



# LAND-BASED THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE IN SOVEREIGN ARTISTIC CEREMONIES OF SELECTED INDIGENOUS ARTISTS FROM CANADA

## RESURGENCE OF INDIGENOUS THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE IN CANADA

In the past four decades in Canada there has been a remarkable development of Indigenous theatre and performance engaged in the anti-colonial and decolonial struggle against diverse racist colonial practices of exclusion, misrepresentation and denigration of Indigenous cultures and philosophies, which led to the disconnection of Native people from their cultures and intellectual traditions. Indigenous artists,<sup>1</sup> however, have been effectively engaged in the processes of cultural reclamation and rebuilding of Indigenous cultures. They have been developing theatre and performance projects aiming at Indigenous theatrical sovereignty, both in theory and practice.

The achievements of Indigenous artists in the sphere of performance arts in Canada have been staggering and testify to their remarkable creativity, especially when one realizes that currently they represent only about 1,807 million of First Nations, Inuit and Métis population<sup>2</sup> residing in this country, as of 2021 Census (Statistics). Many of them have been reshaping the theatrical landscape in Canada, among others: Tomson Highway (Cree), Muriel Miguel (Kuna/Rappahannock), Margo

Eugenia Sojka  
University of Silesia in Katowice  
Poland



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8467-1562>

1 I use the word *artist* as an inclusive term related to individuals whose work embraces several disciplines, as they are not only playwrights, actors, artistic directors, dancers, but also theorists, critics, reviewers—the term is used here as a holistic concept encompassing a variety of disciplines used in the work of decolonization, which also reflects the pluralistic nature of Indigenous worldviews.

2 Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: Indians (more commonly referred to as First Nations), Inuit and Métis. “These are 3 distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs” (Indigenous Peoples).

Kane (Cree-Saulteaux), Marie Clements (Dene-Métis), Kevin Loring (N'lakapamux), Corey Payette (Oji-Cree), and Tara Beagan (Ntlakapamux). A long list of published and staged texts by Indigenous theatre and performance artists residing in Canada, called an “Indigenous body of work” is available online, and it is updated and continually growing—in May 2024 there were 268 names on the list with several hundreds of plays/scripts to their credit (“Indigenous body”). Unfortunately, due to the geopolitics of knowledge production, favoring ideas coming from the dominant Euro-American critics and theorists (Mignolo), many of these authors are not familiar names in the country or abroad, although their work is of big interest to academia and theatre aficionados.

This resurgence<sup>3</sup> of Indigenous artistic expression in Canada coincides with the revival and development of Indigenous thought on self-recognition by such Indigenous scholars, critics and artists as Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe), Audra Simpson (Mohawk) or Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee). Their call for intellectual, cultural, artistic and political sovereignty has been heard by many Indigenous artists but some of them have been involved in this kind of activist and artistic work for several decades. My reflections on Indigenous theatre and performance art focus on selected examples of work by artists of diverse cultural backgrounds, who reside on the territory of contemporary Canada: Floyd Favel (Plains Cree), Monique Mojica (Kuna, Rappahonack and Ashkenazi) and Kim Senklip Harvey (Syilx, Tsilhqot'in, Ktunaxa and Dakelh).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO DISCUSS THE WORK INDIGENOUS ARTISTS

I place the work of Favel, Mojica and Harvey in a theoretical framework that I derive and adapt from ideas by such Canadian critics as Ric Knowles, Lindsay Lachance (Algonquin Anishinaabe), and Jill Carter (Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi). It allows me to trace the development of Indigenous theatre and performance interventions into colonial theatre practices that vary from thematic to more innovative experimental approaches, which represent diverse strategies of decolonization and indigenization. This could be a syncretic theatre characterized by cross-culturality and hybridity or a theatre employing a strategic

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3 Glen Coulthard explains the concept of resurgence as “an intellectual, social, political, and artistic movement geared toward the self-reflective revitalization of beliefs, practices and other embodied experiences that best reflect Indigenous realities” (156).

