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# The Native Plays of Lynn Riggs (Cherokee) and the Question of “Race”-specific Casting

*Courtney Elkin Mohler*

## The Color-Blind Bind and Native American Representation

The tensions surrounding color-blind casting perhaps came to a head in the infamous 1997 debate between August Wilson and Robert Brustein at Town Hall in New York City. Many Native American playwrights and directors reflect a similar position to Wilson’s, promoting the necessity of casting Native actors to play Native characters. There are, of course, myriad political and historical reasons behind this position, among them the legacy of red-face performance in theatre, film, and television and the pervasive mainstream impression that all Indians must be played by non-Indian actors, because all Indians are dead.

One strategy for actively rejecting misrepresentation and the myth of the vanished Indian is to write contemporary roles for Native American actors. Hanay Geiogamah, Kiowa-Delaware playwright and director, for example, stresses the importance of American Indian artists to “establish a strong identity base in their work to help confront and clarify endless confusions resulting from non-Indians’ beliefs and misperceptions of Indian life” (163). Plays such as *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* by Monique Mojica, Geiogamah’s *Foghorn*, and Spiderwoman Theater’s *Winnetous’ Snake-Oil Show from Wigwam City*, among many other Native works, call for casts of Native actors to be successful in their goals of deconstructing popular misrepresentations and stereotypes of Indians.

Although various circumstances arise which lead to color-blind casting (particularly in educational and community theatre or in professional productions of the antiquated European canon), most companies maintain the rule that actors cast in works that directly reflect racial or ethnic experience should identify racially with their characters and ideally look the part (Sun 87–88). One result of this race-cautious and phenotype-bound approach to casting has been the great scarcity of Native American productions, despite the wealth of Native plays in print.

The historical, political, cultural, and aesthetic underpinnings of identity politics in performance, minority (mis-)representation, color-blind casting, and the disproportionately low number of productions by and about nonwhites make taking a stance on this matter tremendously complicated. In his 2013 article “*The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society*,” Daniel Banks reports on the inequity of professional casting, citing a five-year study of almost 500 shows by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition. It uncovered that between the 2006–07 and 2010–11 seasons, 80 percent of all shows in the New York area were cast with actors who identified as either white or of European heritage (2). Banks’s essay provides a critical point of departure for a difficult though important discussion about casting in the growing field of Native American theatre, and at the same time engenders a renewed interest in diverse casting practices

in American theatre at large. The contemporary (and potentially dangerous) rhetoric of “post-racialism” in the United States must be accompanied by analysis: How does imagining that our culture is “past race” impact our theatrical productions? In what ways can we as theatre practitioners, critics, and educators reflect, refract, or reject this concept? How does incorporating Native American performances and performers, which are largely omitted from popular and regional theatrical repertoires, help to reinvigorate the discourse on US ethnic theatre, casting practices, and “particularist” theatre and politics?

### **Riggs as a Site for Rethinking (Native American) Casting Practices**

This essay analyzes some of the cultural, political, and practical considerations of “color-conscious” or “traditional” casting in Native American theatre through the work of Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs, who identified as mixed-blood. Two of Riggs’s works include themes, characters, settings, and structural dramatic elements that reflect what Christy Stanlake calls “Native dramaturgy” (23) and Jace Weaver considers illustrative of Riggs’s “responsibility to that (Cherokee) part of his heritage” (1997, 97). Riggs sets both *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) and *The Cherokee Night* (1932) in Indian Territory: the former arguably contains Native presence, staging the cultural issues surrounding the transition between Indian Territory and Oklahoma’s annexation; the latter directly explores Cherokee identity and themes and includes in its cast of characters both “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” Cherokees. *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which at first glance would likely inspire a white cast, should be cast with phenotypically nonwhite actors in order to reflect the complexities of the multiethnic historical realities of Oklahoma at the turn of the twentieth century. Similarly, *The Cherokee Night*, in which Riggs specifies the characters’ phenotypes and *blood quantum*, could be thoughtfully, purposefully cast with actors from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including though not limited to those who identify as Cherokee and/or Native American.<sup>1</sup>

*The Cherokee Night* reflects the notion of *race* and racial identity as purely inherited and traceable through one’s blood, as the concept was utilized in the United States “to justify both a domestic order of which black chattel slavery was an integral aspect and a continental trajectory of national expansion . . . which could be consummated only at the expense of North America’s indigenous population” (Churchill 46). Due to a variety of interrelated historical and political circumstances that will be explored below in the discussion of *The Cherokee Night*, both Native and non-Native Americans were largely beholden to and preoccupied with the construct of *blood quantum* by the turn of the twentieth century—the setting of Riggs’s two plays. Interestingly, there is no evidence that the playwright insisted on casting Cherokee, Native, or mixed-blood actors in the original productions.

