PiLaCS Papers in Language and Communication Studies
Volume 3, Article 1: 1–21, 2022 | ISSN 2515–4001

Giving Voice to 'Place'

Performative locational communication in Larissa FastHorse's play *Urban Rez*[*]

Andrew Novell
University of East Anglia

Abstract This research focuses on the contemporary Native American theatre of the United States in relation to the 'places' at which it is performed in 'site-specific' productions. Although the concept of 'place' is pivotal to Native American cultural understanding, contemporary Native playwrights have, to date, written mainly for Western proscenium arch stages or studio black boxes. Consequently, the exciting possibility of combining 'site-specific' and Indigenous theatre remains little explored. However, with the production of the 'site-specific' play *Urban Rez* by the Sicangu Lakota playwright Larissa FastHorse, it is now possible to research the performative influence of 'place' in Native American theatre. Written as a multidisciplinary work at the intersection of communication, Indigenous, and performance studies, this paper looks at some of the ways FastHorse draws on the specific 'place' of *Urban Rez*'s performance – contemporary Los Angeles – as a means of cross-cultural communication between its Native performers and non-Native audience.

1 Introduction

For over fifty years, Native American dramatists have sought to develop a contemporary Indigenous theatre in the United States. Emergence as a definable genre in the 1960s, the movement's primary objective is perhaps expressed nowhere better than in the 'credo' proclaimed by theatre theorist Lloyd Keva New (Cherokee), which challenged Native playwrights to "examine Indian culture for that which is theatrical, and then find ways to interpret those unique aspects for contemporary audiences in true theatre settings" (New 1969: 3). Since New wrote those words, generations of Native playwrights have sought to follow his advice, exploring not only the full diversity of Native American culture, but also the political and social concerns of Native Americans in their plays; from the dream time of man's creation to the post-colonial nightmare of the Residential School system.

[*]The author wishes to thank Cornerstone Theatre Company, and in particular Paula Donnelly, for their kind assistance in providing access to the script of *Urban Rez*, without which this project would not have been possible.

Arguably, though thematically diverse, a central unifying feature of this body of work is the conspicuous role a shared understanding of 'place' performs in the communication of meaning. Indeed, 'place', according to Indigenous theatre scholar Christy Stanlake, "figures so predominantly in Native American plays that one could argue that it carries the same value as characters do and often functions just as actively" (Stanlake 2009: 39).

For Native Americans, 'place' forms the literal bedrock of shared cultural communication. As the Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. explains, "American Indians hold their lands – *places* – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind" (Deloria Jr. 1992: 63). Moreover, 'place', as an agent of dramatic creation and communication, has its roots in the earliest traditions of Native American storytelling. Even today, this is found in the practice of 'place-making' (Basso 1996: 5), where geographic features in the land are intrinsically employed to visually support the understanding of oral narratives.[1]

Similarly, since the mid-1960s, theatre theorists have shown sustained interest in the role of 'place' in theatre through the development of 'site-specific' performances.[2] As with Native American theatre, site-specific performance centrally utilises 'place' as a means of non-verbal communication. As Professor Mike Pearson, co-founder of the influential site-specific company *Brith Gof*, points out, integrating the unique stories of a 'place' with other forms of storytelling means a performance site "Might then be understood not just as a geographical location, but as a place in which cultural identities and social relationships can be productively examined" (Pearson 2010: 5). Today, such has been the mainstream theatre's adoption of site-specific practice, such productions might be considered every bit as 'true theatre settings' as those staged in conventional theatre spaces.

Arguably, given the timeline of co-evolution of Native American and site-specific theatre - both in the vanguard of theatrical experimentation - and their shared foci of 'place' as a communicator of narrative, one might expect to find the application of site-specific theatre techniques to Native American theatre would be widespread. However, this is not the case.

Surprisingly, so far, the majority of Native American theatre has been written for

[1] 'Place' as a suitable methodological tool for examining such culture practices has long been recognised, but again, saw sustained growth in the post-structuralist philosophical shake-up of the 1960s. In short, as geographer Tim Cresswell expounds, 'place' can offer, "a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world" (Cresswell 2015: 18).

[2] Defining 'site-specific' performance is notoriously 'slippery' (Pearson 2010: 7), and for the purposes of this paper I will use the definition of theatre theorist Nick Kaye, who states: "Site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within, and conditioned by the particulars of the found space; existing social situations or locations, both used and disused: sites of work, play, and worship. [...] They are an interpenetration of the found and the fabricated. They are inseparable from their sites, the only context within which they are "readable"" (Kaye 1996: 211). As such, my use of the term 'site-specific' throughout refers to performances where locations are "architectures that are not backdrops" (McLucas, Morgan, and Pearson 1995: 46), but rather arenas communicating, according to scenographer Kathleen Irwin, through "spacial performativity" (Irwin 2009: 12).

the same insular environs envisioned by New in the 1960s; proscenium arch theatres and studio black-boxes. The reasons for this are diverse and complex, and arise from a range of cultural, artistic, and logistical considerations,[3] but whatever the underlying causation might be, the result is that the fascinating possibilities of combining Native American and site-specific theatre remains largely to be explored.

Therefore, to contribute to the mapping of this uncharted territory, I ask the question in this paper of what site-specific techniques might communicate, when applied to a place-centric genre such as Native American theatre, that more traditional staging methods might not?

