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## Indigenous Theatre as Resistance: Toronto as a Nexus for Canada's Burgeoning Indigenous Theatre Scene from Late 1980s to Early 1990s

Direnış Olarak Yerli Tiyatrosu: 1980'lerin Sonundan 1990'ların Başına  
Kanada'nın Gelişmekte Olan Yerli Tiyatro Sahnesinin Bir Merkezi Olarak  
Toronto

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### Abstract

The late 1980s and early 1990s were times of great development for the Indigenous Theatre scene in Toronto, Canada's largest city. This paper seeks to provide a closer look at the development of an Indigenous Theatre scene, a space on the fringes of traditional and hegemonic Canadian cultural production. This space, created by and for Indigenous creatives, made space for Indigenous voices and storytelling that did not yet exist to such a degree across Canada. The creation of this space led to the expansion of Indigenous Theatre across Canada and North America, as well as established mainstream interest and space for Indigenous voices, something that was felt through Indigenous activism of this time. By taking a closer look at Canada's first Indigenous Theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts, which is based in Toronto, as well as analyzing two fundamental texts, Drew Hayden Taylor's (Curve Lake First Nations) *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* and Daniel David Moses' (Delaware/Tuscarora) *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, this paper will trace the common themes in these two texts that were prevalent in the work of this time, as well as unpack the connection these plays have to place, specifically in their relation to Toronto and the Indigenous Theatre scene there.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Theatre, Canadian Theatre, Toronto (1980-1990), Native Earth Performing Arts, Theatre as Resistance

## Öz

1980'lerin sonu ve 1990'ların başı, Kanada'nın en büyük şehri olan Toronto'daki Yerli Tiyatro sahnesi için büyük bir gelişme dönemi idi. Bu makale, geleneksel ve hegemonik Kanada kültürel üretiminin sınırlarında bir alan olan Yerli Tiyatro sahnesinin gelişimine daha yakından bakmayı amaçlamaktadır. Yerli yaratıcıların kendileri için oluşturduğu bu alan, Kanada genelinde henüz bu ölçüde yer alamayan Yerli seslere ve hikâye anlatımına yer açmıştır. Bu alanın yaratılması, Yerli Tiyatrosu'nun Kanada ve Kuzey Amerika'da genişlemesine yol açmış ve aynı zamanda Yerli aktivizmi aracılığıyla hissedilen Yerli seslere yönelik ana akım ilgi ve alan oluşturmuştur. Bu çalışmada Kanada'nın ilk yerli tiyatro topluluğu olan Toronto merkezli Native Earth Performing Arts daha yakından incelenerek, Drew Hayden Taylor'ın (Curve Lake First Nations) *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* ve Daniel David Moses'ın (Delaware/Tuscarora) *Almighty Voice and His Wife* adlı oyunları analiz edilecektir. Ayrıca bu makale bu iki metinde o dönemin çalışmalarında yaygın olan ortak temaların izini sürmeyi ve bu oyunların özellikle Toronto ve oradaki Yerli Tiyatro sahnesiyle olan ilişkileri bağlamında mekânla olan bağlantılarını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yerli Tiyatrosu, Kanada Tiyatrosu, Toronto (1980-1990), Native Earth Performing Arts, Direniş Olarak Tiyatrosu

## Introduction

Prolific Cree playwright, Tomson Highway, once described Indigenous Theatre as “the articulation of the dreamworld of [Indigenous] people” (Highway, 2016, p. 24). Theatre's capacity for interaction between actor and audience, ability to mimic or transcend real life, and the creative playing with time make it a unique mode for Indigenous writers to capture their community-specific epistemology for an audience. One of the largest theatre movements arose out of Toronto. The encompassing Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) comprises nearly a quarter of the country's population and has become both an urban centre and the locus for hegemonic cultural production in what is colonially called Canada. It was and continues to be home to some of Canada's largest publishing houses and theatre companies. Specifically, the Indigenous Theatre scene, defined by Highway as being “theatre that is written, performed, and produced by Native people themselves and theatre that speaks out on the culture and the lives of this country's Native people” (Highway, 2016, p. 22), found its footing in Toronto in the early 1980s.

