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The Evolution of Indigenous Identity in Native Indian Drama: A Comparative Study of Cultural Representation from Metamora to The Thanksgiving Play

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand how Indigenous identity and representation have changed over time in Native American drama. For works historic and contemporary, the characters, themes, and cultural narratives present in plays written by and for Native peoples may provide insight into the social and political climates of the times when those plays were penned. The difference between the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in plays such as Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags and the portrayal of Indigenous characters in plays like The Thanksgiving Play and Body Indian is striking and significant. Playwrights who have been part of the historic tribal memory of their peoples may serve as an Indigenous lifeline to live historical memory rather than politicized "wokeness," which seems to be the societal expectation of plays these days.

Keywords: *Indigenous Identity, Cultural Representation, Colonial Stereotypes, Native American Drama.*

I. Overview of Native American Drama and Its Historical Context

Native American drama is a lesser-known but vital component of the Native American literary movement. It consists of plays written by Native Americans that explore Indigenous people's cultures, identities, and histories. For the most part, this genre can be traced back to non-Indigenous playwrights who wished to portray Native Americans for an audience yearning for the "noble savage." Even if early Native American drama had managed to portray Indigenous cultures accurately, its predominantly tragic storylines would have served to reinforce the rather narrow, negative image of Native Americans that most audiences had. Rarely, in early

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plays, were Indigenous cultures imagined with the complexity needed to represent the characters of these cultures, fictional or otherwise, in any good light. Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, non-Native playwrights appropriated representations of Indigenous peoples for their own purposes, often romanticizing or exoticizing Native cultures. This, of course, provided little insight into the real lives of Native Americans and resulted in cementing some pretty one-dimensional stereotypes. But, we owe it to playwrights like William S. Yellow Robe Jr., who authored *The Independence of Eddie Ross* (1997), and Hanay Geiogamah, who penned *Body Indian* (1974), for starting to challenge these misrepresentations and creating a theater bill that features Indigenous peoples and stories.

The resurgence of Native culture in the 1960s and 1970s, often called the Native American Renaissance, included renewed interest in the production of literature by and about Native Americans, including drama. Partly inspired by the civil rights and Red Power movements, this community of writers sought to assert a powerful image of their culture and served as a catalyst for the "sovereignty movement." Writers associated with this movement often cast characters who embraced Native identities and rendered them in what might be called "Native time." Much the same could be said about contemporary playwrights who deal with these same issues and find inspiration in the style of their forebears. One standout contemporary figure in the realm of Native American theater, Larissa FastHorse, critiques contemporary society while exploring the way images of Native Americans have been used to serve various societal ends since the times when the first Europeans came to North America.

The themes of identity, historical trauma, colonization, land, language, and culture permeate Native American drama. Many of its practitioners have taken a deep plunge into biographical imagination, shaping deeply layered, non-linear narratives that reflect their own lived experiences as Indigenous people. This formation of a shared, performative space moves toward what playwright and scholar Larissa FastHorse calls "the broadening and deepening of Indigenous story medicine." It is no accident that storytelling and healing often serve as the touchstones of Native American plays, which increasingly tackle such contemporary issues as environmental justice, gender roles, and the ongoing impacts of colonization in forms that remain strikingly cohesive and innovative.

Indigenous American drama may have historically been underrepresented, but it is such an integral, necessary, and indispensable part of Tribal and American literature that one might be tempted to call it overdue. This is because the works of those few Indigenous playwrights whose work has come to light—chief among them, the late Maurice Kenny—are not only the rightful representations of a people long marginalized and misrepresented; they are also part of our shared human experience.

II. The Role of Drama in Shaping and Reflecting Native American Identity

The theater has served a fundamental function in the establishment and articulation of the Native American identity; it has long been a vehicle for powerful cultural expression and what might be called "identity formation." Native American dramatists have long used the format of the play to "seed change" in both the minds of and in the actions taken by the audiences they perform for. It might be said that such work is done "in character"; it is certainly the case that many plays finished in writing often yield performances that precede the further conversation that really begins when the play is over, and the audience is on its way home. One could hardly find a better forum for reconsidering the frequently comfortingly reductive images and narratives of Native Americans in both Native and non-Native audiences than the stage.