Specifically, I examine here the work of the Los Angeles based Cornerstone Theatre Company, and their collaboration with the Sicangu Lakota playwright Larissa FastHorse, to create the play *Urben Rez* (2016). This work is of particular significance, as it represents the first professionally produced Native American site-specific play in the United States. I focus on some of the means by which *Urban Rez* employs 'place' to communicate sites of performance not as mere aesthetic backdrops or 'empty' spaces, but rather, in the words of art historian Jeff Kelley, "reservoirs of human content" (Kelley 1991: 34), where the 'place' of performance takes an active participatory role in dramatic storytelling.[4] In what follows, I look to illustrate some of the means by which site-specific performance techniques, through a shared understanding of 'place', can function as a means of intercultural communication between Native American and non-Native theatre participants.

I begin this study with a brief background of Cornerstone, Larissa FastHorse, and a synopsis of *Urban Rez*, then move to analyse how 'place' functions as a means of communication by focussing on three key elements of the play: the physical performance space; the 'cultural fair' motif; and the use of caricature.

2 Cornerstone Theatre Company

Cornerstone Theatre was founded by Bill Rauch and Alison Carey in 1986 as a 'traveling ensemble', before settling permanently in Los Angeles in 1992 (Cornerstone n.d.: 'History'). Since then, Cornerstone has worked with many communities in Los Angeles, seeking to raise awareness of the cultural, social, and political issues facing them through the dynamic medium of performance. Significantly, as Cornerstone Artistic Director Michael John Garcés points out, although recognising numerous factors define a community, many of Cornerstone's productions are still, "defined by *geography*" (Carl

[3] For example, most Native American actors are based in the major theatre districts of the East and West coast, where the majority of productions are commercially still produced in more traditional venues.

[4] The use of 'place' as a methodological tool for examining dramatic texts forms the basis of 'platial theory', which has been developed and applied for the analysis of 'place' as a functioning concept in literature and drama (Chaudhuri 1997), and its special significance for the analysis of Native American plays has also been recognised (Stanlake 2009).

2014, my emphasis). For example, the company's *A Jordan Downs Illumination* (2019) was based on and around the Watts neighbourhood in downtown Los Angeles, and used the imminent physical destruction of the location, due to the wholesale redevelopment of the former housing project, to reflect and celebrate its past history as a gathering place for the city's black, immigrant, and generally disenfranchised population.

Cornerstone often presents work in 'cycles', which form collections of plays united by a common theme—for example, the *Faith-Based Cycle* (2001-2005), and the *Justice Cycle* (2007-2010). For its last round of plays, the *Hunger Cycle* (2011-2017), the company looked to devise a work specifically situated in the heart of Los Angeles's urban Native American population.

3 Larissa FastHorse

FastHorse was an inspired choice for the project: an established playwright, with a strong social and political worldview to communicate, yet also one with a stated willingness to give and take in the creative process. She explains that:

> When I start a play, I don't have a preordained idea of what form it should take or the point of the story or how it ends. Sometimes the community I am working with determines those things, sometimes it is up to me. (MacArthur Foundation 2020)

A contemporary of the 'new wave' of Native American women playwrights to emerge since the millennium,[5] FastHorse has quickly established herself with a succession of commercially and critically successful plays. She was the recipient of the PEN Literary Award for Drama in 2019 – in part for her work on *Urban Rez* – and awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2020.

FastHorse's work blends both traditional and modern themes and performance practices, and methodologically, Cornerstone's creative process – one that relies of drawing from the community's 'local knowledge' – was a natural extension of her own ethos as a playwright:

> Because I come from a tribal background that historically did not have a written language, I rely very heavily on oral history. When I do research as a playwright I depend on talking with people and I conduct a lot of interviews. Going through the Cornerstone Institute Intensive was incredibly rewarding as a playwright—and as a human. For me, it was a formalization and deepening

[5] A group which includes Madeline Sayet (Mohegan), Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee), and Annette Arkeketa (Otoe-Missouria).

> of a process that I was inherently doing and gave a whole other dimension to my work. (Clemenco 2016)

For example, Cornerstone began the creative process of *Urban Rez* with a series of 'talking circles'—organised events where the local community was given the opportunity to tell their stories and raise awareness of issues they most wanted to see addressed in the play. From attending these, it became clear to FastHorse that a central concern for the local Indigenous community was their sense of loss of identity linked to the land. She writes:

> They are here – have been here for thousands of years – and yet have no claim to their ancestral lands, no claim to their own name even because the federal government has declared them extinct. There felt to me to be this huge hunger for so many things. At the same time, we are all living, and working, and doing this play on this land that actually belongs to someone else who has no ability to claim it—which I found to be both tragic and a fascinating way of thinking about hunger. (Clemenco 2016)

Choosing the theme of 'Hunger for Culture' (Clemenco 2016), FastHorse then began work on the script for *Urban Rez*, weaving together the individual stories collected from the talking circles and the broader theme of the on-going fight by Californian Native Americans for federal recognition.[6] This was followed by table readings, where the details of the script were further refined and developed through a process of continuing consultation with the community (Figure 1).

4 *Urban Rez*

Urban Rez was performed between April 7th and May 1st, 2016. It was staged at two separate sites in Los Angeles – Kuruvungna Springs and The Los Angeles State Historic Park – both chosen as 'important native sites' (Scrofano 2016) to the Tongva/Gabrielino people, the original Native American inhabitants of the LA Basin.[7] It featured a core of professional actors from Cornerstone, as well as cast members drawn from the local community, several of whom had previously contributed to the original talking circles.

