"We acknowledge our past but look to the future:"

First Nations Theater in the New Millennium

A Tradition of Native Theater

In April 2018, Playwrights Canada Press published *This is How We Got Here*, the most recent work by Métis actor and playwright Keith Barker. Barker has, since May 2017, also served as artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Canada’s oldest and most widely known professional Indigenous theater company, and is thus a suitable reference point from which to unravel the major developments of Native theater in Canada over the past fifteen years. Both *This is How We Got Here* (FP [first performed in] 2016) and his previous play, the award-winning *The Hours That Remain* (2013, FP 2012), are emblematic of contemporary First Nations theater in four substantial ways.

As I will outline in more detail later in this chapter, these plays focus on themes of loss and death within families, inviting trans-ethnic, universalist human empathy and thus providing grounds for transcultural exchange and dialogue. At the same time, the underlying historical experiences microcosmically address political issues of settler colonialism, racism, and the current political situation of First Nations in Canada. Third, the plays’ specific spatial and temporal structures, the erosion of boundaries between life and death, and the presence of supernatural characters on stage indicate a larger epistemological framework that privileges Indigenous knowledges over Western discourses of science. And finally, their use of humor and their emphasis on what Gerald Vizenor terms "survivance" – i.e., "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response" but "an active presence" (1998, 15) – demonstrates a strong sense of resistance against victimhood, a refusal to accept tragedy, and an overall positive outlook on interior and exterior circumstances. These interrelated aspects do not, of course, provide an exhaustive description of contemporary Native theatre, but they have characterized numerous plays by First Nations artists and writers in Canada since Native Earth Performing Arts was founded in Toronto in 1982. In those four decades, much has happened in terms of reconciliation and First Nations empowerment, and the landscape of Native theatre has exponentially diversified – especially so in the past fifteen years.

"The history of Native theatre," Henning Schäfer writes, "is either the shortest or the longest theatrical tradition within the realm of Canada, depending on your point of view" (2013, 19). As Drew Hayden Taylor and many other artists and critics have pointed out, "theatre is just a logical extension of storytelling" (1997, 140) and thus one of the oldest literary genres of the continent, including a wide range of other performance types, such as ceremonies, potlatches, or religious practices. In its contemporary format, it includes predecessors such as Emily Pauline Johnson’s staged

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1 Osawabine qtd. in Hengen (2007, 82).
readings of her poetry in the 1890s in Canada as well as pageants by the Six Nations Forest Theatre (beginning in Canada in 1949, cf. Däwes 2007, 54-55; Schäfer 2013, 20-21). According to Yvette Nolan, there are "two events that marked the beginning of a contemporary Aboriginal theatre" (2010): the founding of Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto, and Métis playwright Maria Campbell's collaboration with Linda Griffiths on Jessica, both in 1982. One might also want to mention earlier plays, such as Mohawk writer Nona Benedict's The Dress (1970), Inuit writer Minnie Aodla Freeman's Survival in the South (1971), or Cree poet George Kenny's October Stranger (1977), and one should acknowledge the Native Theatre School (later expanded and renamed into the Centre for Indigenous Theatre), which was installed by Cree opera singer James H. Buller in 1974 as a four-week training program. The topics of those early plays – living in cities, trying to find one's place between different cultures and traditions, battling racism, alcoholism, and poverty, and relying on non-Western knowledge systems – have not stopped being relevant in the 1990s and 2000s (see, for instance, Shirley Cheechoo's Path With No Moccasins [1991], Floyd Favel's Lady of Silences [1998] or Darrell Dennis's Tales of an Urban Indian [2003]), but they merely constitute a slice of a much larger spectrum of thematic interests.