Indigenous identity is multifaceted and influenced by colonization, dislocation, and cultural survival. The drama that Native Americans create serves as a medium to express how those factors affect their identity and evaluate what that identity means in a world where traditional and non-traditional values often conflict. As characters in plays and as a culture, the Native Americans who write and produce those plays surpass easy stereotypes to present "ordinary" people with "real-world" issues—identity, family, addiction, loss, and resilience—that point to the complex, undulating paths by which contemporary Native Americans traverse their lives. Neither condemnatory nor apologetic, what these writers and performers do is dramatize their "inherent right to exist." Native American drama frequently critiques the romanticized and racist portrayals of Native Americans that have saturated mainstream media and popular culture. For instance, playwright Larissa FastHorse uses satire and irony to poke fun at what she and many others see as nonsensical portrayals of Indigenous peoples. FastHorse isn't alone in this; many Native American playwrights use humor to challenge the kinds of historical and contemporary caricatures that have been imposed on Indigenous peoples. While the people

who created these caricatures might have been acting in "good faith," their actions have often served to undermine the vitality of Indigenous cultures. Hearing the stories told by Native American playwrights in a dramatic format is a good way, in the "good faith" of a "communal setting," to counter caricature.

Modern Native American drama tackles the contemporary life realities of Native people. Resorting to issues like environmental justice and contemporary political activism, these plays confront audiences with the problems that we all must address together—poverty, addiction, and other conditions of the citizenry that one must work hard to change. While some blame the ongoing marginalization of communities on the appearance of psychological "invisible wounds," this theater acts as community medicine. If a play can be a forceful agent of change and make the audience think and feel, modern Native American drama is doing just that—forcing all to rethink the ongoing basing of these communities and challenge the traditional gender roles that many have long taken for granted. In the 21st century, native writers are writing really good plays for "the other side of the curtain."

III. Stereotypes and resistance in earlier drama

1. Analysis of *Metamora; or The Last of the Wampanoags* and Its Portrayal of Indigenous People

John Augustus Stone wrote the five-act play *Metamora; or The Last of the Wampanoags* in 1829. This early American melodrama became extremely popular during the 19th century and is often considered a landmark in American theater. Set in colonial New England, it tells the story of a fictionalized version of the historical figure King Philip, or Metacomet, who led the Wampanoag people. Although the play was well received and is still remembered, it acts as a complex mixture of both reinforcing and resisting colonial stereotypes of Indigenous people. Toward that end, a close reading of both the text and the subtext of the play is necessary.

One of the most frequent ways in which Metamora supports colonial stereotypes is by presenting the character of Metamora as the "noble savage." The noble savage romanticizes Indigenous people as being primitive yet pure and virtuous, existing harmoniously with nature

but ultimately consigned to obsolescence in the face of civilization. Brave, honourable, and tragically doomed, Metamora embodies the classic characteristics of both the noble savage and the brave-but-lost figure. His inevitable defeat serves to reinforce the idea that Indigenous people are destined to disappear as a result of the march of progress and colonization. This tragic inevitability of the figure built on mythologized history also serves to legitimize colonization by implying that the loss of Native culture is part of the natural order and not the result of violence and injustice.

The play frames the Wampanoags in the stereotypical light of the time, as artificial, bloodthirsty savages. Metamora, the Wampanoag chief portrayed in the play, is driven by "revenge and ... violence" toward the sad demise of his people. Metamora is portrayed as motivated by the desire to "kill, kill, kill," yet this language of violence is only slightly veiled in the play's narrative arc. Behind the paintbrush that the playwright uses to frame the Wampanoags, there is a narrative aligned with the agenda of colonialism and the idea of the natural superiority of the European settler. Even if it does reinforce stereotypes, *Metamora* also depicts sympathetic portrayals of Native resistance to colonization. Though it does not present such resistance as entirely successful, it paints Metamora's fight for his land and people as a Just Cause, an honourable stand (even if Metamora purportedly did not know what he was fighting for). Such a presentation might lead 19th-century audiences (and us modern viewers) to empathize with what we might consider the pathos-laden antagonist of the play, considering the human cost of colonial expansion and the largely unfathomable toll it took on Native communities.