The work of playwrights such as Tomson Highway (Cree), Daniel David Moses (Delaware/Tuscarora), and Drew Hayden Taylor (Curve Lake First Nations), among so

many others, was crucial to this burgeoning theatre scene from the late 1980s to early 1990s. Stemming from this was the inception of Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), the first Indigenous Theatre company in Canada, which was based in downtown Toronto. Also around this time, the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster (CRET) was founded by Highway, Moses, and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Neyaashiinigmiing), also in Toronto. These writers and playwrights were all seeking new spaces for their work outside mainstream creative outlets in the Canadian writing scene, where there was such little space for Indigenous voices. Opportunities on the fringes of these mainstream structures allowed these writers to create space and have the freedom to write, perform, transmit, and workshop their creative materials. At this time, some common themes in these works included: land sovereignty and Indigenous land rights, the aftermath of colonial imposition (including the Indian Residential School (IRS) system, addiction, and intergenerational trauma), as well as the importance of community. While these foundational writers engaged in other genres, drama was particularly prevalent among them for its ability to encapsulate story through movement, performance, and the dynamism of live theatre.

This work's hyperfocus on place is necessary since land is at the centre of Indigenous-settler relations. The main epistemological difference between these two groups stems from how they view their relationship to the land. Land is also central to conversations of colonialism as "the land is what colonialism seeks to turn into a commodity for power and profit" (Barker & Battell Lowman, p. 84). Before settler imposition in Southern Ontario, both the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe had a claim to the land that would later become the City of Toronto. Some oral histories consider the Mississaugas' claim to this land as "based on their leasing the area from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy" since this "sharing space was a normal thing to do" (p. 109). Southern Ontario, but especially the City of Toronto, is a unique place. Hayden King (Beausoleil First Nation) sees it as "the heart of empire in Anishinaabe Aki [land], [and a] source of the flood of colonialism that moved through time and across space, bringing a physical infrastructure with it, but also a narrative of radiating 'progress'" (King, 2021, p. 9).

While considering early Indigenous Theatre in Toronto, I will use questions to guide my thinking such as: How can creative production create space for Indigenous voices, presence, and resistance? How can Indigenous authors make space for their

work within dominant hegemonic cultural frameworks that are inherently oppositional to their Indigenous worldviews? In what ways are politics and the arts enmeshed? How can I look at Indigenous texts as a settler-scholar ethically and in a way that honours Indigenous voices and their community-specific contexts?

## **Methodology**

To situate myself in this work, I am a settler-scholar of Greek decent and Canadian citizenship. I am conducting this research and writing in Mississauga and Hamilton, Ontario, two cities within the GTHA that have been built on the displacement and disenfranchisement of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. Acknowledging my position as a settler-scholar, ethical scholarship is at the fore of my research praxis, as I take care to read these texts within their own community-specific frameworks so as to not exert scholarly 'authority' over them, but rather listen to what they might teach me and broker a conversation between other regional texts.

I am constantly looking for ways to make my work more ethical, to keep myself distant but engaged with Indigenous texts, and to find community-specific frameworks to analyze Indigenous texts with, rather than pulling them out of their context and applying my Euro-Western belief systems and generic conventions to them. Willie Ermine (Cree) asks "how do we reconcile worldviews?" when considering his concept of the ethical space of engagement as a mode for "configuring ethical/moral/legal principles in cross-cultural cooperation" (Ermine, 2007, p. 201). One way to do this is to keep stories grounded in cultural perspectives and to offer space for Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories, as Lisa C. Ravensbergen (Ojibwe/Swampy Cree) suggests (Robinson, 2016, p. 189). There is a need for cultural specificity; non-Indigenous scholars can participate in this kind of scholarship through frameworks that make this space possible. It is necessary, especially when engaging in decolonial practices of literature studies, that you "enter into an ethical relationship that requires respect, attentiveness, [and] intellectual rigor" (Justice, 2004, p. 9, qtd. from McKegney, 2008, p. 64).

