

Mac Telle

Native American Playwrights

The Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA) was established at Miami University in 1996, and since then has been home to a wide, yet specific variety of theatrical materials. The collection is wide in the sense that it features work dating back to the 1960s, yet the works are similar in content. They revolve around issues faced by indigenous peoples, usually Native Americans. Most were written by Native Americans from noteworthy tribes, like the Creek or Cherokee. What connects all these works is their progressive outlook on Native American relations. At first glance, almost all of NAWPA's manuscripts feature Native Americans in lead roles. Generally speaking, older plays put their characters in situations that force them to come to terms with their cultural situations, while newer plays are even more progressive, in that they contain plots that do not revolve around issues with situating tribal culture within modern America, but with issues specific to Native American culture.

An older play that offers a stereotypical look at Native American struggles is Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *The Conversion of Ka'ahuamanu*, written in 1988. Special Collections has the manuscript of the play itself, which revolves around Hawaiian and Samoan characters, while the online database has some posters of the production. The snippet for *Conversion* foreshadows a story of a Hawaiian queen "caught in a collusion of cultures." By the end of the play, Ka'ahuamanu, the Hawaiian queen, learns how to accept the Western influences in her life, but also to never place a white man's culture above her own. These types of stories are the most common ones seen early on, because during the 1980s and 1990s indigenous people had won several important legal battles, giving their position in the United States some security. Now they wanted to win some cultural battles. In other words, they wanted to celebrate their culture and

downplay European influences. It makes sense that a long oppressed people would want to combat their outside cultural influences through storytelling. Without a doubt these redemptive narratives helped ease some of the cultural strain Native Americans felt as they were forced to assimilate with whites, but they eventually became stale and predictable. Newer manuscripts are about more varied topics, and they feature native traditions in the background, rather the forefront.

As time has passed, Native American relations have normalized, and NAWPA's collection reflects this, especially in the work of Cherokee descendent Diane Glancy. Her work, written mostly in the 1990s and 2000s, is more progressive than the work that came before hers because it does not revolve around these tired redemptive narratives. Instead, it features Native Americans in situations they actually might recognize, which perhaps signals that the country has moved past the time of worrying about how well indigenous peoples can assimilate. Glancy does not need to tell stories of Native Americans accepting themselves and their differences, because they likely already do. That is not to say that her work does not still revolve around Native American culture and the struggle to precisely define it. In Glancy's 2006 play *Salvage* her three main characters, a couple and the man's father, consider themselves "general Indians," who have mostly settled into their roles in American society. They have lost some, but not all of their traditions. On top of a synopsis, *Salvage* features some stage notes that really help draw a picture of the play in your head. It also reveals the degree in which Glancy's characters cling to their roots. For example, in the section about stage lights, one of the dead characters appears to living ones in a sort of apparition. The notes suggest that she might manifest as an animal. This note reveals that Glancy's characters are still spiritual, one with nature, and believers in the afterlife, all of which are, historically and stereotypically speaking, very common to Native American

cultures. The difference between this kind of portrayal of culture and the portrayal seen in *The Conversion of Ka'ahuamanu* is that the latter celebrates tradition by saying tradition is great, while Glancy's works actually weave these traditions into the story.

There was an interesting shift in Native American storytelling around the turn of the century, and this is captured in the NAWPA archive. Older manuscripts and promotional materials are the ones that typically position Native Americans as the victims of Western cultural takeover. Newer works, which comprise the majority of NAWPA's collection, stray from these clichéd narratives, and reinforce Native American culture by naturally weaving cultural traditions into their stories. Miami University's archive preserves these cultural traditions in their selection of manuscripts in both history and memory. That is, the archive continues certain narratives that have the potential to solidify stereotypes in collective memory.

Bibliography

1. The Conversion of Ka'ahuamanu. 1988. Two acts. 107 pages. 5W. [Poster Two](http://spec.lib.miamioh.edu/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dblpstr.jpg)
<http://spec.lib.miamioh.edu/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dblpstr.jpg>

