

Speaking Out: Voices of Native American Female Playwrights

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I am Cherokee
I am Seminole
I have Potawatamie blood in me

Shoosh, I am Indian, don't tell
Half breed
Mixed blood
Full blood
Blue Blood

Shshsh, I am Indian, don't tell
Shshsh, I am Indian, don't tell

Thus writes JudyLee Oliva in her play *Te Ata*, the story of Te Ata Fisher. Fisher is a Chickasaw storyteller who has informed and educated others on Native American life through her performances demonstrating Native American customs and traditions. The authors presented here face the same challenges as those outlined by Oliva. These authors, female Native American playwrights from all tribal affiliations, define themselves as Native Americans; yet at times, they have had to hide their heritage or have not even known the aspects of it while growing up in a white society. They had little exposure to those elements of their heritage and no connection to their Native American past. For many of these women, it is only in their adulthood that they are able to explore their past to provide a definition of their new existence and identity while making connections with their current existence.

Native American novelist and scholar Louis Owens wrote, "It is a *re-membering* or putting together of an identity" (*Other Destinies* 5). As with all Native Americans, each woman is now no longer just a member of the dominant white society. In acknowledging their Native American heritage, each individual must create or re-create a new identity as both an Indian and as a member of white society. This new existence is one of the elements of their re-created selves that sparks many of their works. Playwright Shirley Huston-Findley states, "Most of their scripts, not surprisingly, focus on women; their personal stories, their relationships with other women and friends, and their cultural and personal identities of Native American women" (Huston-Findley 3). At the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA) Roundtable discussion in March 1999, Huston-Findley remarked, "Certainly, what you've talked about already is a perspective that's drawn from your cultural background. Many female playwrights are also sort of writing against the traditional, the canonical Aristotelian style" (NAWPA

Roundtable). As each woman focuses on her Native American culture, the experiences of other women shape the authors' views on many aspects of Native American life, especially the life of the Native American woman. As the voice and style of these women are unique, they need a place in the new canon of literature to balance out that of the white male. The voice of these authors is more than just a Native American voice; it is the voice of the Native American female. This voice is one that remembers, one that is angry, one full of love. Women have stories to tell that depict Native American life from a female's point of view. These women, both the authors and their characters, deserve and must be heard. In Diane Glancy's play *The Women Who Loved House Trailers*, a character named Berta states, "All we've got are stories. That's where love comes in" (34). The authors take the words, the experience, and the stories of the Native American woman to recreate the history of the Native American. These stories are one thing that each individual possess, and Berta believes that these stories make up the backbone of their lives.

In looking at the emergence of this new fringe group of writers in the literary canon, one needs to examine the traits, birth, and growth of this new voice and explore their views on Native American history and tradition, the multigenerational unit, and the relationships with the non-Native, half-breed, or mixed blood Indian. Owens says, "That is, should we not write of what grips and absorbs us? To do so, of course, is to write of those tensions, dynamics, and torsions of family, history, community, and nation that give rise to the hybrid self" (*Other Destinies* 153). Through the stories of these women, one sees the conflicts that each went through: the conflict between men and women, families, Native American history, the relationship with the white community, and an abusive society. These are the tensions, the dynamics, and the torsions of more than a group of writers; they are those of an entire society.

The art of playwriting as a part of the writing process and coming to terms with the past were subjects in the roundtable discussion at the NAWPA conference. In discussing the voice in the works, Glancy states, "It's such an artifact, the word on the page – in fact, there's some belief, Native belief that writing actually kills the word because the voice is a spirit being, and you tell a story and you make a trail on which you have to walk, you create a whole world. And so what is this written thing here on the page, it was like a little coffin" (NAWPA Roundtable). This is one aspect of writing that many Native American playwrights examine in their work. If a voice is a living spirit, how can one limit it to a page? As a coffin exists to hold the body and spirit, the book becomes the coffin for the written word; it holds this lifeless body of words. With the word dead, so is the spirit of the Native American. The word is no longer transient; it is stuck forever on the paper with no chance at growing, of changing. It is immovable. Glancy states that this is different from the oral tradition of the Native American society. Storytelling does not kill the spirit; it does not attach its spirit to anything. The voice is free to change with each telling. There is no immovable path; the path is transient as the voice is not stuck. Here, the telling of such tales gives a rebirth to the lifeless word, as there is no coffin to hold the spoken word. Now these playwrights work to change the word; the play is not a dead form, but a living, breathing story that the women have put on paper so that others can take the story and create a new life form. Each time the word

is spoken, new meanings and changes take place to illustrate its transience. Playwright Vera Manuel states, “Because these words have a history, my mother’s my grandmother’s, my great-grandmother” (NAWPA Roundtable). Manuel knows the power of the words and is careful in how they are used. They are not just words; they are the lives and histories of her family. Glancy goes on to address the issue of maintaining a Native identity in the world today: “...well there’s some things that don’t melt. Like our voice and our character and our way of life, our style, our thumbprint” (NAWPA Roundtable). She believes that even as members of a large, non-Native society, they still maintain their origins. The spirit of these individuals does not totally assimilate, nor do their Native characteristics entirely disappear. They are like a thumbprint which does not disappear or change in an individual. It does not leave; it forever marks or identifies a person as an Indian.

