

Letter from the Editor

When guest editor Christy Stanlake and I began discussing the possibility of a special issue of *BJTP* on Native American performance, we quickly agreed that the project was both necessary and risky. Native performances have yet to receive due attention our discipline; the time had come for a publication in our field to generate an additional conversation on the current state of theatre by and for indigenous peoples in the Americas. But how to avoid the trap of academic tourism—that dubious approach that fetishizes the culture observed and positions observers as impartial (and omniscient) ethnographers? Stanlake lamented a tendency within the field in which non-Native scholars seem to produce much of the scholarship, and wanted to avoid the problems of what Richard Trexler calls the “We Think, They Act” approach—George Panaghi expands on this in his contribution this issue. Such studies inherently subject a given people to the same loss of cultural territory and sovereignty that they have come to expect from academics/scholars, no matter how well intended. (In fact, when we sent out the initial call for papers, one or two skeptics expressed doubt that a journal sponsored by a Baptist university could pursue the project with anything approaching rigor or respect for the subject—implying expectations of evangelical fervor and ideological rigidity that also could have benefited from some critical reflection.)

“Nations Speaking: Indigenous Performances Across the Americas” responds to our own inquietudes, and aims to open a space for intellectual exchange between Native and Non-native people on the topic of theatre. The essays, scripts, and reviews in these pages focus on artistic performances by Native people, rather than the performative aspects of people’s cultures. Jaye Darby’s “Broadway (Un)Bound: Lynn Riggs’s *The Cherokee Night* addresses the way that Riggs (best known for *Green Grow the Lilacs*) wrote eloquently about the contemporary problems of his Cherokee community, but found the commercial theatre unready for either his subject matter or his unorthodox structural approach. In “Traces of Hope: Native Authorship in the Missionary Theatre of New Spain,” George Panaghi reads closely the records of post-conquest performances by Nahua people in Mexico, searching for evidence of Native interventions into the Jesuit texts. Julie Pearson-Little Thunder chronicles the development of Daystar/Rosalie Jones (Blackfeet/Pembina Chippewa) as a dancer and choreographer in her efforts to bring an Indian sensibility to modern dance and to make contemporary mainstream forms more meaningful to the tribes she encountered. Tamara Underiner examines the most recent production of Coatlicue Theatre Company, exploring Elvira and Hortensia Colorado’s performance of *Caracol: Heart of the Earth, Flower of Hope* as a dense dramatic reflection of Zapatista communal structures, creating an encounter that reflects the political and personal stakes of Zapatista women’s lives.

The Profiles and Highlights feature interviews, play excerpts, and biographical introductions to a variety of Native theatre and performance artists. In each case, the writing was done by someone personally connected with or recommended by the subject. These individuals—Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Diane Glancy, JudyLee Oliva, Rochelle Warner and Bonita Cleveland, DeLanna Studi, and Marie Clements—are all active artists with personal creative vision and a sense of connectedness to their home communities.

In addition to these, Vincent Scott outlines the dramatic ambitions of the Smithsonian Institution's new National Museum of the American Indian, and offers an open invitation to collaboration with their Native Theater Program.

As an organization preoccupied with the connections between performance and religion, *BJTP* always looks for evidence of human preoccupations with the spirit as we encounter it in the arts. While we intend to avoid the mistake of assuming a pan-Indian spirituality—or of promoting any commodified, commercial notion of Native sacred practices for the disaffected middle class consumer—I do see in each contribution a preoccupation with spiritual belief and action. For some, it manifests in the desire to understand the ethical and moral lives of Native communities, for others the conflict between belief systems that accompanies the conquest and subjugation of one group by another; for still others, it is a personal restlessness and longing to feel connected with the world and one's fellow beings. The uniting factor between them—and the starting point for scholarly discussion in this issue—is that these preoccupations manifest themselves as staged performance, as drama, dance, and music. Through these, the Nations speak.