Returning to the suitability of theatre to do this work, I would like to centralize the uniqueness of theatre as a genre in its ability to combine the written, oral, and performative aspects of creative production, while also making space for playwrights and actors to break the form. We can connect the importance of Indigenous Theatre

to what Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) sees as an Indigenous North American “oral story or performance art and poetic tradition that precedes [Indigenous] literary tradition” (Maracle, 2010, p. 77). In this way, theatre is connected to and building from Indigenous oral traditions, while also acting as a kind of resistance to the Euro-Western form and history of theatre.

### ***Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) and Indigenous Theatre in Toronto***

In the 1980s, Highway and Daniel David Moses (Delaware/Tuscarora) were living, writing, and producing their work in Toronto through Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), an Indigenous Theatre company that was created in 1982 (“History,” 2019). In Canada, this was a time for collectivizing of minds, drawing together artists who fit into Canada’s hegemonic ideal of what an artist is and what they can make art about. For those in the margins of hegemonic creative production, they had to fight to get a seat at that table. To combat this, Indigenous creators took it upon themselves to create spaces for their voices to be heard. Keeshig-Tobias rejects the appropriation by non-Indigenous authors who “construct[ed] Native voices, by speaking for the other, she argues, they co-opt the other, and their subtexts remain those of mainstream culture” (New, 1990, p. 6-7). Pushing this further, we can see Indigenous Theatre taking shape and carving out spaces for Indigenous voices and representation that go against the grain of hegemonic writing spaces. We can see this as a decentralizing of the writing community in Toronto, but as something that will eventually trickle across Canada and North America.

By 1991, Moses was acting as Playwright-in-Residence at NEPA to produce *Coyote City*, a title Highway previously held when writing *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) (Preston, 1992, p. 154). By the time Moses was writing in 1991, “contemporary Native theatre was less than a decade old” (Nolan, 2009, p. i). Indigenous Theatre became an outlet for Indigenous artists to express their worldview and transcend some of the limitations of other genres. Highway felt that the stage was best suited for this work, over any other kind of creative production, because he felt that “oral tradition translates most easily and most effectively into a three dimensional medium . . . taking the ‘stage’ that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing—using words, actors, lights, sound—onto the stage in a theatre” (Highway, 2016, p. 22). Since much of Indigenous Theatre deals

with significant spiritual elements, the stakes for this work are high. For Indigenous playwrights, it is their job to articulate a specific epistemological framework while making it digestible and entertaining for an audience, all while not overselling or commodifying their culture, spirituality, or peoples' experiences. It is the space of the theatre that these stakes can be raised effectively and ethically. Highway believes "the mythology of a people is the articulation of the dreamworld of that people; without that dreamlife being active in all its forms . . . [the] culture of that people is dead" (p. 24). It is through theatre where this dreamworld can temporarily exist, maybe only for the space of a single show, but it is the implications of this work that lives on in the audience, the actors, and the creators for a lifetime.

Indigenous Theatre is inherently steeped in story. What makes playwrights like Moses, Highway, and Hayden Taylor so successful at this time is their connection to their material. It is this connection that Maracle believes stories are born from, as she sees "stories arise out of social engagement or praxis" (Maracle, 2010, p. 89). In her Stó:lō context, Maracle sees "Art [a]s a reflection of Stó:lō national and social being, expressed as an imagined state of human collaboration with the world" (p. 90). I think that this can also be expanded to extend into other Indigenous communities. Art, like story, reflects what is important about a community back to them. This is partially why I think Indigenous Theatre is so effective—it can make political commentary, provide a venue for authentic Indigenous portrayal, and provide a stage (both literally and metaphorically) for Indigenous voices.