Many of the themes present in the NAWPA roundtable discussion also find a place in the plays by these women. In Glancy’s play, *The Woman who was a Red Deer*, Grandmother states, “We’re carriers of our stories and histories. We’re nothing without them” (14). Through the character of the Grandmother, Glancy is able to show the importance of the stories of these people. According to Grandmother, the stories of the past define who they currently are as they create their history as a Native Americans. Glancy shows the value that the Native American place on the stories of the past. Their lives reflect the lessons of these stories. It is the job of each individual to tell, to carry the stories for others to learn from. Here, it takes a play to emphasize the importance of storytelling to these people as they define themselves. These stories are the words outside of a coffin; they are the living words of a living society.

These authors also educate the audiences who view their works. Whether it is on the life of an important figure, the history of a tribe, or a concept such as Thanksgiving, the plays of these women explore, explain, and educate the public on numerous aspects of Indian life. The history project of Mattie White Cloud and her questions on Thanksgiving are presented in *Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth* by Martha Kreipe de Montano and Jennifer Fell Hayes. This work explores the multigenerational themes, the mixing of cultures, Native American history, and a connection with the past. When Mattie does not understand why her family does not celebrate Thanksgiving as the rest of her classmates do, her family explains the protests and fasts that occur on Thanksgiving in many different Indian nations. The Native Americans do not have something for which to be thankful; Thanksgiving is a time of their loss and their betrayal, not a time for a feast and celebration. Mattie thinks that all of this ancient history should be forgotten so that she can celebrate this white American holiday. Here one sees the struggle between societies; that of keeping one’s heritage and past alive or forgetting an important part of the past to try and assimilate into white society. In a series of dreams, the Spirit of the Past takes Mattie to see the source of the Native American protests. Mattie sees effects the diseases that the white man brought to this land have on the Indians; she views a white family who decide to desecrate Indian graves to help themselves survive. The white man found an immediate, yet short-term, solution to his hunger, but they did not learn a long-term method for survival. The Indians shared their knowledge, and the English shared smallpox, typhoid, bubonic plague, and influenza. When Mattie sees a

Thanksgiving where the white man is celebrating the massacre of an Indian village, she begins to see why her society does not celebrate this holiday, one that celebrates and gives thanks for the Indian's slaughter. The Spirit of the Past warns Mattie, "We must move on, but ALWAYS REMEMBER" (de Mantano 88). The Spirit has shown Mattie why her generation must remember the actions of the past. Mattie wanted to move past the history so that she could celebrate with the white society. The spirit reminds her that one has to move on, but one should not forget the past. Moving on does not mean joining the celebration of Native American massacres, but remembering the atrocities forced on their ancestors.

The plays are not just of history and of stories; they have a spiritual essence as well. Two cousins seeking information on Native Americans are the subject of JudyLee Oliva's play *Mark of the Feather*. Although both women are seeking information, the information is for different purposes. Elizabeth seeks information to write a thesis while Mary is on a quest and seeks a connection with her past. Elizabeth spends her time distancing herself from the culture and background. She is simply looking for scientific information that will support her thesis. Mary, on the other hand, feels the connection and states that she feels "more red than white" (Oliva 225). Mary has a spiritual connection with those at the Pow Wow, as she seeks out her identity as a Native American.

Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women* is a very powerful example of a Native American play that embodies many different themes from Native American traditions and writings. These themes include the multigenerational theme, the Anglo/Indian conflict, and one of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse common to many Native Americans. At the NAWPA roundtable discussion, Manuel talked about the generational grief that exists in the Native American culture, and this grief provides much of the backdrop of *The Strength of Indian Women*. She states, "And I see that, when I started coming to it I see that they were silenced, you know, and there was no way to tell that story because the grief was so big, and a lot times they were so frozen, so numb" (NAWPA Roundtable). The characters in *The Strength of Women*, the women from Sousette's generation have not talked about the past. They had a huge amount of grief and pain, and each numbed herself from the actions and abuse of the past as a way to survive.

The play revolves around thirteen-year-old Suzie's fast and the feast celebration of her coming of age ceremony. Participating in this event are Eva, her mother, Sousette, her grandmother, as well as other female elders whom Suzie refers to as "aunts" or "grandmothers," all of whom supply the multigenerational aspect of the work. Sousette wants the past told so that one understands, one does not forget. Another important theme is the knowledge and background the elders have to share. Here they share the stories they remember of their past so that the women of the future will know of their hardships and will not let such acts occur again.