*Green Grow the Lilacs* references what may be read as Cherokee and mixed-blood identity in some if not all of the characters, but Riggs never explicitly names the ethnicity of his main characters. In *The Cherokee Night* he references the characters’ Cherokee blood percentage and pays special attention to their range of phenotypes. Although the playwright wrote that *The Cherokee Night*

was about “an absorbed race,” and that “darkness . . . has come to the Cherokees and their descendants” (qtd. in Braunlich 80), I agree with the linked analyses of Weaver, Stanlake, and Jaye Darby that the work offers the remembrance of tradition and past historical trauma in a manner that exemplifies what Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance,” who writes that “[t]he nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes. . . . The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry” (1). By leaving space for a large range of mixed-Cherokee phenotypes in his cast of characters, Riggs helps establish the continued presence of Native Americans and meaningfully expands and questions naturalized conceptions of what a Native person must look like. This reading opens up a space for casting possibilities and future mounted productions of his work.

While *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *The Cherokee Night* grapple with important Native issues, including Indian/white relations, identity politics, mixed-blood identity, connection to and loss of ancestral lands, and the problematics of assimilation, some of these themes may resonate with other American individuals and communities that struggle with related experiences of abjection, isolation, fragmentation, assimilation, and cultural erasure. I must preface this with a disclaimer:

I am not suggesting that every production of Riggs’s plays be cast in such an alterative manner, nor that this approach should be considered the only or correct way to cast his work. Neither am I promoting Brustein’s color-blind casting, as if there are plays where race does not matter. As a director and scholar of critical race theory and Native American performance, I would never argue for color-blind casting of any production, nor do I think that such an approach can exist without further naturalizing whiteness and ignoring racialized inequity. However, a thoughtfully inclusive approach to casting Riggs’s Native plays would bring historical and contemporary critical-race issues into relief. Each play holds up a lens to the special relationship that Oklahomans feel with their homeland, and while distinct in form and tone, both contain the potential to catalyze discussions around inclusive casting practices.

### **Native Presence in *Green Grow the Lilacs***

It seems significant that Riggs wrote the bulk of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *The Cherokee Night*, two plays so deeply connected to the land in which they are set, while living in Paris during 1928–29 on a Guggenheim Fellowship. This literal distance from Oklahoma required him to call on personal memories of his childhood home at the same time that it provided him the space to critically reflect on the current cultural climate of the United States, as well as those diverse characters of the Indian Territory he remembered. Rodgers and Hammerstein harnessed that nostalgic feeling of Riggs when they adapted the script of *Green Grow the Lilacs* to create their musical *Oklahoma!* Certainly, the runaway success and longevity of the white-washed Broadway musical eclipsed that of its source material. Despite the fact that a great deal of the dialogue and all of the characters were lifted verbatim from the original, Rodgers and Hammerstein erased any evidence of a nonwhite presence in their hit show, with the exception of the one immigrant to the

territory, the Persian peddler Hakim (Weaver 2003, xiii).<sup>2</sup> Weaver analyzes Rodgers and Hammerstein's decision to exclude the racially mixed population of Indian Territory at this time, writing that "[t]he landscape (of *Oklahoma!*) has been thoroughly ethnically cleansed until it becomes the vacant landscape of the myths of dominance. Once it is emptied out, Amer-Europeans are free to occupy it without molestation or challenge" (1997, 99).<sup>3</sup> That the story's main conflict and resolution are between the white farmers and the white cowmen highlight the hegemonic fantasy of fulfilled Manifest Destiny and a homogenous (white) American nation.