At the time Moses, Highway and Hayden Taylor were cracking open spaces for Indigenous voices, Indigenous Theatre was gaining a lot of attention in both Toronto and Canada's national theatre scene. Highway's play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, won the prestigious Chalmers Award in 1989 (Nothof, 2019), was a finalist for the Governor General's award, and premiered at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1991 ("Dry Lips," n.d.). It was the first time ever that an Indigenous play was staged at Canada's oldest theatre ("Dry Lips," n.d.). Indigenous Theatre, through the success and high-profile staging of *Dry Lips* in Toronto, was becoming increasingly more present among mainstream thespians and theatregoers across Canada.

Maracle is not the only Indigenous scholar who sees the connection between drama and story. Keeshig-Tobias also highlights the importance of storytelling in

relation to promoting Indigenous literatures, noting storytelling's three purposes since time immemorial, those being to entertain, educate, and heal (Moses, 2004, p. 238). In the case of Indigenous Theatre, all three of these elements are important and are present, but with the deeply political nature of some plays, like those of Highway, Moses, and Hayden Taylor, it is the "healing laughter of stories" we see as being most readily effective to do this work (p. 239). These playwrights have the ability to heal because they acknowledge the value of stories, the potential and the power they hold, and through this, give that power back to the communities and people they represent. They not only heal through hearing, but also through the creation of a platform for Indigenous voices to be heard.

The need for Indigenous Theatre spaces, not just in Toronto but across Canada and North America, stems from Indigenous Theatre's ability to enact Indigenous worldviews and overcome the limitations of other textual art forms. Theatre's ability to encapsulate Indigenous stories and worldviews in ways other genres and media cannot highlights what Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah) believes to be theatre's particular suitability to "represent story through the combination of the embodied, the visual, and the aural" (Robinson, 2016, p. 185). Ravensbergen sees Indigenous Theatre as a site for resistance to colonial erasure of Indigenous voices and stories. She says that "the accepted national narrative seems to believe that [Indigenous] collective trauma is the only thing we—Indigenous people and artists—think or care about. This perpetuates the larger myth that [Indigenous peoples'] worth lies only in the story that includes settlers" (p. 182). When this myth of Indigenous stories only beginning at the moment of colonial contact persists, it frames Indigenous peoples' existence and worth as hinging on colonial presence. Ravensbergen also says, "this kind of recalcitrance becomes performance—a performance that defines a narrative that for generations has invisibilized [Indigenous peoples] . . . [and] decolonizes what some might call the heart of theatre: dramatic action" (p. 182). The dynamic of the theatre-space, that positions the audience and the actors across from one another, sets up the space for dialogue, for witnessing, and ultimately, for testimony and activism.

Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (Chippewas of Nawash) believes that "aesthetics are not extraneous to politics" (Akiwenzie-Damm, 1996, p. 25) and that the artistic elements of Indigenous cultural production are inherently political because Indigenous

presence is a political act. Storytelling is inherently connected to the colonial project. Stories contain important elements of a culture, act as tools of cultural transmission, and provide a way to maintain and educate a culture. This is intrinsically tied to language. If stories are a community's cultural vessels, then "the voice and spirit of a people are dependent on its literature" (Ruffo, 1997, p. 1). When balancing the aesthetic and political capabilities of theatre, we can turn back to Robinson's interview with Ravensbergen, particularly when Robinson asks, "what does theatre do for us?" (Robinson, 2016, p. 190). Ravensbergen sees theatre as having the power to "reveal us. It makes us visible" which reminds her of her younger years, when she was "told the fact that [she] exist[s] is a political act," and extends this further, understanding that "it's a political act to be *seen*" (p. 190, italics in original).