In the context of a diverse range of themes and styles, considering the turn of the millennium as a turning point or historical divide is an arbitrary choice. If anything, the development of Native theatre in Canada has been marked by continuity rather than rupture, and an ever-growing number of professionally trained playwrights, dramaturgs, actors, actresses, directors, and companies have received increasing international acclaim. "In 1986," Drew Hayden Taylor writes in an often-quoted passage, "there was perhaps one working Native playwright in all of Canada. Today [in 1997] I can list at least two dozen produced playwrights of aboriginal descent in Canada, and if that rate of increase continues, by the year 2040 it's conceivable that everybody in Canada will be a Native playwright" (1997, 140). Even if that prophecy will probably quite be fulfilled, the tendency is certainly notable. The best-known playwrights of what Henning Schäfer terms "the 'Golden Age' of Native Theatre" (2013, 24) include Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor, Daniel David Moses, Shirley Cheechoo, Margo Kane, Floyd Favel, Ian Ross, Joseph Dandurand, Marie Clements, Monique Mojica, and Yvette Nolan.2 All of these playwrights have produced work that was also published and/or anthologized, and most of them continue contributing plays to an expanding market. The most prominent anthology, Ric Knowles and Monique Mojica's two-volume Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English (2003), has substantially helped to provide access, to create an awareness of a rich contemporary tradition among critics, teachers, and the general public, and to install First Nations drama in university curricula.

In the past fifteen years, these playwrights have been joined by a number of new significant voices, among them the Turtle Gals Performing Ensemble (The Scrubbing Project, 2002; The Only Good Indian, 2007; The Triple Truth, 2008), Melanie Murray (A

2 For more or less comprehensive surveys of contemporary First Nations drama, see Taylor (1997); Schäfer (2013); Nolan (2010); Nolan (2015); Greyeyes (2016); and Knowles and Riley (2017).

"Like the Last Two Years Hadn't Happened:" Keith Barker's The Hours That Remain

Keith Barker's play The Hours That Remain (FP 2012), which has been produced all across Canada, from Magnus Theater in Thunder Bay, ON, to Gwaandak Theatre in Whitehorse, YT, combines several characteristic aspects of the genre of First Nations theatre and thus perfectly illustrates both the continuities and changes of this genre in the twenty-first century. The play takes up the issue of MMIW (the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women of Canada, who, between 1969 and 2006, were assaulted and killed near the "Highway of Tears" a section of British Columbia Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert) and the consequences of these unsolved deaths for the victims' families. While this focus critically addresses the legacy of settler colonialism and, in terms of its structure and form, foregrounds Indigenous modes of knowledge, it also highlights shared human experiences and thus emphasizes dialogue and connection. "We begin in the dark," as the first stage direction puts it (2013, 3), and the soundscape of a passing transport truck that "shatters into silence followed by the systematic snuffing out of the stars" opens the play with an atmosphere of threat and foreshadowing (3). In the second scene, protagonist Denise Winters is – in another foreshadowing – waiting by the window for her sister Michelle, who eventually arrives late and bonds with Denise's husband Daniel over hockey games and their shared dislike of "girls' night[s]" (6). Denise and Daniel seem happily married, but audiences realize through the following scenes that their life has been overshadowed by Michelle's disappearance five years ago. Since the stage directions do not offer any indications on the time structure, the plot unravels only gradually: we realize that Michelle was one of several dozens of the missing women whose cases have – with few exceptions – not been solved to the present day (cf. Code 2014; Levin 2016; Kurjata 2018). Thanks to social media (such as the #MMIW and the #AmINExt campaigns), other plays (such as Marie Clement's The Unnatural and Accidental Women, 2000), and art campaigns such as the Yukon Sisters in Spirit project (Code 2014), Jaime Black's ReDress Project, or the touring Walking With Our Sisters art installation (see La Flamme 2016), the issue has drawn international attention, and after Project E-PANA, a 2005 initiative of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to look into these unsolved murders, remained largely unsuccessful, the federal government also launched a National Inquiry in fall 2016 (cf. Sabo 2017; Kassam 2017).

