course were both Native and non-Native. Forsythe notes that a plan was "agreed upon to concentrate on Plains Pictographs as a starting point for this inaugural course. Renowned Lakota artist, Colleen Cutschall, was brought in to assist in grounding the students in the history of this art form" (Forsythe). Forsythe explains:

According to Cutschall Pictographic art is a sacred text. They said, "But it is not written", I beg to differ it is written. It is written in the drawings. Our sacred texts are in visual art forms." (Cutschall) Favel concurred and added "Pictographic system is an action system ... telling a story." They are symbolic representations of a people's mythology, ceremony and history. Pictographs use images to represent action (Forsythe).

Plains Cree pictographs acted as the cultural starting point for this particular employment of NPC. A pictograph is a pictorial figure for words or a phrase: Plains pictograph is a style of visual art similar to Egyptian hieroglyphs. The majority of Plains Cree pictographs include non-naturalistic symbols of warriors, women, horses or natural landscape. Traditionally, these images symbolized elements from creation stories, teachings or a nation's cultural beliefs. Favel chose to work with pictographs because he wanted to introduce the students to the idea of "key image" and "action". He believes that the main actions of a story can be reduced to a central image. This image can be directly applied to the work and to the artist's ways of thinking. In this case, Favel had the students choose a key image that best described their allocated section from Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*. Eventually, from this motionless image, the students integrated physical actions. In beginning this course with an introduction to Plains pictographs, the students became immediately rooted in an actor training system that reflected aspects of Favel's Cree worldview as well as his training with Grotowski.

In this course, the participants applied their understandings of Plains Cree pictographs to their own adaptation of *House Made of Dawn*. Favel's goal was to create a system that allowed the performer's body to create a style based on the pictograph method of telling stories. "Pictographs to Favel represented a way of thinking and a way of telling stories in a stylized manner that reflected on who the tellers were and how they lived their lives" (Forsythe). Forsythe documents the first assignment Favel gave to the students

1. To tell a story from the novel.
2. To draw a pictograph of the story.
3. To move and stage the pictograph.
4. To repeat the process with any images/stories that comes out of the original pictograph. (Note: this led to demarcations of "big" and "little" pictographs.)
5. Write a paper of the relationship of your work in this class and Native culture. (Forsythe)

According to Favel, it was natural to start the research for a First Nations actor training methodology in physical exercises. The physical exercises were designed specifically to focus the body's energy in its centre. Forsythe explains:

Work began on physical improvisations in pairs where movements would be shared, copied, transformed and shared again in a free flowing exercise. The students were gradually relaxing and beginning to allow intellectual judgments to be replaced by a "thinking with the body". This was then applied to the telling of the story of their pictographs. The first time they told the story they were to just stand and tell it. The second time through they began to interpret in a physical three-dimensional way the two-dimensional pictographs. The point of view of the storyteller was to oscillate vocally back and forth from first to third person and physically from the presentational to the metaphoric or symbolic. At every step Favel was coaching them to increase the depth of their detail both emotionally and physically with their story's images. Stories were not so much to be told as danced or moved (Forsythe).

Favel's course at Brandon University is described in more detail in James Forsythe's article "The Plains Cree Grotowski". The examples discussed in this chapter serve to demonstrate Favel's choice to use Plains Cree Pictograph as a starting point for that specific class, since the process of transforming traditional elements into performative techniques is potentially the most important aspect of Native Performance Culture.

### **Native Performance Culture and the Playwright- *The Governor of the Dew***

Running from the 8th to the 25th of February 2012, a translated version of Favel's play *The Governor of the Dew*, *Le Maître de la Rosée* was produced by Ondinnok theatre company in Montréal. The piece was translated by Jean-Frédéric Messier and directed by Catherine Joncas.

In an interview I conducted with Favel in February 2012, I asked him to talk about his creation process for *The Governor of the Dew*. The fictional world that Favel has created in this piece is characterized by the presence of a beaver spirit, three co-existing notions of time, and the traditional act of offering tobacco.