### **Adjacent Contexts: The Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster (CRET) and the Kanesatake Resistance**

Around the same time as NEPA and Indigenous Theatre were finding their feet in Toronto, in 1986, Highway, Moses, and Keeshig-Tobias came together in Toronto to create the "political-sounding literary/cultural organization" they called the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, or CRET (Moses, 2004, p. 237). With their diverse community and creative backgrounds come divergent foci on what they feel is most important in Indigenous Literature. For Highway, it was beauty, for Keeshig-Tobias, lessons of their traditional stories, and for Moses, it was trying to find the meaning of it all (p. 237). Despite being "at odds often," according to Moses, they were also "laughing almost always" (p. 237). CRET was not some lofty, idealistic space or a recapitulation of an Enlightenment-era salon, but rather a productive space that offered ways for Indigenous writers (and those interested in the general writing community) to connect and create a space to have their voices heard. CRET put together "lectures and workshops . . . [and] even put out a couple issues of a little magazine dedicated to the idea that the Trickster is emblematic of [their] different worldview and the different literature connected to it" (p. 238). These "intensive workshops in Native cultural production" (Godard, 1990, p. 184) allowed for the ideas circulating between Highway, Moses, and Keeshig-Tobias to create community by finding their way onto the ground and into practice by the rest of the writing community. They were actually creating tactile change, setting up learning spaces where writers could take what they learned and put it to work.



CRET's focus on reinvigorating the presence of the Trickster in the Indigenous literary writing scene stemmed from "the need to open up a space for Indigenous cultural production" and the Trickster "provided a strategic rallying place for Indigenous artists across Canada to make strong political points in a way that was healing for them and their communities" (Fee, 2010, p. 59). One such workshop, put together by Keeshig-Tobias, "posits the word as a process of knowing, provisional and partial, rather than as revealed knowledge itself, and aims to produce texts in performance that would create truth as interpretation rather than those in the Western mimetic tradition that reveal truth as pre-established knowledge" (Godard, 1990, p. 184). These artists and creators who imbue their work with their own community-specific history, spirituality, teachings, and stories, become powerful figures, putting into practice what Maracle believes by seeing Indigenous individuals with traditional knowledge as kinds of "power brokers" (Maracle, 2010, p. 80).

Other kinds of grounded change are happening across Canada in the late 80s and early 90s. Looking back to early Indigenous Theatre in Toronto in the 1980s, just before and during the Kanehsatake Resistance\*, we can see that many Indigenous writers turned to drama as a way of telling their stories as it allowed for storytelling, language, and the embodiment of their worldview to be performed in a way that written (as in, traditionally accepted Euro-Western forms, like the novel) narratives were unable to. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg) reminds us that the Kanien'kehá:ka offer an example of Indigenous resistance through generative refusal in 1990 during the Kanehsatake Resistance, by participating in "both an intense sacrifice and a resurgent mobilization" (Simpson, 2017, p. 233). Through this generative refusal and alongside embodied resistance, Simpson sees "Indigenous peoples with radical imaginations and desires for freedom" as necessary to "create collective, private physical spaces where we can come together and think . . . organize and build resurgent movements" in the present and that have lasting reverberations into the future (p. 234). In many ways, I think this is also the work of Indigenous

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\* In an attempt at highlighting Indigenous activism and resistance, I am turning to the work of Mohawk activists like Ellen Gabriel who deliberately shift towards Indigenous-positive naming by using the term 'Kanehsatake Resistance' when referring to the event known in mainstream media and discourse as the 'Oka Crisis.' In this intentional choice, I hope to elevate the activism of the Mohawks of Kanesatake and Kahnawake, reject narratives that position Indigenous resistance as a kind of problem or 'crisis' that requires the Canadian government, military, or police to 'fix,' and instead celebrate Indigenous resistance.