Unlike *Oklahoma!*, a close reading of *Green Grow the Lilacs* indicates that several of the characters could be of mixed-Cherokee and white descent. Weaver reads the romantic male lead, Curly McClain, as a mixed-Cherokee cowboy, and the play's antagonist, Jeeter Fry, as an individualistic Amer-European. He cites as evidence that Curly calls Jeeter "bullet-colored" and mentions his "bushy eyebrows" and bossy temperament (Riggs 17); it is probable that Natives would have attributed these traits to whites during this time in pre-statehood Oklahoma. Christy Stanlake directed the US Naval Academy's 2010 production of the play through the lens of Native dramaturgy and maintained the possibility that most of the characters could be of mixed ancestry (2010, 3).<sup>4</sup> Based on the demographic and social realities of Indian Territory, as well as the characters, plot, themes, and tone of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, any or all of Riggs's characters could be of mixed European, Native, and/or African American lineage, and casting with this likelihood in mind would enrich a production.<sup>5</sup>

Central to the plot of *Green Grow the Lilacs* is the conflict between Curly—a cowboy who has set his heart on marrying farm-owner Laurey Williams—and the lustful intentions of her farmhand Jeeter, who is characterized as a dangerous and sinister loner. If we read the world of the play through the lens of Native dramaturgy as Stanlake did for her 2010 production, the conflict between Curly and Jeeter may be seen as a metaphorical representation of the cultural conflict that typified the pressures of the transition from Indian Territory to statehood for the Native, mixed, and non-Native peoples who lived there. Stanlake's production illustrated how *Green Grow the Lilacs* may be viewed as an example of what Weaver (1997, 43) defines as a "communitist" narrative: one that actively promotes Native community and communal values, even in the face of the impending United States ethos of individualism and materialism. The play's villain, Jeeter, then characterizes modern consumerism and individualism. In this light Curly's special relationship with the beauty of the landscape, his reverence of the Plains and respect for animals, indicates a distinctively Native communitist epistemology that is community-centered and land-based. His speeches illustrate his connection to the land, as do the folk songs he sings in Riggs's play, which Rodgers and Hammerstein replace with original show tunes in *Oklahoma!* Like other cowpunchers of the time, Curly refers to himself by where he keeps or moves his camp, including not only his animals and the land, but also the people in his community. For example, he rhapsodizes on the place surrounding them moments after he and Laurey are married:

Look at the way the hay field lays out purty in the moonlight. Next it's the pasture, and over yander's the wheat and the corn, and the cane patch next, nen the truck garden and the timber. Everthing laid out fine and jim dandy! The country all around it—all Indian Territory—plumb to the Rio Grande, and north to Kansas, and way over east to Arkansaw,

the same way, with the moon onto it. Trees ain't hardly a-movin. Branch bubbles over them limestone rocks, you c'n hear it. Wild flower pe'fume smellin' up the air, sweet as anything! A fine night fer anyone to remember fer a weddin' night! A fine night—fer anyone. (Riggs 76–77)

Curly's ability to describe and remember important events in terms of place and cycles, such as the pastures laid out "purty in the moonlight," epitomizes the Native focus on spatial rather than temporal, linear reality. Addressing issues with the writing of "Indian" history, Tewa Pueblo historian Alfonzo Ortiz explains that "Indian traditions exist in, and are primarily to be understood in relation to space; they belong to the place where the people exist or originated" (18). Ortiz goes on to say that realities for Native people are "deeply rooted in the soils of the peoples' respective homelands" (ibid.), and these realities have little-to-no meaning without their spatial referents. Illustrating such a traditional worldview, Curly recognizes the specialness of the singular event of his wedding in terms of the space in which it occurs, describing "the night" in relationship to the land and how the weather, air, and flora comingle and interact.

Curly's grounded perspective counterpoints that of Riggs's heroine Laurey, who can be seen as being tempted by assimilation, moving toward American sensibilities and impressed with the idea of a "new buggy with red wheels," "face whitenin'" (makeup), and Hakim's "dew-dads" (14, 37, 33). Curly and Aunt Eller (both of whom, in my reading, are also of mixed cultural heritage) help Laurey to remember the values that are most dear to Native culture: the importance of the land, community, and family. Their guidance and support allay her myriad anxieties regarding the maintenance of her farm and concerns with keeping up with the latest trends. Through their unconditional love and affectionate and instructive teasing, Curly and Eller show Laurey that material goods do not create happiness and that she belongs where her roots are, rather than moving to "Virginia or Californie" (24). By contrast, Jeeter has completely bought into the worst aspects of the new "American" way of seeing the world: he is possessive and destructive, and views women and the land as objects to use for his selfish desires.

