

ABSTRACT

Broadening the Circle: The Evolution of Survivance and Mimicry as Theme in Selected Native American Drama

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From its beginning the modern Native American Literary Dramatic Project has been rooted in the desire to define and preserve a voice driven to the brink of extinction by the forces of Euroamerican colonization. Over time, as the threat of outright extinction has waned, Native American playwrights have begun exploring means of developing Native American voices and resisting colonial assimilation. Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian*, the first play ever produced by the Native American Theatre Ensemble, developed a combination of survival and resistance Gerald Vizenor would later term, "survivance," and N. Scott Momaday's first play, *The Indolent Boys*, turned to the postcolonial concept of mimicry as a means of resisting the cultural erasure of America's boarding school project. Randy Reinholz' play, *Off the Rails*, which premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare festival in 2017, presents the attempt to unify these themes and develop the next step forward in Native American drama.

Broadening the Circle: The Evolution of Survivance and
Mimicry as Theme in Selected Native American Drama

by

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A Thesis

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Marvin and Sabrina Stone. If I have seen further, it is because I have stood on their shoulders.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Would you come up on the stage to dance with us?” They were words I had always wanted to hear, but as I sat there in the front row of the Angus Bowmer Theatre in Ashland, Oregon, watching the first regional premiere of a Native American¹ playwright’s work anywhere in America, I—with my unmistakably Scottish-Irish complexion—was perhaps the last person in the auditorium I would have expected to receive this invitation. The music was starting, a hand reached for mine, and before my anxieties could get the better of me I was standing on the stage, participating in Pow Wow. I had been asked to join a community.

The play in question was *Off the Rails*, Randy Reinholz’ (Choctaw) take on *Measure for Measure* adapted, according to the playbill, into Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,

¹ It must be acknowledged at the outset of this study that there exists no single adequate terminology with which to describe the indigenous peoples of the Americas. “Indian” as a term was originally fraught with so many negative colonial connotations (not to mention its almost farcical inaccuracy) that it quickly fell out of favor when the term Native American was first introduced—even if it has since seen a resurgence in popularity, especially among Native writers. On the other hand, “Native American” is itself a blanket term that fails to take into account the diversity of the people and nations which have occupied America since the pre-Columbian era. It is impossible to provide an adequate taxonomy of all the variations and gradations of Native identity which have evolved from extinction, intermarriage, relocation, or any of the other myriad effects of colonial activity. For the purposes of this study, therefore, I will use the terms Native American and American Indian interchangeably to refer to America’s indigenous population. I recognize these terms are neither complete nor sufficient, but they are the best available terms for what I believe is a vitally important discourse. I use these terms with all due respect and deference to the people who hold them.

where, “Shakespeare meets *Blazing Saddles*.”² *Off the Rails* tells the story of a young Native American man about to be hanged for getting a white girl pregnant, and it does so against the backdrop of a town named Genoa, Nebraska, the site for one of the off-reservation boarding schools America employed in its attempt to expunge Native American voices, stories, and cultures from the ‘new’ world. It tells a story America has been all too happy to sweep under the rug and scrub from its history books—a story that does not mesh well with America’s mythical origins as the shining city on the hill.

I learned of the Indian Industrial Boarding School program—as I imagine many do, given the sparsity of the record—outside of any standard history curriculum. I found brief mentions in books, gathered a few snippets from the family tree with a woman on my mother’s side hailing from First Nations land in Canada. After seeing *Off the Rails* I dug further, stumbling across some of LeAnne Howe’s writings, and from there a few firsthand accounts of boarding school survivors, followed by study after study about the generational traumatic effects of America’s genocidal practices. It is perhaps difficult to believe that such a dark chapter of American history, filled with suffering, cruelty, and trauma could be so carefully concealed as to be almost entirely absent from the public consciousness. Reinholz himself recounts in an interview that,

We still get people who see the play who come up afterward and say, “But that didn’t actually happen, right?” Or, “Oh, that was just that one year of the play and then everything worked out fine?” Because it’s a comedy, so I have things work out well in the story. It’s like, no, it went on for 50 years, and we’re really uncovering the trauma and trying to deal with the trauma. So the idea of doing the

² “Oregon Shakespeare Festival - Off the Rails,” Oregon Shakespeare Festival, accessed June 9, 2020, <http://www.osfashland.org/en/productions/2017-plays/off-the-rails>.

play is to tell the story as the first step of understanding the trauma and then how do we get past it.³

Through all its bawdy humor and the framing device of its sensational Wild West song and dance routines, *Off the Rails* is still the story of a deep and troubled past. It is a voice for the grief and sorrow of those whose lives were pushed aside to make way for America's manifest destiny.

The trauma Reinholz is addressing extends as far back as 1492, with the advent of the Euro-American colonial project in North America which launched one of the worst campaigns of military genocide the world has ever seen. Against the unbridled cruelty and suffering faced by Native Americans during that time, the off-reservation boarding schools, devised by Brigadier General Richard H. Pratt, could almost be framed as a reprieve. While Pratt's superiors in the U.S. Army and men like L. Frank Baum, of *Wizard of Oz* fame, were calling for the outright extermination of Native American people down to the last man, woman, and child, Pratt founded his boarding school program in an effort to avert this extermination. The now infamous boarding school motto, to "kill the Indian, and Save the Man," was in Pratt's mind a rallying cry for clemency and Christian mercy. Nevertheless, firsthand accounts by teachers and students alike paint a picture of the boarding schools as relentless machines of colonial whitewashing and cultural erasure. Assured of his moral superiority and the sanctity of his cause, Pratt would stop at nothing to accomplish his goal of cultural erasure. The boarding schools pushed children out of their homes and drove them hundreds of miles

³ John Soltes, "INTERVIEW: Reinholz Sheds Light on American Indian Boarding Schools in New Play," Hollywood Soapbox, March 8, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodsoapbox.com/interview-reinholz-sheds-light-on-american-indian-boarding-schools-in-new-play/>.

away from their families, and at the end of all their suffering the children found that they had simply exchanged a military genocide for a cultural one. Children in Pratt's schools were beaten, starved, abused, and often killed in the name of a white civility that would help them shed their native identities and become 'true' Americans and industrially productive citizens. The Meriam Report, published in 1928, found the conditions of students in the boarding schools to be appalling, and studies performed since then using the boarding school records housed at the National Archives have suggested that even the estimates of the Meriam Report may have dramatically undersold the rates of sickness and death among the students, both of which may have been purposefully downplayed by the schools' administrators in an effort to remain morally and financially viable in the eyes of the public.

Still, the fact remains that Pratt's schools, however cruel, equipped those who managed to survive with the ability to speak the colonizer's language and use their tools. In 1927, just a few years after Pratt's death, Mourning Dove (Okanagan) wrote *Cogewea, the Half Blood*, one of the first novels ever published in English by a Native American author. D'Arcy McNickle (Salish Kootenai) followed shortly thereafter, with his debut novel, *The Surrounded*, which he published in 1936. As they transitioned from oral to written stories, these early English-language native writers explored what it meant to be Native American in the midst of colonial efforts at assimilation and even the growing call for a kind of pan-tribalism which began to emerge in the wake of the erasure and suffering left behind by colonial activity.

A generation later, in the advent of what Kenneth Lincoln dubbed the Native American Renaissance beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, writers like Hanay Geiogamah

(Kiowa/Delaware) and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) revitalized these questions and brought them to the stage, with Geiogamah founding one of the first all-native theatre companies under Ellen Stewart's guidance at La MaMa, in 1972, with the premiere of his play, *Body Indian*. These writers used the voice earned by those who suffered in the boarding schools to try to come to terms with that suffering and make sense of what it means to be Native American in a culture that doesn't want that identity to exist anymore. Momaday's first play, *The Indolent Boys* (1993), struggles with the boarding school project itself as it delves into postcolonial discourses of Bhabhian mimicry and the precarious nature of nation-building. The boarding schools may have sought to wipe out an entire culture, but the tools and the voice they forced on their students became a potent means of communication across tribal boundaries; a tool of survival and resistance, or what Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) has called survivance.

If these early writers were concerned with finding and preserving Native American identity and voice, then Randy Reinholz is concerned with finding out what it means to be both American and Indian. His stated goal in writing *Off the Rails* was to tell the complete story of the American West. While the early authors and playwrights of the Native American literary dramatic project were often faced with the urgent need to define and preserve voices and stories driven to the brink of extinction, *Off the Rails* speaks from the somewhat more settled position of a voice that has survived. Native Americans still suffer, and tribes still vanish, but *Off the Rails* comes from America's longest standing and indeed its only Native American equity house, Native Voices at the Atrium. Reinholz, an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation, has headed up Native Voices for over twenty-five years, producing over thirty scripts and directing more than sixty plays

during that time. He has received numerous awards and honors throughout his career including, most recently, the Ellen Stewart Career Achievement in Professional Theatre award, in 2019. *Off the Rails* is Reinholz' first foray into playwrighting, and it is the capstone of a year the artists of his company spent trying to come to terms with the legacy of the boarding schools. *Off the Rails* is a story of trauma and grief, to be sure; a story of the boarding schools could hardly be otherwise. However, the main goal of *Off the Rails* is to tell that story and then find out what the next chapter is. America has effectively frozen the records of the boarding schools and the Indian Wars; As Reinholz says, until very recently we as a culture "just don't have the courage to look at them."⁴ *Off the Rails* asks America to look at the boarding schools; it couches their history in the familiar language and comedy of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, and it invites America to see itself, to remember itself, and equipped with that memory and that story to move forward and define itself.

⁴ John Soltes, "INTERVIEW: Reinholz Sheds Light on American Indian Boarding Schools in New Play," Hollywood Soapbox, March 8, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodsoapbox.com/interview-reinholz-sheds-light-on-american-indian-boarding-schools-in-new-play/>.

CHAPTER TWO

Crisis: Erasing a Nation

The Boarding School Project

The story of the boarding school project and, as Reinholz calls it, America's "absolute, muscular effort of cultural genocide" starts in Carlisle, Pennsylvania with the beginning of a particularly troubled chapter commonly omitted from American history textbooks: the Indian Industrial Boarding School Project.¹ Carlisle was the flagship for the Native American boarding school program started in 1879.² The man behind this project was the school's founder, Brigadier General Richard H. Pratt. General Pratt worked under the Office of Indian Affairs, which was established in 1824 as a branch of the War Department responsible for regulating Native American tribes. In 1849 that office, now renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was moved under the Department of the Interior and assumed the new role of educating Native Americans through its "Civilization Division."³ The goal of the Civilization Division was clear: by removing

¹ John Soltes, "INTERVIEW: Reinholz Sheds Light on American Indian Boarding Schools in New Play," *Hollywood Soapbox*, March 8, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodsoapbox.com/interview-reinholz-sheds-light-on-american-indian-boarding-schools-in-new-play/>.

² "Teaching Resources," Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, Dickinson University, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teaching>.

³ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief." *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: Denver* 8, no. 2 (1998), 59.

students from life on the reservations and stripping them of their native names, languages, and clothes, and by specifically breaking up and mixing tribal groups in order to blur their traditional lines of community, the schools aimed to sever children's nascent ties to tribal identities and revert them to *tabula rasa* upon which Pratt could imprint white, Protestant, and above all capitalist American culture. The Indian Industrial Boarding School program was originally conceived as a solution to what General Pratt termed the, "Indian Problem."⁴

It is easy to question, given what we now understand of the boarding schools' devastating impact and legacy of trauma, how such a program was able to gain widespread acclaim from the American public and why a man like Pratt, supposedly rooted in Christian values of charity and love, would knowingly uphold such an inherently abusive system. The answer primarily comes down to a distinction between two kinds of genocide: cultural erasure versus extermination. At the time of Carlisle's founding the American Indian Wars were still underway, and there was a serious debate in America as to whether or not the Native American tribes should simply be eradicated by brute military force in order to secure territory for America's westward expansion. L. Frank Baum, before he wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, advocated for such an extermination in his editorial following the Wounded Knee Massacre, saying,

The proud spirit of the original owners of these vast prairies inherited through centuries of fierce and bloody wars for their possession, lingered last in the bosom of Sitting Bull. With his fall the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the

⁴ Richard H. Pratt, "Kill the Indian, and Save the Man: Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans," George Mason University, Accessed December 7, 2018, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929>.

total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are.⁵

This was exactly the kind of existential threat to Native American lives which Pratt wanted to avoid. Estimates of Native American population before Columbus vary widely, but even the most conservative estimates show that by the end of the 19th century, around the time of the boarding school project's founding, at least 90% of the indigenous populations of North America had been wiped out by a combination of war and disease.⁶ Pratt believed his program offered a merciful alternative to the threat of extinction looming over the Native American students who filled his classrooms. In a letter titled *Kill the Indian, Save the Man*, Pratt prefaced his argument for the boarding schools by saying,

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian, and save the man.⁷

Pratt wanted to move away from the massacres which had characterized the American Indian War, so he took the arguments of his opponents and pivoted their central tenet into his call for cultural erasure and reconditioning rather than wholesale extinction. Pratt truly believed his program was a work of compassion, designed to uplift Native American communities and provide for their liberty. He went on to say,

⁵ Lyman Frank Baum, *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, 20 December, 1890.

⁶ Dean R. Snow, "Microchronology and Demographic Evidence Relating to the Size of Pre-Columbian North American Indian Populations," *Science*, 268:5217 (June 1995). doi:10.1126/science.268.5217.1601.

⁷ Pratt, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man"

“Put yourself in his place” is as good a guide to a proper conception of the Indian and his cause as it is to help us to right conclusions in our relations with other men . . . There shall be in every locality throughout the nation a supremacy of the Bible principle of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and full obedience to the doctrine of our Declaration that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created free and equal, with certain inalienable rights,” and of the clause in our Constitution which forbids that there shall be “any abridgment of the rights of citizens on account of race, color, or previous condition.” I leave off the last two words “of servitude,” because I want to be entirely and consistently American.⁸

As horrible as the boarding schools were for the students who attended them, their founding principles were sadly progressive compared to much of the openly hateful and dehumanizing rhetoric surrounding the so-called “Indian problem.”

Pratt tried to reframe the Indian problem from a framework of white supremacy as obligation and patronage similar to that which Kipling would later apply to the Philippine-American War with his poem, *The White Man’s Burden*. Pratt argued,

It is a sad day for the Indians when they fall under the assaults of our troops, as in the Piegan massacre⁹ . . . but a far sadder day is it for them when they fall under the baneful influences of a treaty agreement with the United States whereby they are to receive large annuities, and to be protected on reservations, and held apart from all association with the best of our civilization. The destruction is not so speedy, but it is far more general.¹⁰

Pratt saw the cultural seclusion of reservations as worse than the military massacres that had taken place. He argued it was unjust to the Native American tribes to allow or

⁸ Pratt, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.”

⁹ The Piegan massacre Pratt refers to here was the Marias Massacre of the Indian Wars on January 23, 1870, in which an estimated 200 Piegan Blackfeet Indians—mostly women, children, and the elderly—were killed by U.S. troops in an effort to suppress Blackfeet militant groups led by Mountain Chief and Chief Heavy Runner. The massacre resulted in a large amount of public backlash, which many now credit with a shift toward policies directed at peace, like Pratt’s own boarding school project.

¹⁰ Pratt, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.”

encourage them to retain their identity, and he cautioned against schools that preserved their native students' culture, saying, "Indian schools say to the Indians: 'You are Indians, and must remain Indians. You are not of the nation, and cannot become of the nation. We do not want you to become of the nation.'"¹¹ Pratt saw the practice of placing students in schools which taught native culture as unfair because it prevented their coming into contact with what he thought of as the intrinsically beneficial and civilizing forces of white American society. Pratt's doctrine of assimilation was based in part on his conception of slavery's effects on the African American community. He even appealed to the example of slavery in order to justify his boarding school program, saying:

Inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Horrible as were the experiences of its introduction, and of slavery itself, there was concealed in them the greatest blessing that ever came to the Negro race—seven millions of blacks from cannibalism in darkest Africa to citizenship in free and enlightened America . . . They became English-speaking and civilized, because forced into association with English-speaking and civilized people; became healthy and multiplied, because they were property; and industrious, because industry, which brings contentment and health, was a necessary quality to increase their value.¹²

From this intensely problematic framework of colonialism, Pratt could not conceive of contact with white American culture as anything other than a net gain. He saw slavery as ultimately a success in cultural elevation, and so he set about trying to copy that success in his boarding schools.

Ultimately, Pratt's boarding school program did actually accomplish some of what he set out to do by changing public opinion of Native Americans and proving that they could be reconditioned to conform to white society. After a student performance at

¹¹ Pratt, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."

¹² Pratt, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."

the commencement ceremonies of 1909 at Carlisle, Commissioner of Indian Affairs F. E. Leupp commented,

All of these young men are Americans—there can be no doubt about that . . . Perfect harmony, precision of movement, and delicacy of expression prevailed throughout, and one could scarcely believe that it was the performance of descendants of the aborigines that one was hearing.”¹³

Leupp went on to say that, “any one who could witness such an exhibition as this today and still remain of the belief that the Indian is not a natural artist, shows that he is a good deal of a barbarian himself.”¹⁴ Leupp’s comments show a definite ideological shift from earlier political discourse at the outset of the boarding school project; they mark out a clear rebuttal against men like Baum who wished for the extermination of what they saw as chronically pitiful and even sub-human Native Americans. Moses E. Clap, then chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and avowed opponent of the boarding school project, even remarked upon observing the students at Carlisle,

I confess that I did not believe it was within the power and capability of children partaking largely of Indian blood to give a performance such as was rendered last evening. I want to congratulate those who participated in that entertainment, and I want to congratulate the Indians as a class on their achievement, and the story of the possibilities which that achievement tells.

Comments like this by Senator Clap, or the remark of a Baltimore woman who met a young student in Carlisle’s outing program who, “was perfectly splendid, and we were all delighted with him”¹⁵ reinforce the fact that despite the terrible conditions and the deeply traumatic legacy of the boarding schools, Pratt’s project was responsible for a marked

¹³ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

¹⁴ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

¹⁵ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

and arguably positive shift in both public opinion and legislative action with regard to Native American populations. Senator Clap concluded his address by saying,

What I have seen and heard here has materially modified my views— at least, with reference to this school. I have believed for years that we should gradually eliminate non-reservation schools; and one view of mine was that we should begin with Carlisle because it was the farthest from the reservations. I am satisfied now that this is a mistake; that while in our own state we honor and respect and associate on perfect equality with the Indians in our midst, we do not have that peculiar sympathy— and I may perhaps use the expression, that intensified sentiment— in regard to the Indian which you have here in the East, where he is practically unknown to you only as he comes here in the character of the student.¹⁶

Pratt's schools, however inhumane, had a traceable impact on moving public discourse around the so-called Indian problem away from extermination and towards acceptance, even if that acceptance came at the cost of wholesale cultural erasure.