Theatre, where Indigenous actors and playwrights came together to create a physical and metaphorical space for Indigenous voice as resistance, but to also assert their continued and active presence as a kind of generative refusal among dominant Canadian society. Here, I am reminded of Gerald Vizenor's (White Earth Minnesota Chippewa) concept of survivance, which calls for a renouncing of "unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" when it comes to Indigenous stories and narratives (Vizenor, 2010, p. 1). Survivance becomes the active reversal of narratives that position Indigenous peoples and communities as victims, rupturing the stereotyping of Indigenous stories as tragedies, and works to resist and reframe Indigenous perspectives as ones of hope and positivity, foregrounding Indigenous presence and power.

### **Drew Hayden Taylor and Daniel David Moses: A Glimpse into Early Theatre in Toronto**

Taking a look more closely at two examples from this time, Drew Hayden Taylor's *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, and Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, which both premiered in 1991, we can see some common themes in the work being done at this time. While these plays are set in different places and time periods, each play deals with themes of addiction, identity and belonging, traditional languages, and the importance of dreams. Since much of the research that looks at this time in Indigenous Theatre is centred around Tomson Highway's Rez Cycle plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, I am choosing instead to study two works by other prominent playwrights of this time that are just as important and impactful on Toronto's Indigenous Theatre scene as Highway's work.

Hayden Taylor's play, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, is about a real spiritual site located on Manitoulin Island. The one-act play is designed to be performed in one setting, using the confines of the stage to amplify the "action and interrelation of the characters" of this dialogue-oriented play (Taylor, 1990, p. 10). In the play's preliminary note, we are reminded that "Dreamer's Rock is a real place with real power. It's located beside a highway on the Birch Island" in Northern Ontario (p. 10). Because this play is about and set on a real sacred site means that the stakes are higher for Hayden Taylor as well as the theatre company producing the production, unlike Highway's work, for example, since Highway's Rez Cycle plays are set on fictional reservations in Ontario

rather than being accountable to real communities and places. This play is rich with palpable irony from this opening production note, highlighting the juxtaposition between the sacredness of Dreamer's Rock and the highway that is right beside it, as if the place has already resisted an attempt at colonial overwriting of Indigenous presence.

In the initial scene, when Rusty (the boy from the present) and Keesic (the boy from the past) meet on Dreamer's Rock across time, the dramatic action unfolds when they touch, as if the "moment contact is made, the magic happens" (p. 16). This physical touch allows the boys to connect across time and space, creating another kind of sacred site within the bodies of these Anishinaabe boys. Later in the play, Keesic tells Rusty that they are in "the Place of Dreams" and one "can never be alone [there]" (p. 19). In this sacred space, the boys stand at a physical, temporal, and spiritual intersection. Keesic breaks the fourth wall at this moment by also speaking to the audience. At this moment, the theatre has been transformed into Dreamer's Rock and has also (albeit temporarily) become a place for dreams and community, where Indigenous epistemology is enacted and those within the community can never be alone. We are reminded in a stage note that Rusty "collapses into the indentation in the rock, a place worn away by the generations of boys who have gone to the rock for their vision" (p. 14). This sacred site is a place where time does not participate in linear, Western-accepted modes, but rather acts as a palimpsest, a place where—through generations of vision quests—the land itself has become imbued with power that supersedes the bounds of time and space. Michael (the boy from the future) explains to both Rusty and Keesic, that "over those thousands of years that boys had their vision quests here, this area amassed a tremendous reservoir of power," which made this encounter possible (p. 35).