The play's major conflict centers on Jeeter's treatment of and desire for Laurey. He frightens her when he first feels rejected by her, and then, following her wedding, sets fire to a haystack on which the newlyweds sit. His attitude toward Laurey is more possessive than affectionate, marked by his turn toward violence as she declares her love for another man. Jeeter's assessment of Laurey as a "thing" to possess is foreshadowed by his collection of pornographic postcards and his dark stories about murdering women. Interestingly, Curly recognizes the differences between himself and Jeeter in terms of how each man values the world around them. He tells Jeeter that "[i]n this country, there's two things you c'n do if you're a man. Live out of doors is one. Live in a hole is the other. . . . How's you git to be the way you air anyway—settin' here in this filthy hole—and thinkin' the way you're thinkin'?" Curly identifies the objects that Jeeter covets and the isolated manner in which he closes himself off to his community, including the sky, earth, and animals that make up Curly's world and worldview, comprise the "pizen" (poison) that will eventually kill him (50). Here, Riggs unknowingly prognosticates the environmental crisis that we face today, where consumerism and capitalism are poisonous to the well-being of a global community.

The story told in *Green Grow the Lilacs* and its popular musical offspring *Oklahoma!*, engages with the themes of a changing community and making community amid social and political change. The ways in which productions of these plays envision community are beholden to, and generate, the cultural milieu of audiences' receptions. The largely white, upper-middle-class people that comprised early to mid-twentieth-century Broadway audiences did not demand phenotypically or culturally diverse casts to grapple with the always modulating concept of *community* in the United States. This was partially due to the fact that wartime and post-World War II American culture focused on establishing a singular national character.

Contemporary Broadway audiences continue to be predominantly white today. According to the Broadway League's report "The Demographics of the 2013–2014 Broadway Audience," "almost 80 percent of tickets were purchased by Caucasian theatregoers." However, questions of race, ethnicity, and culture are now in the forefront of the national imagination. On September 21, 2011 the *New York Times* featured a debate titled "Under Obama, Is America 'Post-Racial'?" Nearly three years later, Tré Easton decried the existence of a post-racial America in his *Huffington Post* article "The Myth of a Post-Racial America." Even the mainstream global platform *Wikipedia* has an entry for "Post-racial America," defining the concept as the "theoretical environment where the United States is devoid of preference, discrimination, and prejudice." We cannot imagine an American community without imagining what it looks like and what different kinds of people it includes. Riggs's text demands a diverse cast that includes Native actors—a cast that reflects the demographics of Oklahoma at the turn of the twentieth century. Such an inclusive approach to casting *Green Grow the Lilacs* would offer contemporary American audiences—faced with issues of identity and questions of belonging—a vision of the nation that is both diverse and historically accurate, thus making this vintage play relevant to current understandings of community and diversity.

Riggs's intimate understanding of Native epistemology heavily influenced the vision of *community* he proposes in this play. Here, community gathers its strength by holding onto aspects of tradition while bracing for political and cultural changes. This concept of community is based on an all-encompassing though dynamic relationship with the landscape and the ancestors who lived and worked on the land in previous generations. Productions that ignore the mixed cultural ancestry of Indian Territory by assuming that all of the characters in *Green Grow the Lilacs* are white miss an opportunity to readjust the terms of "American" theatre to include stories from a Native perspective. A cast inclusive of individuals with varying phenotypes would shed light on widely overlooked aspects of our national historical legacy: hard-fought cultural tensions and exchanges among Amer- European settlers, Native Americans, African Americans, and other immigrants to a region that was instrumental in establishing the local, regional, and national characters.

### **Decrypting *Blood Quantum* in *The Cherokee Night***

While *Green Grow the Lilacs* garnered greater commercial and critical appeal, there is evidence that the playwright considered *The Cherokee Night* to be his most important work. In 1930 Riggs

wrote that “[w]hat astonishes me and delights me now is that finally, by projection, the play has a meaning beyond the story, even beyond the theme” (qtd. in Braunlich 95). The themes explored within *The Cherokee Night*’s seven nonlinearly arranged scenes are at once highly specific to the Cherokee people and have the potential to resonate across cultures, with other Native American peoples, white Americans who grew up in the Plains, and US ethnic minorities, who also struggle against cultural erasure, assimilation policies, poverty, racism, and internalized racism. And while Broadway audiences remain primarily white, in 2012 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in its *How a Nation Engages with the Arts*, reported that nonwhite and Hispanic groups sustained their attendance levels at nonmusical plays between (the recession years of) 2008 and 2012, whereas the majority (white, highly educated men and women) audiences declined. Like our country itself, audiences are diversifying. Reflecting the market-shackled nature of the performing arts industry, the NEA study did not include Native American demographics in its otherwise exhaustive report. The continued omission of Native American plays, which is strongly linked to outmoded ideas about type-casting and race, promotes settler-colonial amnesia and relegates contemporary Native people to the distant past.