The play tells the story of an old woman named Rose Billy who lives by herself on a reserve. One day Rose Billy is visited by an old Beaver. The Beaver is filled with sadness and shame because of what he has lived through. Rose Billy comforts him and urges him to unburden himself by telling his story (James, “Study Guide”). The Beaver tells her that in his youth he was to become the governor of his nation. One day he encountered a group of humans from another land and fell in love with a beautiful young woman despite their many differences. Against the wishes of her people, the young woman swam off with the Beaver. They lived together on the Beaver’s community but after a while the woman got very sick with an illness unknown to the nation’s healers. Broken-heartedly the Beaver urged her to return to her people to seek proper treatment. The Beaver took a new wife from his own tribe and they started a family together. Soon the Beaver became ill with the same sickness as the woman and the illness quickly spread to his new family and all those in their community. The sickness claimed everyone else, leaving the Beaver as the only survivor.

Favel wrote the play in 1996, the same year that his mother passed away. A principal and reoccurring element in Favel’s artistic theories is the awareness of “always being watched” (Favel, “Interview”). This complements Favel’s beliefs that spirit and animal figures are always watching over us, as they do in the Indigenous holistic philosophy wherein humans form relationships with the spirit world. Using the example mentioned above from Charles Eastman’s

*Indian Boyhood* where the husband and wife are being watched from a hole in their roof, Favel communicates the difference between gesture and action, and the idea of performing, both “as though being watched”. He believes that, as in traditional storytelling techniques, the actor’s awareness should be one of performing as though he’s always being watched. For Favel, this is the essence of all performances, whether it is a ritualistic process, storytelling, dance or theatre. The one performing the gestures and action carries them out knowing that they are being watched. Furthermore, Favel believes that it is not only other humans who are observing the performer’s gestures and actions but also those in the spirit world.

Favel’s art follows the rules and laws of his traditional Cree beliefs in order to maintain and honour the relationships he has with the spirit world. Favel wrote *The Governor of the Dew* as a sort of memorial for his mother as the play is based on a Cree myth that was first told to him by her. “The story was that a beaver had gone to visit an old woman who lived up the creek from us when I was a boy” (James, “Study guide”). In an interview, Favel explained to me how he visited this specific creek after the death of his mother. This visit was the starting point of Favel’s process: while he was there, the voice of a Beaver spoke to him (Favel, “Interview”). Favel explains that the Beaver did not speak to him in the English language, but spoke to him through rhythm. The Beaver told him a story in a way that he could understand. He explained that traditionally animals helped to feed and clothe us, and sacrificed themselves to be eaten in order for humans to survive (Favel, “Interview”). With the visit of the beaver spirit, Favel realized how stories are used to remind communities of the relationships they have with animal and spirit figures (Favel, “Interview”). The starting point of Favel’s writing was thus influenced by the area and characters that he has created relationships with as a boy.

The traditional act of offering tobacco appears in *The Governor of the Dew*. Favel explains that traditionally, tobacco is given to spirits or other humans when one is attempting to gain knowledge. The offering of tobacco sanctified both the relationship and the story or information that was being shared. “The focus on tobacco as the primary sacred plant is ubiquitous” within First Nations peoples of Canada (Paper, *Offering Smoke* 3). The primary purpose of the tobacco smoke is as an offering to the spirits. Jordan Paper explains:

Tobacco, offered directly, or as smoke, allows for communication with the spirits. As a Mesquakie told a student seeking to understand Native American culture: “We use it [tobacco] in ceremonies; we throw it in the fire, and then we can talk to the spirits”...”The Iroquois believed that tobacco was given to them as the means of communication with the spirit world” (Paper, *Offering Smoke* 5).

In *The Governor of the Dew*, the old woman, Billy Rose, offers tobacco to the old beaver. This demonstrates respect for elders, animal spirits and the traditional rule of offering tobacco in exchange for knowledge. In respect to and maintenance of this traditional custom, when conducting my thesis research, I too offered Floyd tobacco for the knowledge in which he was sharing with me. Similarly, before the show opened in Montréal, Favel participated in a spiritual ceremony in which he offered tobacco to the Beaver to thank him for the story he shared with him many years ago.

In *The Governor of the Dew*, three different notions of time co-exist simultaneously.