Pratt acknowledged his program's foundational commitment to this cultural erasure when he said to Congress, "we make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization."¹⁷ Pratt believed that all men began at birth as *tabula rasa*. By feeding native children to white American culture in his boarding schools, Pratt believed he could dissolve the children's nascent cultural structures before they had a chance to cement, thereby allowing him to eradicate Native American culture one generation at a time until he could end the conflict once and for all. In this way Pratt arrived at the central purpose of his boarding schools to, "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."¹⁸ Like much of Pratt's writing, this

¹⁶ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

¹⁷ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

¹⁸ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909)

mandate to kill the Indian and save the man takes classically Christian tenets and bends them unsettlingly toward the destruction of the Native American. In this instance his mission statement echoes the common mantra of ‘love the sinner, hate the sin,’ thereby implying that Native American culture is by its very nature a sinful defect. Pratt had an unshakeable faith that God and the Bible were on his side—that is to say, on the side of white American Protestant capitalism—and his perversion of this Christian axiom quickly became the central rallying cry of the boarding school program.

Conditions in the Boarding Schools

Attendance to Pratt’s off-reservation boarding schools was voluntary at the outset, but due to extremely low community opt-in the Bureau of Indian Affairs soon began enforcing enrollment through the use of coercion and force.¹⁹ The Indian Appropriation Act of 1891 codified this coercive behavior, stating that, “the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, subject to the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, is hereby authorized and directed to make and enforce by proper means such rules and regulations as will secure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at schools established and maintained for their benefit.”²⁰ These policies of coercion only intensified two years later, when in 1893 Congress followed up on its previous legislation by investing the Secretary of the Interior with the power to, “withhold rations, clothing, and other annuities from Indian parents or guards who refuse or neglect to send and keep their children of proper

¹⁹ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust,” 59.

²⁰ The Statutes at Large of the United States of America from December 1889, to March, 1891, and Recent Treaties, Conventions, and Executive Proclamations, Vol. 26 (Washington, DC, 1891), 1014.

school age in some school a reasonable portion of each year.”²¹ This behavior was finally officially banned in 1895, but in 1902 Indian Affairs Commissioner William Jones admitted that the process of coerced enrollment continued well past the ban, and extended to the use of bribery, threats, lies, and physical force to part prospective students from their parents and home communities.²² The cultural trauma perpetrated by these abuses was only intensified by the fact that Pratt routinely overcrowded his boarding school facilities, with Carlisle’s first class of 158 students far exceeding the allotment of his initial commission for 120 students.²³

Once he got students in the doors, the curriculum Pratt implemented to undertake his mission of cultural erasure rested on instilling four essential pillars in the minds of the students: “first, usable knowledge of the language of the country; second, skill in some civilized industry that will enable successful competition; third, courage of civilization which will enable abandonment of the tribe and successful living among civilized people; fourth, knowledge of books, or education so-called.”²⁴ Pratt’s curriculum of “civilized industry” was founded on the cornerstone of vocational education. Carlisle’s curriculum centered around vocational training and apprenticeship for boys and domestic training for

²¹ The Statutes at Large of the United States of America from December 1889, to March, 1891, and Recent Treaties, Conventions, and Executive Proclamations, Vol. 27 (Washington, DC, 1891), 635.

²² William A. Jones, “A New Indian Policy,” *World’s Work* 3 (March 1902), 1838.

²³ Pratt, Report to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year 1879, 11.

²⁴ Pratt, *The Indian Industrial School Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Its Origins, Purposes, Progress and the Difficulties Surmounted*, Robert Utley, ed., (Carlisle 1979[1908]), 55.

girls. In addition to their standard academic training in reading, writing, and arithmetic, each student was expected to spend half of each day, six days out of the week, working on making harnesses, shoeing horses, farming, practicing carpentry, fashioning furniture and other household goods, or in the case of the girls, sewing clothes or cleaning laundry. Carlisle received funding in the amount of \$167 per year for each student in attendance, but the annual financial reports show that this subsidy covered only a portion of the overall expenses for each student.²⁵ Pratt's plan was to cover any additional costs by having the students learn practical trades, the products of which could be sold to cover the shortfall in their tuition.

In 1882, Pratt disclosed in his annual report to the Secretary of the Interior that with 134 student apprentices placed under instruction during the year, the school had been able to produce "13 spring wagons, 1 buggy, 177 sets of double harnesses, 6,744 articles of tinware, and 160 pairs of shoes," which in total gained the school \$5,730.84 of revenue at market.²⁶ This represented an approximate 9.5% decrease over the production of the previous year, which Pratt attributed mostly to the students' daily wages of sixteen and two thirds cents being revoked by order of the Department of the Interior.²⁷ In addition, students not involved in manufacture were expected to learn and perform routine maintenance jobs for the surrounding white population, with boys repairing farm implements, shoeing horses, assisting with the carpentry of local building projects, and in

²⁵ Brown Quarterly, Volume 4, No. 3,
http://gayleturner.net/Indian_Boarding_Schools.pdf

²⁶ Pratt Report to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year 1882, 5.

²⁷ Pratt Report to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year 1882, 5

one case even starting a student-run bakery in the local township (though little of this bread ever made it to the students' mouths), while girls mended clothes, cleaned laundry, cooked, and generally assisted with housework. A May 1914 issue of *The Red Man*, one of the school's regular newspapers, featured the following "admittedly rather strenuous" student schedule:

Rise at 6:00 in the morning; breakfast, 6:30 to 7:00; putting rooms in order, 7:00 to 7:30; those on the work details, to work, 7:30 to 11:30; others to school, 8:30 to 11:30; get ready for dinner, 11:30 to 12:00; dinner, 12:00 to 12:30; afternoon work details to work, 1:00 to 5:00; others to school, 1:15 to 4:00; get ready for supper, 5:00 to 5:30, super 5:30 to 6:00; attend religious or other meetings, 6:15 to 7:00; study hour, 7:00 to 8:00; gymnasium, 8:00 to 9:00; to bed at 9:30.²⁸

In addition to widespread chronic fatigue, the strictures of Pratt's vocational curriculum exposed students to immense physical dangers. In August of 1888, Margaret Yates (Apache) lost part of her hand in a laundry room accident, and in November 1891, John Rooks (tribe not reported) lost his left hand to a saw blade while working in a mill.²⁹ A cursory survey of school announcements and newspapers reveals a list of student injuries and deaths that is appallingly expansive, including toes caught under printing presses; fingers and hands lost in the machine shop; heads cut open by heavy tools; legs, necks, and heads injured or broken in falls from ladders while conducting school maintenance; broken legs run over, ripped off, or amputated after horse, carriage, automobile, or train accidents; and a plethora of broken bones, sometimes resulting in permanent crippling or even death, suffered by the school's "student athletes."³⁰

²⁸ *The Red Man*, 6:9 (May 1914), 343.

²⁹ *The Indian Helper* 3:52 (August 10, 1888), 3; *The Indian Helper* 7:10 (November 13, 1891), 3.

³⁰ *The Indian Helper* 6:13 (November, 28, 1890), 3; *The Indian Helper* 6:25 (February 27, 1891), 3; *The Indian Helper* 7:13 (December 4, 1891), 3; *The Indian*

As dangerous as Carlisle's machine shops were, however, their danger paled in comparison to the threat of disease which loomed over the student body at all times. The rampant fatigue and starvation implemented by Pratt's initial policies carried through the boarding school program all the way to its eventual end. In 1928 the Meriam Report, which was the first official government survey of the damage caused by the boarding schools, claimed that meager food budgets (estimated at 11 cents per day, per student), overcrowded facilities, poor or nonexistent healthcare, and the widespread overworking of children contributed to a significantly higher rate of disease and mortality in the Native American communities surrounding the boarding schools, showing an estimated 650% increase in mortality rates for the Native American communities surveyed when compared to other racial/ethnic groups.³¹ The stark truth is that, due to the rampancy of disease, malnourishment, and the physical, psychological, and sexual abuse present in Pratt's schools, many of the young Native American men and women who left for Carlisle and the twenty-five other off-reservation schools like it never made it back to see their families. Indian Affairs Commissioner H. Price outlined the conditions of Carlisle shortly after its founding, describing, "Children who shiver in rooms ceiled with canvas, who dodge the muddy drops trickling through worn-out roofs, who are crowded in ill-ventilated dormitories, who recite in a single school-room, three classes at a time, and

Helper 7:15 (December 18, 1891), 3; *The Indian Helper* 7:34 (May 6, 1892), 3; *The Indian Helper* 8:15 (December 23, 1892), 3; *The Indian Helper* 11:7 (November 15, 1895), 2; *The Indian Helper* 11:37 (June 19, 1896), 3; *The Indian Helper* 12:6 (November 13, 1896), 3; *The Indian Helper* 13:8 (December 3, 1897)

³¹ Lewis Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration; Report of a Survey Made at the Request of Honorable Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior, and Submitted to Him, February 21, 1928., Its Studies in Administration* [No. 17] (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1928).

who have no suitable sitting-rooms nor bath-rooms.”³² In January of 1880, a mere four months after its opening, the Carlisle school saw the interment of its first two student casualties.³³

Over the course of the next four decades, the school cemetery would come to hold the remains of at least 186 individuals, many of whom remain unnamed.³⁴ Carlisle’s graveyard only accounts for a fraction of the lives ended by Pratt’s flagship school, however. In his 2013 study, *A Blueprint for Death in U.S. Off-Reservation Boarding Schools: Rethinking Institutional Mortalities at Carlisle Indian Industrial School*, Dartmouth researcher Preston McBride surveyed the records and correspondence surrounding Carlisle students at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and concluded that the actual death toll, previously set at 227 by Genevieve Bell’s study, *Telling Stories out of School*, could in fact be closer to or over 500.³⁵ According to McBride, many students who were obviously nearing the end of their lives were sent back to their reservations in an attempt to keep the number of casualties in the school’s yearly reports to a minimum.

³² Administrative Report to the Chief of Indian Affairs for the Fiscal Year 1882

³³ “CIS Cemetery Table - Alphabetical (Last Name),” Cemetery Information, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, Dickinson University, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teaching>.

³⁴ “CIS Cemetery Table - Alphabetical (Last Name),” Cemetery Information, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, Dickinson University, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teaching>.

³⁵ Preston McBride, “A Blueprint for Death in U.S. off-Reservation Boarding Schools: Rethinking Institutional Mortalities at Carlisle Indian Industrial School, 1879–1918” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013), 16.

Margaret Yates, who began the earlier list of student injuries with her laundry accident, died on December 9th of 1894 at the age of 21, and now rests on the grounds of the Carlisle School Cemetery. According to the two-volume death record kept in the National Archives, Margaret was the third student of her year to die of consumption. Consumption (tuberculosis) and pneumonia were by far the most commonly cited causes of death for students in Carlisle, together making up almost 70% of the student deaths reported in the existing registers between 1890 and 1906. In fact, according to McBride's study of death rates at Carlisle, "The only year Carlisle failed to officially record a death at the school was in 1902, yet even in that exceptional year, terminally ill students were sent home to die."³⁶ McBride's survey of the student information cards housed in the National Archives found that, of the 1,135 students sent home due to illness throughout Carlisle's forty years of operation, 154 died within the years following their discharge, with seventy-nine of those dying mere months after leaving the campus.³⁷ Of seventy-three children who were taken to the boarding schools of Carlisle, Genoa, and Santee between 1881 and 1894, 64% either died at school or shortly after their return home.³⁸ McBride's survey of the National Archives found that Carlisle had higher death rates in the census years than almost every state that had an Indian nation. Carlisle had a higher death rate than war zones, and during the Spanish American War a Carlisle student was more likely to die than a soldier.³⁹ In response to the incredible gap between his study's

³⁶ McBride, *A Blueprint for Death*, 117.

³⁷ McBride, *A Blueprint for Death*, 122

³⁸ Putney, "Fighting the Scourge," 10

³⁹ McBride, *A Blueprint for Death*, 133

figures and the figures contained in the official reports of the boarding school's fatalities, McBride concluded that, "Carlisle's record keeping system was either wholly inaccurate, which seems unlikely, or deaths were intentionally and grossly underreported."⁴⁰ Faced with the overwhelming figures for illness and death at Carlisle, McBride suggests that terminally ill students were likely sent home intentionally so as to avoid having to add them to the official death tolls reported at the end of each fiscal year.

Many Native American communities were already suspicious of Pratt's boarding school program, and this problem would only have been exacerbated if the true rates of mortality caused by the schools had been made available to the public. Nevertheless, despite Pratt's attempts to conceal the fatality rates of his schools, Inspector William McConnell reported to the Indian Affairs Commissioner in October of 1899 that,

The word 'murder' is a terrible word, but we are little less than murderers if we follow the course we are now following after the attention of those in charge has been called to its fatal results. Hundreds of boys and girls are sent home to die that a sickly sentiment may be patronized and that institutions where brass bands, foot and base ball are the principal advertisements may be maintained.⁴¹

The boarding schools enacted an unbelievable physical toll on their students, many of whom paid the ultimate price for Pratt's picture of a civilized conversion.

Those who survived the physical extremes of the school still had to struggle under the weight of the schools' psychological oppression. Frances Willard, president of the National Women's Christian Temperance Union, recalls one of the school's captains telling her during a tour of the school that, "we keep them moving . . . And they have no

⁴⁰ McBride, *A Blueprint for Death*, 120

⁴¹ William J. McConnell to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 31, 1899, quoted in Putney, "Fighting the Scourge," 10-11.

time for homesickness—none for mischief—none for regret.”⁴² This captain’s comments undermine the supposed Christian grace, civility, and edification of Pratt’s vocational curriculum, instead revealing a program of physical and psychological oppression which actively wore students down to the breaking point through overwork and fatigue. The civilian educators at Carlisle and the schools like it were by no means blind to the injustices of this system, and Estelle Aubrey Brown, in her work, *Stubborn Fool: A Narrative*, confesses,

I knew these girls were consistently overworked, knew they were always hungry. Simply, they did not get enough to eat. We all knew it; most of us resented it, were powerless—or too cowardly—to try to do anything about it. We were torn between the stark necessity to earn a living and our feelings of resentment at the shameful conditions under which we earned it. We were accessories after the fact to the Indian Bureau’s inhumanity.⁴³

The teachers, whether through active participation or passive acceptance, perpetuated the systems of overwork and starvation which Pratt used to make his students more compliant and pliable.

Those teachers who chose to actively participate often did so with complete disregard for their students’ wellbeing. In 1914 Congress launched an investigation of, among other things, the punishment systems enacted throughout the boarding schools. Students testified to having seen, heard of, or experienced being locked up, punched, slapped, whipped, beaten, or starved, as just a handful of the punishments enacted by the school administrators. Lewis Braun, a student from South Dakota’s boarding school system, testified to seeing three boys: Eddie Adams, George Morrow, and Paul Black,

⁴² Frances E. Willard, “The Carlisle Indian School,” *Chautauquan IX* (February, 1889), 290.

⁴³ Estelle Aubrey Brown, *Stubborn Fool: A Narrative* (Caldwell, ID, 1952), 185.

being taken into the disciplinarian's office and "whipped with a baseball bat, and one of them was hurt so he had to go to the hospital." In this same testimony Mr. Braun claimed that the disciplinarian in question had punched a young man named James Kalawat and knocked him down a flight of stairs.⁴⁴ Later in the hearings, a young woman named Julia Hardin (Pottawatomie) testified that, as a result of her refusal to participate in the outing program at Carlisle, she was taken into an office where a teacher, "jerked a board down from one of the window sills and he pushed me down on the floor (five or six times), and two of the matrons held me . . . And locked the door," at which point the male teacher beat Julia with the wooden board, "on the head, and every place" before throwing her in a cell.⁴⁵ The cells which were used at Carlisle and the other schools of its kind were usually dark, damp, had little or no air circulation, and they were often guarded by students who were forced to stand watch over their compatriots' punishments. If Pratt's teachers couldn't work or educate the Indian out of their students, they showed little, if any, compunction when resorting to beating the Indian out of them. It is little wonder, then, that in her study of Carlisle Bell estimated that during the school's operational period from 1879 to 1918 over 17% of the school's population either attempted or succeeded in running away.⁴⁶

Faced with the suffocating strictures of the school's schedule, the intolerable conditions of famine and the ever-present threat of disease, and the merciless corporal

⁴⁴ Testimony of Lewis Braun, Student, February 6, 1914 in *Hearings*, 996-997.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Julia Hardin, Student, February 7, 1914, in *Hearings*, 1101-1103, 1105, 1006.

⁴⁶ Bell, "Telling Stories Out of School," 210, 410.

discipline of the teachers, children at the schools quickly found themselves driven to the extremes of desperation and despair. In February of 1898, two female students reportedly attempted to set fire to the school grounds two times within the space of a single night, and according to the school's newspaper, both girls, "pleaded guilty after Pratt turned them over to the local authorities for prosecution" and were handed eighteen month sentences.⁴⁷ Jaqueline Fear-Segal, in her own work on Carlisle, found that one of the boys buried in the cemetery had committed suicide when he managed to get his hands on a pistol, which he immediately discharged into his own chest.⁴⁸ From the outset, the school's rhetoric teemed with messages of death and despair for its young students. Reverend J.A. Lippencott, in his address at the 1898 commencement ceremonies of Carlisle, reportedly told the students, "You can not become truly American citizens, industrious, intelligent, cultured, civilized until the INDIAN within you is DEAD."⁴⁹

Cultural Genocide

Examining the effects of the cultural offensive waged in Pratt's boarding schools, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota), a Native American social worker specializing in the effects of trauma on native communities, decries the boarding schools as centers of cultural genocide. The use of the term genocide is fraught with political, moral, and especially legal ramifications. There is still no complete consensus that the actions taken against the native populations of North America constituted

⁴⁷ *Red Man*, 14:9 (February, 1898), 1.

⁴⁸ Fear-Segal 24.

⁴⁹ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (University Press of Kansas, 1995), 274.

genocide. Individuals such as Canadian Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin or former prime minister Paul Martin have come forward to decry the actions of colonization and the boarding schools as genocidal, but neither the United States nor Canada have ever officially admitted to committing acts of genocide against their native populations.⁵⁰

Lyman Legters, in his article, *The American Genocide*, outlines the United Nations' official definition of genocide as follows:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, and including five types of criminal actions: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁵¹

Any one of these acts alone is sufficient grounds to condemn a program as genocidal, but Legters finds that the Carlisle school which formed the basis of Pratt's vision for Native American salvation performed almost every act laid out in this definition.

Seeking to avert a military genocide, Pratt had transferred the genocide from the battlefield to the classroom. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart calls out the oppression the boarding schools forced on their students, saying:

Abusive behaviors—physical, sexual, emotional—were experienced and learned by American Indian children raised in these settings. Spiritually and emotionally, the children were bereft of culturally integrated behaviors that led to positive self-

⁵⁰ “Chief Justice Says Canada Attempted ‘Cultural Genocide’ on Aboriginals,” accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/chief-justice-says-canada-attempted-cultural-genocide-on-aboriginals/article24688854/>.