In the way Hayden Taylor plays with time in *Dreamer's Rock*, Moses is similarly interested in playing with space across time in his play, *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. At the outset of the play, we meet White Girl, who believes that she has "bad medicine in [her]" after she was forced to attend Residential School by a treaty agent (Moses, 1992, p. 7). Recalling her time in the Residential School, White Girl remembers her first encounter with a glass window. She describes it as "a wall you can see through" on which she "banged [her] face. The glass broke. Sharp pieces, too. That's what [a scar on her hand] is from" (p. 13). We can imagine a young and confused White Girl

finding herself faced with the possibility of escape in the form of a portal to the outside world, then being confronted violently with the transparent but still physically-present barrier of the glass window pane. This encounter is one that scars White Girl, physically in the form of a cut on her hand, but also psychologically, as she holds this memory with her. This is a lesson that she literally wears on her skin, reminded of the violent encounter of the colonial attempt to control and confine her. This is one divergence between these two plays; while *Dreamer's Rock* mentions the layers of trauma and violence that colonialism caused for Indigenous peoples, the play never mentions Residential Schools or the impact they had on Indigenous peoples across Canada. Both of these plays were published in the early 90s, a time when Residential Schools were still open and operational in Canada. The last Residential School to close was the Gordon Reserve Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, which closed in 1996 (Hanson, 2020), five years after these plays were first published. Moses, however, makes the Residential School an important backdrop to the events and trauma that his characters experience in both acts of his play.

In the second act of *Almighty Voice*, Ghost and Interlocutor return to the play transformed, signified in their change of guise and both characters wearing whiteface. This act begins with the characters performing a play within the play, called "The Red and White Victoria Regina Spirit Revival Show," which takes place on the "auditorium stage of the abandoned industrial school at Duck Lake" (p. 31, p. viii). We must ask ourselves who the audience of this play within a play is. We can read the metaphorical audience as the ghosts that linger in the abandoned Residential School, but perhaps Moses has also broken the fourth wall, allowing the audience to stand in as witness of both plays. The Interlocutor, the character that White Girl transforms into for the second act, responds to Ghost's (*Almighty Voice*, post-transformation) question by saying, "How do I feel? With my hands! . . . I feel this evening like the moon . . . envious and pale of face and alone" (p. 54). Not only do we have Interlocutor trying to lighten the situation with an attempt at glib humor, but Interlocutor reveals a truth to Ghost—at this moment, they feel alone as the moon, paralleling the isolation they felt as White Girl in the Residential School.

Both Hayden Taylor and Moses are concerned with language and the power of names in their respective plays. Hayden Taylor's *Keesic* asks "What power does a name have if it doesn't have a purpose or meaning?" (Taylor, 1990, p. 22). Language

has the ability to shape the way a culture sees the world, highlighting the things they value and believe in. The more important something is, the more words a group will come up with to describe it. Anishinaabemwin is no different, and Keesic highlights the power of this language for the Anishinaabe people, saying that their “language is formed by [their] thoughts. [Their] thinking forms [their] worlds” (p. 66). Since being in the ‘present,’ Keesic has been forced to speak English through the power of Dreamer’s Rock. Keesic, however, does not like English, saying “there is no beauty in it. In [Anishinaabemwin], when you talk about the earth or the forest, you can smell the leaves around you, feel the grass beneath your feet. Until [their] language is spoken again and rituals and ceremonies followed, then there are no more Odawa” (p. 66).

Similar thoughts on the words we use to name and describe things can be found in Moses’ *Almighty Voice*. In this play, White Girl encourages Almighty Voice to use English names for each other when they meet in secret as a form of protection, believing that the God of the colonizers “won’t know it’s [them] if [they] use their names” (Moses, 1992, p. 9). They will be able to hide from the colonizers in this way by blending in with them. This gets complicated later on in the second act when Almighty Voice dies and is transformed into Ghost, a character Interlocutor taunts with stereotypical and racist iterations of Indigenous characters in popular media and history. The use of whiteface in this act has a multi-resonant function. In a way, the use of whiteface is reminiscent of the “minstrel traditions of nineteenth-century America” and vaudeville performances where white actors used race as a comedic costuming device (Wright, 2014, p. 194). Whitewashing can also symbolize the whitewashing and erasure of Indigenous peoples’ culture through the imposition of Residential Schools. The masking effect symbolizes different things for each character, acting as a mask for Ghost to hide behind while representing Interlocutor’s internalized racism. In the final scene of the play, Interlocutor begins wiping off her whiteface and “unmasking the woman inside” (Moses, 1991, p. 56). When Ghost does the same, both characters literally and metaphorically crack through the whiteness that seeks to suppress them.