Metamora projects the mold of a noble savage, yet he is also represented with considerable complexity and depth, especially in his relationships with others. His ardent love for his wife Nahmeokee, his close bond with his people, and his will to help them at any cost render him all the more admirable because he is represented as doing what is right for his people—beyond the familiar figures of trail guides, boatmen, or plain good Indians one found in stories from that time. He is presented, as characters of that time often were, as a leader and warrior, yet the story emphasizes that he does not embrace leadership lightly or without reservation. He is on the edge, emotionally and ethically. His only reason for taking up this role is the profundity of his people's situation. For leadership in that context to be heroic is pretty close to a no-brainer.

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When Metamora first went up on stage, the interest in the mythology of Native American history reached new heights in the United States. Figures like Metacomet were popularized in this magical view of culture and history, as characters in a nostalgia act put on for an audience that couldn't quite see the present for all those happy, pre-contact scenes they were being shown. The story of Metacomet, who was not only a king but a darn good one, was gussied up in romantic motifs against a backdrop of a supposedly simpler time when the Indian was more visible in the landscape of North America.

In its day, Metamora was a ground-breaking work for presenting an Indigenous main character. Yet, despite its admirable traits, Metamora perpetuated stereotypes and tropes about Native Americans. Many 19th- and 20th-century portrayals of Native Americans rendered them "noble savages," tragic figures with little prospect or agency. *The Last of the Wampanoags: Metamora* is a complex and enigmatic work that affirms and undermines colonial representations of Native peoples. It has contributed to both the growing awareness of the plight of Native peoples in the face of colonialism and the romanticizing of them. B. Donald Grose analyses thus:

> "The projection that is readily apparent from reading the Indian novels, poems, and plays of the nineteenth century is the need to justify the destruction of the Indian, to show this destruction as part of the moral progress of civilization. This justification was a mutual action between writer and reader, actor and audience, and was an act of collective expiation." (191)

2. Cultural Continuity and Change in Mid-20th Century Works

Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs,* and Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian* are plays with a purpose. They bear down on the critical issues facing Native American communities and bring to bear on those issues, with sharp focus, a series of incisive themes—identity, alcoholism, and assimilation among them. Though the plays are separated by a quarter of a century in time, and a good deal in style as well, both offer important perspectives on the vital, if too often unremarked upon, matter of how contemporary Natives negotiate and understand their "Indigenous" identities in a world that all too often seems determined to make them "invisible."

Green Grow the Lilacs, composed in 1930, is a folk play that takes place in Oklahoma Territory during the early part of the 1900s. While it might be more widely known as the muse for the musical *Oklahoma*! that took Broadway by storm, it greatly captures the lives of people on the

frontier, the blending of cultures, and the social conditions affecting the Cherokee Nation. The play's structure and dialogue implicitly highlight the bitter struggle between the preservation of Native identity and the path of least resistance toward conformity with settler culture, all against a backdrop of dubious mythology and relentless expansion. Instead of bombarding you with political assertions, *Green Grow the Lilacs* interacts with Indigenous identity in an understated manner. The characters, who include both Natives and settlers, showcase through their interactions the merging of their cultures. This play illustrates the gradual mixing of Native and non-Native identities as the characters navigate their shared space, each holding onto their respective heritages while assimilating aspects of settler culture. In Riggs's world, Native and settler cultures have always influenced each other, and they do so in a way that leads to a gradual, if not always easy, process of assimilation. Within this world, characters like Aunt Eller are a blend of both cultures: She has adapted her lifestyle to fit settler norms, but she still has a strong relationship with the land that is hers. Both characters and audience are aware of the complex and fraught negotiations of identity that Native individuals have to face in a world that increasingly demands assimilation into one homogenous identity. The play doesn't shy away from showing both the losses and the adaptations that come with this blending. The settlers moving into the area change the relationship with the land that is current at the time—profoundly affecting the Native Americans assigned here. They haven't the slightest idea what's about to go down. Losing their land doesn't just mean they're physically displaced; it opens wide a gaping abyss of profound cultural and spiritual displacement. On the spectrum of character, both Native and non-Native, the tie to the land is tenacious. Sadly, colonization becomes the method used, by both halves of the character spectrum, to untie that tenuous tie. The identity of the frontier is a point of convergence for Indigenous and settler cultures. It is where both worlds meet. But those worlds do not meet without conflict. The frontier is a touchpoint for the tensions faced by Native Americans striving to keep their identities in a world carving ever more towards the dominant American culture. Phyllis Cole Braunlich describes:

> "He authentically reproduced the rhythm and poetic quality of Oklahoma speech with an accuracy unmatched before or since by any other writer. He wrote prolifically; most of his plays were published, many of the others were performed, and in addition he made numerous contributions to poetry and prose. His characters were varied, genuine, and unique. Riggs's originality was both his genius and his curse, since it was sometimes perceived as "regional" or "experimental." Believing that drama is "interaction between people" and that character is destiny, he wrote from emotion and intuition, making no attempt to write the "traditional Western." His plays are satisfying drama, sometimes stark, usually realistic,

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> sometimes rich with color and pageantry, and certainly of enduring interest. In his Oklahoma plays one walks into the light of an age that has passed and there experiences the aura, mood, and folkways of times and places as authentic as memoirs." (394)

In contrast, *Body Indian*, which was written and first staged in 1972, directly tackles the grim aspects of life for Native Americans. While the earlier works might be seen as presenting a more palatable picture, *Body Indian* goes into the hard-hitting problems of alcoholism, poverty, and the loss of culture. The main character, Bobby Lee, is a middle-aged Native man who is trying to regain control of his life and is having a lot of difficulty with the issues of addiction and unemployment. This work marks a significant shift in the kind of drama that Indigenous people are doing and are being done to them. Unlike Green Grow the Lilacs, Body Indian paints a straightforward, sincere picture of Bobby Lee and his Native contemporaries' splintered identities. Living in poverty and haunted by the specter of alcoholic despair, they wrestle with the almost impossible task of forming any individual or communal identity. The play mirrors Lee and his peers' mixed-up lives in its own mixed-up structure—*Body Indian* is not a linear narrative. For Bobby Lee, alcoholism is not merely a personal problem; it is a synecdoche for the greater, wrenching catastrophe that plays havoc with the identities of Native individuals and communities.

Assimilation is harmful, leaving in its wake characters caught in cultural limbo and despair. Bobby Lee serves as a window for the audience to see the struggle not just of one individual but of many Native people caught in the relentless pressure of assimilation and its demand to conform. Yet, the play does not offer much hope. Bobby Lee's story is a sad one, and his death at the end is a powerful statement about the toll assimilation takes. *Body Indian* is a play about fractured community ties. Wilson Norma points out:

> "Near the end of each of the five scenes, Bobby Lee passes out; and in turn, the other characters roll him for money to buy more wine. Although there is some comic relief when the characters dance, sing, and joke about the money they don't have, overall Body Indian is starkly naturalistic, a somber warning. The bizarre party mood is broken in each scene by the lights and whistle of a train. This repeated motif implies that all alcoholics are in danger of being maimed because Bobby Lee lost his own leg when he passed out on a railroad track. The train symbolizes the culture that invaded their land, dislocating the Indians from their source of life. So cut off from the earth are these alcoholics that after they have taken all his money, they sell Bobby Lee' s artificial leg for wine." (85)

Its characters struggle with disconnection, not just from their ethnic roots but also from one another. Kinship, once a traditional Native value that guaranteed a ready-made support system in times of need, is fast eroding. Bobby Lee's search for friendship and connection is foiled at

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every turn, exposing the deepening loneliness and despair of modern Native life. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, we see an almost playful interpretation of Indigenous identity—a character imbues a Native American woman with the traits of an old hag who floats among the clouds. This female figure is a mix of Indigenous cultures with no real resolution to her identity.