reappropriation/adaptation of canonical texts (Knowles). I am interested, however, in theatre and performance practices aiming at theatrical sovereignty that can be achieved through the creation of alternative Indigenous methodologies and aesthetics. Lachance divides them further into land-based, place-based and community-engaged practices, representing a three-pronged relational dramaturgical model (“The embodied politics”). Indigenous productions belonging to the first two categories still negotiate within the structures and practices of Western theatre. Those that can be placed in the model proposed by Lachance, such as the works by Favel, Mojica and Harvey, privilege alternative sovereign Indigenous processes that affirm Indigenous cultural and intellectual traditions. I concentrate on their work on Indigenous theatre which foregrounds land-based theatrical processes in theory and practice.

The theater and performance artists have been engaged in the processes of cultural reclamation and rebuilding of their specific Aboriginal cultures. This work has been achieved through the decolonization and indigenization of Western theatre conventions, created both in on-reserve and off-reserve/urban locations, which result in the development of alternative land-based Indigenous processes and methodologies. In this study I address the following aspects of decolonizing and indigenizing theatrical practices: 1) theater as artistic ceremony and 2) theater as a research methodology and an episteme, a knowledge building practice. These practices challenge the Aristotelian views on theater as imitation of reality, and the notion of theater as an artificial literary form which foregrounds the importance of text in artistic creations. The artists oppose the mainstream Western’s theater focus on naturalism, psychologically driven characters, dialogue-heavy linear narratives, and such rigid theatrical conventions as, for instance, unities of time, space and action. Instead, they are interested in the concept of physical theater conceived as a process.

## INDIGENOUS THEATER AS ARTISTIC CEREMONY

The transformative nature of theatrical processes proposed by the artists who aim for artistic sovereignty can be compared to the transformative nature of Indigenous ceremonies. The roles, aims and functions of their work differ from the mainstream productions, because they transform theater processes into acts of healing, community making, resurgence and survivance. Gerald Vizenor’s concept of ‘survivance,’ once it is used with reference to theater, replaces the notion of theater as entertainment with the idea of theater as a process of survival and resilience to be achieved through

“a sovereign return to the rites, languages, lifeways, and application of knowledge systems that constitute the birthright of a living, active People” (Vizenor vii). These words encapsulate the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous theater and its important political role in the decolonization processes taking place in Canada, and globally.

Ceremony in theater, as Yvette Nolan (Algonquin, Irish) reminds us, is “about reconnecting: reconnecting the artist to her ancestors, the viewer to lost histories, the actor to the audience” (55). The concept of ceremony—or ‘artistic ceremony’—has been used by several artists to describe their ideas on Indigenous theatre and performance. Favel employs the term with reference to his vision of Indigenous theatre as a healing process and its spiritual role in restoring balance and wholeness to the world. Participation in ceremonies is an important aspect of his concept of theatre, as it prepares participants for a transformative experience in the non-urban space on the Poundmaker Cree Nation reserve, where he works on his ideas on Indigenous theatrical practices. For Jill Carter, residing in Toronto, theater is an “urban ceremony, in the sense that it unites a scattered body politic”; it creates communities, it may offer “real healing, and permanent transformations,” and, moreover, it “can also be a gateway” to Indigenous cultures (Petkar). The word ‘artistic ceremony’ is also prominent in Harvey’s conceptualization of Indigenous performance. When she reflects on her play *Kamloopa. An Indigenous Matriarch Story* (2019), she states that it is an Indigenous artistic ceremony, a storytelling ceremony (“Protocols”). Moreover, her concert documentary hybrid project is titled *Horizons: A Rocking Indigenous Justice Ceremony* (2021). Harvey also looks at stories as ceremonies, and one of the theater methodologies she proposes is named by her a Fire Creation Ceremony (“The Indigenous”).

