

HANAY GEIOGAMAH'S BODY INDIAN, FOGHORN AND 49: THREE NATIVE AMERICAN PLAYS THAT REINFORCE INDIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many American theater plays have been published about Indians over the centuries. However, although they are relevant to the study of the image of Native³ peoples in drama and on the stage, they basically reflect different stereotypes and distorted perspectives about Indians. As Wilmeth (2000) explains, those American dramatists (only a small number of them were Indians), “did little honestly and objectively to depict the Native American but created their own image of what an Indian was, reflecting most often their own values and beliefs” (p. 128).

Fortunately, with the creation of contemporary Native American theater, Indian playwrights have had the chance to present their cultures, customs, traditions and lifestyles from a real and authentic approach. At the same time, contemporary Native theater has also become an excellent vehicle for Indian playwrights to encourage their people to better know themselves and their cultures in order to search for a strong Indian identity⁴ within themselves, while also contributing to the preservation and perpetuation of Native American cultures.

Therefore, in this work we provide first a brief historical background regarding contemporary Native theater and then we proceed to analyze three plays by the Kiowa-Delaware playwright Hanay Geiogamah. As will be seen, these theater plays present authentic Indian concerns and serve as excellent examples to encourage American

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3. The terms Native American, American Indian, Indian and indigenous will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter. However, the specific tribal names will be used when possible.

4. For a study of the origin of Indian identity and its historical evolution since Europeans' arrival to the New World until the 1970s, see Hazel W. Hertzberg's *The Search for An American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (1971). In addition, for a study of Indian identity in contemporary society, Eva Marie Garrouette's *Real Indians: Identity and the survival of Native America* (2003) serves as an excellent example of the many ways in which American Indians think and speak about their Native identities.

Indians to search for their Native identities within themselves.

2. OBJETIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this work is to present contemporary Native American theater as a historical, literary, and cultural vehicle to learn about indigenous cultures, traditions and customs from a real and authentic approach, while leaving aside the false images created by white stereotyping toward Indians. For this purpose, we will make use of both a historical and literary approach. To start with, we will deal with a concise historical background in which American theater about Indians will be briefly touched upon in order to reflect white stereotyping and misperceptions about Native cultures. After this, we will focus on the emergence of contemporary Native theater and explain about some of its characteristics. Finally, we will provide a concise literary analysis of three Native plays, *Body Indian*, *Foghorn* and *49*, by Kiowa-Delaware playwright Hanay Geiogamah. The aim of this literary analysis is to deal with how the Native playwright captures the need for Indians to abandon the stereotypes that have been created around their cultures, while encouraging them to walk towards a firm and consolidated indigenous identity, which is clearly based on Native traditions, and that will help ensure Indian cultural existence.

3. BRIEF HISTORICAL BRACKGROUND

The misrepresentation of Native Americans and their lifestyles can be observed through the wide variety of literary works that the white man has produced since his arrival to the American continent. As Wilmeth (2000) points out, "Native Americans from the white man's first encounter were seen only from their biased and distorted perspective and over the centuries" (p. 128). Such is the case of the multiple theater plays about Indians that were published by Euro-American writers, and which have become clear examples of white stereotyping and misperceptions about Indian cultures "dominated by the noble savage, the villainous red devil, and the Indian princess or pathetic maiden, with few of these types portrayed as real people having distinctive personalities" (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 150).

Although the first American theater plays about Indians seem to date from the late 18th century, Wilmeth (2000) affirms that the introduction of the Indian character to North America took place through Indian roles in French masques and plays in the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition, it is important to take into consideration the influence of British drama for the development of American plays about Indians as it was "the impact of British drama on early American playwrights, such as Thomas Morton's *Columbus; or, A World Discovered* (1792), and the first of many Columbus plays that ultimately led to the introduction of the Indian in indigenous American drama" (Wilmeth, 2000, p. 128-129).