⁵¹ Lyman H. Legters, “The American Genocide,” *Policy Studies Journal* 16, no. 4 (June 1988): 768–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1988.tb00685.x>.

esteem, a sense of belonging to family and community, and a solid American Indian identity.⁵²

Pratt's schools were brutally efficient in eradicating the students' native identities. Photos from Carlisle's records show hundreds of children rendered unrecognizable as the smiles, flowing hair, and rich variety of garments on the incoming students gave way to the dour stares of gaunt, short-haired boys and girls in military uniforms. It is important to note that while Pratt began the boarding schools with this goal of cultural erasure, the Bureau of Indian Affairs actually shifted away from this policy toward the end of the program's life. During the last decade of Carlisle's operation, Commissioner of Indian Affairs F. E. Leupp showed a drastic ideological shift in the Bureau's approach toward native students as he instructed the graduating class,

Never forget or regret that you are Indians. I know that you have had a lot of stuff of the other sort prattled to you, but I hope you have improved your opportunities to wash it out of your minds. Pride of race is one of the saving graces. You were born Indians and I want you to hold your heads right up as Indians and look every other man in the face as fearlessly as if he owed you something. Don't overlook for a minute that you were the first Americans, and that we, of what is now the dominant race, were your guests a good while before we became your guardians.⁵³

This statement is still filled with a colonial sentiment reminiscent of Kipling, but it is nevertheless an incredible step forward from the kind of racial relations and perceptions which characterized American Indian relations just a few decades before at the outset of Pratt's program. Still, the change in goal and sentiment surrounding Pratt's schools was too late for the majority of the Native American population.

⁵² Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 59-60.

⁵³ Indian Craftsman 1:4 (May 1909).

Brave Heart states that the vacuum of native identity Pratt's curricula instilled in his students opened the door to a far deeper oppression than the outward bruises and scars inflicted on them by the teachers. Borrowing from Paulo Freire's concept of internalized oppression, she says, "An individual incorporates the harshness of the aggressive authority figure, which may be projected onto others with ensuing hostility. The individual may further internalize the aggressor which can lead to guilt, self-blame, self-criticism, and depression."⁵⁴ This internalization of the aggressor represents the most lasting damage inflicted by the boarding school. Its impact has long outlived General Pratt, propagating itself from generation to generation within Native American communities.

After internalizing the oppressive behavior they learned in Pratt's classrooms, the children who survived the boarding schools passed this oppression down to their children and grandchildren. A participant in one of Brave Heart's support groups perfectly captures the effects of this internalized oppression in his own story, saying:

The rage and anger is still there in all of us . . . there ain't no cavalry running around here! We're doing it to ourselves. I've never been in a boarding school. I wish I was because all of the abuse we've talked about happened in my home. If it had happened by strangers, it wouldn't have been so bad—the sexual abuse, the neglect. Then I could blame it all on another race. [Pause]. I don't think I've ever bonded with any parental figures in my home. Physically, they were there. But that's all. And yes, *they* went to boarding school.⁵⁵

Being one generation removed from the boarding schools did little to ameliorate this man's experience of their impact. The devastating wake of generational trauma left by Pratt's boarding schools in many ways mirrors the survivor's child complex identified by

⁵⁴ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 66.

⁵⁵ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 69.

Judith Kestenberg in her work with the children of holocaust survivors. Kestenberg lays out the symptoms of this complex as follows:

(a) anxiety and impulsivity, (b) intrusive holocaust imagery including nightmares, (c) depression, (d) withdrawal and isolation, (e) guilt, (f) elevated mortality rates from cardiovascular diseases as well as suicide and other forms of violent death, (g) a perceived obligation to share in ancestral pain as well as identification with the deceased ancestors, (h) compensatory fantasies, and (i) unresolved grief. Further, descendants of survivors feel responsible to undo the tragic pain of their ancestral past, often feeling overly protective of parents and grandparents, and are preoccupied with death and persecution.⁵⁶

Further adding to this litany of symptoms, the Department of Health and Human Services found in a 1995 study that the age-adjusted alcoholism death rate is 5.5 times higher in Native American communities than the national average.⁵⁷

Many of the symptoms Kestenberg lists are apparent in the account of Brave Heart's experience with a 15 year old Pueblo girl who attempted to take her life via aspirin overdose. When asked why she had made the attempt on her own life, the girl said:

I just can't talk to my parents. I don't want to burden them with my problems and feelings. They have so much pain of their own. I just can't bring myself to do that, but I felt like I had no one to talk to. That's why I took those pills—I just felt so tired. I wish I could take away their pain. They have suffered so much themselves in boarding school. I'd like to go away to college, but I can't leave them. I feel so guilty, like I have to take care of them.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Judith S. Kestenberg, "A Metapsychological Assessment Based on an Analysis of a Survivor's Child," In *Generations of the Holocaust*, ed. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy, 137-158, (Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ Indian Health Service, *Trends in Indian Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, 1995.

⁵⁸ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 62.

The young girl's story presents a poignant illustration of the survivor's child complex in her compensatory fantasies of being able to protect her parents or somehow wipe away their suffering, her guilt over both their past pain and the burden her own pain would place on them, and ultimately in the suicide attempt that results from her deep depression.

Brave Heart posits that the lingering wounds of the boarding schools cannot heal in the native community because of something she calls disenfranchised grief. She defines this phenomenon as, "grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned."⁵⁹ She sees the root cause of this phenomenon as twofold, saying, "Grief from traumatic deaths following the Wounded Knee Massacre and boarding school placement . . . May have been inhibited both intrapsychically with shame as well as societally disenfranchised through the prohibition of ceremonial grieving practices."⁶⁰ The first cause, according to Brave Heart, is the shame imposed if a person or group of persons are seen as being largely incapable or undeserving of grief. Little recognition is given to their sense of loss, and their mourning is therefore treated as culturally inappropriate. She asserts that:

The historical view of American Indians as being stoic and savage contributed to a dominant societal belief that American Indian people were incapable of having feelings. This conviction intimates that American Indians had no capacity to mourn and, subsequently, no need or right to grieve.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 62.

⁶⁰ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 63.

⁶¹ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust," 63.

Even if society is now far more willing to recognize the enormity of the trauma inflicted on the Native American community, that is no guarantee that adequate space will be given for the public redress of these grievances.

The second cause Brave Heart outlines is the prohibition of ceremonial grieving practices. The strict campaigns of cultural sterilization undertaken by the federal government against Native Americans cut the survivors off from ritual and communal means of healing. In her case work, Brave Heart observes that, “The absence of rituals to facilitate the mourning process can severely limit the resolution of grief. The lack of understood social expectations and rituals for mourning foster pathological reactions to bereavement.”⁶² Without traditional rituals the mourning process cannot be properly concluded and the survivors are therefore trapped in the continual rehearsal of their trauma.

The boarding schools were just one of many tools employed by European colonizers to disperse and destroy Native tribes and nations throughout North America. Between allotment, relocation, off-reservation boarding schools, disease, war, and the host of other genocidal implements leveled at Native peoples in the post-Columbian era, as many as fifty-five million indigenous people lost their lives in the centuries following European contact. This devastation, sometimes called the Great Dying, was so unprecedented in its magnitude that a 2019 study found its effects produced a depopulation severe enough to be observed in the polar ice caps, which reflect a net change in global surface temperatures and atmospheric carbon following the eradication

⁶² Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust,” 63.

of such a vast portion of the world's population.⁶³ These numbers have not recovered; the 2010 census reported a total Native American population of only 5.2 million. There is simply no way to fully account for the devastation caused by a loss of this magnitude. The nature of what it means to have a Native American voice or identity is inextricably linked to the grim memory of this Great Dying. Those who have sought to rebuild Native America and define its voice through the centuries that followed European contact have, without exception, had to contend with the unspeakable weight of this legacy of trauma. It is not possible to understand the voices of the Native American literary and dramatic national project without first understanding the enormity of this loss.

⁶³ Alexander Koch et al., "Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207 (March 1, 2019): 13–36, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2018.12.004>.

CHAPTER THREE

Foundation: The Discourses of Nationalism

If you want to be sovereign you have to act sovereign, and before you can do that you have to think of yourself as sovereign. One has to be able to envision oneself in a sovereign manner.

Jace Weaver (Cherokee), *Splitting the Earth*

Imagined Continuities

Before tracing and addressing the Native American literary and dramatic nation building projects of the 20th century, it is first necessary to define the scope of the terms “nationalism” and “national identity” within the context of this discussion. After all, as Benedict Anderson points out in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, “Nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proven notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse.”¹ Liah Greenfeld, one of the foremost historians of nationalist theory, places the beginning of nationalist discourse in early sixteenth century England, citing the conflation of the term “people,” which had formerly signified the peasantry, with the term “nation,” which before that time had been reserved for the ruling elite.² As a result of this equation of terms, Greenfeld states that, “Every member of the ‘people’ thus interpreted partakes in its superior, elite quality, and it is in

¹ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London ; Verso, 2006), 3.

² Liah Greenfeld, *Advanced Introduction to Nationalism* (Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub, 2016) 16-18.

consequence that a stratified national population is perceived as essentially homogeneous, and the lines of status and class as superficial.”³ In order to survive, according to Anderson, such a nation must project, “an imaginary political community—and imagined as both limited and sovereign.”⁴ The nation is limited because it must at some point come to the end of its finite borders; the nation is sovereign, or at least imagined as sovereign, because otherwise it will be fundamentally incapable of securing its own rights and the rights of its members; and finally, according to Anderson, “it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁵ In Greenfeld’s example of sixteenth century England, the sudden uplift of a massive portion of the population into the positions of power vacated by the aristocratic casualties of the Wars of the Roses meant that the English population suddenly blurred its traditionally clear barriers of class stratification and came to see itself as a unique whole with enough internal homogeneity that it united its people behind the convincing projection of a single national identity.

The term “convincing” here is extremely important because, as Anderson points out, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents them where they do not exist.”⁶ There is no such tangible, naturally occurring thing as a nation;

³ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6.

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

all nations are inherently the products of human philosophical artifice and therefore must constantly inculcate in their members the desire to maintain and reify the ideologies and the structures of power which form their foundations. In this way the nation is almost like a religion, as Lloyd Kramer writes, “In every case, however, the nationalist creed requires a language, a literature, and a group of interpreters who sustain the narrative of the nation like theologians or priests sustain the narrative of a religion.”⁷ Here Kramer touches on one of the most important aspects of nationalist theory: the centrality of language in both maintaining and projecting the national narrative/image.

According to Kramer, language, “produces and reflects the essential traits of a nation, including its creativity, originality, and even its national virility.”⁸ Language is the life’s blood of the national project, and the crucial foundation which supported it in its nascency. Anderson notes that all of the most successful pre-national communities from which nationalism developed staked their claims on the bases of both a unifying religion and, most importantly, an exclusive holy language. According to Anderson,

All the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power . . . Such classical communities linked by sacred languages had a character distinct from the imagined communities of modern nations. One crucial difference was the older communities’ confidence in the unique sacredness of their languages.⁹

⁷ Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (1997): 525–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3653913>, 534.

⁸ Lloyd Kramer, *Nationalism: Political Cultures in Europe and America 1775-1865*, London: Prentice Hall, 1998, 45.

⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13.

These pre-national communities—Anderson cites Islam, Christianity, and Confucianism as some of the most prominent examples—each held that their holy language was, in fact, more true and more attuned to the fundamental fabric of reality than any other language, and it is this certainty of belief in a language that emanates a reality which allowed these communities to bind their membership together. It is perhaps due to the early influence of these pre-national communities which surrounded nationalism at its outset that, as Kramer points out, “virtually all nationalisms advocate and celebrate a single unifying language.”¹⁰ It is the construction, refinement, and ultimately the projection/dissemination of this unifying language and narrative which, perhaps more than anything else, characterizes the national project.

In the dissemination of this unifying national identity and script the discourse of nationalism begins to enter into conversation with the discourse of postcolonialism. Kramer observes that the structures of nationalism tend to develop and consolidate around this central function of language and thought, saying,

The collective activities of education, state bureaucracies, and national economic institutions all depended on written information and ideas, a universal pattern that connects the history of nationalism to the modern history of publishing and journalism and mass communications. Some historians have in fact described the modern nation as a centralized communications network that carries national narratives of events and culture from major urban centers into all classes and geographical regions of a political state.”¹¹

The national communications apparatus, both ushered in by and fundamentally dependent upon the rise of print and other mass media, orients itself almost wholly on the production and spread of a single, homogeneous national narrative. The nation must regularly educate

¹⁰ Kramer, *Nationalism*, 43.

¹¹ Kramer, *Nationalism*, 48.

and re-educate its citizens about their national identity in order to maintain the solidity of its impression within their minds and project the forcefulness of its imagined sovereignty.

This sovereignty must, however, be projected both internally and externally, as the nation, in order to survive, must not only convince its subjects that it is a sovereign whole, but must also project the image of that sovereignty convincingly to the rest of the nations against which it defines itself. Anderson posits that the formations of nation-ness and nationalism,

Are cultural artefacts of a particular kind . . . the creation of these artefacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces . . . once created, they became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.¹²

Once they have formed, according to Anderson, the concepts of nation and nationality become modular construction materials capable of being exported by the national apparatus. It is here that nations begin their colonial projects, seeking to disseminate their national materials far and wide in an effort to universalize themselves and grow the bases of their power.

This pursuit of growth, however, problematizes the national project at the same time that it supports it because it slowly eats away at the clear and recognizable other required to maintain a Gramscian cultural hegemonic apparatus. As Partha Chatterjee states, in his essay for *Nation and Narration*,

Nationalism . . . Seeks to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment and fails to do so. For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal

¹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4

ideal, needs its Other; if it could ever actualise itself in the real world as the truly universal, it would in fact destroy itself.”¹³

This is the fundamental tension which lies at the heart of all colonial projects.

Colonial Mimicry: Almost the Same, but not White

It is this tension between the two contradictory but ultimately necessary functions of universalizing and othering that manifests itself most clearly in Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry presented in his essay, *Of Mimicry and Man*. Here, Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as, “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*.”¹⁴ One of the clearest examples within American history would be that of the Indian Industrial Boarding School program, the stated goal of which was to, “feed the Indians to our culture” and thereby, “kill the Indian, and save the man.”¹⁵ The process of mimicry begins with the nationalist re-education of the colonized subject which is an effort to incorporate them into the national fabric by inculcating in them the “civilizing” ideologies of the host nation. This educational project, however, stands at odds with the competing nationalist claim that the colonized subject represents an inherently inferior “other” that is morally, intellectually, and/or physically deficient when compared to the superior and more appropriate colonizer subject. The colonized subject must be seen as both inherently inferior and in need of “civilization” and yet also

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, in Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 293.

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” October 28 (1984): 125–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>, 280.

¹⁵ Richard Henry Pratt, *The Indian Industrial School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania*, vol. 10, no. 3., Cumberland County Historical Society Publications (Cumberland County Historical Society, 1979).

naturally capable of attaining that civilization if simply exposed to the communicative and educational apparatus of the nation. As Bhabha points out, such a discourse,

Is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.¹⁶

Essentially, the slippage of mimicry exists in the dissonance between the colonizer's claim of a necessarily savage and inferior race of colonized subjects and the colonizer's simultaneous claim that, through the enforced dissemination of its language and educational apparatus—in essence its civilization—the modular national materials identified by Anderson can be effectively projected onto this colonized subject body in order to “civilize” and incorporate it into the universalizing national whole. By their very existence the colonized subjects, thus educated and reformed into the desired image of the appropriate colonizer, become themselves inappropriate. Their likeness to the colonizer creates an ambivalent slippage of competing identities because, by successfully adopting and mimicking the forms and systems of the colonizer's civilization, the colonized subject effectively deligitimizes the colonizer's claim to any native or natural civility that would ratify their position of assumed superiority over the colonized subject. The colonial educational apparatus therefore becomes, according to Bhabha, a system which inherently,

Problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the “national” is no longer naturalizable. What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite

¹⁶ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 280.

simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents* . . . ”¹⁷

Bhabha does not precisely clarify his definitions of repetition and representation, but the former is taken to constitute an abortive or incomplete attempt at the mimesis which is achieved fully by the latter. It is this incomplete mimesis—almost, but not quite—that Bhabha sees as the turning point between mimicry and menace, because the repetitive nature of mimicry produces,

The sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of recalcitrance which coheres to the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers.”¹⁸

The visualization of power is here taken to mean the colonizer’s attempt to realize their universalizing claims through the dissemination and reproduction of their state apparatus, but the recalcitrance of the mimic subject denies this claim even as it supports it. The mimic, in the recalcitrance of its dual being which produces the slippage of identity, suddenly turns the colonial paradigm back on the colonizing subject and subjects it to its own evaluative claims of a naturalizable civility, exposing the layers of artificiality surrounding the colonizer’s subject body and nullifying the markers of distinction which previously held together its claim to an *a priori* national identity. The mimic’s own body and person becomes, to the mimic, a text of slippage and contradiction which serves as a constant reminder of the illegitimacy of the colonizer’s claim over them.

¹⁷ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 281.

¹⁸ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 280

However, the true menace of the mimic does not come simply from the presence of this slippage, as Bhabha clarifies that,

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations; a question of authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an *object* of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation.¹⁹

Mimicry actually disrupts colonial authority in the process of its creation and education, before the mimic has even had a chance to begin interacting with the received paradigms of the colonizer. By imposing the artificial structure of its civilization on a subject occurring outside its proper borders, the colonial nation effectively and immediately contradicts its own claim to cohesion. Such an education highlights the processes by which the colonial nation's superstructures generate and disseminate the colonizer's cultural ideology. The colonial educational project banishes at once any illusion that these superstructures operate under any normal or natural ideological paradigm. The education the mimic receives highlights the arbitrary construction of the colonial framework, thereby calling attention to the fact that the colonizer subject is not the projector of this artificial superstructural formation so much as its co-projection alongside the mimic he seeks to create.

The functions of this mimicry and the slippages of its inappropriate co-projection alongside the colonizer subject body are endemic to American Indian culture. Forced into America's militarist boarding schools, mentally and physically beaten into the moulds of

¹⁹ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 283-284.

the national apparatus of education, religion, and industry—feelings of hybridity and alienation are nearly universal in Native American experience and identity. Chas D. Carter, the American Indian Representative to Congress from Oklahoma, illustrated perfectly the inexorable advance of Bhabha’s mimic subject in his remarks at the 1909 commencement ceremonies of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, when he said,

Why, were there ever more rapid strides of progress than have been made with the Five Civilized Tribes? Was there ever such a speedy evolution as that of transforming a primitive people from savages to Christian civilization in less than four generations? Why, my pale-face brothers,—and I don’t want to be offensive, but you boast about your Anglo-Saxon civilization—I want to say to you, sirs, that the Indian has achieved within one-hundred years what it took the egotistical Anglo-Saxon more than three-thousand years to do.²⁰

Carter’s remark here captures the exact sentiment of the turning point where the mimic transitions from student to menace as he comes to understand and evaluate the colonizer’s claims and repurpose the colonizer’s language and culture against them. Carter becomes the observing and scrutinizing judge of his colonizing overlords as he continues, saying,

Now, I want to say in conclusion that, on behalf of the Indian, we have ceased to hate our long-ago conquerors; the seeds of prejudice and distrust which were sown by the aggregations of the white man in the early days have been supplanted by those of gratitude, inspired by the altruistic friendship of later generations. And long after the last Indian reservation has been broken up, after the last acre of tribal land has been allotted, after the last vestige of tribal government has been obliterated, and each Indian has become a United States citizen— long after all that will the composition of American character feel the Indian’s impression.²¹

²⁰ *The Indian Craftsman* (Vol. 1, No. 4) | Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-craftsman-vol-1-no-4>.