The plot of the play centres on a local Native American artist, Max, who identifies as a tribal member of the Nicoleño—a people originating on the Channel Islands off the Californian Coast. Although closely affiliated historically to the Tongva, unlike them the

[6] Although the State of California recognised the Tongva in 1994 as "the aboriginal tribe of the Los Angeles Basin" (Oropeza et al. 2008), they remain devoid of federal recognition as a tribe.

[7] Tongva can be translated as 'of the earth', and their close affinity with the land can be detected in their work at Kuruvungna Springs, where they "keep its histories, keep rich knowledge of its possibilities, and keep our attention on its critical, incalculable resources" (Scrofano 2016).

FIGURE 1: One of the 'talking circles' in progress during the early rehearsal stages of *Urban Rez* (Photo Credit: Paula Donnelly)

Nicoleño are officially considered as 'extinct' in the eyes of the federal government.[8] Max ekes out a simple living at the local community fair, the eponymous 'Urban Rez', by selling his 'genuine' Native American art. However, after an encounter with the local federal representative, an officious everyman described only as 'The Government Person', Max is arrested and his art confiscated. As the Nicoleño tribe do not possess federal recognition, Max is unrecognised as a Native American, and his 'genuine' art is thus deemed to be breaking the American Indian Arts and Crafts Act (U.S. Department of the Interior n.d.). However, Max is informed by the Government Person that there exists a 'loophole': if he can successfully gain federal recognition that day for the Nicoleño he will escape prosecution and his artwork will be returned. When the labyrinthine complexity of the application becomes apparent, Max recruits the other characters at the fair to help him complete it, and in the process, the fragile coalition that exists between the inhabitants of *Urban Rez* is exposed, broken apart, and re-examined; old friendships are fractured, and new alliances, often through convenience, forged.

5 The Cultural Fair

Urban Rez is set in contemporary Los Angeles within some sort of Indian Cultural fair. FastHorse writes that as the 'participants'[9] check-in to the compound they should, "be

[8] Current research suggests that descendants of the Nicoleño are in fact still present within the population of California. See Morris et al. (2016).

[9] Significantly, FastHorse favours the term 'participants' as opposed to 'audience' in her notes for the play.

encouraged to explore the fair, but not directed in any way except to be told when to enter" (FastHorse 2016: THE SPACE). The exact nature of this fair remains somewhat ambiguous, and FastHorse's description seems purposefully vague when she writes of it as, "An immersive fair blending fact and fiction" (FastHorse 2016: FORMAT).

How does this ambiguity draw on the location to speak to the participants? Well, FastHorse appears to utilise 'place' for the first time here to non-verbally communicate this to those present; the vagueness of the set's description, as well as a no proscribed code of behaviour for those attending, suggests the fair motif is designed to encourage a platial questioning by participants on the complex history of such fairs in relation to the Native American experience.

For example, historically the staging of 'cultural fairs' occupies a troubled position at the intersection of settler-colonialism and Native American culture. Frequently in Euro-America's staging of its own 'cultural' heritage, Native Americans have been induced to 'perform' their cultural practices to agree with colonial misconceptions, fabrications, and outright invention. Notable examples are the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, at which, as Sarah Huhndorf notes, "While the exhibits frequently raised the spectre of Native Savagery, they also quelled viewers' fears by promising them that "progress" would soon render the Indian threat meaningless" (Huhndorf 2001: 31).

Nevertheless, as David Beck points out, "The 1893 world's fair provides a lens through which we can view the ways in which American Indians were continuing to adapt to the changes and challenges they faced" (Beck 2019: xv). So, while it is true much exploitation and manipulation of Native American culture did occur at such events, it is also possible to view Native American involvement as "part of a legacy of resourcefulness rather than another story of exploitation" (Sanders 2015). As such, this can be seen as an act of 'Survivance', which, according to author Gerard Vizenor (Anishinaabe), creates "a sense of native presence over the absence, nihility, and victimry" (Vizenor 2006: 1).

Arguably, *Urban Rez*'s use of the cultural fair is to communicate its contentious social positioning. Certainly, the necessity to adapt to 'changes and challenges' is a recurrent theme in *Urban Rez*, and the fair motif strengthens the questioning of the historical duality of fairs to both exploit Native American culture, while at the same time serving as a means to prevent its total eradication.

Conversely, while fairs emphasised the 'otherness' of Native Americans, the appropriation of Native American culture also occurred at national fairs in the 19th century on a grand scale, primarily due to the colonial search for a national identity through identification with the spirit of the country's original inhabitants. While Native Americans served as convenient 'hostiles' for settlers to glorify themselves by overcoming, they also represented a oneness with the land that the same settlers envied and longed to acquire

for themselves, largely through the practice of 'going native' (Huhndorf 2001). However, smaller, more traditional Native American fairs – such as the pow wow – have suffered historically, and continue to suffer today, from similar appropriation, most notable by 'Hobbyists'.

'Hobbyism' has a long history in North America, from its earliest colonial settlement, and came to prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1960s, as Philip J. Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) informs us, the Hobbyist pow-wow circuit, running parallel to more authentic Native American gatherings, fostered an, "almost continuous "powwow highway" of hobbyist gatherings" (Deloria 1994: 129). Even today, in countries such as Germany, the Hobbyist movement forms a multi-million dollar entertainment industry: a legacy of authors such as Karl May, who glorified the romantic, and almost totally imaginary, vision of Native American culture in his *Winnetou* novels of the 1930s. May's work gained ever greater popularity through a series of *Winnetou* films in the 1960s, and today, such is the obsessional nature of Native American appropriation in Germany, the term 'Indianthusiasm' has been coined to define the phenomenon (Taylor 2019). Again, a tradition of cinematic appropriation far from alien to the theatre going public of Los Angeles.