When, in Barker's play, Denise begins investigating some of these cases, Daniel echoes the police's and the public's common reaction either by arguing that "these kinds of people" (52) probably invited assault by their "high-risk lifestyle" (51) or by trying to silence Denise entirely. Denise, on the contrary, provides a differentiated account and points to the factors of systemic neglect, poverty, lack of infrastructure, and gender...
inequality to give a voice to the victims, and so does Barker's play at large. The actress playing Michelle also embodies three other missing women, highlighting their common fate and the similarities between the cases. The perpetrators remain invisible, but their overbearing presence regularly punctuates the plot not only through the raped and beaten bodies of the victims, but through the recurrent expressionistic effects of the sounds and headlights of their transport trucks. Even though the characters are fictional and the names have been changed, the historical backgrounds are accurate and invite both remembrance of the missing women and an awareness of the underlying reverberations of political and social injustice.

This effect is crucially underlined by the play's temporal structure and epistemological framework. *The Hours That Remain* is only structured by "shift[s]" between scenes (9, 10, 12, 62) and "blackout[s]" (39, 44, 48) to defy linear time. In between flashbacks, encounters, and memories, we realize merely from the dialogue that substantial time has passed between the first scene and scene four, in which Michelle and Denise talk about an argument that Michelle had with Daniel. Even though this dialogue seems to happen only a few days after the opening scene, Daniel tells Denise that Michelle "disappeared over five years ago" (20), so that audiences will grapple with the contradiction between her presence on stage and the temporal frame. Evidently, Denise interacts with her sister as if she had never disappeared. On the one hand, Daniel's explanation of trauma-induced "hallucinations" (20) or "visions" (46) is coherent with a western understanding of reality and thus logical, but on the other hand, the actress playing Michelle (as well as the other victims) is present on stage, and the audience can see and hear her too. Reductive notions of linear time and of what is "real" (52) are continuously undermined, and it is only in the final scene that we come to understand – together with Denise – that she too has gone missing. "About a month ago," Daniel tells her with reference to scene three:

I walked into the kitchen and there you were, standing in your bathrobe. Singing without a care in the world like the last two years hadn't happened. I didn't know what to do so I stayed awake that night in case I was dreaming. But the next day you stayed, and then the next day came, and the next, and I kept on pretending like this was the way things had always been. (68)

The fact that she has, in fact, been dead for two years, evidently disappearing five years after her sister, explains (in retrospect) the odd gaps and "beat[s]" (10, 19-21, 33, 45) in the play when Denise is absent for "over two weeks" (33) or suddenly finds herself "at the police station" after an encounter with Michelle (44). Yet, Daniel – who initially represented a rational approach to reality – interacts with the supernatural figures of Denise and Michelle (and eventually admits that he has been able to see Michelle all along), before he can let go of them "as they take the long road home" (70). The play ends on a chorus of women, joined later by Daniel, who all sing Jimmie Davis's "You Are My Sunshine" before they fade. An "optional ending in the blackout" adds "a burst of celebration" to the lights' fading, "[l]ike when someone you haven't seen in a long time walks into a room full of family and friends" (72).

The violence of loss and death is counterbalanced, in the end, by a sense of hope, community, and belonging, but Daniel is left behind with a sense of "struggl[e]" (71)
even as the uncertainty has been cleared. Even the denouement that provides temporary understanding for the audience (which is withheld from the majority of the missing women's relatives until the present day) is deceptive: while suggesting order through the mathematical insight that, just as Michelle was the fourteenth victim, Denise was the seventeenth, this clarity is ultimately eroded by the timelessness of the framework. As the title suggests, the play is about an unspecified period of time, and Keith Barker explains this choice by referring to his own family: "My uncle lost both sons to suicide and he said, 'For those of us left behind, it's just the hours that remain’" (qtd. in Smith 2014). Beyond this experience of grief, and in connection with the play's non-linear structure, its gaps and supernatural presences, the title also foregrounds an Indigenous-centered system of knowledge, in which the past is not something spatially behind us. As Daniel David Moses explains with reference to the Tuva belief that "because they can't see the future, that it must be behind them" (2016, 247):

perhaps the past isn't quite present either for those of us with minds that turn with the circles. The past has already happened, after all. It's more like it's just a step to the side, events you make out in the periphery of your mind, which is perhaps another way of thinking about remembering. It's a reality that is always there for consideration, though as the spirals of the years you live extend and bend back, it does develop some layers, some foldings, the details are harder to remember, more eternal than infinite. (248)