These times include:

Fictional world of the play’s real time: Narrator Remembering the story
Time of the Story: The story that the Mother and the Young Beaver share
Time of the Past: Billy Rose and Old Beaver reminiscing of the story

Favel believes that in demonstrating these different notions of time and space, his piece has the potential of connecting the living world with the inhabitants of the spirit world. Favel attempts to create relationships for the participants and the spectators with the spirit world in presenting spiritual figures (the Beaver) and spiritual situations (the offering of tobacco). Time in this piece is not meant to create a feeling of nostalgia but is seen as a potential link to the spiritual world. The concept of circularity is central to the notion of time as in Aboriginal thought; the real world is conjoined with the spirit world and is in a constant relationship with it. Therefore, the passing of time is circular and permeates both worlds. The concurrent passing of time in both the living world and the spirit world is a recurring element present in all three pieces analysed in this thesis, and a significant theme in this particular case, as it denotes aspects of Favel's personal belief system.

Following Favel's formulas I would use the equation  $TR \times PR = TH(2)$  to describe the creation process of *Governor of the Dew*. This equation of "tradition multiplied by process equals theatre doubled" includes traditional elements (the Beaver spirit and the offering of tobacco) with Favel's specific process (the story told to him as a child and the Beaver's voice speaking to him) to create a performance that contains both spiritual and theatrical elements. In honouring traditional beliefs and spirituality, Favel creates a process that allows the moment of performance to become a link to the spirit world. However, it is not necessary for every spectator to be aware of the creator's process in order to understand or enjoy reading or watching this piece. The process is a part of the method that the playwright, director and cast must execute in order for the moment of performance to create this spiritual link. Through writing, performing and staging techniques that originate in Aboriginal beliefs, theatre has the potential to connect with tradition on a spiritual level.

## **As a Director- on *House of Sonya***

In 1998 Floyd Favel directed *House of Sonya*, an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. When writing about his experiences working on *House of Sonya*, Favel explains "We should not only perform plays that are exiles or colonials to this land, but actually transplant these classical dramas to the soil of this country" (Favel, "House of Sonya" 4). The play discusses the consequences of leaving one's reservation to live in more urban centres such as Vancouver, and the violence and racism that First Nations can experience. Consequently, this piece also explores the horrible living conditions that some experience while living in their own communities. In his article "House of Sonya" Favel describes the dramaturgical and rehearsal techniques he experimented with while directing this piece.

Favel explains how the dramaturgical technique for this piece is based on the Plains Native Winter Count that he was developing at the time. This Winter Count system is a way of "recording time through a series of images" (Favel, "House of Sonya" 4). Traditionally, the one in charge of the Winter Count would produce a "key image embodying the central events of the year that had just ended, and that image would act as a catalyst into other stories depicting that year" (Favel, "House of Sonya"4). This idea of reducing the play's concepts or actors' experiences to particular images was a part of Favel's initial rehearsal process. He explains:

Prior to the rehearsal period I spent four weeks with the cast of Native actors exploring the text and ways of adapting it to our own experience. We approached *Uncle Vanya* as though it were a year that had just ended, first by breaking each unit down into specific images, and by isolating specific images in the text that resonated within or personal experience. These images acted as catalysts for other, more personal stories drawn from the actors' lives and imaginations; from them we created new scenes or dances, or variations on the original scenes through solo improvisations.

Although the first couple of weeks of rehearsal were fruitful, initially there was much that didn't work. Having the actors do their own solo rendition of the play, or a specific scene, integrating a personal story, often simply resulted in a simple recreation of *Uncle*

*Vanya*. We found that these scenes were not truthful because they were not related to the actors' own lives. We had yet to find the bridge between Vanya and our own memories and reality.

A breakthrough came after two weeks of work. Doris Linklater created an improvisation that touched and spoke to all of us and came to inform the style of the play. She played an older Sonya coming home and remembering the events of the past. I remember the day she did this scene as I had to go outside and smoke, so affected was I. After this, other actors began creating scenes that spoke of their pasts, they began to remember. This deep personalization helped us appropriate the text. *Uncle Vanya* now related to our lives.