As I will seek to illustrate later, FastHorse confronts the inauthenticity of Hobbyism through the use of caricature in *Urban Rez*, but here, in her use of the fair motif, to communicate a spacial decolonisation of Euro-American Hobbyist inauthenticity through the creation of a truly authentic Native American 'cultural fair'. Indeed, FastHorse goes further, suggesting that contemporary Native American fairs require a greater level of authenticity, certainly a greater understanding of the individuality of tribal practices, if the diversity of Native American culture is to survive within the urban environment. This is given voice by the character of Adrienne, custodian of the 'APPRECIATION VS APPROPRIATION' booth in *Urban Rez*,[10] when she explains:

ADRIENNE

> People in LA don't even know we exist so we have to be more authentic than normal. We can't do pow wow dances in bright colors like everyone else. We need to dress in our traditions and prove who we are. (FastHorse 2016: 46)

While this is an obvious allusion to the before-mentioned tendency of Native American culture to be depicted falsely to meet the expectations of Euro-American fairgoers, it

[10]The set design of *Urban Rez* incorporates several informational 'booths', with titles including, 'LIVE OFF THE LAND / NATIVE PLANTS MATTER', 'GREAT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CITY / INDIAN RELOCATION ACT', and 'INSTANT KARMA / GUILT REDUCTION'. The 'APPRECIATION VS APPROPRIATION' is described as a place where "Participants learn the difference between appreciation and appropriation of Indigenous cultures by exploring topics like Columbus Day, feather headdresses, Missions etc." (FastHorse 2016: THE SPACE).

also perhaps illustrates again the latent adaptability and resourcefulness of Native American culture to persist through adaptation to the reality of circumstance—in other words, another instance of 'Survivance'. Although this may be articulated verbally through the written text of the play, arguably platial undertones such as these are more effectively communicated to the participants attending *Urban Rez* through their 'local knowledge' of the 'place' at which they reside. For, as likely as not, the participants' previous experience of Native American fairs in urban areas such as Los Angeles would be from attending just such inauthentic pow wows as those FastHorse mocks.

6 The Space

Obviously, the theme of the 'cultural fair' is most evident in the play's set design. FastHorse describes the 'SPACE' of *Urban Rez* as comprising a "Marketplace of community service tables, food crafts and artists lives here" (FastHorse 2016: THE SPACE), and thus sets the scene for the importance of this production as a community-oriented event.

The fair motif is extended here to communicate a platial statement on the dichotomous, transitory position between permanence and impermanence that urbanised Native Americans occupy, and reflected in Shannon Scrofano's environmentally sympathetic set design. For example, in some respects *Urban Rez* reminds us of a typical fairground set-up, constructed of temporary booths and sideshows, suggesting a transitory event (Figure 2); while in other ways, this particular fair appears to manifest as a more permanent micro-society, perpetually in operation and intimately connected to the day-to-day lives of its 'community'. Consider the market stalls in this context, the plants and vegetables for sale tethering the guy ropes of the fair to the land and the bedrock of the local economy (Figure 3). These suggest a permanency, for as ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan observes, "the preservation of traditional agroecosystems must occur in conjunction with the maintenance of the culture of the local people" (Nabhan 2002: x).

Yet, while at the heart of community involvement, the *Urban Rez* fair seems forever condemned to remain on the peripheries of contemporary Los Angeles society. The semi-transparent 'Openness' of the structures was designed so the audience should not feel "cut off from the space beyond" (Scrofano 2016), it also functions to remind participants that behind the seemingly impermeable structures of modernity – the concrete constructs that now cover so much of Los Angeles and the cardboard shanties that festoon its streets – there remains the traditional land of someone's ancestors. This dichotomous relationship between Native Americans' traditional lands and the contempered concrete jungle of Los Angeles seems to have been conceptually present from the beginning of the production, with Cornerstone choosing to launch an event to publicise it in the city's Skid Row district of 'Indian Alley', the site (historically) of many Native Americans' first encounters with

FIGURE 2: The transparent nature of the 'booths' appears to encourage the participants to look beyond the production to the parks and gardens on which it is performed, and the 'Urban Rez' of Los Angeles's skyscrapers, viaducts, and motorways in the distance. (Photo Credit: James Cheeks III)

urban living through social migration.

This dichotomous nature of *Urban Rez* is further communicated through the use of the motif of circularity, both physical and metaphorical. The significance of circles within Native American ceremony is well documented, and has been examined within the theatre context (Haugo 1999: 228-256), and FastHorse's characters, building on the motif, proclaim in turn, "we are all part of the circle", "the circle makes us all stronger", and, "I am part of the circle today" (FastHorse 2016: 86-87).