In *Body Indian*, we are caught in the fray of a more contemporary experience of Native identity, one that is split, adrift, and troubled by the effects of colonization—rot that has set in after a long and short spell of being down and low. While *Green Grow the Lilacs* hints that it may be possible for cultures to survive by adapting to dramatic change, *Body Indian* articulates a dire prognosis—that cultural loss is unavoidable. The characters in *Body Indian* do not present a model of adaptation; they manifest a model of survival in a world of cultural wreckage. The two plays deal with the same theme, "assimilation." But in *Body Indian*, assimilation appears as a destructive force—especially for marginalized American Indian communities and their cultures. On the other hand, in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, assimilation seems to be a natural, albeit a slow, blending of practices of the two cultures in Oklahoma so that both can coexist. *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *Body Indian* give us two different but related perspectives on what it means to be Native American in a society that often forces Native people to give up their identity. The former looks at the beginnings of the transfer of culture on the frontier and what that meant for the people who lived there. The latter play by the same author tackles the harsh, modern-day reality of life for many Native Americans, where deep cultural loss and issues like alcoholism are prevalent and nearly impossible to overcome—not when the dominant culture keeps insisting on the kind of identity that these two plays challenge.

IV. **Contemporary Reinterpretations**

Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play* and William S. Yellow Robe Jr.'s *The Independence of Eddie Ross* grapple with the appearance of contemporary Indigenous self-representation. The characters in these plays endeavor to find a path to representing themselves. And, in their efforts, they poke serious fun at the nonsense of "wokeness," political correctness, and social assurance that often do a poor job of securing the kind of representation that Indigenous people actually want. Written in 2015, *The Thanksgiving Play* is a satirical comedy about well-meaning, culturally clueless white people trying to put together a Thanksgiving pageant for an audience of schoolchildren. The characters involved in the play-within-a-play are themselves not Native American. The idea of performative wokeness is at the center of the

play. The white characters, in their almost desperate desire to be seen as politically correct and socially aware, end up reinforcing the very stereotypes they intend to avoid. FastHorse makes the point that non-Indigenous people, no matter how good their intentions, often have a hard time genuinely representing Indigenous cultures. More often than not, the non-Indigenous characters in the play focus on their own fears of being seen as "woke" rather than on any authentic engagement with Indigenous cultures or perspectives. The characters often find themselves in situations that demand absurd levels of and unusual forms of cultural sensitivity. Awkwardness and absurdity are inevitable when the dictates of appearance overtake the dictates of content. And suppose characters are sometimes painfully inept in their efforts to go beyond appearance to substance. In that case, that's partly a function of the actual cultural and historical cluelessness behind most of what they attempted. Not having believable Indigenous figures in a tale that's supposedly about Indigenous history makes the story ironic.

The myth surrounding Thanksgiving humorously gets taken apart in this play. It is a myth that has historically helped to erase Indigenous cultures and has long denied Indigenous peoples the right to live in their traditional ways. The characters in this play labour under the assumption that it is possible to create an "inclusive" pageant that will allow all the performers and viewers to enjoy the performing experience and viewing the next scene in the narrative of Thanksgiving. What they discover is the impossibility of that premise and, along the way, get to have a little fun with the premise of the holiday itself. The play primarily criticizes the frequent marginalization of Indigenous voices in discussions about their representation. While the characters in the play work hard to ensure an accurate portrayal of Native history, they fail to incorporate perspectives of people living that history, thus replicating a broader societal pattern that side-lines Indigenous voices in crucial conversations about identity.

Fast Horse illuminates the tension between wokeness and cultural appropriation, highlighting how well-intentioned efforts to avoid appropriation can lead to something like "erasure lite." The play pushes the audience to consider, not for the first time, the crucial questions of who gets to tell Indigenous stories and why even some supposedly "good" ways of representing Native peoples can end up being not so good after all. In their review of the play Cox and Pettit mention:

> "In addition to undermining standard settler-colonial views of Native history and peoples, the play's in-jokes and other comic moves poke fun at predominantly white, liberal theater culture via their onstage

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> representatives. The characters know just enough about Native American history and culture to make a mess of it; they know just enough about their own craft to mess that up, too." (224)

The Independence of Eddie Ross (1993) tells a story not typical for a Native man in contemporary America. While many would tell the life of a New Mexico Pueblo man in the role of a poverty-stricken victim living a screen narrative of unhappiness due to legal reasons, drinking, or violence, this story accomplishes something that few contemporary narratives concerning Native men do: it depicts Eddie Ross as someone living a life of freedom, health, happiness, and self-determination. In fact, The Independence of Eddie Ross serves as an indictment against the stereotypes that many narratives convey about Native men. In this sense, the figure of Eddie Ross serves as the poster child for the positive depiction of Native men living in narratives that eschew the typical screen story of poverty and unhappiness.