After two weeks of exploring the links between the script and our own pasts, I then went back to the original text and replaced Chekhov's scenes with our new ones, maintaining the basic structure of the original text (Favel, "House of Sonya" 4).

The process that Favel employed when creating this piece is one that relied on collective creation. The personal emotional and spiritual experiences of the cast influenced the way in which *House of Sonya* was created. This play is a collaborative interpretation that reworks a classic script to acknowledge contemporary Aboriginal concerns and issues. Favel's process includes a methodological approach that honours his Cree worldview, which enables the content of the text to reflect current social and political issues affecting First Nations people.

Native Performance Culture can be recognized as a distinct method that unites elements of traditional Aboriginal culture and contemporary theatre practices. In privileging Aboriginal ways of knowing, Favel has successfully begun to create and document an approach to theatre-making that originates in Aboriginal principles. However, Favel remains aware that there are many ways of envisioning and creating art. He believes that "this work is ongoing and will never end. It is endless as [Aboriginal] cultures are myriad and multidimensional, impossible to completely know" (Favel, "Poetry, Remnants, and Ruins" 34). The formulas and theories discussed in this chapter are not the only available instruments for creating or analyzing

contemporary Aboriginal theatre but they are examples of precise guidelines that can be used and potentially enable other artists to further their own investigations.

## Thesis Conclusion

The aim of this study is to consider the ways in which elements of Aboriginal culture are manifested in contemporary theatre. As First Nations theatre in Canada becomes more of a discernible phenomenon, culturally-specific Aboriginal worldviews and traditional practices are being introduced to mainstream audiences through various contemporary artistic processes. This thesis attempts to articulate how the essence of contemporary First Nations theatre resides in the philosophical idea of circularity. This philosophy reveals itself in the belief that all aspects of reality, however it might be perceived, are integrated together in a universal web of relations. Scholar Georges Sioui believes that this circular philosophy, the sacred circle of life, is present in all areas of Aboriginal life, spirituality and arts; the reality of the sacred circle of life appears to permeate Aboriginal peoples' vision of life and the universe (12). In this study, the circular philosophy has been examined in relation to culturally-specific notions of life and death, traditional storytelling techniques, and contemporary theatrical performances. Through interviews with practicing Aboriginal artists like Floyd Favel, Yvette Nolan and Marie Clements and through an exploration of their individual theatrical processes, this research has attempted to identify how practicing Aboriginal artists consciously privilege Indigenous ways of knowing in their approaches to creating theatre for the contemporary stage.

Based on these investigations it appears that a simple description of an “authentic” Aboriginal aesthetic is impossible as the creative processes of individual artists differ significantly. As discussed in Chapter One, Cree playwright and director Tomson Highway's distinctive style has served as the expected Aboriginal aesthetic model for contemporary Canadian theatre audiences since the mid 1980s. However, given the variety of ways in which Aboriginal artists are creating and presenting theatre, “Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal

Theatre” cannot be categorically restricted to one style or approach. The works discussed in this thesis can be identified as acts of cultural preservation and renewal; they expose audiences across Canada to traditional storytelling techniques, mythological stories and characters, and key aspects of Aboriginal philosophies.

Larger venues, such as Canada’s National Arts Centre, as well as smaller venues including community-oriented Aboriginal Friendship Centers are currently producing play that express traditional Indigenous beliefs and artistic customs. There are a number of theatre companies devoted to the maintenance and expansion of Aboriginal cultural practices through theatrical performances. The Toronto-based company Native Earth Performing Arts, for example, provides a base for professional Native performers, writers, technicians and other artists, while encouraging the use of theatre as a form of communication that includes both dialogue within the Native community and communication with mainstream English theatre audiences (Native Earth). Other practicing Aboriginal theatre artists and companies include Shirley Cheechoo, the founder of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig on Manitoulin Island, and Marie Clements, the founder of Urban Ink Productions in Vancouver. Such companies strive to communicate and preserve cultural elements such as Aboriginal dialects, songs, dances, images and spiritual beliefs for current and future generations of both Native and non-native peoples in Canada.