The strong supernatural presences, the liminal space between life and death, and the non-linear structure of the play all contribute to this overall effect of centralizing and celebrating an Indigenous worldview, which has – from Tomson Highway's The Rez Sisters (1986) to Marie Clements's The Edward Curtis Project (2010), from Margo Kane's Moonlodge (1990) to Falen Johnson's Salt Baby (2013), or from Daniel David Moses's Brébeuf's Ghost (1996) to Jani Lauzon's A Side of Dreams (2015) – been at the heart of First Nations theater in Canada.

Continuities and Futures

Since 1986, when Cree pianist Tomson Highway installed the first piece of his (as yet unfinished) "Rez Septology" (2003, 152) – a cycle of seven plays set in the fictitious Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario – much has happened in the Native theatre scene in Canada. The Rez Sisters, a road play about seven women who travel to "the biggest bingo in the world" in Toronto (Highway 1988, 27) rose to instant international fame when it was presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1988, and subsequently "became the benchmark" of contemporary Native theatre (Nolan 2010). Like Barker's The Hours That Remain, The Rez Sisters is firmly rooted in an Indigenous cosmology, and it ends on a note of hope and conciliation beyond physical death. His sympathetic characters, his signature mix of Cree and English language elements, the presence of a trickster figure, the merging of quotidian and supernatural dimensions, as well as music and dance proved highly successful with both Native and non-Native audiences, even though some of the darker scenes—such as the rape of Nanabush with a crucifix in Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (1988) – did not spare audiences from a confrontation with colonial violence. Most importantly, however, all of Highway's work, including his more recent plays Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout...
(2005) and The (Post)Mistress (2010), unfolds from the principle of exchanging the serious Christian doctrine of genesis ("Let there be light") with the creative power of humor: "Let there be laughter" (Highway 2005, 165).

This sense of humor has also become the trademark of Drew Hayden Taylor, whose earlier plays Toronto at Dreamer's Rock (1989), Someday (1990), and alterNatives (1999) negotiate questions of Native identity and Canadian history while also merging witty dialogues and sharp political observations with forms of kitchen-sink comedy. More recently, his comedy Cerulean Blue (2014), about an intercultural blues band, also combines interpersonal conflicts (in this case in the music scene) with larger questions of identity: "Wow, you're all white," an Anishinaabe character remarks: "Playing the blues" (Taylor 2015, 25). Yet Joanne, the band's bass player, responds: "Excuse me, I'm not white. I'm Irish" (25). Another character in the play is described as "half French and half OCD" (2015, 39), stripping any essentialist identity politics of its (genetic) basis. The title as well as the theme allude to Taylor's previous "Blues quartet" (Taylor 2002, 7), a cycle of comedies begun with The Bootlegger Blues (1991) and The Baby Blues (1995) in the 1990s, which continued with The Buz'Gem Blues (2002) and The Berlin Blues (2007), all of which deconstruct stereotypes and ethnic markers of identity in Taylor's signature style of what Stephanie Wesley calls "hilarious and heartwarming" dialogues (2017). Taylor's most recent play, Crees in the Caribbean (FP 2015), uses the same techniques to explore the transnational and transhemispheric dimensions of Native identity; and he continues to be one of the most prominent voices of First Nations drama.