For a long time, Eddie was unable to emerge victorious. He found himself in a situation where the only escape was aligning with one side or dismantling the dual existence so many individuals inhabit. Eddie wrestles, in a manner almost Shakespearean, with the expectations laid upon him by the non-Native community and himself. He strives to realize an independent, good life in the North. In this endeavor, he takes on the solid and silent male stereotype. Eddie's path, of course, is beset with societal challenges—that is, bias, stereotype, and limitation—located squarely in the hub of contemporary Indigenous life. But Eddie's path is also lined with personal challenges that all young men face: the search for self, the discovery of the kind of stature that allows them to stand in both communities—in the life they lead and the life they choose to lead.

Common media portrayals of Native Americans might be expected to appear in this play, but they don't. For example, the main character, Eddie, is not a noble, romantic figure embodying traditional resilience. He is a confused, contemporary guy who cannot quite get a grip on modern living. And he's not even presented as the kind of representative Indian that some might caricature as a bad role model. On the contrary! Eddie's fight, in a way, is a critique that Native folks in the here and now are not responsible for embodying any role or ideal that might meet the expectations of either the dominant society or their communities. Eddie and some of his cohorts express the feelings of disconnection that many contemporary Natives experience between cultures.

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This dislocation intensifies under an unyielding societal force that promotes a truncated, almost parodic, image of what it is to be 'Native' today. Eddie's quest for self-determination is much more than a personal journey; it is emblematic of a far larger and more collective pursuit undertaken by many Native individuals. They are valiantly trying to carve out recognizable and meaningful identities for themselves in a cultural stage set that is as fragmented as it is bewildering. Eddie's storyline also allows for a pointed exploration of the sorts of societal pressures that many Indigenous individuals are folded under.

Pressure is a constant for people like Eddie, who come from historically underrepresented cultures. These individuals are often expected to serve up ready-to-go cultural authenticity on demand. The alternative—being seen as fully and equally individual in life and art—isn't a path many take, though Eddie does reject this pressure. Indeed, the film accentuates his journey toward finding comfort in his skin, without the need for any labels that others might find convenient. In an interview William Yellow Robe mentioned:

> "Like in *The Independence of Eddie Rose*, which deals with alcoholism on the reservation, we had one member who said "I grew up in that home, that's my house on stage, you put my life on stage," and he just broke down and started crying. I have had members of different Native communities who have come to the plays, have virtually broken down and have identified with the characters in the situation because it's so close to their home." (Pulitano and Robe 35)

The Thanksgiving Play and *The Independence of Eddie Ross* take astute aim at the modern non-Native world. They criticize the way Indigenous culture is often co-opted and "packaged" by a society that demands a certain narrative of Native identity in order to make sense of the modern world. In short, two theatrical works—*The Thanksgiving Play* and *The Independence of Eddie Ross*—address in incisive, witty, and useful ways the modern societal pressures on Indigenous people that make self-representation very difficult. Though satirical, these plays offer storytelling that cuts to the heart of the tricky business of identity at a time when it seems Indigenous representation is often either misleading or completely ignored.

V. Conclusion

The intricate dynamics of representation, resistance, and reclamation in cultural identity inform the development of Indigenous personhood in American Indian drama. The characters in such plays as Metamora; or The Last of the Wampanoags once reflected romanticized or

stereotypical figures in colonial narratives. Yet, the baser representations have gradually given way to plays that serve as platforms for expressing the relatively complex identities of Indian peoples. Indeed, some plays like Green Grow the Lilacs and Body Indian have taken a significant turn toward being about these people and how they think, often in terms of gut issues that many of us find too easy to caricature or criticize from a distance.

Indigenous playwrights have reshaped Native identity in the modern world in recent dramatic works like *The Thanksgiving Play* and *The Independence of Eddie Ross*. In these plays, societal expectations and the burden of cultural continuity are confronted as the playwrights assert a new narrative of what it means to live as a Native person in the United States today. The paper emphasizes the significance of Indigenous drama in recovering Indigenous narratives and reasserting how they are told. In doing so, it acts as a powerful vehicle for dialogue on identity and sovereignty in a modern, multicultural world.

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