The concept of ceremony has also been used to describe research into Indigenous cultures. It can be employed as useful interpretation tool when research is conducted through a theatrical process, which is an important strategy in the alternative vision of Indigenous theater as a research methodology. The seminal work on Indigenous research methods by Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), titled *Research is Ceremony* (2008), provides insight into methods that might be used in Indigenous theatre. Indigenous research is considered by him as a life-changing ceremony (61), a means of raising consciousness and awareness (69), and a process of healing and transformation, which, to use Wilson’s words, if it “doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right” (135). His concept of Indigenous research as ceremony clearly defies the traditional western sci-

entific research paradigms grounded in the concept of rationality and objectivity of knowledge, which, as history shows, misrepresented, dehumanized and denigrated Indigenous people and their cultures and knowledges.

#### FLOYD FAVEL AS A PIONEER OF A SOVEREIGN INDIGENOUS THEATER METHODOLOGY

My discussion of Indigenous theater as a research methodology and episteme is based on Favel's pioneering theory of theater and performance practice which he calls Native Performance Culture (NPC).<sup>4</sup> His goal is to achieve intellectual and cultural/theatrical sovereignty; thus he privileges Indigenous concepts, rather than allowing settler colonial frameworks to establish the terms of discussion. Favel proposes a conception of Indigenous theater as a new artistic genre which, as he makes it clear, is not "a form of "sub-theatre" ("Dwellings" 229). He insists on the novelty of theater for Indigenous people, because although there are, as he claims, "theatrical elements in storytelling, dance and ceremonies," which many scholars read as early forms of theatre, this does not "make them theatre" ("Poetry" 33).

This new genre is not limited by any ethnic criterion or the western concept of identity, which foregrounds individualism and is anti-relational. Favel rejects the concept of ethnic identity in favor of the notion of indigeneity as a land-based social paradigm,<sup>5</sup> based on kinship relations, a spirit of care and sharing, which in his case is grounded in Cree values ("Identity Bending").<sup>6</sup>

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4 Favel presented his ideas on NPC in texts published in diverse venues, which can serve as examples of Indigenous theories reframed as stories, expressed in a variety of genres, and frequently written in a metaphoric language, which defies expectations of traditional western highly analytical theoretical discourses. My discussion of Favel's work is based on his selected texts and interviews, for instance, *Poetry, Remnants and Ruins: Aboriginal Theatre in Canada*, "Theater: Younger Brother of Tradition," "The Artificial Tree: Native Performance Culture Research, 1991-1996," "Artist statement. Monsieur Artaud and I: Peyote has a laso," "The Theatre of Orphans/ Native Languages on Stage."

5 Favel's ideas on indigeneity are similar to those by Jeannette Armstrong, who looks at Indigeneity as a social paradigm, as a way of interacting with the land to gain wisdom and knowledge. In her dissertation, Armstrong discusses the topic with reference to Syilx language; she points out that Syilx peoples' identity is literally tied to perpetuating life on the land, not just human life, but all life forms (1).

6 In Favel's words: "Cree is not an ethnicity, or a blood, but a culture that absorbs People from all backgrounds, that is the strength and power of Cree Culture. My understandings of the broad issue of Indigenous identity come from my Cree

For this new genre Favel developed the first documented Indigenous “system of theatre creation” (“Artist Statement” 102), or a theory of Indigenous performance and theater, which he proposes to all Indigenous artists who choose to revisit their specific cultures for artistic inspiration. It is then a pan-Indigenous theory, both in conception and in practice; it is culturally specific, and can result in a variety of culturally grounded NPCs, be they, for instance, Cree, Anishinaabe or Salish.

The essence of this theory is encapsulated by the artist in the following general formula or equation: Tr (traditions) + Pr (process) = Th (theater, public performance) (“Artist Statement” 99). The theorem evolved in recent years into a more detailed model outlined by another equation<sup>7</sup>: Fa [H (Tr X Pr)] = Th<sup>2</sup>, which looks like an alchemy or a healing formula (H stands for healing) describing a transformative process similar to ceremony. This is exactly what this concept of Indigenous theatre, grounded in family (Fa), community, and a broadly understood tradition (Tr), presupposes. Tradition embraces both material and immaterial elements of culture, be they artifacts, cultural objects, artistic patterns or designs as well as oral storytelling, philosophies, worldviews, knowledges, histories and value systems. They can be used by artists as cultural sources to be staged but not in their original form. They are to be transformed into theatre or performance (Th), through a transformative theatrical process employing culturally specific “techniques and methods of performance and staging” (“Poetry” 33). According to Favel, the whole process is a “life-enhancing journey” (“Poetry” 33), and the “system of theatre creation based on the ruins of [his] culture,” derives from his search for “origin, and feelings of fracture and angst” (“Artist Statement” 102).