A circle can represent movement, and, paradoxically, also the stability of the eternal. While the seasons may change through a repetitive cycle, they do so with the inevitable certainty of a return to their origins and rebirth—a metaphor with particular resonance in a play staged within the natural environment. In the introductory notes to the play, FastHorse indicates the action takes place "in a circle or oval" (FastHorse 2016: THE SPACE), and as Scrofano explains, this extended to the set design:

> We gravitated towards circles, looking at circular spaces, simple or inverted, understanding how native performance works in circles and how housing and built structures worked in the Tongva/Gabrielino cultures in this area of Southern California. (Scrofano 2016)

However, while circles here suggest a fragile unity, there is also something troubling

FIGURE 3: Participants at *Urban Rez* are encouraged to partake of the various activities on offer beyond the production itself. The plants on sale remind us of the importance of land in the economy of Native American peoples, perhaps. (Photo Credit: James Cheeks III)

about the circularity FastHorse creates. For example, if Max's attempt to complete the federal recognition paperwork, he seems locked in the inescapable 'loophole' of federal government bureaucracy. Perhaps more problematic, although appearing to circularly return to an Aristotelian state of order, the play's character ultimately achieves little in resolving the conflicts that have been exposed. 'Nothing's changed', the character of Robie informs us, hinting at an altogether more Absurdist outcome (FastHorse 2016: 86). Indeed, the play ends suggesting an interminable 'cycle' of greater conflicts to come: "Goodbye Nicoleño, I'll see you in court!", the Government Person assures Max ominously (FastHorse 2016: 85). All of this is, arguably, reinforced by 'place'—the man-made constructs of City Hall looming on the skyline and reminding this in no land of Native law and justice, but one governed implicitly by the federal judicial system.

This realisation raises the question of just how far a return to 'authentic' Native American traditions can be taken in a place such as Los Angeles, not least, due to Indigenous tribal diversity. This is not, after all, a rural reservation of just one Indigenous tribe: other tribes and cultures must be acknowledged at *Urban Rez* to include the varied and multicultural populous of the LA Basin. Thus, the production looked to link the paradoxes surrounding urban reservations' physical existence and 'place' – as did the historical fairs of the past, straddling stylistically awkward geographical boundaries – with the sociologically dichotomous 'place' of urbanised Native Americans within a diverse multicultural community. A good example here was Cornerstone's decision, at the State Historic Park, to stage the production under the freeway viaduct on its periphery. The viaduct carries the freeway, which in turn 'carries' symbolically the point of transition between the island

idyll of the park's natural green space and the reality of the man-made concrete cityscape beyond. Here, 'place' triggers understanding in both character and participant alike. For example, Robie, another of the dislocated Native characters of Urban Rez, recalls how the freeway rekindles lost memories of her ancestry:

ROBIE

> But then I remember that once there was a village at the beginning of the Harbour freeway. The ancestors travelled those places that became roads so when I drive on the freeway it is ancestor time. Time to remember the stories. (FastHorse 2016: 2)

It is tempting to suggest that Robie is tapping into the description of the Native American storytelling process of 'place-making', which Keith Basso describes as, "an adventurous fleshing out of historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events—in short, a place-world" (Basso 1996: 6). Again, FastHorse appears to be focusing on the importance of 'place' as a potential cultural unifier, for among *Urban Rez*'s fragmented social gathering of disparate characters, if the thin thread of solidarity that binds them is a 'hunger for culture', then that culture will most likely be one rooted in the land itself.

But these are also characters 'alienated' from their 'place-world', and in many respects living in the aftermath of what, some have suggested, amounts to a cultural 'genocide' perpetrated against the inhabitants of California (Lindsay 2012). As a tribe now officially 'extinct', this is particularly true for those like Max of Nicoleño ancestry. For him, as an unrecognised Native American, his feelings of alienation from his culture directly relate to the loss of his ancestral homelands. The place once sacred to his ancestors is now buried beneath city blocks and freeways, rendered 'invisible', and as he shares such close affinity to it, he too is now rendered equally invisible to the world:

MAX

> Hunger for culture. I feel like I don't belong here everyday. The land is invisible. I am invisible. Our culture has been devoured and it feels like there is nothing left. (FastHorse 2016: 2)

In truth, perhaps these sentiments are as relevant to everyone at *Urban Rez*: after all, its inhabitants are, in one fashion or another, dislocated from a true sense of belonging and acceptance in the natural world—such is the alienating reality of metropolitan life.

Ultimately, *Urban Rez*'s focus on 'place' exposes particularly well the paradox of land as both a unifier and an agent of alienation for the real communities that make up the demographic of any urban reservation. From the community atmosphere initially

created, spectators are reminded that this is also their space, their place, and much more than simply a fitting scenic backdrop for an entirely fictional dramatic work. It is, they learn, a mirror to reflect all they have personally experienced of governmental and racial segregation depicted in the play. The 'place' where *Urban Rez* occurs, the seemingly benign 'circle or oval' of a performance space, is revealed as a battleground, both physically and psychologically: a combative arena where the fight for the recognition of one's right to a homeland must be played out, again, and again, and again.

Perhaps nowhere is this dramatic allusion communicated more strongly than in FastHorse's several references to specific 'places' of historical Native American/Colonial conflict: 'Battle of Little Big Horn', 'Wounded Knee 1890', and 'Alcatraz Occupation' (FastHorse 2016: 58). Each of these 'battles' leads us through the history of Colonial/settler/Native American conflict, from Custer's defeat, to the US Cavalry's massacre in retaliation, to the return of Native American affirmative action through the rising of the Red Power movement, and each of these 'battles' reminds the participants of *Urban Rez* of the historical importance that geographical locations have played in the fight for Native American sovereignty. Most significant perhaps is the reference to the occupation of Alcatraz Island, an act in part to celebrate the original Indigenous islanders, themselves neighbours of the Tongva and Nicoleño. These battles for a right to lay claim to the land, so central to the Native American experience – who can legitimately call it their own, either through winning it through their own efforts or from intrinsically linear heritage – are further explored by FastHorse through her use of caricature.