²¹ *The Indian Craftsman* (Vol. 1, No. 4).

No other word but menace seems adequately capable of capturing the unique slippage presented by such a statement. The interplay of friend and foe, subject and object, judge and judged within this one statement is both delightful and terrifying. Carter is the colonizer's supposed friend who infiltrates their national project and prophecies its ultimate subsumption under the compromising forces of the colonized mimic using the colonizer's own voice. He perfectly captures the genuinely intimidating ambivalent slippage between colonizer and colonized that threatens to take over the colonizer's national apparatus and render the once dominant colonizing subject obsolete. He positions himself as a kind of usurping heir apparent to the colonial project, the creation that overtakes and devours its creator. Carter, as Bhabha would say, "turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite."²² Part of this transition from mimicry to menace seems to follow from the fact that the colonized subject is at once the crowning achievement of the colonial project—the ideal subject it forms of its own will, on its own terms, and to the best of its ability—and its greatest enemy. The mimic represents a voice equipped with more than all of what the colonizing subject can muster, capable of both discrediting and superseding the colonial nation's cultural apparatus because of the mimic's ability to contain within itself multiple cultures simultaneously and to apprehend and adapt to the colonizer's culture with shocking rapidity. The rise of the mimic presents both the culmination of the national project in the construction and imposition of its intended and idealized subject identity, and the ultimate obsolescence of that national project as it

²² Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 284.

creates a national subject which exists outside of its national borders and therefore destabilizes its image as a sovereign, limited, cohesive community.

Remembered Selves: The Roots of Native Nationalism

So then what is a Native American nationalism? What is the lasting impression that Carter predicts America will feel no matter how completely it manages to eradicate or assimilate the tribal governments? The question of defining and developing this Native American nationalism is to some extent necessarily fraught with issues from the outset. Before the question can even be considered, it must be understood that there are 537 federally recognized tribes in the United States alone, with another 634 federally recognized First Nations communities in Canada.²³ Each of these indigenous communities have their own lands, languages, traditions, and certainly their own experiences of Euroamerican colonial expansion. This vast plurality is further compounded if communities which are not federally recognized are included in the tally, and it goes further still if those who are members of multiple tribes or who stand with one foot on either side of the colonized/colonizer line are given consideration with regard to their own unique experiences of what it means to be native. It is simply impossible to account fully for the sheer variety of Native American and First Nations voices which have joined together and contributed to the Native American theatre movements formed in the 20th century. Native experiences are not monolithic, and they should not be treated as such, and yet at the same time there are undeniable commonalities of culture and

²³ Angie Turner, "About AFN," Assembly of First Nations (blog), accessed February 6, 2020, <http://www.afn.ca/about-afn/>.

worldview which existed before colonial overreach and, as Jace Weaver points out in his chapter of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*,

Since the very moment of colonization, accelerating (as Cherokee anthropologist Robert Thomas argued) during the reservation period, and reaching final culmination during Termination and Relocation, a separate, distinct acknowledgment of something more than singular tribal identity coalesced.²⁴

The colonial project of physical and cultural genocide was thankfully unable to consummate its vision of a whitewashed society, but the totality of its scope and the pervasive legacy of its victims' suffering has generated a new kind of Native American consciousness, coincident with the existing tribal identities, but which itself transcends tribal boundaries. It is in the context of this broad sense of a general and pan-tribal Native American consciousness and sensibility that my study of Native American nationalism defines its scope. There is, to be sure, far too much diversity among the indigenous peoples of North America for any one study to ever be able to take into account, but it is in the milieu of shared voices and ideas created at the crossroads of these various cultures that Native American scholarship has traditionally found the opportunity to study the commonalities which bind together the Native American national consciousness.

While the printing press may have been the great catalyst of European nationalism, which launched cultures myopically devoted to the archival, reproduction, and distribution of the kind of standardized cultural artefacts which theorists such as Benedict Anderson and Lloyd Kramer have described, this was certainly not the case for the Native American nationalisms which emerged following the catastrophes of European contact. To begin with, Native American tribal and cultural character is far more centered

²⁴ Jace Weaver, "Splitting the Earth," in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 40.

on the sharing of oral tradition. As Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) says in his pivotal essay, *Towards a National Indian Literature*:

Through the past five centuries the oral tradition has been the most reliable method by which Indian culture and community integrity have been maintained. And, certainly, it is within this tradition that authenticity is most apparent and evident.²⁵

Unlike the printing press, the Native American oral tradition is largely unconcerned with attempting to fabricate a standardized, perfectly reproducible set of shared cultural artefacts; it is dedicated far more to the 'spirit' than to the 'letter'.

Second, where the great European nationalisms which drove the colonization of America all sought to frame themselves as the messianic figures of a kind of Baconian bid for historical progress and primacy, Native American nationalisms rarely concern themselves with the eternally removed carrot of progress dangling at the end of history. Native American myths and histories, rooted in this oral performative culture, almost universally opt to focus on images of return rather than progress. The iconographic systems of many Native American tribes are notably dominated by images of circles and cycles. Where the infallible straight line of European progress drives toward a homogenizing universal enlightenment, Native American mythology tends to prefer a concept of time as contained and complete; time encompasses existence, community, and identity, marking out their limits and defining their scope. To the Tewa, for instance, time is the great journey south. It is marked by real, tangible geographical sites which the Tewa remember, and which they can point to, and it tells them where they come from, where they have been, and why they are where they are now; it tells them how and why

²⁵ Simon Ortiz, *Towards a National Indian Literature*, in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 256.

to live, and lets them know what to expect at the end of their travel. The idea of a linear journey like this, having a clear beginning, middle, and end, at first seems to adhere fairly closely with a standard European model of time, but for the Tewa—as indeed for many tribes—the present is just the prelude to the beginning. There is no endless progress of the unknown, reaching out to tame creation through the exercise of divine right and reason; there is only the journey and the return.

This was, of course, baffling to the sensibilities of the European settlers who first arrived in America. European nationalisms for the most part sprang up from the fertile soil of the great pre-national Christian communities. Their foundational traditions and holy texts solidly assert the linearity of time itself, centering history on the line drawn between creation, incarnation, and redemption. History is progress toward an end, and that end is inexorable. Even if western nationalisms have now prevailingly moved toward science and away from religion to explain their universe, they have nevertheless held onto this foundation in linear, monodirectional time. The messianic image has simply shifted from redemption to evolution. Everything that came before is obsolete, and everything that comes after will be better; the long arm of history *must* bend toward progress. This is why Edward Tylor, commonly considered the founder of modern anthropology, states that,

[My] standard of reckoning progress and decline is not that of ideal good and evil, but of movement along a measured line from grade to grade of actual savagery, barbarism, and civilization. The thesis which I venture to sustain, within limits, is simply this, that the savage state in some measure represents an early condition of mankind, out of which the higher culture has gradually been developed or

evolved, by processes still in regular operation as of old, the result showing that, on the whole, progress has far prevailed over relapse.²⁶

In this view, if pre-columbian Native Americans were not as thoroughly modernized and technologically advanced as their European counterparts, it is because they were stuck in the past. They were a kind of living fossil record to the Europeans who first set foot on American soil; a snapshot of an older humanity. To a mind steeped in the kind of Baconian servility to progress which stands at the heart of most European nationalisms, seeing this cultural fossil record elicits an exceedingly ambivalent response. Caught between the image of a post-Edenic degradation and the promise of a steady progress toward either redemption or evolution, the European colonial consciousness, perceiving Native American culture as its past, is both enticed and repulsed by its existence. The Native American subject presents both the noble savage, somehow preserved in a time capsule from the vicissitudes of human degradation, and the unevolved subject, for whatever reason cut off from progress and left at the side of the evolutionary road, closer to animalism than the supposed human ideal. Either way, the Native American subject elicits fear and uncertainty as it unsettles the image of the European national subject as the current pinnacle of existence. European nationalism cannot come to terms with this duality; it must not allow it. In a written record, things are either true or false, right or wrong. In the European model history is the line which points towards progress. For that line to shift, branch off, or worse, to curve back in on itself is unthinkable; it unseats progress itself and undermines the very foundations of the national project which would cast itself as universal human destiny.

²⁶ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (J. Murray, 1871), 14.

For the most part, Native Americans simply do not have these concerns when faced with the histories either of other tribes or of their European counterparts. The most important thing about a people's story is what it means to them—how it helps them live and learn to be themselves. History is not either true or false—questions of authenticity or accuracy don't really mean the same thing in an oral performative context. In *The Earth Shall Weep*, James Wilson's history of Native America, he says,

People believed that each tribe had its own special relationship to the superior spiritual forces which governs the universe and that the job of each set of tribal beliefs was to fulfill its own tasks without worrying about what others were doing. Tribal knowledge was therefore not fragmented and was valid within the historical and geographical scope of the people's experience. Black Elk, talking to John Neihardt, explained the methodology well: "this they tell, and whether it happened so or not, I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see that it is true."²⁷

History is simply the stories that help people understand who they are. Different people and tribes aren't the same, so why should we expect them to have the same histories?

In a culture with a written history, everything is founded on systems of exclusion and classification. Events occur, perspectives are gathered and evaluated, and then facts are recorded and archived as accurately and reproducibly as possible—both Deweys would be proud. But an oral performative culture doesn't work this way. Oral stories are open and changing. When a history is performed and recalled it becomes exactly that—a recollection. Oral history is memory, and memories change with every retelling. They flow like fluids into and out of each other, branching out and making synaptic connections as they go. They change based both on who is telling them and who is receiving them. Memory is timelessly present, always being able to be recalled to the

²⁷ Vine Deloria, *God Is Red* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973), 9.

current self. For everyone, whether European or Native American, the past is the site of identity, but for an oral performative culture that past is always up for reinterpretation. One of the cornerstones of Native American identity is that it is always a site of performative contest, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

Such performative records do not often mix well with written records as they seek to undermine the immutable printing press and its infinitely reproducible artifacts. In her book, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, Loren Kruger traces the use of theatre as a tool to interpret and redefine the national image in the popular mind. Much like the oral record, the national theatre is a site of contested images and interpretations of the national identity. While the theatre has often been used, much like the written record, as a tool for reinscribing the prevailing ideologies of the bourgeois middle class, Kruger pushes back against any view of national theatre that is too eager to reduce the national audience into a monolithic upper/middle class simply looking for a reinscription of its own identity and values. According to Kruger the national audience is both reinforcing and constantly evaluating a plurality of contested national images, and it therefore offers, “no stable ground or ruling principle on which to erect the nation or the nation’s theatre, but rather a battleground of intersecting *fields* on which the legitimacy of national popular representation is publicly contested.”²⁸ Theatre in many ways constitutes the front lines of the struggle for national identity. As the products of the bourgeois language and art are increasingly delivered to, and therefore filtered through, the lower classes in an attempt to educate them and inculcate a sense of loyalty to the prevailing cultural paradigm, the result is that the lower

²⁸ Kruger, *The National Stage*, 6.

classes become increasingly capable of both generating their own art and judging the prevailing bourgeois art forms through the lens of their own ideologies and experiences. It is for this reason that Kruger writes, “the collocation of *theatre* and *public sphere* is at once self-evident and problematic.”²⁹ This problematization of the theatre as a site for both conformity and contest is the very reason that it is so uniquely suited to building and defining the national image.

Theatre, perhaps more visibly than any other form of art, finds itself continuously in the battleground between the structures of the ruling bloc, which strive to reinscribe and legitimate the norms of an existing cultural hegemony, and the experimental attempts by the counter-hegemonic minority to utilize the extreme visibility and rhetorical potential of the stage to set up their own dissenting views of the idealized national identity. It is for this reason that Kruger writes about theatre as a struggle,

Not so much between a desired autonomy and apparently heteronomous social and political incursions, but rather among competing attempts to legitimately define the appropriate relationship between theatre and society. In this perspective, the institution of theatrical nationhood appears both a cultural monument to the legitimate but nonetheless exclusionary hegemony . . . and a site on which the excavation and perhaps toppling of that monument may be enacted.³⁰

The national theatre presents an incredibly effective medium for the inscriptions of the ruling bloc and their structures of cultural hegemony, but it is equally the site from which those inscriptions may be upturned and replaced. Like an oral record, the theatre is ephemeral and constantly in a state of flux; it can and must continually respond to the changes in its culture in order to remain relevant and maintain its status. These qualities

²⁹ Kruger, *The National Stage*, 6.

³⁰ Kruger, *The National Stage*, 25.

make the theatre an excellent barometer by which to gauge the national discourses taking place in a culture and pinpoint areas of potentially contested identity. Theatre is potent precisely because of the way in which it demands to be connected to an audience for immediate consideration and action.

While the performative space of the national theatre has traditionally worked at the outskirts of the great European nationalisms, straining against the monolithic identities and unshakeable centers defined by the printed records, for Native American nationalisms devoid of such written records the performative space of the theatre is the only identity. Change and contest are not only normative, but necessary to the Native American national project. The fluctuating nature of the performative space is not unwelcome or subversive; it is vitally definitional and necessary to the nation's survival.

Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better

One of the foremost implements of this survival has been the trademark adaptability of Native American culture. The oral tradition, with its inherent malleability and its focus on tales like those of the Trickster,³¹ which center on themes of rebirth and reinvention, is in many ways the heart and soul of this culture of resistance. Adaptability has always lain at the core of Native American mythology, so it is natural that this spirit of adaptability would become one of the foremost means of recourse against Euro-

³¹ The Trickster figure is a common cultural myth shared by many Native American tribes. It has several iterations, ranging between Crow in the Southwest, Coyote in the Northwest, or Saynday (sometimes Sendeh) of the Kiowa, to name a few. Hermes/Mercury of Greco-Roman mythology and even Krishna are also common examples of the Trickster archetype. Tricksters are generally characterized by rampant change and elusive mutability, often showcasing the disruptive side of human nature and imagination. For a more complete exploration of Trickster figures/myths, Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World* is an excellent resource.

American colonial overreach. In his essay, Ortiz recounts watching an Acqumeh community in New Mexico observe the Catholic saint's days of John and Peter in a way that blended together the Catholic celebration with a ritual of communal sharing and the call for rain. He says of the ceremony,

Obviously, there is an overtone that this is a Catholic Christian ritual celebration because of the significance of the saints' name and days on the Catholic calendar. But just as obviously, when the celebration is held within the Acqumeh community, it is an Acqumeh ceremony. It is Acqumeh and Indian (or Native American or American Indian if one prefers those terms) in the truest and most authentic sense. This is so because this celebration speaks of the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms. In fact, it is a celebration of the human spirit and the Indian struggle for liberation.³²

On its own, this saints' day celebration could be taken as an interesting case study in the appropriation of colonizer culture by the subaltern subject, but Ortiz takes it further, to something more akin to the subsumptive appetites of the Bhabhian mimic subject as he continues, saying,

Many Christian religious rituals brought to the Southwest . . . are no longer Spanish. They are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them . . . And because in every case where European culture was cast upon Indian people of this nation there was similar creative response and development, it can be observed that this was the primary element of a nationalistic impulse to make use of foreign ritual, ideas, and material in their own—Indian—terms. Today's writing by Indian writers is a continuation of that elemental impulse.³³

It should hardly be surprising, given the proclivity of Native American storytelling to turn toward acts of adaptation, reappropriation, and survival, that the Native American

³² Simon Ortiz, "Towards a National Indian Literature", in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 254.

³³ Simon Ortiz, Towards a National Indian Literature, in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 254.

nationalist impulse should take this emergent pan-tribal community down a path that very closely mirrors that of Bhabha's mimic subject. The cornerstone of this Native American nationalism may be resistance, but it is by no means a resistance of pure isolationism. As Gerald Taiake Alfred says, in *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*,

Experience . . . Has shown that cultural revival is not a matter of rejecting all Western influences, but of separating the good from the bad and fashioning a coherent set of ideas out of the traditional culture to guide whatever forms of political and social development—including the good elements of the Western forms—are appropriate to the contemporary reality.³⁴

Where the traditional forms of European nationalism have felt the need to fiercely delineate and protect their borders, this Native American nationalism appears to experience no such compulsion; anything is fair game for the literary dramatic project—even the voice of the colonizer.

³⁴ Gerald Taiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebuilding: The Dramaturgy of Survivance

It is within the Native American oral performative tradition, replete with the possibilities of generational renewal and adaptation, that Native American drama finds the original foundation for its dramaturgy of survivance. This concept of survivance, first laid out by Gerald Vizenor in his work, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, is, “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.”¹ Certainly Native American drama contains an almost ubiquitous sense of the great tragedies of colonization and the burden of generational trauma left in the wake of America’s repeated acts of genocide; to ignore these themes one would have to ignore the voices of Native American dramatists entirely. Outside a handful of well established Native American theatre companies, the majority of Americans most likely come into contact with Native American drama—assuming they encounter it at all, given the preponderance of white-written, colonially driven counterparts—in events like the annual reenactment of the Trail of Tears in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, or the various reenactments of colonial tragedies and displacement narratives staged by tribes like the Alabama Coushatta, in Texas, or the Navajo, in New Mexico. The public face of Native America is almost always associated with these narratives of suffering and

¹ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1999), p. vii.

disenfranchisement. In one sense, this is good; the pain and suffering of the people who lost their homes and lives to manifest destiny must never be forgotten. But in another sense this conflation of Native American identity with narratives of suffering and disappearance plays dangerously well into the popular colonial images of the vanishing Indian or the doomed noble savage. This is the struggle Vizenor describes between survival and survivance; between the potentially paralyzing draw of grief and the resilient determination to adapt and face the future.

Foundations of a Native American Theatre

It is precisely against these colonial narratives of disappearance and extinction that the great Native American theatrical movements of the 20th century first established themselves. The formal institutions of Native American theatre have roots starting as far back as 1956, when Cherokee actor, director, and playwright Arthur Smith Junaluska began the American Indian Drama Company in New York.² However, the 1960s and 1970s saw arguably the two most significant jumps forward for Native American theatre, with the founding of the Institute of American Indian Art in 1962, and then of the incredibly influential American Indian Theatre Ensemble at La MaMa in 1971 (though Hanay Geiogamah would later change the name to NATE, or the Native American Theatre Ensemble, in 1973).³ NATE was composed of sixteen members, spanning a wide range of geographical and tribal backgrounds. After he secured funding for this pan-tribal

² Karen Gayton Swisher and Anita Benally, *Native North American Firsts* (Gale, 1998), 157.

³ Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective* (Cambridge UP, 2009), 8-9

troupe, Geiogamah worked with La MaMa founder Ellen Stewart to put the members of his all-Native company through a nine month training program, after which they debuted his first play with the company, *Body Indian*. In the playbill for the performance, Geiogamah outlined his goals for the ensemble by saying,

We want to do plays about the Indian past, present and future. We believe that the American Indian Theatre Ensemble Company can function as a component of the overall movement to achieve true equality and self-determination for American Indians. Eventually we want to organize a performing arts group within every Indian tribe that is large enough and viable enough to sustain one. If we can do this, then there is no question that Indian culture will thrive and evolve in the future.⁴

From its outset, Geiogamah's theatre was never about personal acclaim or notoriety, but rather about community development and cultural perseverance. NATE was, first and foremost, a movement of nationalism and survivance as Geiogamah and his ensemble sought to lay the foundations for a Native American national theatrical project.

Established in the face of ubiquitous narratives of absence and invisibility, the cornerstone of this movement was the conviction that Native American communities needed to see themselves on the stage. The theatrical project started at NATE covered a diverse array of cultures and methods, but a few things can be said generally about the commonalities of Native American theatrical dramaturgy.

First, as Geiogamah's above statement on the founding artistic vision of NATE shows, Native American theatre is heavily oriented on issues of community, and tends to focus less on the individual. As Jeffrey Huntsman points out in his chapter for *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*, in Native American drama, "the artistic self is typically

⁴ Hanay Geiogamah, "LaMama: Document: Program: 'Na Haaz Zan' and 'Body Indian' (1972) [OBJ.1972.0320]," accessed February 6, 2020, <https://catalog.lamama.org/index.php/Detail/objects/1698>.

unobtrusive, and the dramatic work in effect proclaims the artist's involvement with his community."⁵ Geiogamah's first plays with NATE, *Body Indian* and *Foghorn*, both reflect this community orientation as they notably decentralize the action from a main character onto a series of characters related either by familial or tribal ties, with a strong focus on how these characters influence each other through their actions.

Second, Native American dramatic works, much like the literary works which preceded them and the oral works which in turn preceded those, tend to play with the concepts of nonlinear time and undefined spaces, rather than adhere to some of the unities which have historically been more characteristic of Western theatrical traditions. These are major characteristics of many Native American myths and oral traditions, and their influence comes through very clearly in most Native American drama. For Geiogamah's part, *Body Indian* is constantly shifting back and forth between past and present as it tells the story of Bobby Lee and his small community. The idea of circles, cycles, and the decoupling of individual identity and narrative from linear time and space are all fundamental themes of Kiowa mythology, and this specific cultural heritage seems to have played a significant role in determining the direction of his early work. In fact, *Body Indian* is rife with themes and images of spirituality, as the characters pass an absurd number of wine bottles around the room in a repeated circular ritual that plays as a darkly humorous shadow of sacred Kiowa community rituals held in stark tension with the rampant alcoholism that threatens to destroy the play's community.

⁵ Jeffrey Huntsman, "Native American Theatre," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 83.

Body Indian

Body Indian is a play of eleven characters, which takes place across five scenes. The play's central character is Bobby Lee, who lost his leg to a train accident and now struggles with alcoholism. The other characters form Bobby's family and community, including two aunts, an uncle named Howard and his girlfriend, a friend named Thomson and his wife Eulahlah, Bobby's cousin Marie, a few teenagers, and James, Howard's young grandson. The play is set in Howard's one room apartment which, apart from one bed on which Bobby Lee spends the majority of the play stumbling in and out of consciousness, is furnished primarily with wine bottles strewn across the floor. Before the play begins, Bobby has just received money from the government, and he intends to use it to enter himself into a rehabilitation program in Oklahoma. Before going to the program, however, Bobby decides to visit his friends and family at Howard's apartment. Confused, tired, and somewhat drunk, Bobby believes his friends and family crowd around him because they are glad to see him, but for most of them the positive intentions of community and fellowship, while present, are overshadowed by a dark hunger to lay claim to the money Bobby has just received so they can buy more alcohol. Bobby Lee is an easy mark, and everyone tries to convince him to drink more and more wine in celebration of their reunion in the hopes that he will eventually reveal where he's keeping the money.

Each of *Body Indian*'s five scenes plays out the central ritual of the piece: characters pass drink around a circle, give that drink to Bobby, Bobby passes out immediately after drinking, and then one or more of the characters search his body to find money for more alcohol. In Geiogamah's prefatory note for the play he warns against

overplaying the drunkenness of the characters because he wants to underscore the steady, intentional, and almost mechanical way in which the characters perform this ritual as they cannibalize Bobby's wealth and eventually his body in service of their addictions. As Annamaria Pinazzi points out in her analysis of the piece, "A measured expression does not render a diminished sense of cruelty and violence. The cold, almost resigned, methodic searching of Bobby's inanimate body is as gruesome as any gorey Grand Guignol sequence."⁶ As the play progresses this ritual builds its intensity until the play draws toward its crescendo, where Howard encourages James to take Bobby's prosthetic leg and hock it at the pawnshop because, "[Bobby] sure is goin' need a drink when he wakes up. Y'all know that!"⁷ The unbelievable and almost comical callousness of Howard's words typifies the attitudes of the characters as a whole, who in this final scene are described in the stage directions, where Geiogamah says, "It is apparent on the player's faces that they have forgotten everything that has happened in the previous four scenes, that they are unaware of their abuse of Bobby."⁸ The characters are cut off from memory and history, their faces lie empty. It is this unfeeling, unheeded self-centeredness, and the vacuous hypocrisy of the characters' words and actions, that is the real heart of *Body Indian*.

⁶ Annamaria Pinazzi, "The Theater of Hanay Geiogamah," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 181.

⁷ Hanay Geiogamah and Jeffrey Huntsman, *New Native American Drama: Three Plays* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 33.

⁸ Hanay Geiogamah and Jeffrey Huntsman, *New Native American Drama: Three Plays* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 42.

The duplicity of Bobby's community perfectly captures one of Geiogamah's most pressing concerns regarding modern Native American communities. In an interview with Kenneth Lincoln, Geiogamah said,

The hypocrisy that Indi'n brotherhood, Indi'n love, all this Indi'n kind of thing . . . to me was an hypocrisy that I felt very strongly about, 'cause I had seen it, experienced it, and believed in every part of my mind and my heart that it was a real thing. The really pernicious part was that so many Indi'ns did it without really knowing it, without really understanding what they were doing to each other.⁹

Bobby's friends and family truly do not seem to understand what they are doing to him; they simply lack the requisite self-awareness. They have forgotten themselves; they are stuck. The play depicts a cycle of abuse, addiction, and codependence that none of the characters seem to be able to see their way out of, with the exception of Bobby, who in the play's final scene, sitting alone and without a leg, suddenly wakes up and realizes what has transpired. Instead of blaming his community, Bobby decides his friends' actions were simply the result of this cycle, and so he smiles, reaches for his crutches, and gets up. Bobby loses everything, but the loss is purgative as it helps him finally recognize and break free of the destructive cycle which has enveloped his community. As Geiogamah explains,

He's face-down, and it's almost like a jack-in-the-box that pops up. It's like the smile on a clown, a painted-on smile . . . By that point all his feelings and everything are completely choked and parched out of him. When a lot of Indians are at that point of extreme exposure, they smile . . . Bobby realizes that he let this happen to him . . . he's taking responsibility for himself . . . He's clean now, he's

⁹ Hanay Geiogamah, "MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 295.

been cleaned out, cleansed . . . It's just clean, it's over, start over. So he says hello to himself, there's nobody else there for him.¹⁰

There is a great deal to unpack in this statement. First of all, there is the purgative element of this ending, which clearly plays into the fundamentals of Aristotelian tragedy. In fact the whole play actually makes heavy use of the Aristotelian archetype. Bobby's *hamartia* manifests itself through his alcoholism, of course, which is a drive toward self-medication and coping, but more significantly it manifests itself through his misplaced trust in family and community, and his inability to engage responsibly with people he knows to be damaged and weak like him. His *peripeteia* comes from the funds originally intended to place him in a rehab facility being diverted toward the continued degradation of his community, leaving Bobby himself both destitute and alone as his friends and family dissolve away in search of more alcohol. His *anagnorisis* comes in the moment of his awakening in scene five, when he sees his leg is missing and wryly repeats the words of welcome his community used to draw him in. This all culminates in Bobby's *catharsis*, which leaves him so empty that he cannot do anything but paint on a smile and face his future, finally seeing himself and his community for the first time. Geiogamah takes, unabashedly, from the Aristotelian tragedy, but this doesn't make his work any less authentically Native American; if anything this taking makes it more authentic as it reflects the voracious adaptability of Native American storytelling and culture. Geiogamah takes what he can, wherever he can, and he incorporates even one of the bedrock voices of traditional western theatre into his own storytelling. As Bobby wakes up, he hearkens back to both the trickster, who often finds himself similarly alone and

¹⁰ Hanay Geiogamah, "MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 296

destitute at the end of excess, ready to begin anew, and the Aristotelian tragic hero, who empties himself of everything and allows the audience to see itself and release its pent up pathos.

Even more significant than these Aristotelian echoes, however, is the acknowledgment that Bobby is seeing himself for the first time and finally taking responsibility for himself. In the end this is perhaps the most important aspect of the Native American literary dramatic project—namely, to allow a people to see and take responsibility for themselves. This is the core and indispensable mission of the Native American theatre, and the reason that even at its founding, Geiogamah understood that NATE would not be enough on its own, but would need to engender similar movements in every tribe across the country in order to achieve his goals. As Jace Weaver says in his chapter of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*,

One can make up any geographic, ethnic, or other category one wishes—from something as all-encompassing as world literature to, *reductio ad absurdum*, the “literature of West 86th Street.” In every instance, however, one must interrogate oneself as to what is at stake—what is gained and what is lost—by any given category, not only intellectually and pedagogically, but politically and ideologically as well. In the case of American Indian Literary Nationalism, we believe, ultimately, what is at stake is nothing less than Native identity, definitional, and actual sovereignty . . . It is about the ability of Natives and their communities to be self-determining rather than selves determined.¹¹

Bobby Lee wakes up, sees what has happened, and in one moment he both understands and assumes ownership of himself completely; he breaks the cycle, and he moves forward.

¹¹ Jace Weaver, “Splitting the Earth,” in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 41.

Survival Humor

When Native American audiences saw *Body Indian* for the first time, their reaction was unexpected. The play premiered at La MaMa in front of a house packed with Native American audience members, and Geiogamah recalls that, “from the very thing when that lady gets up off the bed, ‘achhh,’ people just started laughing and laughing and laughing.”¹² The play was never intended to be funny, however. In his interview Kenneth Lincoln asked Geiogamah if the play was supposed to be comedic, and he responded,

I thought that I was just writing about an alcoholic setting. I guess for me all the humor had gone out of that—out of my experiences and my trafficking in the alcoholic aspects of life. It would sometimes cease to be funny to me. I had sometime since stopped finding the humor in it, or seeing that there was anything funny about this. I was writing a serious play, but the whole humor was in something unknown to me going to come off the situation.¹³

After the play premiered, Geiogamah asked some of his audience members why they had laughed so hard, and they responded that, “they had to laugh ‘cause it was one of the only ways they could deal with the play itself. That play was just so damn graphic it was just really . . .” That night at La MaMa, even if Geiogamah didn’t intend for it to happen, his audience drew survival humor out of *Body Indian*. In the face of suffering, in the face of hardship—in the moments where we draw nearest the line of catharsis in a Native American play—we almost always find the mechanism of survival humor; the moment when Bobby turns back around with his sardonic smile. It is not always easy to

¹² Hanay Geiogamah, “MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah,” in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 294.

¹³ Hanay Geiogamah, “MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah,” in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 294-295.

understand even for someone well versed in the community, as Geiogamah's recollections show, and it is unfortunately almost universally unpalatable to white audiences and critics alike, who often misapprehend its catharsis for stark irreverence, but survival humor is one of the chief pillars of Native American theatre. Geiogamah calls it, "part of the arsenal that you can draw from the tribal thing. Accept it."¹⁴ This is the capacity for a kind of self-*schadenfreude* which goes all the way back to the trickster stories, where Trickster and the ancient tribes run between wanton excess, suffering, foolishness, self-sacrifice, and a whole host of other experiences which characterize the extremes of existence, and they do so almost invariably with a self-aware sense of humor that helps them to see and learn.

This sense of humor is the distancing—bordering on a kind of *verfremdungseffekt*—which allows people to step back and see themselves in these stories; to really evaluate themselves and their situations. As Gerald Taiake Alfred says, in *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, "Indians have found a humorous side of nearly every problem, and the experiences of life have generally been so well defined through jokes and stories that they have become a thing of themselves."¹⁵

Geiogamah sees survival humor's capacity for self-knowledge as the only way forward for the Native American community, as he says,

I think that Indi'ns always have the capacity to look at themselves. Indi'ns know themselves, and that's part of the sardonic thing that's in Bobby Lee's life. They know what the hell they're doin', what they're capable of, and they know their weaknesses, they know their strengths. The part where they fail themselves is in

¹⁴ Hanay Geiogamah, "MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 296.

¹⁵ Gerald Taiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.

knowing their strengths. They haven't grasped how to activate them in this terribly new world in the past four hundred years, at least not in the right kind of way . . . Of course we've lived through a tragedy, there's no doubt about that, but the capacity to renew oneself, and to heal oneself, and to take care of oneself is always there, always has been there . . . I see the Indi'n capacity for humor as a blessing. It is a miraculous thing that's pulled us through so much. It's everything from the past that we've brought forward with us, our memories, ancestors, especially that, all these things are religion to me—singing, dancing, stories, suffering, all of that. And respect and caring for each other. So in that sense humor is truly a part of religion. I truly believe the older Indi'ns laughed, and laughed, and laughed.¹⁶

The mechanism which drives survival humor is as old as the Trickster stories of the various tribes' oral traditions, which is to say as old as the tribes themselves. Survival humor is perhaps inexorably tied to the Native American spirit; it is the way in which Native Americans come to see and understand themselves amid hardship and suffering. It is in survival humor that we find the root of Vizenor's survivance. It is a resolve not merely to remember and grieve, but to bring that memory forward and to let it mix with the joy and the determination of living and acting. This is the foundation of Native American theatre. It is in this ever shifting landscape of extremes, caught between tradition and evolution, sorrow and joy, grief and humor, excess and dignity, that the Native American theatre somehow resolves into the image of a people determined not just to survive, but to live.

The Boarding School Mimic

If *Body Indian* put forward the idea of a Native American national theatre that could preserve the native voice and help the tribes to remember and see themselves as potent, self-determining bodies, then N. Scott Momaday's play, *The Indolent Boys*,

¹⁶ Hanay Geiogamah, "MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, 297.

presents a possible path forward from this foundational self-determination as it turns from the more inward focus of Geiogamah's earlier work toward an aggressive program of resistance and decolonization. A major part of the Bhabhian mimic's program of cultural subsumption resides in the use of the colonizer's language and art forms to both assume and subvert the colonizer's claims of national identity. Set against the powerful colonial linguistic apparatus of the boarding schools, *The Indolent Boys* does exactly this.

N. Scott Momaday is widely recognized as one of the first great English-language authors of the Native American community. He is known primarily as a novelist, short story writer, and poet, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969 with his novel *House Made of Dawn*. His bibliography does, however, include three plays, two of which deal expressly with the boarding school program. *The Indolent Boys* is the first of these plays. Based on an actual event, *The Indolent Boys* centers around the death of three young Native American schoolboys who ran away from the Kiowa Boarding School in the middle of winter in an attempt to return to their families.

The boys themselves are largely absent from the script, the main character of which is a young graduate of the boarding school named John Pai. At the beginning of the play, John Pai finds out about the disappearance of the three boys and he leads the rest of his class in grieving. The children ran away after the oldest, fifteen-year-old Seta, was whipped by Barton Wherritt, the school's disciplinarian. As everyone at the school waits to see if Emdotah, the school's Kiowa caretaker, will be able to find and return with the boys safely, John Pai begins interacting with Carrie, a purely fictional young white teacher. John Pai has just been accepted to a major seminary, and the majority of the play consists in he and Carrie going back and forth regarding what exactly his position as an

alumnus of the school means, both for his people and for hers. Both Wherritt and Gregory, the school's superintendent, see John Pai as a paragon of white civility and the promised culmination of the boarding school program. They seek to lay claim to John Pai as a model student and crowning achievement. For her part, Carrie seems to genuinely enjoy and care for John Pai, though in many ways she comes to fetishize John Pai as an exotic and uncontainable other as the play progresses. Eventually, just like in the historical source material, the Kiowa find out what has happened to the three boys and descend upon the school. Gregory is beaten and the school laid to waste, while Wherritt hides in the rafters to escape retribution. In the end, John Pai runs back to the camps in the boys' stead, rejecting the supposed civility of the boarding schools and returning to the idyllic community life the boarding school took from him.

John is the perfect image of the mimic, as he stands in the liminal space between the colonizer and the colonized, having received his white American education without relinquishing the memory of his cultural heritage. He has a strong feeling of the ambivalent double consciousness which resides within him, and in his first scene he stands alone on the stage, talking to a picture of Abraham Lincoln:

You know, Mr. Lincoln, I am beside myself. (*pause*) I like the notion of being beside myself. We *Gaigwu*, we Kiowas, have a story, an old, holy story about hero twins. One boy threw up a gaming wheel. It came down and split him in two . . . I have heard that there were times, Mr. Lincoln, when you were beside yourself . . . I am truly beside myself. I am a red Indian . . . We are a savage race, rather good looking, tall, dark, stoic, fierce, uncivilized, often dangerous. In some books we are said to be noble. Mr. Pratt, who imprisoned some of my relatives in Florida, gave us a way to become civilized . . . He has provided us with schools, schools in which we learn how to slough off our red skins, forget our languages, forget our parents and grandparents, our little brothers and sisters, and our dead ancestors. School here, Mr. Lincoln, is a camp where the memory is killed. We must forget our past. Our existence begins with the cutting of our hair and the taking of a Christian name. Here at the Kiowa Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma, on the banks of the Washita River, I am taught not to *remember* but to

dismember myself. Well, Mr. Lincoln, I am beside myself, and I see my reflection in a pool of water or a pane of glass, and I wonder who I am . . . I am a white man, am I not? It is perhaps not easy to tell.¹⁷

John Pai is cognizant of the slippage present within his own identity—almost but not really white—but at this stage in the play he has yet to embrace that slippage and what Bhabha would term the farcical potential of his dualized identity. Even if he has not fully embraced his dual identity yet, there are mixed messages bubbling away just underneath the surface of this passage, betraying the colonial ambivalence toward the colonized subject body. John is savage but noble, uncivilized and dangerous, but also tall, dark, and handsome. John himself is as yet unsure of his identity, but Carrie, the young white woman who works at the school, is quick to supply her own explanation of John’s identity:

CARRIE: You’ve been accepted at Seminary! Come here.