Notions about racial purity and the alleged links between race and biology have historically and continually separated and subordinated groups of people based on socially constructed generalizations masquerading as objective facts. *The Cherokee Night* explores the premise that the amount, or “quantum,” of one’s Cherokee blood is central to one’s character. The construct of *blood quantum* and its related rhetorical and legal uses developed alongside increasing colonial efforts in the Americas, but gained prominence with the advent of nineteenth-century pseudoscientific disciplines such as craniometry, phrenology, ethnology, and eugenics (Churchill 45). In her article “DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe,” Kimberly TallBear writes that “[t]he ‘measuring’ of blood is a much-debated and well-established tool for testing racial authenticity. It had its birth in the U.S. federal government’s colonization of American Indians” (82). Citing Carole Goldberg-Ambrose, TallBear continues: “[t]here was ‘little sense of commonality . . . among diverse groups of people. . . . Gradually, however, the racially inspired policies of non-Indians began to reproduce in Indians the original European race-based conceptions,’ and such ideology was furthered by U.S. treaties with tribes and laws that promoted group Indian identity.” The list of character descriptions in *The Cherokee Night* detail the characters’ phenotypes, illustrating how effectively Native communities had absorbed colonial notions about the relationship between pedigree and identity:

VINEY JONES, *a talkative, brown-haired country-school teacher . . . HUTCH MOREE, a blond [sic], hefty, rather dumb oil-field teamster. . . . AUDEAL COMBS . . . a marcelled young blonde . . . ART OSBOURN, a dark, scowling young man . . . BEE NEWCOMB, a dark, vivid, strange-looking girl . . . [and] GAR BREEDEN . . . lithe and dark, a half-breed.* (Riggs 112–15)

Riggs’s careful attention to phenotype reflects the intense cultural concerns over blood quantum, identity, and assimilation that were commonplace in Indian Territory and early Oklahoma.<sup>6</sup> Riggs himself experienced these divisive mandated policies, which often separated extended families and pitted loved ones against one another (Weaver 2003, ix–x). Unfortunately, notions of identity as bound up in blood remain at the forefront of Indian matters today. Many Native communities have

so thoroughly absorbed colonial concepts of racial purity that tribal membership is determined and denied to individuals based on their percentage of traceable Indian blood.

Riggs's concern over pedigree can be vividly seen in the last scene of *The Cherokee Night* in which John Gray-Wolf, an elderly full-blood Cherokee, nurses a wounded Edgar Spench. Within the world of the play Spench is a well-known half-white, half-Cherokee murderer and outlaw. During the course of the interaction he blames his misfortunes and selfish, criminal behavior on his Indian blood, saying that "[r]obbery, arson—I'm guilty. Wife desertion, rape, murder! . . . I tried everything. . . . Sump'n inside—no rest, I don't know—bad blood. Too much Indian, they tell me." Gray-Wolf responds: "Not enough Indian." Gray-Wolf goes on to explain that his own son was also shot because he "was half white" and problematizes the "mixture" (Riggs 207–8).

Upon first examination this scene seems deeply embedded in essentialist notions of identity; both characters are invested in the ideology of blood quantum and conceive of race (and destiny) as biologically determined. Julie Pearson Little Thunder condemns Riggs's play, as well as the choice to categorize it as a piece of American Indian dramatic literature, writing that "Riggs's treatment of fullbloods and mixedbloods is irrevocably dated. He manipulates some clichés about Indians in order to debunk them, but much of his material is hobbled by his own unconscious stereotypes" (356). She passionately exposes some of the troubling ideas present in Riggs's work as a piece of essentialist dramatic literature. My point of departure from her critique is that *The Cherokee Night*'s obsession with blood quantum, seemingly bound only to outdated concepts of identity, can be made relevant to current issues regarding race and racialization in the United States through live performance and casting choices. The play has the potential to at once paint a critical moment in US history, and at the same time to resonate with contemporary multicultural and multiracial audiences. *The Cherokee Night* should be cast and staged in order to visibly deconstruct the biologist concept of blood and the negative assessment of all forms of assimilation present in Riggs's text. Production choices could illuminate the colonial/imperialist roots of one of the most troubling sociopolitical problems for Native America today: the racializing of Indian tribal communities and peoples.<sup>7</sup>