7 Wanda

The way FastHorse ties caricature to location can perhaps best be seen in her depiction of Wanda in *Urban Rez*. Described as "Not Native American, wanna be NDN" (FastHorse 2016: CAST OF CHARACTERS), and more derogatorily as a "twinkie" (FastHorse 2016: 82), other than the fact she, "grew up in LA" (FastHorse 2016: 54), little of Wanda's true background is revealed to us. Stating, "I just want to belong" (FastHorse 2016: 73) as her primary raison d'être, the only explanation for Wanda's obsession with being recognised as Native American is an ethereal, "I've always felt it" (FastHorse 2016: 19). Although passionate for Max's campaign to recognise the Nicoleño, one feels her activist fever is an attempt to gain recognition from any tribe that will claim her. The protest signs in her car are, "Generic ones, just in case" (FastHorse 2016: 16), as if whatever campaign she encounters is worth feigning support for in the hope of winning tribal affiliation, and she displays little tribal discrimination when voicing her desperate longing for a place to 'belong':

WANDA

> If I had a reservation that claimed me, I'd never leave. No matter what. Better to die part of something than live alone. (FastHorse 2016: 54)

Wanda may be "just trying to help" (FastHorse 2016: 36), but it is hard not to ascribe a reading of her as an exposé of those who doggedly pursue identification with Indigenous people to satisfy, perhaps less than altruistic, personal needs. Location is again pivotal in perceiving Wanda's significance here, as she arguably displays the stereotypical attitudes held by many non-Natives, particularly in sprawling, somewhat soulless, metropolitan areas like LA.

Centrally, Wanda's 'dis-location' from the reality of the place she resides functions to illustrate the systemic inconsistencies in understanding of people like her. For example, FastHorse stresses that at *Urban Rez*, "Participants learn the difference between appreciation and appropriation of Indigenous cultures" (FastHorse 2016: THE SPACE), and when Wanda states, "I feel Indian" (FastHorse 2016: 67, my emphasis), she reveals a chronic terminological lack of understanding. The word 'Indian', derived as it is from Indigenous, requires the coming of colonists for the necessity of its 'invention', and, as such, is an entirely place-based, and colonial, signifier. As Vizenor puts it, "The Indian was an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation: the word has no referent in tribal languages or cultures" (Vizenor 1994: 11).

Similarly, Wanda's Indigenous self-identification does not extend to an understanding of geographical realities, a naivety she demonstrates when she fails to comprehend Mexicans are North Americans (FastHorse 2016: 55). This locational disconnect is also reflected in her costume, with her buck-skin attire being more aligned with Plains Indians than the Nicoleño of California (Figure 4). Again, arguably, FastHorse enlists the 'local knowledge' of the play's participants for the humour of this to be 'read' effectively, drawing on their no doubt daily familiarity in encountering such glaring cultural inconsistencies.

Wanda's cosmetic appropriation – dressed more in line with the extra requirements of central casting than tribal authenticity – appears to signal that her conception of Native American culture is indeed the stereotypically 'bankable' one of 'Wild West' mythology or the 'romance' of the frontier, both largely 19th century inventions, but indelibly imprinted in the collective Euro-American psyche through mythologised images of Buffalo Bill, Custer, and Rooseveltian 'rough riders'. In the platial context of *Urban Rez*, its performance site located minutes from the backlots of Hollywood, the influence of cinematic Indigenous representation is surely as significant, through a subtle, subliminally communication with the play's participants. In this context, Wanda's 'Generic' placards in her car begin to appear to advertise, as prominently as the 'Hollywood Land' sign that once overshadowed the cityscape, the tendency of Euro-Americans to expediently homogenise Native American culture whenever possible.

Hollywood's stereotypical and uniform 'Injun', antithetical to the true complexity of

FIGURE 4: Wanda (Sheri Foster). Does her buck-skin jacket represent solidarity or appropriation? (Photo Credit: Kevin Michael Campbell)

the tribal system, appears similarly reflected in the disconnect between Wanda's artificial experience of reservation life, as a visitor to 'pow wows' and 'Sundance', and that which she encounters in the urbanised reality of Los Angeles. Although Wanda cherishes her romanticised vision of the reservation, filled with the music, dance, and ceremony that she would 'never leave', she is equally capable – perhaps uncomfortably for many participants to *Urban Rez* who have done this themselves – of offhandedly demonising the reality of reservation life:

WANDA

> Real reservations are prisons. They are the sucky land that no one else wanted. (FastHorse 2016: 54)

For Wanda, the 'cultural fair' of *Urban Rez* seems to embody this unpalatable reality. She refuses to recognise the legitimacy of a 'place' like *Urban Rez* as representing an 'authentic' Native American expression of its culture, stating, "if this is supposed to be a rez, where's the commod cheese and the fry bread?" (FastHorse 2016: 54), and at times appears completely at a loss as to the purpose of *Urban Rez* at all:

WANDA

> Isn't it ironic that people who don't have reservations, the original people of LA for instance, are doing this reservation themed thing? (FastHorse 2016: 54)

The true irony is that Wanda, a self-confessed 'Native' of Los Angeles and 'wanna be' Nicoleño, fails to recognise the opportunity *Urban Rez* affords to establish some type of truly urban Indigenous reservation in the city.