Consequently, the presence of Indian characters in American theater plays became a popular tendency since the 18th century. Numerous plays about Indians (see Wilmeth, 2000) were published by white authors with little knowledge about the reality of Native

Americans, who generally perceived Indians in European terms, and with much focus on senseless Indian stereotypes. However, although these plays have proved to be significant and relevant for the study of American Indians on stage and in theater, they did not deal with authentic Native concerns (López Pérez, 2020).

Fortunately, with the creation of contemporary Native American theater, the Indian of the white man started to be left aside in order to present a real and authentic approach to Native Americans. This literary genre emerged in the second half of the 20th century during the so-called Native American Renaissance (Lincoln, 1983), and it was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which contributed to the reawakening of Native cultures. At the same time, the Red Power also had an impact on the beginnings of contemporary Native theater since it was a period of significant Native political and social activism, which resulted in a series of incidents and ethnic movements (see Nagel, 1997) that favored American Indian cultural traditions.

Contrary to American theater about Indians, “Native theater is theater that is written by natives, and performed by native, tribal, indigenous, American Indian, Native American actors. It comes from a native voice and perspective” (Howe, 1995, p. 63). Thanks to the emergence of this contemporary genre, different indigenous theater companies were created (see Däwes, 2007; Heath, 1995; López Pérez & Benali Taouis, 2022), and they produced multiple Native American plays by indigenous writers that were later collected in collections and anthologies (see Däwes, 2020; López Pérez & Benali Taouis, 2016). All these theater plays deal with authentic Indian concerns and present American Indian traditions, customs, lifestyles and cultures from a real approach. This proliferation of Native plays has brought about a significant body of research on the field and different initiatives (see Däwes, 2020; López Pérez & Benali Taouis, 2016), which help promote the genre and explore new themes, while also contributing to giving more visibility to a literary genre which has been overlooked over the years, and that “has much to offer to the North American literary and cultural landscape” (Däwes, 2020, p. 424).

4. HANAY GEIOGAMAH'S *BODY INDIAN*, *FOGHORN* AND *49*

Hanay Geiogamah is one of the most important Native playwrights in the United States and a fundamental figure in the development of contemporary Indian theater (López Pérez & Benali Taouis, 2016). His *New Native American Drama : Three Plays* (1980) is the first published collection of theater plays by an Indian dramatist, and it includes three remarkable pieces, *Body Indian* (1972), *Foghorn* (1973) and *49* (1975). *Body Indian*, the first play included in this collection and produced the Native American Theater Ensemble (NATE) in 1972, focuses on the devastating effects of alcohol among Indians. Geiogamah's first play is crowded with scenes in which alcohol dangerously turns Indian characters into cruel individuals who are completely unaware of their sad reality and their conflictive situation. Collapsed from several days of drinking, Geiogamah's Indian characters are presented as completely incapable of establishing a solid relationship with each other. For this reason, in the “Author's Notes” the Kiowa-Delaware dramatist cautions the reader not to interpret this play as a “primarily study of the problem of Indian alcoholism” (p. 8), since the disrupted relationships among the characters prove

to be a problem of major concern in the lives of Native Americans and in the play itself.

Instead of supporting each other to overcome the effects of alcoholism and the hard difficulties in their lives, Geiogamah's Indian characters continuously avoid each other and refuse any possible progress to improve themselves, while contributing to their own separation and isolation from their tribal society. This situation leads to a continuous internal disintegration of the Indian community, an aspect that contributes to endangering the concept of unity that has characterized Native American cultures over centuries. In contrast to such disintegration, the Indian characters in the play are united only by their addiction to alcohol and their actions are reduced to their anxious need to have more alcoholic drinks. In this sense, one can agree with Pinazzi's idea that Indians are "united only by the feeling of being the white man's victims" (p. 182). In the play, Geiogamah's Indians appear as a group of people definitely overcome by the white man's image of what an Indian was, while abandoning the struggle for the preservation of Native American cultures and the right for a voice to speak for and about themselves. In addition to these feelings of victimization, the indigenous characters in *Body Indian* also seem to be united by their unconscious need to remain together in a community that is suffering from an internal fragmentation. In this sense, alcohol could become a sort of excuse for the gathering of these Indians, which seems to turn this theater play into a sad story, since it is only through alcohol that Native Americans are able to remain together, while lacking a real sense of strength and reliance on their indigenous heritage.