The nonlinear structure of *The Cherokee Night*, which Darby (12) connects to the "ritual consciousness" often found in Native works, invites another potential reading of the final scene between Gray-Wolf and Spench. Darby draws on the definition of *ritual consciousness* given by Paula Gunn Allen in her book *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* in which she writes: "the ritual nature of time is the measure used, so action sequences include memories, legends, histories, dreams, and visions, the combination of which suggest the integrative nature of ritual consciousness" (94). Although this is the last scene of the play, it is set in 1895 and is therefore chronologically first. Gray-Wolf's words could be seen as a foreboding of what will happen if Cherokee blood continues to be absorbed into the white population. According to this reading, the preceding scenes in which Cherokee mixed-breed characters "choose crime, drunkenness, laziness and prostitution in their despair" manifest his ill omen (Braunlich 392). But Riggs positions this scene last, allowing the audience to hear Gray-Wolf's warning as the final message before exiting the theatre.

The essentialist overtones of his message should be highlighted and then undermined by careful casting choices. Debby Thompson argues that Anna Deveare Smith's portrayal of characters across racial and gender lines help the audience to critically examine racial identity as something both personally experienced and ideologically constructed, as "fact and act." This "other-oriented acting approach," which conceptualizes "racial identity as performative," is useful for conceptualizing future productions of *The Cherokee Night* (Thompson 137). If phenotypically "nonwhite" and "white" actors portray the mixed- and full-blood characters within the play, Gray-Wolf's words take on a special significance. He states "with troubled compassion" to Spench that his experience as a "full-blood Cherokee" helps him to "remember the way my people lived in quiet times. Think of my ancestors. It keeps me safe" (Riggs 208). But if race, racism, and internalized racism are alienated throughout the play through the distancing effect of "nonrealistic" casting, Gray-Wolf's use of the word *blood* would take on multiple meanings, such as memory, ties to tradition, or communal values. Casting a production of *The Cherokee Night* according to Riggs's embedded blood-quantum specifications may lead a contemporary audience to read the first six scenes as a finite illustration of what has already happened to Native American people. Cross-racial casting could illustrate that both assimilation and active remembrance of communal values are processes in which individuals and groups participate, rehearse or reject.

Casting *The Cherokee Night* with actors who may or may not be enrolled in a federally recognized tribe but who present a range of possible physical features, skin tones, and cultural backgrounds would help to present the themes of the play. Light-skinned mixed actors or Caucasians cast as the characters Hutch and Audeal, both of whom Riggs describes as part Cherokee and light, would broaden commonly held notions of what "Indians" look like. An even gutsier approach to casting would purposely highlight the constructed nature of blood quantum as an aspect of identity. One could cast a phenotypically "white" actor to play Spench or Art, who at various points in the script blame their Indian blood for the misfortune they have been dealt and created in their lives; the disjunction between these characters' self-identification as "ruined by Indian blood" and the actors' lighter skin might disrupt the expectations of those audience members who equate race with skin color.

Characters within the play also link skin pigmentation with racial identity, and in some cases reflect internalized racism experienced by many Americans in communities of color. In scene 3, for instance, Viney Jones displays snobbery and bigotry against her own sister Sarah and her childhood friend Hutch, revealing the extent to which she has internalized racism. When Viney refers to Hutch as "[t]hat dumb Indian" (151), Sarah comments that Viney is technically more Cherokee than Hutch. Viney retorts: "Well, I'm thankful to say it doesn't show" (ibid.). We quickly learn that the qualities Viney associates with being "part Indian" and holds in contempt are Sarah's and Hutch's inability to change to meet American standards of modern living. She disparages them based on what they can't "get" and impugns their traditional values, saying "Do you think I want to be looked down on because I can't do anything, can't get along like other people? Do you think I want to make the kind of mess of my life *you* have—and live in a filthy hole like this the rest of my days—?" (ibid.; emphasis in original). Despite Sarah's debilitating rheumatism and poverty, she maintains her strength through a sense of cultural pride and connection with her ancestors. Although Viney has "done very well" for herself, she has forgotten