Next to Highway and Taylor, many of those playwrights who were part of the "Big Red Bang," as Drew Hayden Taylor calls the "sudden renaissance of Native theatre" (2016, 159) continue producing new work, including Shirley Cheechoo's Your Dream Was Mine (2005), Ian Ross's Bereav'd of Light (2005), or Yvette Nolan's The Unplugging (2012). If Drew Hayden Taylor has become particularly famous for his comedies, Marie Clements is probably the most radically experimental of contemporary First Nations playwrights in her translations of Indigenous knowledges into performative work. Her plays continuously eradicate boundaries between nations, between past and present, mythology and historiography, reality and representation, material and spiritual worlds, and between different media. In addition to her Unnatural and Accidental Women (2000), which is perfect complementary reading to Keith Barker's The Hours That Remain, her Burning Vision (2003) addresses environmental concerns (while also transhistorically inquiring into the bombing of Hiroshima); her Copper Thunderbird (2007) presents a biographical approach to Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau; and The Edward Curtis Project (2010) combines photography and drama in a multi-media approach to the nineteenth-century photographer. Like Tombs of the Vanishing Indian (2012), in which three sisters in the 1970s meet a character from the 1850s, The Edward Curtis Project merges historical time with the present, highlighting not only the permeability of temporal and spatial dimensions, but also perforating the contours of fixed human identities. As in many contemporary plays, a large number of

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3 OCD stands for obsessive-compulsive disorder, a mental disorder compelling people to perform a specific routine or activity at high intervals of repetition.
characters is played by a smaller number of actors; and instead of conventional acts and scenes, Clements relies on twenty-four “frame shifts” to structure her play.

Whereas questions of identity, colonial trauma, stereotypes, racism, and image control were at the heart of many plays in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1991) or Vera Manuel’s *The Strength of Indian Women* (1998), the 21st century has seen both a continuation of these themes (e.g., Margo Kane’s *Confessions of an Indian Cowboy*, 2001; Joseph Dandurand’s *Please Do Not Touch the Indians*, 2004; or Drew Hayden Taylor’s *God and the Indian*, 2014) as well as an expansion into other issues, including futurity (Daniel David Moses, *Kyotopolis*, 2009), the honoring of First Nations war veterans (De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig, *How Will You Remember Me?*, 2005), climate change (Yvette Nolan, *The Unplugging*, 2012), or transnationalism and global solidarity (DM St. Bernard, *Gas Girls*, 2010).

Even though it may have become easier to complement theatrical dialogues and action by using technological devices, such as video or image projections, there is an equally relevant number of highly successful plays that refrain entirely from using stage technology. One of these is the award-winning *Huff*, a “masterpiece” (Bimm 2017, n.p.) by Cree playwright and actor Cliff Cardinal, who is certainly among the most prominent of the recently emerged writers. In a cyclical form of monodrama, *Huff* unravels the harsh story of a dysfunctional First Nations family on an unnamed reserve: Wind, one of three brothers who try to come to terms with their mother’s death, has to deal with the disastrous long-term consequences of colonial history: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, domestic violence, racism, solvent abuse, the “reserve school system” (2017, 35), rape, and suicide. Without any technological effects, the play radically makes visible and then crosses the boundary between diegetic and extradiegetic spaces: the lights come up on Wind, played – like all other fifteen characters – by Cardinal himself, who has a plastic bag duct-taped tightly over his head, and his wrists handcuffed behind his back. “This is a suicide attempt,” he tells the audience: “I say ‘attempt’ but it’s looking pretty good” (2017, 6). After dramatic scenes of heavy breathing and apparent physical suffering, Wind walks toward the audience and asks for help with the removal of the bag: “Hey, can you get this off me? Seriously. This isn’t a metaphor. If you don’t help me I’ll suffocate right here” (2017, 6). As could be expected in a theater situation, the audience might not react immediately, so the effect is contingent upon the empathy of the spectators⁴ – who may take a while to realize the authenticity of the situation. By radically dismantling the fourth wall and involving audiences in the existential moment of life and death, Cardinal destroys all theatrical illusion to highlight the need for human compassion and moral courage, regardless of cultural conventions. Like Keith Barker’s *The Hours That Remain*, *Huff* thus merges its negotiations of historical legacies with an unmistakable appeal to audience members’ sense of ethical and political responsibility.