As the play progresses, the reader becomes aware of Indians' absolute unawareness of the way in which they abuse and degrade each other. They struggle to have more alcohol, they do not offer their help for those who collapse after each drink, and they are neither interested in improving their own situation nor in allowing others to improve. Instead, they can only think about getting more money to buy alcoholic drinks. These egotistic reactions are especially noticed through the indigenous characters' abuse towards Bobby Lee, the main character in Geiogamah's play. Bobby is presented as an encouraging Indian, whose eagerness to enter a rehabilitation program for alcoholics, presents him as the only Native American character who wants to overcome his addiction to alcohol and to search for a new life within his Indian identity. Although his efforts should be considered as excellent examples of Native Americans' strength and need to overcome such a precarious situation, Bobby's comrades cannot understand his friend's reasons because of their inability to see a way out without their addiction to alcohol. Such incapability to see can be related to one of the themes "pervading all of Geiogamah's work", which coincides with the fact that "whites refuse to see, and therefore condemn to invisibility, anything that does not answer their expectations" (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 180). This aspect seems to provoke a metaphorical blindness of Geiogamah's Indian characters.

Towards the end of the play, this blindness disappears for Bobby when he becomes aware of the hard injustices and atrocities that his friends have committed against him. In fact, the addiction to alcohol of Geiogamah's Indians in the play go as far as removing Bobby's artificial leg in order to get his money to buy more wine. This atrocity becomes even more cruel when it is known that the money that Bobby hides in his leg is intended for his rehabilitation program. Thus, at the end of the play Bobby ironically repeats the

sentence that his supposed comrades had used to welcome him at his arrival to the gathering in order to make a contrast between his comrades' pleasant welcome and their ultimate abandonment: "Well, h - ell - o . Bobby Lee. How are you, hites? Lo - ng time no . . . see" (*Body Indian*, p. 44).

Although Bobby's awareness of his comrades' betrayal and his own loneliness seem to suggest a sad and destructive future for him, these aspects can be interpreted as providing Bobby with a new strength to overcome his horrible situation and to start a new life leaving aside his addiction to alcohol and those weak Indians who have not shown the courage to leave the Indian of the white man. As Huntsman (1980) explains, Bobby's suffered injustice at his comrades' hands, but "his suffering has been redemptive, and this realization ultimately makes *Body Indian* a play of optimism and triumph" (p. xvii). Bobby is left alone, and this allows him to reflect on what Native Americans have unconsciously become, while also offering him the opportunity to heal and to find the real essence of his Indian identity within himself. This aspect could also reflect Geiogamah's intention or desire to bring about change and healing through theater: "Theatre, to me, is probably the most peaceful form of resistance against a colonial government. There's no bloodshed. That's the reason I do theatre, to bring about change. To bring about the healing process. But also, to enrich human beings" (Stoudt, 2005, p. 60).

In Geiogamah's *Foghorn*, the second play that the Kiowa-Delaware playwright includes in his first collection of theater plays, the need to reflect on what the Indian has become and the importance for Native Americans to have a better knowledge about themselves and about their identity turn also into aspects of serious relevance to be developed by the indigenous dramatist. Although *Foghorn* is presented as a play mainly focused on the presentation of Indian stereotypes throughout history, Native Americans have to overcome white stereotyping, while searching for the real aspects of their indigenous cultures and identity as Indians.