JOHN PAI: This . . . This is an extraordinary day.

CARRIE: Just think, John. You’re the first from the Kiowa School, the very first and only! Why, you’re going to put us on the map, do you realize that? Oh, wait till George—Mr. Gregory—hears, and Agent Adams, and your parents!

JOHN PAI: My parents . . .

CARRIE: They will be so proud! Oh, *congratulations*, John! What does it feel like, to have been chosen?

JOHN PAI: You deserve the credit, ma’am. It was because of you. . . .

CARRIE: By no means! Your application was very strong, they say, *your* application. They speak of your originality, your command of the language, your eloquence.

JOHN PAI: Yours. I set your words down on the paper. I couldn’t . . .

CARRIE: Don’t be impertinent. I was merely your, your intermediary.

JOHN PAI: Imagine. I am eloquent, and it isn’t even my native language.

CARRIE: But you have taken possession of it, appropriated it, made it your own, as if you were born to it.¹⁸

¹⁷ N. Scott Momaday, *Three Plays*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005618034>. Act 1, Scene 1, 24.

¹⁸ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 2, 28.

John Pai's transformation thus far has taken place across the two axes Benedict Anderson points out as emblematic of the overarching pre-national communities: language and religion, but Carrie is quick to reappropriate these transformations and draw them back into the service of the school, claiming that John's example will set the boarding school on the map, in effect furthering its agenda as a colonizing educational apparatus of the national project.

Carrie hopes that by sending John to seminary she will turn him into the kind of cultural priest Kramer describes, but John's incomplete mimesis shortly manifests itself in what is, to Carrie, a childish and farcical slippage in language, but by which she is nonetheless troubled because it threatens to derail her colonial designs for John's transformation:

CARRIE: You will make a fine preacher, John. You will spread the gospel, as they say. You will glorify the word of God.

JOHN PAI: The word of dog, the voice of the turtle.

CARRIE: (exasperated) If we can get you past your impertinence! Your riddling is . . .

JOHN PAI: Unseemly?

CARRIE: Out of place. Remember yourself; you are almost no longer a schoolboy; you are almost a man of the cloth.

JOHN PAI: I *do* remember myself.¹⁹

This is the first of a number of instances in this play where John begins to reach back into his cultural identity, finding connections to a past with the kind of exclusively holy language that characterizes Anderson's most compelling pre-national communities. Carrie initially dismisses it with mocking derision, but in the passage which immediately follows she finds herself inexorably drawn to John's language games, betraying the slippage of desires which stands at the heart of Bhabha's system of mimicry:

¹⁹ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 2, 28.

CARRIE: (*almost intimately*) I love to play at words with you. You know that. I love you to play with me . . . at words. But sometimes I think I've been wrong to encourage you.

JOHN PAI: I love you to encourage me.

CARRIE: It's just that I wanted for so long to find a student who, who could make use of me, total use, whose mind and sensitivity I could shape and sharpen, who would justify and fulfill me, who would confirm me in my purpose . . . in my person and . . . vocation. It is what every . . . teacher dreams of, John. And I found you.

JOHN PAI: You invented me.²⁰

Like many of Carrie's passages with John, this exchange bears unsettlingly heavy sexual undertones which Momaday uses to emphasize the colonial fetishization and mystification of the colonized subject body. Carrie displaces her desire for a universalising "natural" identity *a priori* onto John because of the connection he bears to this pre-national community which transcends the bounds of her own imagined national community and speaks to the ideological structures which lie inherent at its core. John expresses this community that Carrie fetishizes in the following story of a childhood attempt to run away from the boarding school:

JOHN PAI: It was worth it. When I reached my mother's camp it was as if I had returned from the dead. I was so glad to be there, and everyone was so glad to see me. We wept with gladness. The old people, my grandparents, my mother and father, even the children wept. We wanted to touch, and we touched each other. We touched so softly, so gladly, the way very old, blind people touch the babies. And then we talked, all at once, and it wasn't talk somehow, but it was sounds and silences and singing and weeping, some old, jumbled expression of our being: *Eh neh neh neh*. And it seemed to me that the whole world was there in the time being . . . the old free life of the *Gaigwu* was there, just *there*, and it was mine, as it had been when I was born.²¹

John's community with the *Gaigwu* is physical and palpable; it is a pure presence unmitigated by the need for language. The manifestation of this community takes on its

²⁰ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 2, 29.

²¹ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 2, 32.

own kind of pre- or extra-lingual expression of being. John's community reaches, or at least claims to reach, into roots far older and deeper than those of Carrie's imagined national project, and it is this perceived purity of being or presence which Carrie appears at first to fetishize in John. Throughout the play Carrie keeps returning to the idea of John as somehow more natural and therefore childish and yet alluring. She often returns to this idea through the image of an afternoon picnic they shared, which she describes the first time saying,

CARRIE: The two of you were playing with it, rolling it on the grass and thrusting sticks at it—I think you were showing off, but you were very skillful, I remember. I remember it so clearly. The wheel rolling, and you running after it, beside it, and it rolled so prettily in the grass, among the wildflowers, and the leather lace spinning, and the little ring in the center, where the strings were all strung together, it was small, wasn't it? (*She makes a ring with her thumb and forefinger.*) And you thrust your stick right into the little ring. (*She moves her other forefinger into the ring.*) It was remarkable, really. Really remarkable.²²

This passage is of course deeply sexual, but at the same time it recalls the gaming wheel of John's story in his initial scene with Lincoln's portrait, where he speaks of the one man split into twins and reflects on the estrangement he feels gazing at his own reflection, disturbed by the uncertain doubling of identity it represents. While John perceives his doubling as inherently repulsive and confusing—a blemish on his otherwise pure being—Carrie sees in it the merging of her own cultural image with that of the imagined natural, exotic other as she continues her recollection of the scene, saying,

CARRIE: You and Sailor were running after the rolling wheel, and you were . . . you were, well, you were young men running, and you had taken off your shirts—against the rules—and your bodies were young and hard, and, I don't know—rippling—and you were yelling and laughing, as if that were the only afternoon in the history of time, and you were more alive than you had ever been, and I was somehow a girl again, and there was in you a wildness, a kind of life that I had never seen, never imagined, and there was in me a terrible, shining, exciting

²² Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 2, 34.

gladness, and I was somehow a girl again, and there was in me a goodness, a rapture, something worth saving for its own sake. It was, yes, rapture.²³

As Carrie finally and fully gives in to her rampant fetishization of John Pai, her language turns from sexual to orgasmic with her final conclusion in rapture. What is fascinating about Carrie's response here is that rather than make the move toward the phobia of menace, she places on John and Sailor's bodies the hope of a kind of redemption for her own being from the artificial structures which surround her.

Carrie moves from trying to reinscribe her own national identity onto John and she begins instead to place in him a redemptive ambition reminiscent in some ways of Benjamin's concept of messianic time. She actually mentions, in both of these descriptions, that John and Sailor appear to defy time itself in both their movement and their being. If Bhabha's model of mimicry allows for two standard forms of response to the mimic: either farcical amusement or foreboding menace, Carrie seems to suggest a third option in this redemptive ambition. Where Chas Carter's remarks at the Carlisle commencement ceremony seem to indicate a kind of hostile takeover in the transition from colonizer to colonized as hegemonic heir apparent, Carrie here seems to receive this promise of transition with hope and eager anticipation. John's transcendence presents for her an actual link to the universalizing claims of which her own existence can bear only shadows and imitations. Carrie finds herself caught between a lost or displaced naturalizable girlhood and the apparent artifice of her own white American identity. She gives voice to the desire for a messianic other to save her from this tension in a letter to her mother, saying,

²³ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 2, Scene 2, 58.

CARRIE: When I came here, mama, I was moved by an uncommon zeal. I wanted—and want—so much, more than I can say, to save the Indians. But from time to time my zeal declines, and I become confused. I begin to think of saving myself, of saving my own soul. In the night, sometimes, I question whether or not I am entitled to assist—or intervene—in the salvation of *their* souls, their Indian souls. Sometimes it occurs to me as a possibility that they have a greater possession of their souls than I have of mine.²⁴

Carrie cannot buy into the boarding school's espousal of Christian values as she comes increasingly to doubt the reliability of the faith claims which have thus far guided her efforts to colonize John Pai and the other children. This schism between the boarding school project and any substantive connection to a redeeming faith claim is widened yet further when Gregory, the agent in charge of the school, remarks, "Early in the game I learned not to depend on others. My father used to say, 'Thy hand to plant, thy hand to harvest.' I think it's in the Bible."²⁵ Carrie, formerly infatuated with Gregory, in this scene becomes increasingly disgusted by the artificial hollowness of his character. Gregory pretends to a certain level of connection with the Bible, an emblem of pre-national unity, but in the end his connection is merely that of a flippant and opportunistic appropriation. He mixes cultural axiom with scripture and can no longer either tell the difference between the two, or even be bothered to care. Bhabha remarks on this kind of split-presence which the Bible develops under the appropriative nationalist project, saying, "the holiest of books—the Bible—bearing both the standard of the cross and the standard of the empire, finds itself strangely dismembered."²⁶ Carrie is not wrong in questioning the extent to which her national identity can lay claim to a redeemed soul; the

²⁴ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 1, Scene 3, 35-36.

²⁵ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 2, Scene 4, 66.

²⁶ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 285.

layers of nationalist artifice surrounding the white American educational apparatus in which she participates virtually preclude any connection to the kind of pre-national religious unity her imagination seems to be reaching out for.

Finally, by the play's end, even Gregory has come to recognize John as a figure of cultural transcendency, but unlike Carrie's sentiments Gregory's recognition is by no means wholly positive:

GREGORY: It hasn't all been failure, you know. We have had our moments.

CARRIE: Yes, we have, Mr. Gregory. Yes, we have. John Pai is our triumph.

GREGORY: (*confidentially*) You know, we must take advantage of that.

CARRIE: Take advantage?

GREGORY: Of John Pai's success, which is ours, rightfully: Let's admit it. John pai is the proof of the pudding. He is the personification of our mission, don't you see? When Richard Henry Pratt set up his great experiment at Fort Marion, and when he established his school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, his vision was that of a young man like John Pai, *exactly* like John Pai. John Pai is the problem, the reckoning, and, above all, the solution. We have a hundred Indian children at various stages of, of evolution. Their knees and elbows are black, they have lice in their hair, they speak a language that is remote and rudimentary, not to say unmelodious. (*pause*) They peer at us as if *we* were the freaks. They look at us as if they see into us, through us. But the great truth is, Carrie, that anyone of them could become a John Pai if we just followed the formula, minded the rules. Isn't that so? Was it so obvious with John Pai?

CARRIE: I suppose not. He came well before my time, but I imagine that he came with lice in his hair and a runny nose and running sores. That's pretty much tuition here, isn't it? (*pause*) Did you know that he had run away?

GREGORY: What? Ha! You see? Well, I need to check my records, of course—but, you see, to us accrues the credit! We have graduated John Pai. We have realized Mr. Pratt's dream. We have taken our place in the hierarchy. We are the model now.

CARRIE: Have we killed the Indian and saved the man?

(*John Pai steps forward*)²⁷

There is a great deal to unpack here. First, this exploitative claim Gregory places over John's person as the triumphal product of his labor speaks directly to the earlier defined dynamics of mimicry by which the colonial subject appropriates the colonized other as

²⁷ Momaday, *The Indolent Boys*, Act 2, Scene 4, 67-68.

the crowning achievement of its national apparatus. John is the product which validates the colonial nationalist undertaking of the boarding school project, but at the same time he is also indicative of the menacing force which haunts it with the displaced, silently judgmental gaze of the only partially present dualized other. In attempting to assert what Edward Said characterizes as the colonizer's, "synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis," Gregory subjects himself to immersion in the judgmental gazes of those he seeks to contain under his own panoptic power—the watcher suddenly, and very conspicuously, becomes the watched.²⁸ This is seen both in the way in which Gregory becomes cognizant of the piercing, dehumanizing gazes of the children in the school and in the way in which John emerges at the end of the scene, unbidden but seemingly ever-present.

Second, the fact that Gregory follows his recognition of the menace inherent in the gazes of the students with immediate and vehement othering through his racist and dehumanizing deconstruction of the students' physicalities follows directly upon Bhabha's projected path of colonial response to the mimic. Bhabha states that in the final stage, once the mimic has been fully realized and confronted, "Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body."²⁹ Gregory feels immediately threatened by the gaze of the children because it uncovers the irremediable artificiality of

²⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage, 1979) 240.

²⁹ Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 285.

his own body, and so he verbally lashes out against their bodies in order to displace the phobias he has surrounding his own unexamined, unmarked body.

Finally, it is incredibly important to address what Gregory says at the very end of this interchange: “we are the model now.” This immediately brings into the conversation one of Benedict Anderson’s claims regarding the characteristic plurals which weave throughout societies and uphold their imagined unity. According to Anderson,

Nothing assures us of this sociological solidity [Anderson’s national imagination] more than the succession of plurals. For they conjure up a social space full of *comparable* prisons, none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence) of the oppressiveness of *this colony*. (Contrast prisons in the Bible. They are never imagined as *typical* of this or that society. Each, like the one where Salome was bewitched by John the Baptist, is magically alone.)³⁰

Nationalism thrives on the image of the franchise—the nationally homogeneous chain of institutions. Any given cross-section of the nation must be imagined as essentially the same as any other. What is especially interesting is that as perhaps yet another consequence of nationalism’s attempt to cast itself in Enlightenment terms, and in direct relation to this desire for the recognizable repetition of the franchise, nationalisms appear almost invariably to seek out the creation of recognizable copies. The colony therefore acts as a franchise of the nation, allowing it to see itself as though in a mirror, and thereby to perceive itself as singular, cohesive, and strong enough to project its force both socially and spatially into the world around it. The paradox of this franchise mirror is that in the very moment in which it allows the nation to see the self outside itself it immediately invalidates the imagined continuity of the national project along much the same lines as those of mimicry. The functions of mimicry not only work in the

³⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

interpersonal arena of cultural interchange in which Bhabha defines them—between the inappropriate colonized other and the appropriate colonizing self—but these same forces of mimicry also work between the large-scale social bodies of the inappropriate colony and the appropriate nationalist empire. The end result of this mimicry is that the colony itself becomes a mimic, mirroring, supplanting, parodying, and ultimately rejecting the claims of its colonizing oppressor, and precluding by its very existence any ratification of the imperial, universalizing project of the national colonial apparatus. John Pai doesn't need to do anything to Gregory at the end or lift a single finger against him; Gregory has already unseated himself in the simple act of creating John Pai.

Ultimately, we see in the epilogue that John Pai runs away and rejoins his family at the camp. At the end of all his observation and silent judgment, John Pai finds the colonizer wanting, and he simply leaves, opting for isolation. Like *Body Indian*, this end feels somewhat frustratingly unresolved and directionless. Both the cathartic survivance of *Body Indian* and the isolationist mimicry of *The Indolent Boys* pave the way for their protagonists to reclaim agency as they come to see, understand, and take ownership of themselves. In the conclusions of both plays, however, there is no path forward—no clear hope for redemption or improvement. *Body Indian* and *The Indolent Boys* are excellent at defining and preserving a Native American voice, but neither offers any clear prescription for how to use that voice once it is established. In *Off the Rails*, Reinholz builds off the work of Geiogamah and Momaday as he tries to answer this final question of how to use the voices they established.

CHAPTER FIVE

Completing the Story of the American West

“When you do a show—a world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival—the country comes. And they’re all here.”

Randy Reinholz, OSF Audience Talkback

“Buffalo Bill’s Wild West is in town . . .” These are the first words of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s playbill for the 2017 world premiere of *Off the Rails*.¹ The play takes place in a fictionalized version of 1880s Genoa, Nebraska, against the backdrop of an off-reservation Indian industrial boarding school and a whorehouse. The playbill goes on to describe the program as, “*Blazing Saddles* meets Shakespeare.” This is a good indication of the play’s at times uncomfortable indulgence in irreverent humor, but one that also sets the stage for the play’s discussion of difficult themes surrounding gender and racial discrimination in the oft-romanticized Wild West. Despite its comedic trappings, *Off the Rails* is first and foremost a story of trauma. Reinholz embraces the legacy of the boarding school project and the horrors of westward expansion, and he does so primarily by developing deep ties to the same themes of Bhabhian mimicry that N. Scott Momaday first used to address the boarding school legacy in *The Indolent Boys*. *Off the Rails* is replete with echoes of the Bhabhian mimic. Even the text itself, woven from Shakespearean source material and what Reinholz has jokingly referred to in talkbacks as

¹ “Oregon Shakespeare Festival - Off the Rails,” Oregon Shakespeare Festival, accessed June 9, 2020, <http://www.osfashland.org/en/productions/2017-plays/off-the-rails>.

his “fakespeare” voice, takes on a kind of mimicry of its own as it blurs the line between Native American and Shakespearean traditions. Reinholz uses this mimicry to highlight the hypocrisy and the hollow artifice of the play’s colonial power structures, but then at the tipping point of the play’s climax he turns from the mimic’s menace to an unlooked-for grace. *Off the Rails* begins as an all-out assault of Bhabhian mimicry, but at the end, just as the play’s Native American characters finally gain the power to tear Genoa apart, they choose not to. Survivance, as defined by Gerald Vizenor, rests in the distinction between reaction and continuance. Given the option to simply react—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—Reinholz’ characters instead choose to continue; they choose to build a new Genoa founded on their own values of community, forgiveness, and renewal rather than stooping to the pseudo-Christian retributive “justice” of the colonizer. *Off the Rails* is a play of pain and anger in search of healing, not revenge. It seizes power with the inexorable voice of the mimic, but it turns that power to the ritual healing and communal continuance of the Native American drive for survivance.

Off the Rails opens with Madame Overdone (French-Lakota) and the rest of the workers and clientele of her Stewed Prunes Saloon preparing to audition for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, which is supposed to come into town soon as part of its tour. General Gatt, the mayor who takes the place of *Measure for Measure*’s Duke, is the play’s figurative stand in for Richard Pratt, the founder of the boarding school project. As the play begins, Gatt leaves town and charges the newly-arrived boarding school superintendent, Captain Angelo, to govern in his place with the help of Gatt’s second in command, McDonald (Scottish-Choctaw). Captain Angelo’s first act as Gatt’s lieutenant is to order the sheriff to arrest Momaday, a young Pawnee student at the boarding school,

for getting the Irish orphan Caitlin pregnant. Despite the couple having exchanged vows in the Pawnee way, Angelo sentences Momaday to death because they have not had a Christian wedding. This particular change, with all the themes of violent anti-miscegenation it brings up from America's history, is incredibly significant because it fixes one of the core problems that has always plagued *Measure for Measure*—namely, its dramatic clock. Especially for a modern audience, it is difficult to sell the idea that a young, privileged, white nobleman is going to be hanged for such a minor crime, but replacing that young man with a Native American sadly makes the stakes all too believable. In the words of Madame Overdone, “An Indian boy gets a white girl pregnant—son, they’re gonna hang you for that.”² The urgency of Momaday’s plight lends a great deal more dramatic tension to the actions of Alexie and Isabel as they scramble for a way to save his life. The shift in the play’s racial context also colors Angelo’s refusal and manipulation of their efforts with a much darker and more multifaceted evil than even the original could muster.