The idea of wholeness in this theater process is indicated in the notion of “theatre doubled” (Th<sup>2</sup>), which brings to mind Artaud’s vision of theater<sup>8</sup> developed on the basis of his research into Indigenous cultures. The concept of the “double” in Indigenous theatre, as Favel explains, relates to the Spirit World (Sen-Podstawska and Favel 200), and hence this idea of theater embraces both physical and metaphysical/spiritual realities. He points out that the proposed methodology is sacred, as the vision

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Culture, taught to me at the feet of my ancestors where I have sat with my head bowed” (“Identity Bending”).

7 For more information see Sarasa Performance Lab Inc. (previously Miyawata Culture Inc.): <https://sarasaperformancelab.com/about>. This formula evolved from Favel’s earlier conceptions of Indigenous performance.

8 Artaud’s vision of theater was published in his seminal 1938 work *Théâtre et son Double* (The Theatre and Its Double); it was impacted by his experience of the Balinese gamelan and dancers at the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris.

of this sovereign Indigenous theater comes from the Great Spirit. Indigenous theater “did not exist prior to colonization,” and therefore the basis of any Indigenous contemporary theater methodology are Indigenous “pre-existing expressive sacred arts and structures” (Favel “On sacredness”). Favel’s concept of “theatre doubled” draws on Indigenous holistic philosophies that are inclusive of spirituality, and for the Cree artist, it is the Cree view of pluralistic reality that guides his thinking. He envisions theater that creates a sense of balance and harmony, which is central to the Cree view of life. This view of Indigenous theater as a sacred form of expression, similar to “storytelling, movement, writing, and any other form of expression” (Favel “On sacredness”), is what distinguishes his concept of Indigenous theater from the dominant culture’s ideas on theater practices, as well as from the syncretic or hybrid forms of Aboriginal performance. One might say that Favel proposes a program for rebuilding spirituality, which is a valuable proposition and an important contribution to theater theory, as it shows the importance and role of this type of Indigenous theater in the process of re-indigenization of the contemporary world that is plunged in spiritual crisis. Favel believes that we are all Indigenous (“On sacredness”) and we need to restore Indigenous values. One way of doing it is through a culturally specific NPC as an act of decolonization and empowerment.

#### **THEATER AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND A KNOWLEDGE BUILDING PRACTICE**

The crucial aspect of the NPC formula is the theater process, which is privileged more than the final performance, and in many cases, the dramaturgical process, becomes “an end in itself—the process is the work,” as Lachance points out (“The embodied politics” 2). The theater work becomes both a research methodology<sup>9</sup> and a knowledge building practice guided by a specific cultural episteme, Indigenous worldviews, philosophies, values and principles, be they Cree or Salish, as they are situational and therefore pluralistic. The theatrical process, the way it is conducted by Favel, Mojica and Harvey, honours these Indigenous research perspectives. The artists look at theater as a means of self-study and self-exploration in the context of reclaiming Indigenous axiologies, ontologies and epistemologies.

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9 The use of theater as research methodology has been a fast-growing area in the recent decades, especially in the participatory and documentary theatre practices. The research in the form of artistic experimentation becomes more a narrative enquiry or a development of performance text.

They are engaged in Indigenous research that differs in its purpose and values from the western one because it is designed, to follow the arguments of Kathleen Absolon, as a tool for reconnecting to ancestry, the land, culture, language, history and Indigenous knowledges (77); such research is a portal to “learning about self and self-in relation to Creation” (Absolon 69), and it must be guided by the principles of “respect, reciprocity, and relationality” (Wilson 86). In contrast to the western scientific thought, which privileges the concept of objectivity, universal truth and neutrality, Indigenous research is a personal and subjective process which honors Indigenous worldviews and is supportive of family, community or nation obligations (Wilson 59). In theoretical texts and interviews,<sup>10</sup> the artists position themselves in their specific cultures and provide appropriate identifications. This is one of Indigenous protocols related to self-presentation, which is also a way of affirming cultural heritage and language. This act of self-positioning is a way of affirming their relationships to families, communities and nations and at the same time this is an acknowledgment of responsibilities. Their theatrical projects are grounded in personal, family and community histories.