Primarily composed of different episodes within the history of Euro-American and Indian affairs, such as the arrival of Christopher Columbus, the Trail of Tears, the reservation period, American education policy and the incidents at Wounded Knee, the play becomes an accurate exposition "of the most persistent stereotypes" (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 184). According to the different scenes and periods in Euro-American domination, different and various pejorative terms are used in order to illustrate white stereotyping. Just to cite some examples, it is especially interesting to notice whites' characterization of Native Americans as "filthy savages, murderers and scalpers" (*Foghorn*, p. 52) at the time of Columbus' landing in America, which is a similar portrayal that the American teacher presents when making reference to Indian children as "squaws", "bucks", "savages", "deaf" and "dumb" (*Foghorn*, p. 58-59).

Even though the long list of Indian stereotypes continues throughout the play, Geiogamah does not intend to deal with a serious attack on white stereotyping because his intentions do not aim at offending white society for the creation of such distorted and prejudiced views. Rather, he states in the "Author's Notes" that such stereotypes are "pushed to the point of absurdity", and that "the satire proceeds by playful mockery than bitter denunciation" (p. 49). Such mockery is especially noticed through the different

comic and humorous scenes that Geiogamah presents in his play. Just to cite some examples, there is a scene in which a Roman Catholic nun, who has come to show God's wisdom to Native Americans, carries a cross made of paper money (*Foghorn*, p. 57). Another comic episode refers to the romantic encounter between Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas, in which the English settler is ridiculed through Pocahontas' account of his sudden impotence (*Foghorn*, p. 62-65). These scenes of the play in which humor is used are in line with Huntsman's (1980) affirmation that Geiogamah presents "these stereotypes in a new light, twisting them into new configurations and helping audiences exorcise them with knowledgeable laughter" (p. xviii). In addition, this aspect also makes reference to the importance of humor in Native theater as it can be considered as one of the principal textual devices that the Kiowa-Delaware dramatist makes use of in his Native plays (Čerče, 2020).

In contrast to the extended list of Indian stereotypes, Geiogamah also introduces a scene⁵ in which Native Americans are portrayed in completely idealistic terms when making reference to their physical appearance. In this sense, American Indians are described as having "lovely, stoic faces", "beautiful facial lines" and "beautiful costumes" (*Foghorn*, p. 68). However, Geiogamah does not want to be judgmental about those Indian haters who present derogatory Indian stereotypes, and neither does he want to praise Indian lovers for those romantic perceptions of Native Americans. Instead, the Kiowa-Delaware playwright intends to encourage American Indians to search for a real and authentic portrayal of themselves. Although Geiogamah does not explicitly state such intention, the development of his play seems to walk towards Native Americans' search for their own identity within themselves, leaving aside those offensive and idealistic characterizations created by the white man.

In preparing Indians for such process, Geiogamah firstly have Native Americans confront the multiple stereotypes created by white society over the centuries. This confrontation can be considered as Geiogamah's interest in making American Indians reflect on their own past in order to illustrate how Native Americans and their cultures, traditions and lifestyles have been mistakenly defined by the white man. In addition, although the Kiowa-Delaware dramatist presents those stereotypes as the result of whites' distorted and prejudiced perspectives, American Indians' confrontation with such stereotypes can also be suggesting Geiogamah's intention to make Indians aware of their own acceptance of such misconceptions and stereotypes.

Apart from this, Geiogamah's presentation of Indian stereotypes can also be embracing the dramatist's warning against the danger of such stereotypes for both the present and future of Native Americans. As Pinazzi (2000) explains, *Foghorn* "is also an invitation for Indians to question their own past and present in order to challenge that destiny of a

⁵. The scene that Geiogamah chooses in order to make reference to the idealistic perspectives of those Indian lovers is presented through the caricature of the First Lady pronouncing a speech about America's intentions to declare one of the West Indian reservations a national park (*Foghorn*, p. 68-69). During her discourse, it is especially important to notice that although the First Lady presents herself as a clear romantic Indian lover, it is evident that she is just acting according to America's intentions to appropriate from Indian lands.

vanishing race which history seems to have decreed" (p. 184). The destiny that Pinazzi mentions is probably what the future beholds for American Indians if they make no efforts to search for their Indian identity within themselves, which is the ultimate message that Geiogamah seems to be entailing in the development of his play. Native Americans have long been the victims of white stereotyping; therefore, the Kiowa-Delaware playwright seems to be seeking to provoke a reaction on his Indian people to search for the real nature of their Native culture and identity.

