

NAWPA Project

Miami University's archive is home to a collection of original theater work by Native American women—the Native American Women Playwrights Archive, or NAWPA. This archive is a collection of work dating from 1967 to the present and includes images, audio and visual recordings, manuscripts, and newspaper articles documenting public engagement with these unique works. The archive spotlights a few better known playwrights but holds records of many more. Many of those records now only exist in physical form and are preserved in Special Collections at King Library.

One of the better-known playwrights is Judy Olivia Lee. Lee writes many short, sometimes one-scene plays that speak to challenges individuals face because of gender or race. One example of her work is *The Crow on the Cradle*¹, a reference to a song with the same name by American folk singer, Judy Collins. Lee's style is such that much is said with few words spoken by the characters. In *The Crow on the Cradle*, two women, friends, are waiting at an abortion clinic. Jill, of mixed Native American and white decent, is waiting on her medical procedure while her husband, Dan, attempts to be there with her.

Dan is black. Both Dan and Jill, minorities, fear for this unexpected pregnancy and the experience their future child would have in a world that did not treat them well. Jill and Dan carry a façade of being the fearless “feminist prochoice progressives” when in fact they are acting out of fear. They fear for the life they could bring into the world. Contradictions like these are part of humanity. Judy Olivia Lee's perspective as both a woman and a minority woman allows for her experience to flow through her work in a powerful way.

The NAWPA collection at Miami University has a growing assortment of what is called *Spiderwoman Theater*. *Spiderwoman Theater* comes from 1970s Brooklyn, New York. A small

group of Native American and non-Native American women created a theater group to break down stereotypes and comment on economic and sexual oppression.² Forged during the feminist era of the 70s, these women used theater to tell often untold stories of lives of forgotten people. The NAWPA archive not only has scripts available to read there and nowhere else, it also hosts correspondence between founding members and people all around the world who were interested in their message and techniques.

Spiderwoman Theater performances blend Western and traditional performance styles based on life experiences. The founding members cite Hopi Tales, by E. Malotki for why they call themselves Spiderwoman. “Spiderwoman” was the Hopi goddess that wove everything into creation. The women in this group “translate... personal stories, dreams and images into movement, and refine them into the essential threads of human experience.” They also say that by weaving their own patterns they can “reflect the human tapestry, the web of our common humanity.” The flaws woven into all of us is how the spirit find their way out to become free, as the Hopi legend says.³

Inside the NAWPA collection one can find correspondence and promotional material for the work created from the 1970s to the 1990s. Letters to and from Native American playwrights provide further insight into this unique collection of works. Requests from around the world⁴ to present their material on the international stage shows just how impactful and meaningful the material was at the time of its creation. Promotional materials often written by the theater troupe offer a preview of the collected works. These newspaper clippings often tout feminist backgrounds, bold subject matter, and prepare future readers of the off-brand styles associated with Native American playwrights and performances.

Pictures found only in the archive point to the dramatic use of heritage in a modern world. These contemporary women break molds found in Western style theater and, certainly for their time, pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable to hear from women and minorities on stage. These women paved the way for change through performance and writing. These performances are as free as the spirit left behind by the Hopi goddess. The vision of Native American playwrights is preserved at Miami University's Special Collection, where historians, thespians, and anyone interested in a Native American perspective can move through artifacts as free as the Spiderwoman spirit.

¹ Crow on the Cradle, 2018, Script, Miami University, King Library, NAWPA, The Walter Havighurst Special Collection, Oxford, OH.

² "NAWPA: Spiderwoman Theater," Miami University Libraries Steward Sustain Department, Accessed April 30, 2018, <http://spec.lib.miamioh.edu/home/nawpa-spiderwoman-theater/>.

³ Who We Are, 1991, Letter, Miami University, King Library, NAWPA, The Walter Havighurst Special Collection, Oxford, Ohio.

⁴ Ledin, U. (1978). Film and Video. [Letter] Miami University, King Library, NAWPA, The Walter Havighurst Special Collection. Oxford, Ohio.