Favel identifies himself as a Cree theorist, artistic director, playwright, community historian, activist and cultural leader, who was the only Indigenous student of the Polish revolutionary theater director Jerzy Grotowski in his Pontedera Centre in Italy. He uses his family and community stories in the NPC theatrical process and engages his family and community members in the diverse culture-reclaiming activities he organizes on the reserve, and Grotowski’s name is also evoked as his father figure (Forsythe 356). Monique Mojica depicts herself as a Kuna and Rappahonack playwright, artistic director of Chocolate Woman Collective, stage and film actress and social

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10 See footnote 4 for several texts by Favel; some of the texts and interviews by Monique Mojica which examine her sovereign artistic strategies are “In Plain Sight: Inscribed Earth and Invisible Realities,” “Monique Mojica: reclaiming Indigenous history and culture through theatre,” *Staging Coyote’s Dream. Volume 3* (edited with Lindsay Lachance), *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way: Mapping Embodied Indigenous Performance* (with Brenda Farnell). Kim Senklip Harvey’s hybrid theatre/performance texts and critical discourses serve as a good example of decolonizing and indigenizing practices of Indigenous interdisciplinary artists. For instance: her blog and podcast episodes “The Indigenous Cultural evolutionist” in the years 2018–2021 (the blog is currently unavailable online but many of the ideas from these texts have been recorded by Harvey in her podcasts) (see Works Cited); *Kamloopa. An Indigenous Matriarch Story, Horizons: A Rocking Indigenous Justice Ceremony*, and an insightful interview of Harvey by Molly Cross-Blanchard, “Indigenizing Theatre: An interview with Kamloopa Fire Creator Kim Senklip Harvey,” among many other texts.



activist. She makes it clear, however, that her artistic practice has been impacted by her involvement in the Spiderwoman theater established by her mother and aunts. Kim Senklip Harvey describes herself as a Salish<sup>11</sup> storyteller, Indigenous theorist and cultural evolutionist, who uses a variety of modalities, including playwriting, TV writing and blog and podcasting to work towards the equitable treatment of her peoples” (The Indigenous Cultural Evolutionist). In her blog she frequently references her attachment to her family and cultural community and responsibilities she honors in her work. All of the artists foreground their commitment to projects of artistic sovereignty and resurgence, and they develop methodologies that center Indigenous knowledges relative to their specific backgrounds. They also reflect critically on the values that guide their theater work. Harvey, for instance, formulates her own ethical guidelines for research as impacted by Seven Grandfather teachings and, when interviewed by Molly Cross-Blanchard, she discusses her ethical responsibilities with reference to the development of Indigenous Matriarchal Theatre practices, with a matriarchal protocol which states that “[e]veryone gets a voice” (Cross-Blanchard).

Apart from the above axiological categorizations, Indigenous theater, as it is conceived by Favel, Mojica, Harvey and other theater artists, functions as a practice for reclaiming Indigenous onto-epistemologies,<sup>12</sup> for restoring, affirming and re-envisioning of pre-contact philosophies, ways of life and values which colonizers tried to eradicate with “violence, shame and silencing” (Darby et al. 192). The artists are interested in the development of dramatic techniques informed by Indigenous holistic philosophies rooted in the land, by the belief in the plural nature of reality, not a universe but a pluriverse, reality that embraces the physical and metaphysical. They honor non-anthropocentric perspectives, and a relational worldview that is based on responsible relations between human and other-than-human beings. They also recognize the importance of the plural ways of knowing or accessing knowledge, including dreams, visions, intuition, prayers, ceremonies and various types of stories.