With Momaday’s life on the line, Alexie (Kiowa), runs to summon Momaday’s sister, Isabel (Pawnee) so she can plead for Angelo’s mercy. Isabel supplicates Angelo and he finally relents, but he does so on the condition that she must offer him her body. Isabel conveys the terms to Momaday, and after some initial argument he resigns himself to death. Overhearing their conversation, Madame Overdone comes up with a plan to trick Angelo into thinking he has conquered Isabel so he will commute Momaday’s sentence. It turns out Mariana, one of the workers in Madame Overdone’s saloon, was

² Randy Reinholz, *Off The Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 31.

once betrothed to Angelo before he ran away and abandoned her. Isabel pretends to meet Angelo in bed under cover of night, but Mariana takes her place. The following morning, even though Angelo believes he has slept with Isabel, he orders Momaday's immediate execution. In the play's final act General Gatt returns from his secret business trip and approaches Angelo to reclaim his power, but Isabel comes forward to accuse Angelo, revealing everything that has occurred in Gatt's absence.

Reinholz adds to *Off the Rails* a framing device, setting all of the play's struggle and darkness against the impending arrival of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, an incredibly problematic piece of colonial theatre, but one which has nevertheless captured the town's imagination. As the first act of *Off the Rails* opens, the employees and customers of Madame Overdone's whorehouse, the Stewed Prunes, are warming up with a raucous song and dance routine about money and sex, as one of the characters calls out that they will, "dance 'Indian style' all night long," and two others discuss what they're planning to perform for Buffalo Bill's upcoming auditions.³ *Off the Rails* kicks off with a discussion of booze, sex, money, and what is perhaps the most notorious voice of colonial overreach that ever came to the American West.

Text as Mimic

Reinholz does nothing to shy away from his play's imposingly colonial backdrop, however. Rather, *Off the Rails* represents a concerted effort to mix together some of the most potent voices Euroamerican colonialism has ever spawned and to force them into conversation with the native voices they have so often been used to erase. In a talkback

³ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 3.

with audiences after the first preview of *Off the Rails* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one audience member asked what had drawn Reinholz to Shakespeare, and he answered, saying,

I was reared in a very unusual way. I had the King James Bible when I graduated from high school, and that was the book I owned. And my grandmother thought I should have the collected works of Shakespeare, 'cause I was going to college. I was going to go to college, and that was really unusual in my family. So those are the two books I went to college with.⁴

It would be difficult to pick any two texts from the western canon bearing histories so replete with colonial misappropriation and abuse as these two, and yet they are precisely what Reinholz chooses to use as the foundation for this turning point in Native American theatre. This blending of the traditional Native American voice with some of the most potent voices of western colonization speaks to the relentless appetite for appropriation and adaptation within the Native American dramaturgical tradition. It also draws significant parallels with N. Scott Momaday's earlier work in *The Indolent Boys*, where he first applied Bhabhian mimicry to the genre of boarding school drama. In *Off the Rails*, Reinholz takes possession of the voices of Euroamerican colonization and he uses them to fight back against the silence and erasure that have historically been the hallmarks of American interactions with Native American voices. *Off the Rails* thus presents the dual face of a mimic text, containing the power of both colonizer and colonized, and using this power to undo the spell of colonial silence and erasure.

The text itself is constantly at work trying to reappropriate and redefine the colonial discourses which have historically shrouded this chapter of American history

⁴ *Off the Rails: Chat with Randy*, accessed May 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0NR6vvVChw&feature=emb_logo.

from the public consciousness. Reinholz himself acts as a kind of mimic as he uses his education, steeped first and foremost in Shakespeare and the Bible, to dialog with and reappropriate these texts which represent the historical bases of western colonial power. *Off the Rails* is filled with references to Shakespeare's other works including, among them, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. Overdone's early line, "tonight the queen carouses to our fortune," clearly echoes Gertrude's line in the final act of *Hamlet*.⁵ As Momaday and Caitlin come to the end of their secret nighttime rendezvous, Caitlin speaks directly from *Romeo and Juliet*, telling Momaday that, "Parting is such sweet sorrow."⁶ Near the play's end, Overdone tells Gatt:

The Ponca Chief Standing Bear once said,
"Our hands are not the same color, but if
You pierce yours or I pierce mine we both feel pain.
The blood that flows is the same color.
God made us all."⁷

This is one of Reinholz' most striking references, as within the play's Shakespearean context and language it cannot help but recall the words of Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most problematically disenfranchised characters, tying his words to the plight of Native Americans facing a white expansionist society determined to erase them. Reinholz plays with, leans on, speaks to, and grapples with Shakespeare throughout his script in a way that powerfully illustrates the complex relationship between his own voice and cultural history and the body of Shakespeare's work. The result is a play, performed in what is

⁵ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)*, (Ashland, OR: Tudor Guild, 2017), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

arguably the primary seat of Shakespearean theatre for North America, that rewrites the entire relationship between native voices and Shakespeare.

The rhetorical efficacy of Reinholz' choice to work through Shakespeare first becomes apparent in his prologue as he reveals the central mission of his play. Before the show, the speakers send out a message thanking the tribes who used to inhabit the land upon which the theatre now stands. As the lights come up, Momaday's grandfather stands front and center as he tells the audience that they are now entering *Kituks* Creek in the traditional lands of the Pawnee.⁸ Reinholz is not simply telling the story of an 'Indian problem'; he is telling the story of an American problem. This announcement reminds the audience that the injustices of the past benefitted the colonizers as much as they harmed the indigenous people. These systems of privilege and imbalance are still in effect to this day as the audience members sit in comfortable theatre seats on what were once tribal lands. Reinholz wants everyone to own this story, and Shakespeare's voice is exactly the bridge he needs to reach both sides of his audience. In her interview with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Reinholz' wife Jean Bruce Scott says, "We're in a moment where a lot of native people have had access to education—two generations now—so the voice is clearer and it may not be as native or traditional as it once was, but that's something that we're trying to rebuild."⁹ Reinholz and Scott recognize that the boarding schools have marred the native voice, but while they acknowledge the need to rebuild what was lost they also refuse to throw away the powerful tool that came out of this suffering. In the introduction for his script, Reinholz says that *Off the Rails*, "Demonstrates the resilience

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Reinholz and Scott, interview.

of Native people and their ability to use the government's forced education to turn dire situations to their advantage."¹⁰ His ability to hold in one voice both the Shakespearean language of the boarding schools and the native language of his heritage is precisely what equips Reinholz to tell this forgotten story of the American West.

In the process of telling this story, Reinholz adapts his historical text with just as much liberty as he does the Shakespearean text. The centerpiece of this historical adaptation in *Off the Rails* is General Gatt, who of course presents an obvious parody of Brigadier General Richard H. Pratt. Gatt's first scene in the play opens with an almost comically insensitive series of actions:

Flash of camera brings lights up on GENERAL GATT at his desk wearing a Plains Indian headdress. He is being photographed by MCDONALD and SHERIFF

GENERAL GATT: I will travel as a U.S. officer.
This bonnet endears me to the savage.
(He places the headdress on MCDONALD)
Yet the maxim of the school sets our course
We must, 'Kill the Indian, Save the Man.'¹¹

This handful of lines alone presents a *tour de force* of racism and condescension. The war bonnet is a sacred garment of extreme cultural importance and yet he wears it like a toy, even thinking it will endear him to Native Americans. Wearing it inappropriately is offensive enough, but then he places the headdress on McDonald, who in OSF's production visibly recoils because he actually does understand its significance. Finally, Gatt brazenly repeats his maxim of cultural eradication to McDonald, a member of the very culture he wants to eradicate. To his credit, Gatt does not always lump McDonald

¹⁰ Reinholz, *Off the Rails*, vi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

and everyone else in the play together under the blanket term “Indian.” He recognizes McDonald’s specific tribal affiliation later in this same conversation when he says, “Discipline provides the path to salvation. You Choctaw learned to obey and survived.”¹² Reinholz is Choctaw; he understands the price of that survival.

Despite McDonald’s position as Gatt’s counselor, once Angelo arrives Gatt places McDonald as only the second in command, saying:

GENERAL GATT: I am to leave
In my remove you are the Mayor;
Morality and mercy in Genoa
Live in your heart and tongue: McDonald
Is second in command.
ANGELO: An Indian?
GENERAL GATT: My Indian. McDonald here is trusted,
With insights no white man would consider.¹³

Gatt’s problematic use of the possessive here harbors a troubling echo of Pratt’s words on the supposed elevation of African American slaves, and yet this action does not appear to spring from malice or conscious contempt as it might coming from Angelo. Rather, Gatt seems to intend the comment as a sincere albeit incredibly misguided attempt to praise McDonald. Later, as Gatt practices his celebratory speech about extending the railroad and bringing wealth to the town, he does so standing in front of a stark reminder of the oppression his schools have brought to the Native American community. Reinholz’ stage directions note: “‘I will not speak Pawnee’ is written repeatedly on the chalkboard,” once again underscoring how completely oblivious Gatt is to the suffering and cruelty his

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 17-18.

actions allow to take place.¹⁴ By the play's end Gatt seems more like an idiot than a villain, as seen in his final exchange with McDonald:

MCDONALD: And with revenue from the railroad, the General pledges improvements to the school.

GENERAL GATT: I do?

MCDONALD: We are moving into the future.

GENERAL GATT: I do.¹⁵

Gatt may not be a good man, but he does not mean to be evil like Angelo. Gatt's sins are the sins of ignorance and omission. To borrow from the *Book of Common Prayer*, they are less of what he has done, than of what he has left undone.

Gatt, like his historical counterpart, is a monument to the kind of blind ignorance and thoughtless racism which allowed the colonial apparatus of westward expansion to very nearly eradicate all Native American life on the continent. Pratt ostensibly meant his schools for good. However terrible conditions were, there is no indication that Pratt ever actively participated in the tortures which too often took place in his school system. Pratt may not have been actively malicious and evil like the men who ran many of his schools, but that is hardly the same as saying he did well for America and its native communities. Even as a caricatured parody, Gatt presents very nearly as flattering an image as it is possible to give Pratt while still acknowledging the grim legacy of his life's work. Gatt shows the image of a man so consumed by his thoughtless pursuit of some mythical white American Christian capitalism that he has neither the ability nor the desire to empathize with those around him.

¹⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵ Ibid., 143.

McDonald is not the only one who uses the Bible to oppose Angelo, however.

When Isabel comes to plead her brother's case, she urges Angelo to show mercy, saying:

ISABEL: My brother is condemned to die:

I do beseech you, let it be his fault,

And not my brother.

ANGELO: Condemn the fault and not the actor of it?²⁰

Here Isabel draws on the same Christian saying that Pratt historically used to coin the school's infamous motto, "kill the Indian, save the man," but Angelo's Christianity is bent so far from grace that he merely scoffs at her words. Like McDonald, Isabel tries to appeal to Angelo's humility and the recognition of his own sin and need for grace, saying:

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once;

How would you be, if He, who is at top

Were to judge you?²¹

All her pleading is to no avail, however, and at the end of her appeals Isabel uncovers what truly lies at the heart of Angelo's convictions in this final interchange:

ISABEL: Yet show some pity!

ANGELO: I show it most when I show justice.

ISABEL: Whose justice?

ANGELO: The white man's.²²

This is Reinholz' final judgment on the hypocritical theology of westward expansion and manifest destiny. The constancy of Isabel's commitment to true Christian doctrine forces Angelo to reveal that his beliefs are nothing more than a quasi-religious veneer supported by his own racism and self-righteousness. Reinholz takes hold of the Bible—arguably the

²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²¹ Ibid., 60.

²² Ibid., 60.

most central text of Western colonization—and he uses its voice to discredit the colonial project at its very foundations. *Off the Rails* is a mimic play; it masters the voice and text of the colonizer, employing Shakespeare, the Bible, and even America’s colonial history to its own ends as it uses these disparate voices and texts to overturn colonial authority.

Character Mimics

For a text that is, itself, a mimic, *Off the Rails* is also replete with characters who take on the mantle of the mimic. The young Pawnee student Momaday, whose name is a clear homage to N. Scott Momaday, arguably presents the clearest ties to *The Indolent Boys* and its project of the boarding school mimic. Just like John Pai before him, Momaday is the voice of tradition, memory, and resilient determination in this play. He speaks with the spirit of his grandfather, practices the way of the *Hirruska* (warrior society), and far more than any other character he both speaks and sings in his traditional tongue. Like John Pai he resists the religious indoctrination of the boarding schools and their imposition of Christianity, telling his grandfather’s spirit that the school forces him to pray, “Only to their god, never to the Creator.”²³ Also like John Pai, Momaday holds onto childhood images of a home far removed and a family and community now lost, as he shows in this interchange with his grandfather:

GRANDFATHER: We can talk.

MOMADAY: What good is that?

GRANDFATHER: To remember . . .

MOMADAY: Remember? I only remember our long walk.

GRANDFATHER: And where did you go?

MOMADAY: South, to what they call “Indian Territory.” Two moons of walking. We just ate fat and grains cooked over a fire.

GRANDFATHER: Sounds bad.

²³ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 10.

MOMADAY: It was. But it was that or starve. Then they stole me from Mama and made me come here.

GRANDFATHER: Why?

MOMADAY: To break our family. Destroy our way of life.

GRANDFATHER: I wish I could help.

MOMADAY: They imprisoned Uncle Smokie when he tried to rescue me. And they've hung others.

GRANDFATHER: Good thing I'm already dead.²⁴

The long walk of two moons calls back directly to John Pai's reminiscence about his own childhood home. The grandfather's remark about his own death, even if it bears the hint of a kind of irreverent survival humor, speaks to the way *The Indolent Boys* treated the deaths of its three young runaways, questioning earnestly whether life in a colonial western society is really better than death. Momaday also calls up the question of legacy that John Pai plays with, or that we see in Chas D. Carter's commencement address analyzed in an earlier chapter. From his jail cell, Momaday proclaims, "They seek to bury me. They don't know I am the seed."²⁵ Momaday takes Tertullian's traditional Christian refrain, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and he freely appropriates it for his own mission and message. He is utterly convinced of the inevitability of his culture's survival, even in the face of imprisonment and death.

Momaday is the most obvious connection between the mimicry presented by *The Indolent Boys* and that offered by *Off the Rails*, but he is by no means the play's only, or even its most successful, mimic figure. While N. Scott Momaday's earlier work focuses on the image of a single young man performing the schismatic role of the mimic, *Off the*

²⁴ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 10-11.

²⁵ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 85.

Rails features a cast filled with potential mimics. One of the most notable is the play's central heroine, Isabel, who has converted to Christianity and at the play's start is training to become a teacher for the reservation schools. Her first major interchange in the script comes when Alexie tries to convince her to come back and save her brother Momaday from hanging:

ISABEL: What have I to offer in such a case?
He should have left the traditional ways.
If it's unsafe to speak Pawnee or dance,
How much more will they punish us if we
Pray or practice the old customs?
ALEXIE: It's hard for some to turn their backs.
ISABEL: I am still Pawnee,
I am preparing to help the people.
ALEXIE: You mean Chaticks si Chaticks, you call
Yourselves, the Men of Men.
ISABEL: All Indian people.
I'll be a teacher next month.
My education will benefit them.
ALEXIE: By the time your training is complete
The children at the school will be ruined.
ISABEL: How do you mean?
ALEXIE: Momaday will be dead.
The new way of teaching, beat the students,
Starving them until they speak English.
ISABEL: They must learn to be disciplined.
ALEXIE: Is that how you will teach'm, turn'm into
Servants for the homes and shops of the settlers?
ISABEL: We have to change or we won't survive.
ALEXIE: We lived on these lands for a thousand years
Never needing the Great White Father
Or his God.
ISABEL: Education is the new path.
ALEXIE: Is it education or extermination?²⁶

The questions of authenticity, hybridity, and loyalty implicit in this interchange are stark reminders of the complex ambivalence which often plagues mimic figures. The blending

²⁶ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 39-41.

of colonizer and colonized in the single voice and body of the mimic subject is a blending of friend and foe. The mimic presents an incredibly powerful figure of menace to the colonial gaze, but it is crucial to remember that the colonial voice within the mimic also presents a kind of menace to their own colonized culture. Isabel and Alexie are both products of a colonial educational apparatus, but neither really belongs fully on one side of the colonizer/colonized line or the other. Just like John Pai, they are cut in two; their names are their own enemies. Alexie runs away from his education and his voice of mimicry, choosing instead to fritter his time away at the Stewed Prunes, enjoying all the drinks and company Madame Overdone can offer. He survives by coping with parties and alcohol in much the same way that Bobby's friends and family did in *Body Indian*. It is an existence, but not necessarily a life.

Isabel herself is hardly in a better position, however. At the beginning of Isabel's character arc, she is far removed from any trace of the mimic's resistance as she seems to have opted completely for a path of survival through assimilation. Unlike Alexie, Isabel fully embraces her colonial education as a means for betterment, but for her that betterment is a pure drive for assimilation. Like John Pai, Isabel has been groomed to go back out as an emissary and a cultural missionary to her people, but unlike John Pai she has fully embraced this role. When Isabel goes to visit Momaday in his cell, he calls her out on her assimilationist stance, saying,

MOMADAY: You have become one of them, a Christian,
Afraid to sacrifice your morals, to save a person,
Not Christ on a cross, but your real brother.

ISABEL: Christ is more than just a symbol to me.

MOMADAY: And what am I?

ISABEL: A man I love, behaving like a savage.

MOMADAY: You will not call me a savage, like the teachers in the school.
I practice the way of the Hiruuska (Warrior Society)

Caitlin, tatatuuraapirihu' (I love you)
Ta tatuuraapirihu'. Ta tatuuraapirihu'.
ISABEL interrupts his Pawnee.
ISABEL: They call you savage, when you behave like an animal.
Speak English. You always break the rules.
When you disrespect them, it hurts us all.
MOMADAY: Those are the white man's rules.
ISABEL: They have become mine.²⁷

Isabel speaks with the voice of the colonizer, showing clearly just how much she has managed to internalize the teachings of the boarding schools. It is the ambivalent self-contempt of the hybrid mimic figure which shines through in these lines. Caught between both camps but unable to reconcile fully with either, Isabel initially tries to cut herself off from her Native American roots, but Momaday denies her attempt at assimilation, saying,

MOMADAY: They don't want you. They will hate you because
You are dark, and dirty, an Indian.
You will never be smart enough, or white enough.
And they will never let you forget.²⁸

He gives voice to the curse of the mimic—almost the same, but not white. And yet at the same time that this dissonant tension within Isabel is a curse, it also stands out as her greatest power.