But why is Wanda so obsessed with locational references? Why does she hold such strong 'romantic' views of reservation life? And why, despite the fact she 'grew up in LA', does she not consider herself 'part of something' and alone in a city with the largest concentration of Native Americans in the United States? Such disconnect seems at odds with Native American conceptions of place, for as Leanne Simpson (Mississauga/Nishnaabeg) reminds us, "Every piece of North America is Indigenous", and, "[M]any indigenous peoples are attached and in love with our homelands regardless of where we live" (Simpson 2017: 195).

Arguably, Wanda's disconnect appears again to communicate the dangers appropriating as opposed to understanding: a mis-conceived ideology that lies behind many new-age followers that indulge in the questionably phenomenon of 'Hobbyism'. According to Deloria, 'Hobbyists' have historically "played Indian in order to address longings for meanings and identity that arose from the anxieties of their time" (Deloria 1994: 151). Such anxieties, of course, continue to exist in LA and many other places today, and viewed as a hobbyist, an explanation appears for Wanda's expressions of dogma about the significance of places, as this represents one of the key hobbyist criteria for establishing true Native American authenticity in the hobbyist mind.

So, could we describe Wanda as a caricature of the archetypal urban/Hollywood hobbyist? Perhaps. For example, as Deloria again points out, to gain legitimacy in hobbyist lore, "One such factor was place—did an Indian live on or off the reservation?" (Deloria 1994: 143). When hobbyists "imagined an accessible Indian culture, they also refigured racial difference around at least three variables—genetic quantum, *geographical residence*, and cultural attitude" (Deloria 1994: 143, my emphasis). This interpretation perhaps explains why Wanda's obsession with gaining Native American recognition is portrayed as connected to her desire to gain legitimate 'geographical residence' on a reservation.

Another trait of the hobbyist is to frequently proclaim scholarly knowledge of Native American culture while in actuality possessing next to no real understanding of it, and such 'Indianthusiasm' perhaps explains Wanda's frequent *faux pas* surrounding Native American culture. She even manages to disrespect the entire Nicoleño tribe by mispronouncing their name: 'Nickelodeon' (FastHorse 2016: 5). Through this outdated malapropism – one that suggests flickering imagines of dramatized frontier life available for a nickel at sideshows – is Wanda suggesting that Native Americans are just entertainment? It is hard

not to read this as a platial reference to the city's cinematic contribution in the stereotyping of Native Americans into the 'Injun', moreover, silent, outdated, and consigned to history.

Ultimately, Wanda demonstrates the worst aspects of the 'hobbyist' – the cliché of the 'plastic shaman' – and all those who throughout the history of the colonisation of the Americas have attempted to identify with Indigenous groups in the belief this will bring them a greater spiritual connection with the alien land they must now call home. While again often based in naïve good intentions, FastHorse reminds us of the uncomfortable truth that many Americans, finding themselves with no clear understanding of their ancestral roots or place in the new world, behave like Wanda in attempting to find solace through the unscrupulous affiliation with marginalised communities. Significant comments when communicated physically on the 'Hollywood Land' of make-believe.

8 Conclusion

In the above analysis, I have sought to show something of how *Urban Rez* employs 'place' of performance to communicate cross-cultural conflicts through non-verbal performativity. Everyone owns a personalised understanding of 'place' – accreted from the personal experiences of societal education and cultural inheritance – and yet, paradoxically, a shared 'local knowledge' of 'place' is also the one thing that unites us most fundamentally. I suggest that it is FastHorse and Cornerstone's exposing of this cross-cultural platial understanding which proves so resonant and powerful in *Urban Rez*.

Clearly, through FastHorse's use of the 'cultural fair' motif, she reflects the local Native American community's traditions and beliefs. But more than this, the 'place' of the cultural fair is a thought-provoking one: although readily identifiable, apparently unchanging, and seeming a bastion for local culture, it is also a transitory, ethereal, and nomadic entity. It is composed of many different participants and performers, who co-exist in a swirling liminal space where conventional social order is ill-defined. It is a place where the question of who belongs and who does not, remains in perpetual flux.

The production's choice of locations was also significant in highlighting the importance of 'place' within the Native American community. However, for all the beauty of the natural spaces in which it performed, there is little idealisation of these places the *Urban Rez* design—no attempt to disguise the urbanisation of these idyllic locations within which they are now land-locked, or to provide an aesthetically pleasing back-drop for comfortably sentimental reflection or nostalgia. The urban setting remains very much in evidence as a reminder of the fundamental nature of the reality of Indigenous land: at once unseen but ever-present, hidden but forever beneath the feet, an omnipotence that no amount of urbanisation or settler city-planning can truly extinguish. While, conversely, the ethereal,

minimalist set design – the fairground barker booths and vagabond stage – might suggest an intrinsic impermanence within both Western and Indigenous cultures in California. The temporary shanty dwellings, reminiscent of encampments perhaps, are those that can easily be picked up and carried away when the show is over. But the land, the 'place', remains unchanged after the fair's brief residence; all that remains are stories, the 'place-making', the memory of a tale's telling, and perhaps some greater understanding communicated subliminally through the event in which all have participated through its location. As FastHorse puts it:

> The idea for the play is that you get to show up and you get to belong for as long as you choose to hang out at the "*Urban Rez*." That's really the experience. We all get to show up and belong somewhere and create our own community for a moment. That's what I am hoping this experience does; it invites you to feel invested in, and a part of, and in control of something, and to have it change you. (Clemenco 2016)

Lastly, Wanda's platial communicative role in *Urban Rez* exists to expose the long-established tendency of Euro-America to 'go native' in order to find meaning. Arguably, no 'place' could provide a more resonant setting for this than Los Angeles, where Wanda forms a caricature of 'new age' Hobbyism: a refugee from 'spiritual bankruptcy' on a new-age vision quest that "seems to provide Hollywood's only hope for redemption" (Huhndorf 2001: 181). Given its performance location – Kuruvungna Springs is less than a ten-minute drive from the Hollywood Hills and Sunset Strip, and only twenty minutes from the playboy beaches of Milieu – it is interesting to speculate what discomforting nerve Wanda may have touched in some participants to *Urban Rez*, who, with just a little more self-scrutiny than her, might spot themselves reflected in the polished artifice of her persona.