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11 Harvey’s ancestry is Syilx, Tsilhqot’in, Ktunaxa and Dakelh—which belong to the Interior Salish Plateau people living in the territories of contemporary British Columbia.

12 I draw on the term onto-epistemology as discussed by an Indigenous scholar Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe Bear Clan), who argues for non-separation of these areas in Indigenous philosophies, and proposes the concept of place-thought as a “non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated” (20).

The above artists inscribe Indigenous onto-epistemologies in their artistic projects. Favel acknowledges the pluralistic vision of reality when he advocates developing Indigenous “theatre systems that reflect supernatural realities” (email), or when he reveals alternative sources of accessing knowledge, such as dreams. The idea for the play *Governor of the Dew. A Memorial to Nostalgia and Love* (1), for instance, as the author points out in the introduction to the text, came to him in a dream. The concept of pluriversal reality is excellently shown in Harvey’s *Kamloopa*, where different ontologies are interrelated when the trickster enters the space of the physical urban reality, and other “shifter animals can travel between all worlds” (*Kamloopa* x). The non-anthropocentric and animistic perspectives are enacted in the text, where personhood is granted not only to humans but to all Creation, including animals, plants, rocks, the Earth and all elements; beings from multiple realities move easily between them, ancestors interact with urban characters, and there is a constant identity bending between humans and totem animals. Harvey designed the text as ‘presencing’ (Simpson 96–97),<sup>13</sup> a multidimensional reality with matriarchal, ancestral and animal worlds interconnected, and all of them, as she stresses, are real, as they represent valid ontologies. A Native perspective exhibits a spiritual view of the universe and expresses an Indigenous concept of spirituality that relates to the belief in the holistic notion of the interconnectedness of all creation with no hierarchy between humans and non-humans, where everything is interrelated, where the spirit world is never separated from the ordinary experience of the solid material world (Grieves 364). Favel’s statement, “we live in a multidimensional world. We do not ‘believe’ in ghosts, but we live with them and are in communication with them” (email), corroborates the idea that Indigenous beliefs are not based on the notion of trust but on the direct experience of multiple realities.

## LAND-BASED THEATER PRACTICES

Favel proposes a vision of Indigenous theater which can be classified as land-based, but to use Lachance’s categorizations, it is also a community-engaged practice. It is impossible to make strict divisions between these types of theater performances due to the fact that they are interrelated, and it is the Indigenous conceptualization of “land”

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13 ‘Presencing’ is a term used by Leanne Simpson to show the importance of any act of showing that somebody/something is present in spite of being silenced by any systems, ideologies, etc. Acts of presence are integral to Indigenous resurgence; they relate to our human and other-than-human relations.

which is foundational for Indigenous land-based practices. The artists under discussion in this study provide in their essays and interviews ample reflections on the Indigenous concept of land and its impact on their artistic processes.

Land is recognized by them as a bedrock of Indigenous life. Favel, for instance, asserts that “the land, the energy and the laws of the land are the basis of life for Indigenous people on the Turtle Island. From them come architecture, ceremony, worldview, languages, which are diverse but bound by the same natural and supernatural laws” (“Dwellings” 225). He also adds that land and landscapes are “the first teachers of Indigenous peoples, they carry the people’s languages, histories and ethical principles” (“Dwellings” 226). In Indigenous earth-centered philosophies, land features as alive, sentient and sacred, not simply a matter with special capabilities, which shows that Indigenous people have an overtly spiritual-materialistic understanding of the environment. Land is also conceptualized as a ‘storywork’ (Archibald), an archive of stories, a storyscape or a storied landscape covered with/in stories, as Mojica and Harvey frequently point out. This notion of the land as a living story, both human and more-than-human, encapsulates the vision of land-based theatre. Favel makes it clear that “the earth and the ancestors, spirits of this land will inform the style, methodology of what the work shall be” (“Dwellings” 227). Land-based theatre, as Lachance argues, may “involve physical interaction with land and waters” or land may be “invoked philosophically,” and the stories and languages explored in the process may be considered land-based resources (“Tiny Sparks” 54). The land itself, as a holistic Indigenous concept and a living entity, is treated as a collaborator in the three stage NPC practice (tradition–process–performance). For all of the artists discussed here the land-based process involves a physical interaction with the holistic concept of the land.