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⁴ In Native Earth Performing Arts’s performance on October 10, 2015, no audience member at the Aki theatre moved at first, until Cardinal repeatedly told them the bag was, in actual fact, airtight.
Conclusion

Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), where Huff was performed in 2015, is certainly one of the most visible hubs of contemporary First Nations theatre, but it is not the only one. Native plays are produced by mainstream theatres, including Theatre Passe Muraille (Toronto), 25th Street Theatre (Saskatoon), the Great Canadian Theatre Company (Ottawa), or Magnus Theatre (Thunder Bay), but a remarkable number of Indigenous companies and festivals have dedicated themselves to the development and production of Native work. In addition to NEPA, whose “Weesageechak Begins to Dance” festival also crucially supports the development of new plays, the more prominent First Nations theatre companies include De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig (“Debaj”) on Manitoulin Island, Full Circle, Spirit Song Native Theatre, Urban Ink (all Vancouver, BC), Gildas Box of Treasures Theatre (Campbell River, BC), the Sen’klip Native Theatre Company (Vernon, BC), Red Roots Theatre (Winnipeg, MB), Keewatin Native Dance Theatre (Keewatin, AB), Nakai Theatre Company (Whitehorse, YT), Gwaandak Theatre (Whitehorse, YT), Ondinnok (Montréal, QC), the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company (renamed Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre in 2015; Saskatoon, SK), and Takwakin Performance Lab (Regina, SK/Toronto, ON). This variety of companies across urban and rural locations also represents a broad range of different production styles: for instance, De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig (Anishinaabe for ‘people who tell stories’), founded in 1984 on the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, have developed their own creation process, termed "4D" or "Four Directions:" Beginning with an idea rather than a written script, the process of improvisation and collective storytelling goes through four phases, "Resource–Script–Revision–Performance," a cycle that begins again after every production (Schäfer 2001, 173; cf. King-Odjig 1996). This holistic approach "means we recognize that we create with our entire selves – our emotional, our physical, our intellectual, and our spiritual selves" (Hengen 2007, 67). Through this process, the theatre company seeks to explore modes of self-expression for the "next generation," as Joe Osawabine emphasizes: "We acknowledge our past but look to the future. Native theatre now is more about hope for the future than it is about hardships of the past" (Hengen 2007, 82).

The consequences of settler colonialism, the legacy of residential schools and forced adoption, as well as historical dispossession and issues of sovereignty continue to play a strong role on contemporary Native stages. However, these issues have been modified and expanded into a stronger orientation toward dialogue and reconciliation in more recent years. With reference to the Seven Fire Prophecies of the Anishinaabe, Algonquin playwright Yvette Nolan calls this phase the "Eighth Fire" in Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture: "The eighth fire is an extension of the prophecies, a suggestion and a wish that now is the time for the Indigenous people and the settler communities to work together to achieve justice, to live together in a good way" (2015, 117). Just as Denise realizes at the end of The Hours That Remain that she "ha[s] to let go" in order to complete her transition (Barker 2013, 70), non-Native audiences will have to realize that a just and peaceful future requires responsibility and respect toward Indigenous rights and Indigenous knowledges. The Truth and Reconciliation process has been an important step on this path, and the website of the
National Center for Truth and Reconciliation, which opened in Winnipeg in 2015, also emphasizes this forward orientation: “The Future is Ours to Create” (2018). In the ongoing project of this Eighth-Fire future, First Nations theatre has made substantial contributions to “liv[ing] together in a good way” (Nolan 2015, 117), and it is not only for this reason that it continues to hold a central position within Canadian drama and Canadian literature at large.

**Works Cited**


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