One of the ways where Native vs. White conflict occurs is when Suzie questions Eva about her ceremony, and Eva says that she never had a ceremony. Sousette states that this is her fault because the Native Americans stopped having the puberty ceremonies

because others were afraid of the Indians and their customs. This generational exchange demonstrates the attitudes and changes that occurred in society during the lives of Sousette, of Eva, and of Suzie. In Sousette's youth, such ceremonies along with other native traditions were common, but by the time of Eva's puberty, the Anglo society was trying to eradicate such traditions and customs. It was no longer a time to celebrate their heritage; society demanded that the Indian assimilate into the white society. In order to assimilate, or blend in, the Native Americans were forced to leave the customs, traditions, stories, and their past behind. Entire generations lost the knowledge of what it meant to be an Indian. By the time that Suzie is "coming of age," the white society, having been exposed to numerous cultures, is more accepting and tolerant of different cultures and their beliefs. Slowly society began to understand and saw the importance of and the need for cultural customs and traditional ceremonies. As part of this gathering, Sousette wants to tell, and for the other elders to also share, the stories that have led them to this point; the stories of their past which helps define them. Sousette tells Eva, "We decided that you need to know everything, about the school, and about us. You need to know because of Suzie. It's her history, too" (Manuel 175). Now Sousette realizes that the future generations must know the atrocities these women endured. Suzie, her mother, and countless other women deserve to know what happened to the older generation, and how it has affected the rest of their lives. Much of the existence of these women revolves around the experiences at residential schools, where physical and sexual abuse was common. As Sousette says, this is the history of all the Native Americans.

The history is not only for Suzie, but her mother as well. Eva remembers her childhood being one without love and full of abuse. It is only through the stories of these women that she learns why her mother abused her. Eva asks, "Do you remember how you used to beat me, Mom? Do you even remember the bruises? Do you remember the ugly things you used to call me, and all those times you left me alone?" (193). Sousette's early years at the residential schools scarred her to the point that she became an abusive parent, and Eva, in turn, became an abusive parent to Suzie. Eva speaks of the names she has called Suzie, the beatings she has given her, and the fact that she pushes her daughter away when Suzie seeks attention and love, just as Sousette was unloving to Eva. Here, the abusive cycle starts with the early residential schools and continues through several generations. The residential schools make up the past for each of these women, and each has her own story of the abuse she faced and its continuing impact. When talking about her writing at the roundtable, Manuel states, "And so the history of residential schools is something where there's lots of silence, and people have a really hard time talking about that history" (NWPA Roundtable). Manuel uses this knowledge to develop the tension in the play.

When asked about the school, Lucy, a grandmother, states, "There's some things that you shouldn't write down. There's some things that I shouldn't tell you" (181). These stories have no place in a coffin where all can see, and the past can not change. These are stories that some of the women have difficulty with and do not want to face, yet it is a part of their lives that cannot be ignored either. They are the words that should not be written, as they will then become the non-living words. These experiences are their past and present. In order for society to comprehend this portion of Native American

history, the women must face the past as they tell their stories. The residential schools were institutions designed to remove the Native traditions and force the white culture on its students. The girls were expected not to speak their language, not to follow their traditions, and pray only to the white man's God. It was at school that the women all faced sexual abuse. As the different elders tell their story, more atrocities come to light. Not only was there sexual abuse, the girls faced numerous deaths, sickness, and beatings. It is through the play that Manuel is able to write about the horror of the residential schools with such emotion. Each woman is given the chance to tell her story in a very graphic, emotional way. It would be impossible to convey this topic with the force and impact in any other genre. These women are given a physical voice that shows the emotions involved in this subject.

Agnes, another grandmother, states, "You know the Creator left me alive for one reason. It could just as easily have been me that got killed. Somebody has to talk about what happened to the little girls" (189). She now makes it her job to travel around the country and warn society, especially women, of the history here so that others may change their behavior and that this incident does not repeat itself. Agnes reminds the other elders of the sexual abuse they endured while at the residential school. She relates her story to her move to the city and her life as a prostitute. Agnes traces each of these acts back to life at the school. The sexual abuse is one of the common threads that link these women together. The abuse is also the act that shapes each of the women in their lives in all their relationships well after they left the school.

Louis Owens wrote, "Those stories, too, must be told. For stories are what we carry with us through time and across distance" (*Mixedblood* 166). Owens realizes that one must learn the stories of the ancestors to make the connections in our lives. These women authors have taken the stories from their past and the history of the elders as material for their works. As the stories of the residential schools, along with other acts of abuse, are a nightmare to some, these past actions are not a reason to remain silent, remain numb; instead, the women need to tell others of the hardships they endured. These plays connect the elder Indians with the younger ones, and they bind the women in all facets of their lives. The authors have taken part of their history and recorded it so that all could see and hear of the past. These subjects are the past of these, and countless other, women. These are the stories that have lived with these female playwrights, and they want the past known for it is a part of their heritage. Even though it may be tough, the stories must be told.

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