her roots, become greedy and selfish, and has forsaken her community and family in exchange for “money and a good home” (151, 154). Speaking strangely, as if she is channeling their late mother, Sarah tells Viney that “[t]he way to be is humble, and remember the life that’s in you. Our Maw told us once the way we was meant to live ‘Remember it’ she said. ‘Remember it and your days’ll be food and drink. They’ll be a river in the desert, they’ll be waving grass and deer feeding. . . . The nights’ll come. [/] The children’ll be born’” (153). Although they were born sisters, Sarah tells Viney that “[y]our blood ain’t mine” because Viney has rejected all it means to be alive, which Sarah knows comes from memory, not blood (152). This important distinction could be meaningfully highlighted through alternative casting choices. Perhaps the actress playing Viney could be phenotypically darker than Sarah; this choice would highlight how one’s commitment to communal, traditional values can stave off the erasure that often accompanies assimilation. This issue of becoming modernized, of abandoning spiritual/cultural wealth in the face of material riches, is one that might resonate strongly for other communities of color in the United States whose traditions stand in contrast to the values of hegemony. To this point, casting Mexican American or African American actors to play Viney and Sarah could highlight the reality that there are Cherokee people who look more black or Latino than fixed types of “Indian.”

There are important connections to be made between the experiences of other American minorities and the themes present in Riggs’s works. I am in no way suggesting a conflation between African American and Native American experience, but I do wish to point out that racism, enforced assimilation, removal from traditional lands, coerced Christian conversion, and in some cases slavery were part of both groups’ historical experience. Colonialism’s drawn and controlled borders separated Native tribal communities along the US/Mexican border, linking these communities through an experience of fragmentation. Mexican American and Asian American immigrants today grapple with enforced assimilation practices, cultural imperialism, and experience tensions between elder and younger generations regarding cultural heritage and adaptation—issues that have plagued Native American peoples for centuries. Casting actors in *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *The Cherokee Night* who hail from a range of cultural backgrounds would help historicize and illustrate white privilege, and could potentially extend notions of American identity. By including unexpected phenotypes Riggs’s plays could dismantle essentialist ideas of what it means to be Indian, resulting in the promotion of the communal values that characterize Native life while placing value on lived experience and memory over antiquated notions of identity as equated to blood.

## **Staging Race**

In 2010 Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., produced a critically acclaimed run of *Oklahoma!*, directed by Molly Smith. Donatella Galella argues that Smith’s multiracial casting of this production has the potential to promote “the optimistic sense that equality is possible under the Stars and Stripes, although such a banner of nationalism often covers up racial material differences” (221). In contrast, Jill Dolan praises Arena’s *Oklahoma!* in her blog “The Feminist

Spectator” as an example of how theatre companies might refashion the American canon “to speak across identity communities, instead of sequestering it in presumptively white enclaves and preserving it for white people” (n.p.), because that vision does not reflect the complexities of identities in contemporary America. These critical conversations and tensions spurred by Arena’s choice to intentionally cast actors of color in a story about Indian Territory becoming Oklahoma—a story wildly white-washed by Rodgers and Hammerstein—make evident that we can no longer ignore race onstage nor omit stories that are “inconvenient” to cast. Instead, theatre professionals must harness the potential that performance holds for debating how racialization operates in the United States through meaningful multiracial casting practices.

Most recently, playwright Mike Lew illuminates the importance of diversifying the larger theatre-going audience in the United States:

Right now the institutional theater has the same demographic problem as the Republican Party: largely aging, largely affluent, largely White. If you truly want a young and diverse audience, you’re going to have to fundamentally change up your programming in a way that may very well alienate your existing base. Which may be okay. Because that base isn’t large enough to form a sustainable coalition. (n.p.)

The survival of professional theatre companies relies partially upon their ability to grow and retain their nonwhite audiences through expanding the kinds of stories they tell and how they tell them. To reflect the moment in which we live, theatre must become a battleground and laboratory for addressing the prickly, exciting, and dangerous sociopolitical issues surrounding identity creation and maintenance. Given the wealth of Native plays published during the past four decades, including collections by playwrights Bruce King (Haudenosaunee-Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (Assiniboine), and Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa-Delaware), and anthologies of Native plays like *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays* (1998), *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays* (2000), *Keepers of the Morning Star: An Anthology of Native Women’s Theatre* (2003), and *Footpaths and Bridges: Voices from the Native American Women Playwrights Archive* (2008), and the considerable growing demographic of people who identify as Native, the exclusion of Native stories and artists from the American theatre is a marketing oversight at best, and a willful act of cultural erasure at worst.