A more urgent need for the creation of a strong Indian identity is revealed in Geiogamah's *49*, the last work in the first collection of Native theater plays by the Kiowa-Delaware dramatist. *49* can be considered both a traditional and contemporary play in the sense that it is developed through "two different temporal levels, past and present" (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 185), which ultimately come together as a unique way to overcome the time of division and disruption provoked by the white man's presence. Although both different temporal levels can suggest the idea of an individual interpretation, they are widely interrelated and therefore, the need for their analysis as parallel sequences is clearly evident.

The traditional scenes that Geiogamah includes in his play are presented through the character of Night Walker, a holy man and tribal leader who encourages Indians to maintain their cultural and traditional values throughout time. At the same time, this spiritual leader is also an observer of the 49⁶, an Indian social event that Geiogamah uses to make reference to the present and to contemporary issues in the lives of Native Americans. The participation of Night Walker in past events and his observation of what is happening in contemporary society clearly reflects the interrelation and connection of both different temporal levels. In the past sequence, Night Walker appears as a holy man whose main objective is to prepare his Indian people, especially those younger generations, for future "times of division, wandering, and grief" (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 186). At the same time, he is also able to observe the attempts to break the celebration of the 49 during the present sequence. Surrounded by the young tribespeople, Night Walker moves within the ceremonial area, and he delivers a long prayer in which he presents his preoccupation about what the future can hold for his people, while preparing them "for a loss that will be like death to [Indian] people" (*49*, p. 103).

In addition, he introduces the presence of two traditional Indian personalities, Singing Man⁷ and Weaving Woman⁸, in order to teach young Indians about the importance of

⁶ In his introduction to Geiogamah's *New Native American Drama: Three Plays* (1980), Huntsman defines the 49 as "a contemporary social event" and as "a time when Indian people, mostly young, gather for a night of singing, dancing, and conversation, predictably leavened, like most parties everywhere, by the promise of intoxicants and sex. The point of the 49s is not chiefly that it is Bacchanalian but that it is a chosen time for meeting and enjoyment, for a renewing of strength and identity" (p. xx).

⁷ Singing Man teaches the young tribespeople about the importance of the drum as a significant element brought by Earth Mother (*49*, p. 112). As a complement to young Indians' instruction, Singing Man also talks about the importance of songs for the perpetuation of Native cultures, while encouraging his Indian people to sing and learn songs as a way to perpetuate cultural transmission (*49*, p. 111-16).

traditional and cultural values through storytelling. The stories presented by these two indigenous characters seem to help young Indians to better know themselves and their cultural heritage as they also open a path for the consolidation of their identities as Indians. Meanwhile, Night Walker, with his shamanistic powers, is allowed to see the incidents⁹ which occur during the celebration of the 49, and that contribute to threatening the cultural continuity of this Indian gathering.

Although in this case both past and present events appear as interacting at the same time, it is precisely because of such interactions that the different events are disrupted. In this sense, this disruption seems to provoke a fragmentation within the whole development of both past and present sequences, an aspect that could be suggesting the disruption of Indian cultural continuity or even the internal division of indigenous communities as a consequence of the influence of white society. According to such interpretation, a parallelism between the lives of Native Americans and the narrative technique of Geiogamah's play can be established. American Indians were not able to continue with the development of their Native cultures and traditions partly because of the obstacles presented by the white domineering society, thus contributing to the destruction and fragmentation of part of Indian cultures. A similar process can be noticed in the narrative structure of Geiogamah's play in the sense that both past and present events cannot be completely developed because of the continuous interaction of both temporal levels, which seems to provoke a disruption associated with the lives of Native Americans. Thus, as Čerče (2000) explains, it can be safe to say that Geiogamah's most consistent theme in his theater plays makes reference to "the past in the present, the past bearing down upon the present" (p. 4).