Moses takes advantage of the activist potential in the theatre space. He makes strong political statements that go against government policies, like Residential Schools and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police being used to subjugate and control Indigenous peoples, using this safe space to critique colonial erasure of Indigenous

history and problematize the way Indigeneity gets re-presented in contemporary iterations.

In *Dreamer's Rock*, we have a similar layering of meaning onto names in the use of "Toronto" throughout the play. Toronto, the capital city of Ontario (the province where *Dreamer's Rock* is located) and Canada's largest city and metropolitan area, are at the forefront of an audience's mind since the play places Toronto in relation to *Dreamer's Rock* through the phrasing of the title. We get another meaning for 'Toronto' in the play, when Keesic tells the boys that his "people are great traders" and "those people to the south have a word for when people gather to trade, but it covers any place where important things happen. It's called 'Toronto'" (Taylor, 1990, p. 37). The boys see 'Toronto' as a metaphorical space where trade and important knowledge are exchanged, rather than solely a physical place. As the three boys meet across time on *Dreamer's Rock*, the space becomes 'Toronto' because of the connection they make and the trading of knowledge and information they partake in, but when they all go back to their respective times, *Dreamer's Rock* will cease to be 'Toronto.' Hayden Taylor takes creative liberties with the language here, as the boys are all Anishinaabe and the word 'Toronto' is actually an Iroquois word (from the Haudenosaunee language family). In Iroquois, Toronto is understood to mean "where there are trees in water" (Government, 2021), but an audience is asked to suspend their disbelief for the moment of the play, creating their own kind of 'Toronto' through the connection and knowledge-sharing that happens between the actors on stage and the audience in the theatre.

## Conclusion

I would like to return to Armand Garnet Ruffo's landmark essay, "Why Native Literature?", specifically Ruffo's belief that "the voice and spirit of a people are dependent on its literature" (Ruffo, 1997, p. 1). In all forms of Indigenous literature, Indigenous voice and beliefs are central to the spirit imbued in the work. Indigenous Theatre is in many ways the most suited to describe and perform Indigenous worldviews because of theatre's capacity for polyphonic voicing, staging, lighting, movement, as well as the use of figurative language and Indigenous traditional languages. Indigenous Theatre in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Toronto was essential in embodying Indigenous cosmology outside of traditional Western forms,

like the novel for example. Despite the Western roots and flare of Canadian Theatre, Indigenous Theatre re-purposes and deviates from these traditions to make space for Indigenous worldviews and voices.

Overall, Native Earth Performing Arts as well as other Indigenous led creative groups, like the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, were integral to the development of the Indigenous Theatre scene that found its roots in Toronto before spreading across Canada. These spaces also led to necessary critique of Canadian artistic spaces that largely lacked Indigenous and minority representation.

The Indigenous Theatre scene has grown, making space for Indigenous voices and worldviews in a way that ruptures dominant settler-Canadian views. In a few decades, Indigenous Theatre has gone from being a fringe community in Toronto's theatre scene to a thriving and revolutionary community of its own. Toronto's Native Theatre School grew from the small initiative that offered workshops and summer programs starting in 1974 (Johnston, 2005) to the creation of the Centre for Indigenous Theatre (based in Toronto) ("Our Beginning," n. d.), one of the first Indigenous Theatre schools in North America. This program offers training by Indigenous industry professionals and degrees in theatre. Indigenous Theatre continues to flourish in both mainstream and independent theatre communities, where Indigenous playwrights and actors can find community and stage their worldviews in and around Toronto and its surrounding area.

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