### **If We Build It . . .**

As a visual, live form of cultural representation, theatre can illuminate the complex issues of creating, belonging to, or being excluded from a community—issues that are tethered to US settler colonialism and cannot be separated from the changing processes of racialization and identity. Native American theatre has often been created by and for Native people and about Native issues; this focus has been crucial for Native dramatists and audiences alike, helping to thaw the cultural deep freeze caused by decades of removal, assimilation, and termination policies. Native theatre

focused on addressing the needs and concerns of the Native community continues to be relevant, especially to the niche Native American audiences that such theatre cultivates. Riggs's Native plays offer a key example of how intentional multiracial casting practices might expand naturalized notions about race and identity for those niche Native audiences, and for a broader theatre-going demographic as well.

Contemporary Native artists, such as Mark Anthony Rolo (Chippewa), Terry Gomez (Comanche), Larissa FastHorse (Lakota), William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (Assiniboine), and Diane Glancy (Cherokee), who deal with issues of Native cultural identity, internalized racism, blood quantum, and sociopolitical alliances with other minority groups may also benefit from intentional casting with a range of phenotypes in ways that makes their plays producible for audiences in a variety of contexts, therefore adding Native artists to the American theatrical repertoire. In a lively discussion following her piece "Do White Playwrights Think about This?" FastHorse writes: "my personal belief has been that we are nearly invisible in American culture and American theater so any aspect is a welcome change from the norm. Meaning, please produce a Native writer with whatever resources you have. We have to create demand then address ways to fill it in the future. Doing nothing will produce nothing" (n.p.). Of equal importance, roles that have traditionally been considered "non-raced" though "American," and specifically those roles within the American canon that contribute to dramatizing the history of the United States, must be opened to Native actors who are so often omitted from the American narrative.

Theatre companies that are serious about diversity must produce works by Native American dramatists. When dramaturgically appropriate, these plays should be cast with performers who visually reflect the diversity of phenotypes that make up contemporary Native America. Like any bold, political, artistic choice, this casting will be appreciated and misunderstood, and in some instances will garner significant push-back from Native and non-Native audience members who remain particularly attached to staging "authenticity." This is not a cry for color-blind casting nor a dismissal of the potential problems that come with casting non-Native people in Native roles, but if plays written from the Native perspective remain unproduced—despite strong dramaturgical evidence in support of intentional, diverse casting—what chance do we have to grow our pool of professional Native actors or dramatists?

As we near the end of Barack Obama's presidency, the issues of racialization and identity practices and their relationship to performance and performativity are playing out in the national cultural imaginary with bravado and a degree of self-awareness that is unprecedented. Questions about cultural appropriation and authenticity rub up against identity shaming as we consider "transracial" activists/"fakes" like Rachel Dolezal and Andrea Smith.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement reminds us of the deadly results of racism as people with certain phenotypes are victimized by regular police brutality and harassment. Certainly, the stage is set for conversations on the difficult topics of race, racialization, authenticity, and identity construction; the thoughtful, gutsy ways in which we cast will determine the various shapes that these discussions take. The sociopolitical and cultural realities that divide Native American communities—settler colonialism, cultural appropriation, assimilation, capitalism, racism, and biologically determined identity—are implicitly and explicitly connected to Native *and* non-Native US audiences.

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## Notes

1. *Blood quantum* is the concept, and related legislation, that ties racial identity to the percentage of one's ancestors that are documented as full-blooded Native American.
2. Andrea Most argues that the eventual inclusion in the community of the peddler Hakim—who is a “thinly veiled representative of the Jewish immigrant” (82)—is a key example of the work as pro-assimilation.
3. Weaver borrows the term *Amer-European* from John Joseph Matthews, writing that Amer-Europeans “are Europeans that happen to live in America. Matthew’s terminology reflects the difference in worldviews between the two peoples, Native and non-Native” (1997, xiii).
4. I am indebted to Christy Stanlake, whose dramaturgical and directorial vision of *Green Grow the Lilacs* has greatly influenced my reading of the play.
5. See Murray Wickett for a detailed analysis of the social history of Oklahoma.
6. See Ward Churchill (1999), Annette Jaimes (1992), and Kimberly TallBear (2003) for analyses on how Indian services and lands historically have been allotted according to the percentage of Native “blood.”
7. See Kimberly TallBear for a compelling analysis of how Native American tribes have been racialized as a product of colonization. She describes the frequent use of biological testing, such as DNA analysis, as a requirement for tribal enrollment (82).

8. During the summer of 2015 both Rachel Dolezal and Andrea Smith were the subjects of media controversy for fraudulently representing themselves as, respectively, African American and Cherokee.

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