## **Storytelling Conclusion**

The tradition of Aboriginal storytelling has been revisited and integrated into each piece discussed in this thesis. The concept of storytelling appears to be an essential aspect to both traditional Aboriginal culture and its reappearance in contemporary theatre. Both formal and informal storytelling techniques actively engage and involve the tellers and the listeners in a process that permits an exchange of cultural history and knowledge. Equally, formal (told at a

specific time in a specific place) and informal (told at any time in a non-particular place) storytelling proposes a fluidity that is seen in the non-linear forms of First Nations stories. As introduced in the first chapter, one of storytelling's primary functions is to remind the participants of their relationships with both the natural and spiritual worlds. Creating artistic processes that modify traditional stories for the stage allows for these relationships to be simultaneously remembered by Native communities and shared with contemporary Canadian society at large. This research has attempted to associate Aboriginal storytelling with the ability to evoke a sense of community and to build relationships between the performers and the audience. These relationships are maintained in real time between the performers and their human audience, and also in the co-existing time of the spirit world, with the spirits who choose to observe or participate in the performance. One of the first motivations of the Aboriginal artist is to create a process through which the witness or spectator will be exposed to the reality of the presence of spirits and the spirit world. It is through traditional storytelling techniques that artists are able to articulate the oftentimes ineffable phenomena of their histories, cultures and traditions.

## **Spirituality Conclusion**

Aboriginal spirituality and the inclusion of its various manifestations in the works of theatre practitioners is a primary focus of this study. Through performance analysis and personal interviews, I have attempted to show how Aboriginal artists from various nations, including Algonquin, Cree and Métis, incorporate the spirit world into their works.

Although there are several cultural differences among the various Aboriginal nations in Canada, the spirit world seems to be a Pan-Native belief that is recognized and interpreted by Native artists from every nation I have worked with. Currently, it appears that most Native

theatre companies are working in ways that develop Pan-Native artistic processes which consider the cultural beliefs of all those involved. For example, while Michael Greyeyes and Yvette Nolan have “different Aboriginal backgrounds, in the rehearsal room they developed their own cosmology, or set of rules, that spring naturally out of their joint Native existence” (Citron). This study has explored numerous artistic processes and discusses how culturally-specific beliefs and experiences are transformed so that performers from Ojibwa, Mohawk and Algonquin nations, for example, can create cross-cultural rehearsal and performance systems. As discussed in Chapter Two, one of director Yvette Nolan’s priorities is to create rehearsal and performance environments specific to each production wherein the company creates their own rituals and artistic processes. This allows for the cultural beliefs of all participants to be considered, and ultimately, for a distinctive creative process to be set and followed.

Another important concept explored in this thesis is the idea of “hybridity”. Instead of considering Aboriginal theatre a cultural “hybrid” due to its employment of, for example, both Aboriginal oral traditions and Western theatrical practices, this study suggests seeing the “hybridity” as the merger of real time and space with spiritual time and space. This shifts the analysis from simply identifying a theatrical form that combines Western theatre practices with elements of Native culture, and instead, allows for a greater appreciation of the spiritual and philosophical concepts embedded within each piece.

### **Time and Space Conclusion**

Time and space play significant roles in contemporary Aboriginal performances. Time in Aboriginal performance is always moving, but in a cyclical fashion as opposed to a linear one. As plays progress in real time their events also unfold in the spirit world. The performer is aware that the performance may be in relationship with the spirit world; the audience, then, by

extension attains the possibility to form or privilege spiritual relationships of their own (Favel, “Younger Brother”: *passim*)

In ethnographer Pauline Tuttle’s article “Beyond Feathers and Beads”: Interlocking Narratives in the Music and Dance of Tokeya Inajin (Kevin Locke)” she quotes traditional Lakota Hoop dancer Kevin Locke as he explains his understanding of both the “sacred space” and the “intersubjective time” during his performances. The following points summarize how Locke perceives his role in, and the spiritual energies associated with, Aboriginal performance:

- [I]...stand at the confluence of the past, present, and the future as an embodiment of “what can be remembered and what is imaginable”
- integration of the physical, spiritual, conceptual and temporal appear through movement, texture, colour, symbol, and sound
- this all unfolds in a detemporalized space created and transformed by the integration of the dreams and visions of ancestors and one’s own  
(Tuttle 99)