Towards the end of 49, such disruption disappears when Night Walker encourages both the young tribespeople and the Indians at the 49 to join all together in order to reinforce their union and create a strong identity base for their cultural survival. In this sense, Geiogamah's Indian characters create a strong barrier which does not allow the police officers to break their Native cultural heritage, and Night Walker supports and encourages them by reminding all of them who they are, their Native traditions, and also the fact that they must remain together and get prepared for the future:

NIGHT WALKER

Go!

⁸. Weaving Woman teaches a group of young Indian girls about the relevance of weaving unique designs for the preservation of their indigenous cultures. She firstly advises them to use mind and memory before such designs are on the rug because these are essential factors that can ensure the existence of Native American cultures (49, p. 115-16).

⁹. The police officers' continuous attempts to break this social event, the fight between two young Indians at the meeting (49, p. 93-94), and the outrageous discussion between two young girls who have a car accident while heading for this social event (49, p. 116-19), put in danger the celebration of the 49 in the play.

Go forward!
The tribe needs you.
I go with you.
I am always with you.
We are a tribe!
Of singers.
Of dancers who move with the grace of the bird.
Of people who know color.

Of weavers.
Of good hunters.
We pray.
We are a tribe!
Of people with strong hearts.
Who respect fear
As we make our way.
Who will never kill
Another man's way of living

The presentation of these two different stories through different temporal levels and their ultimate unification can be interpreted as Geiogamah's intention to provoke a reaction within the mind of Native Americans. In other words, the fragmentation of the two stories in different points of time could be associated to Indians' disruptive situation after the oppression of white society, whereas the unity that the Kiowa-Delaware playwright proposes can be encouraging American Indians to develop a strong disposition to overcome such obstacles. By coming all together, Native Americans show their strength as an Indian community, while coming to the traditional concept of unity that has so much characterized Indian cultures. In this sense, this return to unity paves the way for the consolidation of a strong Indian identity which ensures Native American cultural continuity. As Weaver (1997) explains, Indian authors "prepare the ground for the recovery and even recreation of Native American identity and culture" (p. 43), an aspect that can be clearly perceived in Geiogamah's 49.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the centuries, the image of American Indians has been more often than less a cultural construction of the white man, whose misperceptions and biased perspectives have led to an endless list of Indian stereotypes. These stereotypes soon started to

appear in the numerous American theater plays about Native Americans, whose writers offered a limited knowledge about Indians, which resulted in an unreal representation of American Indian cultures, traditions and lifestyles.

Fortunately, with the creation of a contemporary Indian theater, Native dramatists have been able to offer a real image of American Indians through their multiple theater plays. In addition, and in the case of Geiogamah's first collection of plays, American Indians are encouraged to abandon and disentangle the misperceptions that white stereotyping has created in the mind of the Indian, while searching for an indigenous identity within themselves. This process can be said to embrace the return to traditional Indian heritage in order for Native Americans to recover their identity, while they adapt themselves to modern times.

Thus, Native American theater becomes an excellent historical, literary and cultural vehicle to encourage Indians to search for their identity, while clearly opening the path for the perpetuation of American Indian cultures. This path towards the preservation and continuation of Native cultures can be possible through a literary genre that allows for a combination of both tradition (coming from Native oral traditions and performance) and modernity (coming from Euro-American style of theater, that is, play-writing), which could be considered to reinforce a firm Indian identity that can ensure Native cultural existence.

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