Ultimately, rather than suggesting *Urban Rez* forms a definitive blueprint for the Native American theatre, it is hoped that this brief examination has revealed the notable contribution that 'place' can provide in communicating narrative, and to suggest its role be considered more actively within the academy. 'Place' in the hands of those sensitive to its performative possibilities – those with a 'sense of place', we might say – can significantly function in revealing to the wider communities the concerns affecting the lives of their Indigenous members through the mutual recognition of 'local knowledge'. Currently, the 'site-specific' experimentation of Cornerstone and FastHorse remains anomalous in the contemporary Native American theatre movement, but in a world looking to explore more environmental, less insular theatre arenas, their work will surely be seen as in the vanguard of realising the role that 'place' can play in the sustainment and growth of a vibrant Indigenous theatre of the future—not just in the United States, but even globally.

References

Basso, Keith (1996). *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Beck, David (2019). *Unfair Labor? American Indians and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago*. Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.

Carl, P. (2014). *Interview with Michael Garcés*. URL: https://howlround.com/interview-michael-garces/.

Chaudhuri, Una (1997). *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Clemenco, Sage Alia (2016). *Urban Rez: Playwright Larissa FastHorse on the Urban Indian Experience*. URL: https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/urban-rez-cornerstone-theater-larissa-fasthorse/.

Cornerstone (n.d.). *History*. URL: https://cornerstonetheater.org/about%20/history/.

Cresswell, Tim (2015). *Place: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Deloria, Philip J. (1994). *Playing Indian*. New Haven, CT: Yale Historical Publication.

Deloria Jr., Vine (1992). *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion – the Classic Work Updated*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

FastHorse, Larissa (2016). *Urban Rez*. Unpublished Play Script. Los Angeles, CA: Cornerstone Theatre Company.

Haugo, Ann (1999). "'Circles Upon Circles Upon Circles: Native Women in Theater and Performance". In: *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*. Ed. by Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye Darby. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, pp. 228–256.

Huhndorf, Shari M. (2001). *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Irwin, Kathleen (2009). *The Ambit of Performance: How Site Makes Meaning in Performance*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Kaye, Nick (1996). *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents*. London: Hardwood Academic Publishers.

Kelley, Jeff (1991). "Art in Place". In: *Headlands Journal 1991*. San Francisco, CA: Headlands Center for the Arts, pp. 34–38.

Lindsay, Brend (2012). *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*. Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.

MacArthur Foundation, The (2020). *Larissa Fasthorse*. URL: https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2020/larissa-fasthorse.

McLucas, Cliff, Richard Morgan, and Mike Pearson (1995). *Y Llyfyr Glas*. Cardiff, Wales: Brith Gof.

Morris, Susan L., John R. Johnson, Steven J. Schwartz, René L. Vellanoweth, Glenn J. Farris, and Sara L. Schwebel (2016). "The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman's Community". In: *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 36.1, pp. 91–118.

Nabhan, Gary Paul (2002). *Evening Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

New, Lloyd Kiva (1969). "Credo for American Indian Theatre". In: *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*. Ed. by Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye Darby. Vol. 2000. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, pp. 3–4.

Oropeza, J., J. Scott, L. Yee, M. Davis, and B. Karnette (2008). *Senate Bill No. 1134, Pub. L. No. 1134*. URL: http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/sen/sb_1101-1150/sb_1134_bill_20080131_introduced.html.

Pearson, Mike (2010). *Site-Specific Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sanders, Emily (2015). *The 1893 Chicago World's Fair and American Indian Agency*. URL: https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/1893-chicago-worlds-fair-and-american-indian-agency/.

Scrofano, Shannon (2016). *Reclaiming Spaces: How 'Urban Rez' Created a Play within a Cultural Fair*. URL: https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/cornerstone-theater-urban-rez-set-design-place-keeping.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake (2017). *As We Have Always Done*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Stanlake, Christy (2009). *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Drew Hayden (2019). *Searching for Winnetou*. URL: https://www.cbc.ca/cbcdocspov/episodes/searching-for-winnetou.

U.S. Department of the Interior (n.d.). *The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990*. URL: https://www.doi.gov/iacb/act.

Vizenor, Gerald (1994). *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

— ed. (2006). *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.

Andrew Novell is a PhD Candidate in American Studies at the University of East Anglia. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Directing from Rose Bruford College (2001), a Master of Arts in Theatre Directing from UEA (2003), and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from Rose Bruford College (2018). His

main area of research is the use of site-specific theatre techniques in the contemporary Indigenous theatre of North America. As well as his academic and teaching career, he is an actor, director, and writer, with over twenty-five years of experience of working in both the UK and the USA. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.