When Isabel goes to meet Angelo and plead for her brother's life, it is her peculiar hybridity which seizes him and drives him toward lust. Isabel begins her final assay of Angelo's mercy, saying,

ISABEL: Hark, how I'll bribe you . . .
ANGELO: Bribe me?
ISABEL: Ay, with such gifts that heaven shall bestow on you.
Not with nuggets of gold; but with true prayers

²⁷ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 81-83.

²⁸ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 81-83.

Supplications climbing to heaven and entering
Ere sun-rises, prayers from a virgin soul.
ANGELO: How, virgin?²⁹

Without really intending it, Isabel's language creates an extreme dissonance which confuses and disarms Angelo. She offers prayers, but she does so in the initial guise of a bribe, and her last line about entering ere sun-rises with a virgin soul is rife with sexual imagery. Angelo immediately takes it as such, his fixation on the word 'virgin' also betraying the colonial fixation on the myth of the virgin land. Angelo reflects on the effect Isabel's words have on him once she leaves, saying,

ANGELO: What do you, or what are you, Angelo?
Do you desire her foully for those things
That make her good? A soulless pagan brought
To the light through Christ. O, let her brother live!
ANGELO crosses to desk to sign a pardon.
Thieves for their robbery have authority
When judges steal themselves. What, do I love her,
That I desire to hear her speak again,
And feast upon her eyes? What is't I dream on?
O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint,
With saints do bait your hook! Never could the strumpet,
With all her double vigor, art and nature,
Once stir my blood; but the virtue of this Indian maid
Arouses me quite.³⁰

Angelo cannot come to terms with how he feels about Isabel. She is at once dirty, savage, and pagan, but also pure and saintlike—conforming to exactly the images of idealized American Christian femininity that Angelo seeks. His gaze splits Isabel apart into a confusing milieu of characteristics and sign systems that he is completely incapable of

²⁹ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 62.

³⁰ Randy Reinholz, *Off the Rails (OSF House Script)* (Ashland, OR: OSF Tudor Guild, 2017), 63.

reconciling. Whiteness and redness, civility and savagery, purity and carnality—all of these boil together in Angelo’s fervent gaze, and the result is that Angelo loses control of himself as he grows in his fetishization of and desire for Isabel. Having thus lost himself, Angelo makes his final advance, saying,

Who will believe you, Isabel?
My unsoiled name, and you an Indian.
My word against yours, my station in town,
Will so outweigh your accusation,
That you shall choke in your own report,
Reeking of squalor and be the squaw you are.
Now I give my superior race the rein:
Fit your consent to my sharp appetite;
To redeem your brother, thereby
Yielding your body up to my will
.....
You’ll answer me today,
Or, by the passion that now guides me most,
I’ll torture that boy to make the Sand Creek Massacre
Look like a Sunday picnic. As for you,
Say what you can, my false outweighs your true.³¹

The rampant sexuality of these and other of Angelo’s lines, the loss of self before a fetishized “pure” other, the desire to obtain or consume that purity, and even the brief image of a Sunday picnic all cast Angelo as a kind of perverse echo of Carrie, from *The Indolent Boys*.

The primary interactions which lie at the heart of both *The Indolent Boys* and *Off the Rails* are those between a colonizing white educator and a colonized Native American student mimic. Both plays lean very heavily on the strong fetishization of this colonizer/colonized, teacher/student relational dynamic—it is actually one of the more striking characteristics of Isabel’s mimicry that she is the student actively looking to

³¹ Reinholz, *Off the Rails* 76.

become the teacher and replace colonial authority. Where the texts part ways, however, is in the reactions of their two teachers. For Carrie, John Pai is a kind of messianic figure of redemptive transcendence. She sees John Pai as the hope for a vital call to life, community, and authenticity that could wipe away her own artificiality and lead her to something deeper and more truly human than anything she can get from the structures of her society. John Pai is the alluring but vexingly forbidden model that could save Carrie and lead her into something new and better. Angelo feels nothing of the sort for Isabel. Isabel presents the promise of a universal goodness and rational purity that Angelo has tried so hard to cast both himself and his culture as. She dispenses the myths which prop up both his personal and cultural identities, and he despises her for it. Angelo acknowledges the promise of Isabel's purity and goodness, but he is utterly incapable of seeing in her anything but his own condemnation.

Faced with Isabel's purity Angelo is unable to master himself, so he displaces his need for mastery back onto Isabel. He feels an uncontrollable need to possess her, but in the description of his conquest he notably dispenses with all description of her beauty, saintliness, or any of the other features she displays that so vex him. He must have Isabel so he can destroy her. Isabel's faith is more devout, her commitment to duty more sincere, and her purity and integrity more unassailable than anything Angelo can muster. She is everything Angelo claims to be, even though she is merely "a squaw." Angelo must destroy these traits in her and reduce her to the reeking squalor he envisions because her very existence threatens his own claim to civility. In the end, despite all his contempt and vitriol, Angelo is the one who describes himself as bestial, having given himself over to passion, and he freely admits his falseness, nevertheless maintaining that it outweighs

her truth. Angelo, whether fully aware of the change or not, admits that he has no legitimate claim to the myth of the white man's civilization; all he has left is his base appeal to an ideology of might makes right, couched behind his invoked imagery of a military massacre. Such a man can hardly claim civilization, much less guide it.

Isabel's commitment to mercy is more Christian than Angelo's—her devotion to preserving life and liberty more reflective of the American ideal than even his least offensive actions. Isabel is everything Angelo claims he wants to form using the children of the boarding school, but her purity is so perfect that it discredits him and nullifies any claim to authority or superiority he may have once held. She replaces him, and in so doing she earns the right to take the helm of society. The play is replete with potential mimic figures operating from various states of hybridity, but Isabel is the one who finally succeeds in subsuming the colonizer's voice and seizing his authority. If, as Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars have often theorized, it is in the liminal spaces at the borderlands that cultures really come to construct and define themselves, then Isabel, existing in the purely liminal space of the mimic between the terms Native and American, presents the grounds from which to define a new national identity. Unseating Angelo she comes into this power, and as the play draws to its close we find that it is Isabel, more than anyone else, who now has the power to determine the course of Genoa. To paraphrase Jace Weaver, she is finally self-determining, rather than a self determined.

Broadening the Circle

At the height of Isabel's power, when she has finally succeeded in discrediting Angelo and has come into the fullness of her place as the voice of Genoa's future, Isabel turns to grace. The mimic's voice is almost always one of subsumption, replacement, and

expulsion for the colonizer; it is a voice of resistance and overthrow. Yet as Gatt comes back to town and the play winds down to its conclusion, Isabel chooses to use her new-found voice to call for one thing over and over again: grace. She extends grace for the cruelty of Angelo, and she extends it for the criminal negligence of Gatt. Isabel has the right, far more than anyone else in the play, to claim retribution—an eye for an eye. Instead, she lays down her case and she chooses to forgive. Grace has a weight, though. Forgiveness is never free. To forgive a debt is both to assume and to pay it. To understand Isabel's call for grace it is first necessary to understand the debt she is choosing to forgive.

First, there is the debt of Angelo and the men like him who ran so many of America's boarding schools; the debt of beatings, starvation, and the cruelty of erasure. It is important to remember that Isabel comes from the schools. However distant she may seem from the students' problems, she knows what it means to survive a colonial education. Second, there is the more obvious debt of Angelo's actions within the play. Angelo is lecherous and at times violent with Isabel. He lies, threatens, insults, dehumanizes, and ultimately betrays her, all while claiming the Christian faith that Isabel actually adheres to. Much like Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, Momaday is ultimately spared because another prisoner dies in his place, but at the point of Isabel's call for grace she knows nothing of this scheme. Isabel pardons Angelo in the full belief that her brother is dead. Even as her brother's supposed killer spits insults in her face, Isabel pleads for his life. Finally, and most importantly for the audience, there is the far less obvious debt of Gatt's (and by extension Pratt's) negligence. Gatt is the law and order of Genoa, its final authority. Everything that happens in the play happens on his watch.

Angelo perpetrates myriad offenses in the play with no end of malicious intent, and nothing should ameliorate his responsibility for those actions, but everything Angelo does, he does because Gatt allows him to.

Gatt's debt in the economy of grace which exists here at the end of *Off the Rails* is the debt of privilege; it is the unpalatable truth of how the West was won. The reason Gatt's portion of this final debt is so crucially important for the audience is that here, in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, as the lights go down and the reminder of the theatre's location on tribal lands comes across the speakers, nearly everyone in the audience shares a piece of this debt. The reason it is so important that Gatt finds reconciliation at the end of *Off the Rails* is that if he can enter back into community, then it means that all of the people sitting in that audience and sharing in that debt can also enter back into that community.

Forgiveness does not preclude grief or erase wrongdoing, however, and Reinholz makes no attempt to hide the terrible actions that took place in the boarding schools from his audience. In order to grieve he must name the tragedy, and so in scene transitions throughout the play, Reinholz projects pictures of the Native American students before and after coming to the boarding schools. At first these pictures show just a handful of students at a time, but on either side of Angelo's speech about the school becoming a beacon of industry the number of children in the photographs grows considerably. By the final projection, hundreds of students stand together, short-haired and with sunken cheeks, the smiles from the earlier photographs long gone. These are the children who own the debt that Isabel forgives.

Understanding the weight of Isabel's forgiveness, the only question remaining is how she musters the strength for it. The answer, which calls back to Geiogamah's *Body Indian*, has to do with Vizenor's concept of survivance. For the whole play, Isabel does exactly one thing: she searches for answers. At first, she looks to the boarding schools as the only answers for survival. Coming from the schools, Isabel catches herself in a loop of reaction, trying desperately to cling to survival without any regard for real betterment or continuance. It is not until Angelo finally betrays Isabel and orders the execution of her brother that she understands her hopes for surviving by adhering to the colonial system are empty and meaningless. At the Stewed Prunes, hearing the news of her brother's death, Isabel is Bobby, from *Body Indian*, sitting outside the liquor store, empty. But where Bobby has nothing, not even a leg to stand on, Isabel has the power of her mimic voice. As Gatt says, Isabel is, "Educated in our ways, arguing with our laws."³² She has real power to guide the conversation and determine the course of her story. Bobby stands up and he has nothing, so he can only walk away. Isabel, however, has a voice, and with that voice she has power, so she walks back to her community and she uses her voice to find a path not of mere survival, but of continuance.

The reason Isabel reaches for grace is that it is the only way to change this story and stop the cycle of vengeance from repeating. As Madame Overdone says to General Gatt while he sits in judgment over Angelo,

You kill him, for killing her brother,
Who was in a school where they, 'Kill the Indian,'
Because his family was fighting to protect themselves.
Where does it end?³³

³² Ibid., 136.

³³ Ibid., 138.

Both sides are locked in a cycle of blind reaction. Just like in *Body Indian*, this community is taking the same actions again and again with no regard to the way these actions are tearing them apart and keeping them from moving forward. When Bobby wakes up his catharsis is purely individual; he can only save himself from the cycle. But when Isabel wakes up she has the voice of authority, and with it the power to save her whole community. Isabel finally steps into this power before everyone, saying,

ISABEL: Mercy is not a symbol of weakness.

Forgiveness reveals a path from madness.

His lust and greed are products of these wars.

We will teach this man what he was stolen.

Now, great general, he must learn to listen.

ANGELO: If it please . . .

ISABEL: Not talk, listen.³⁴

Bobby laughs, then walks away. John Pai witnesses and judges, but then he runs back to the camps and their isolation. Isabel chooses to stay. The time for Angelo and Gatt's voices has passed; it is her turn to speak. Here at the end of this play Isabel works not just to repair her old community, but to build toward a new one.

Reinholz follows suit, and after he has made space for the public grief and recognition of this shameful chapter in American history he invites his audience to partake in the reconciliatory ritual of Pow Wow. Momaday extends this invitation, saying:

In the boarding schools we couldn't sing and dance. NOW WE DO. We have one more special moment on stage. In Pow Wow, we broaden our circle. So we ask some of you here in the front to join us on stage. Raise your hand if you would like to join our circle.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 139.

³⁵ Reinholz, *Off the Rails*, 146.

Overdone and Isabel follow up by giving recognition to those whose suffering makes this reconciliation possible, saying:

OVERDONE: We have these dances because of the resilience of those boys and girls AND the caring families and elders who practiced their traditions.

ISABEL: And we celebrate these living cultures and traditions with you.³⁶

As Momaday says, this undeserved but freely given grace broadens the circle and asks even non-native audience members to join their voices and bodies with the songs and rituals of the Pawnee.

Reinholz spends the majority of his play carefully unpacking the terrible legacy of the boarding schools and the damage they inflicted on the Native American community. He never shies away from addressing the starvation, disease, and beatings that took place in the boarding schools under the pseudo-Christian banner of manifest destiny. And yet, after telling the story of this deeply traumatic chapter in American history and giving a public voice to the grief left by this trauma, Reinholz turns that grief toward healing. In the moment he has won the right to speak out and decry the wrongs of the boarding schools' legacy, Reinholz decides to use his voice as a call for healing rather than vengeance. Reinholz invites all Americans into this healing moment, native and non-native alike, because he believes this burden is not just for the Native American community to bear; the legacy of this American genocide belongs to everyone, and in the words of Simon Ortiz, "in sharing, there is strength and continuance."³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 146-147.

³⁷ Simon Ortiz, Towards a National Indian Literature, in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 254.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The legacy of the Indian industrial boarding school program is one of deep, unspeakable trauma. The victims of this trauma were young men and women ripped from their homes with false promises of Christian virtue and grace, only to find pain, suffering, sickness, and even death at the hands of a country that wanted nothing more than to erase them. Yet as terrible as the traumatic legacy of the boarding schools is, it was only a single piece of the widespread program of genocide which America launched against its native populations. The final act of this genocide has been to erase itself wherever possible from America's memory. Carlisle closed its doors just a little over a century ago, yet its mission of cultural erasure is still going strong. In 2019, when Eric Ting directed *Between Two Knees*, a play about the massacres at Wounded Knee, he said,

So much of who we are—who we love, *how* we love, the fights we choose and those we run from, what we value, what we reject, our sense of belonging, our sense of home—is tangled up in the accumulation of what has come before. But what if the world conspired to erase your past—your language, your culture, your ritual, your place? What if the textbooks that have told your stories just . . . stopped . . . telling them? What if you seemingly disappeared from history?¹

When I saw *Off the Rails*, many of the people around me had never even heard of the boarding schools. I myself barely understood the weight of the suffering they had enacted. All people, Native American or not, look to the past to establish their identity.

¹ Eric Ting, "From the Director," *Oregon Shakespeare Festival Playbill*, 2019, 40.

We are the stories we tell and remember, so what happens when a nation forgets its story?

It is the looming weight of this question which first brought Geiogamah's *Body Indian* to the stage. From its outset, Native American theatre was a survival mechanism. In order to be itself, a nation must see itself. If he could get the story out, and if he could keep that story alive, Geiogamah was confident that he could help Native American tribes across the country to hold onto their identities. It was a way to help a people see themselves, and seeing themselves, to move and grow. Geiogamah took the oral performative tradition of Native American culture and he founded his theatre on some of its most important aspects: adaptability, survival, memory, community, and humor. The survival humor Geiogamah found quite by accident on that opening night at La MaMa shows the heart of a people with a seemingly limitless capacity to face suffering without giving in to despair. Native theatre is staggering in its ability to adapt and survive in the face of suffering and loss. At the end of *Body Indian*, even with half his legs and none of his cash, Bobby laughs, picks himself up, and keeps on walking. There is no other option but to keep moving—to survive.

When Momaday wrote *The Indolent Boys*, he built from and continued this theme of survival, adding to it the layers of the mimic's resistance. John Pai is the perfect voice of this resistance. He speaks with the force and authority of the colonizer's voice and even their religion, but he also retains the strong roots and traditions of his tribe. If *Body Indian* was the voice of the present, helping the people to see themselves, *The Indolent Boys* is a full-throated call to recover the past. Momaday reaches into the redolent history and tradition of Kiowa culture and he finds within that tradition and memory a strong

foundation for the future. It all comes back to the cycle; a nation's past is the only key to its future. Without addressing the past, a nation can never learn to move forward.

This study is hardly exhaustive in its scope. Geiogamah and Momaday are hugely influential, and their works studied here highlight some of the main themes and ideas Native American artists have struggled with throughout the twentieth century, but there are still so many artists like LeAnne Howe or Lynn Riggs whose works I have not had the room to even touch on in this study. Geiogamah's time with Ellen Stewart and NATE also deserves significant further study as the early works which came out of that collaboration set so much of the foundation for where Native American theatre is today. Randy Reinholz and his wife Jean Bruce Scott have led Native Voices at the Autry for over twenty-five years, and while *Off the Rails* is Reinholz' first foray into playwrighting, he and his company have produced numerous plays by Native American and First Nations artists during this time. The premiere of *Off the Rails* opened a door, and recent years have seen an explosion in the number of regional productions for plays written by Native American artists. These works represent a new movement in American theatre that is as yet largely unstudied. One of the most important areas for further consideration is the way in which the audience for these plays has changed over time. *Body Indian* was in many ways a play in search of a Native American audience; Geiogamah was very clear that his goal was to establish and preserve a voice, identity, and way of life for Native American communities. Reinholz, by contrast, makes it clear in his interviews, talkbacks, and even in the piece itself that he is speaking to an audience of outsiders and trying to help them look in. Many of these new plays are specifically trying to educate and change their audiences, and it remains to be seen how or if these efforts can succeed.

Reinholz prefaces his play by saying that he hopes to tell the complete story of the American West. What is that story? It's a chapter so shrouded behind layers of myth, misrepresentation, and erasure that America hardly knows anything of it except the colonial bluster of Buffalo Bill's Wild West spectacles. The West wasn't Christian cowboys and unwashed savages. It was the Trail of Tears, and the battles at Wounded Knee. It was the tail end of an extinction event so dire that its record is forever carved into the polar ice caps. The real West was nothing like what we put in our movies; if it were we likely wouldn't have the stomach to watch them. The West is a chasm in the American consciousness. It is a past we refuse to address. But if the past is never addressed then it can't be defined, and defining a nation's past is the key to helping shape its future, so Reinholz takes hold of the narrative with both hands and he tries to define the West. He uses all the techniques of the mimic refined and handed down by Momaday, and he mixes in just enough of Geiogamah's joviality and survival humor to keep his audience from turning away. He weaves together the voices of everyone who has come before him, and he uses the weight of these voices to tell a new past—a new key to the way forward.

At the height of his play's rhetorical power Reinholz calls for exactly one thing: reconciliation. He tells a story of cruelty and rape and bloodshed, which is still just the barest fraction of the suffering that actually took place in the west. He has every right to stand before the Gatts and the Angelos of the world and call for justice, but instead he chooses to end his play with a simple question: "Would you come up on the stage to dance with us?" At the time I was some mixture of thrilled, terrified, and slightly

nauseated. Looking back, I am humbled beyond words and deeply grateful. The circle has broadened. I have been given a place.

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