Even though Locke is a dancer, his perspective on performance can be considered interdisciplinary and be productively applied to Aboriginal theatre studies. Locke acknowledges how elements of the Aboriginal philosophy—the physical, spiritual, conceptual and temporal—are reflected in his performances through movement, texture, colour, symbol, and sound. Acknowledging Locke’s respect for his culture is significant when examining his particular performance style for two reasons: the first being that it allows him to create a particular performance aesthetic, the second being the link he creates with the spirit world and the figures that inhabit it. Locke, along with other artists such as Floyd Favel and Michael Greyeyes, believe that the moment of performance can be used as a tactic to honour relationships that have been formed with the spirit world.

In *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* the co-existence of real time and space with the time and space of the spirit world is revealed through the character of The Lone Woman. As discussed in Chapter Two, The Lone Woman appears in both the real world of the characters and in the spirit world. The piece's director, Yvette Nolan, also includes a physical gesture that represents the connection of the living world and the spirit world. This gesture has the characters stand with one hand reaching forward and the other reaching back. Nolan believes that this position connects everyone who came before and everyone who is to come.

Michael Greyeyes' *from thine eyes*, explores how humans cope with death and how the journey to the spirit world commences. As some characters in this piece appear in both the real world and the spirit world, the audience is presented with the passing of simultaneous time as well as the polytheistic worldview of Aboriginal peoples. The passing of time in this piece transcends linear time and is instead demonstrated through a memory that is specific to each character in a space that takes place somewhere between the real world and the spirit world.

In Floyd Favel's play *The Governor of the Dew*, three different notions of time exist simultaneously. These times are the fictional world of the play's real time, the spiritual time of the Beaver's story, and the time of the past. This piece moves from the past to personal memories and to the future without warning and thus reflects a characteristic of traditional Aboriginal storytelling.

## **The Future of Aboriginal Theatre Studies in Canada**

Through this research, I have attempted to show how Aboriginal theatre artists create pieces that incorporate and reflect their particular worldviews and beliefs. Similarly, Aboriginal

scholars and artists are publishing articles and books that allow them to share cultural knowledge, making it accessible to both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. Rob Appleford's book *Aboriginal Theatre and Drama* is an anthology of scholarly articles by Aboriginal playwrights, directors, and actors. This allows for the theories and works of practicing Aboriginal artists to be acknowledged and read by any interested parties. This is an example of accessible written works by Aboriginal artists which further contributes to theatre studies scholarship. Scholar Ric Knowles has played a decisive role in the collecting and publishing of Aboriginal literature in Canada. Along with Monique Mojica, Prof. Knowles edited and published a two-volume set called "Staging Coyote's Dream", which is an anthology of First Nations drama in English. This collection brings together plays by some of the more well-known Native playwrights in North America and some who have not previously been published. In the interview I conducted with Yvette Nolan in March of 2011, she told me that she and Knowles would be collecting and working on a theatre history book that aims to outline the development of Aboriginal drama and theatre in Canada.

On an international level, Eugenia Sojka, director of the Canadian Studies Centre at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, is editing a book that intends to present and explore Floyd Favel's methods and theatrical advances as an actor, playwright and director. This anthology will be published in English and will include original pieces and new works by Favel in addition to pieces by specialists and practitioners who have explored his work. It will be accessible to readers worldwide.

Through an examination of the works created by practicing Aboriginal theatre artists, this study considers Aboriginal theatre to be a contemporary practice that is developing out of traditional cultural elements. By analyzing the works of First Nations artists like Floyd Favel,

Yvette Nolan, Marie Clements and Michael Greyeyes, I have tried to demonstrate how First Nations theatre is more than just culturally-specific content applied to Western dramatic structures. Rather, contemporary Aboriginal theatre artists are giving the stage to Aboriginal traditions, philosophies and knowledge. Generational storytelling, elements from ritual acts, techniques from traditional dance and song and the fundamental relationship between First Nations peoples and the land have made their way to mainstream stages across Canada and proven to be educational, entertaining and above all, transformational.

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