#### FLOYD FAVEL’S LAND-BASED THEATER PRACTICE

Favel develops his NPC theory and practice on his ancestral land, the Cree Poundmaker reserve. His research and practice of reclaiming Indigenous stories is part of the process of re-storying traditional Cree territories. When he works with non-Indigenous stories or classical drama, he metaphorically plants them in the Cree land, thus establishing a relationship which leads to their transformation. Thanks to Favel’s land-based work, the Poundmaker reserve has become

a center of Cree culture.<sup>14</sup> The artist has been at the forefront of Cree cultural movement, reclaiming, restoring and revitalizing Cree culture traditions, histories and stories which were silenced by colonial policies. The whole process has also been an important element in Favel's self-healing after years of struggling with the legacies of colonialism in his life. He developed the NPC methodology through a long process of theater work which engages his family and community first, and later many participants from all over the world, who are invited to learn the theater theory in practice, reclaim their own indigeneity, and gain alternative philosophical perspectives and knowledges.

An important part of this theater process is the immersion in tradition, in the Cree way of life, participating in ceremonies (e.g. Peyote ceremony, sweat lodge, Sundance), and such traditional activities as dancing, singing, storytelling or Indian sign language classes. The participants build relations with the land and its human and other-than-human beings. Collecting and braiding sweetgrass, for instance, is a way of establishing this kind of connection. Staging such ceremonies, songs, dances and other activities which are considered sacred, alive, possessing spirit and ancestral knowledge encoded in them, would be an act of desacralization, pseudo-mysticism or exoticization. What Favel proposes is the decoding of knowledge inscribed in these sacred traditional activities, stories and objects, by distilling their patterns and structures and revealing principles on which they are based, which eventually become the foundations of new dramaturgies, performance or a script. Through this transformational process the sacred Indigenous knowledges are protected, and performances based on "Native ways of montage, composition and structure" ("Dwellings" 230) shape a unique form of Indigenous theatre.

The study of Favel's essays, a number of them translated into Polish in a book titled *Piszący z ziemi. Teatr indygenny Floyda Favela i inne eseje* [Writing from the Earth. Floyd Favel's Indigenous Theatre and Other Essays] (Głowacka and Sojka), shows that the artist developed Indigenous dramaturgies on the basis of principles abstracted from the following elements of Plains Cree cultural traditions: the Plains Indian Winter count system, Plains Indian sign language, Cree narrative systems (storytelling), Plains Indian pictographic language,

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14 Notice the big variety of cultural activities organized by Favel on the Poundmaker reserve, including the annual Indigenous Performance Festival, Pison Maskanaw Winter Trail Sacred Stories project, Plains Indian Sign language workshops. Favel heads a Sarasa Performance Lab Inc. (previously Miyawata Culture Inc.), which are Indigenous companies based on the Poundmaker Reserve, Saskatchewan, Canada. For more info see: <https://sarasaperformancelab.com/about>.

Plains Cree tipi structure, traditional Cree hand shadow storytelling techniques and the string game/string figures. He develops specific exercises and training methods, experimenting with voice and movement, and explores the concept of Indigenous architecture, a special place for artistic ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> Favel is a pioneer of a sovereign Indigenous theater/performance, of sovereign Indigenous methodologies and aesthetics as acts of decolonial indigenization that are grounded in Indigenous knowledge. His theory and methods are consciously created from and specific to Aboriginal culture(s). He stresses, however, that it is a pan-Native practice to be employed by any Indigenous artist who chooses to revisit their culture for artistic inspiration (“Theatre: Younger Brother”).

### MONIQUE MOJICA’S LAND-BASED PRACTICES

Mojica started formulating her theory of the theater process, also rooted in the NPC ideas, at the time of her collaboration with Favel. Her version of land-based theater foregrounds her hybrid cultural background as Rappahannock (Virginia), Guna (Panama) people, and Haudenosaunee (Great Lakes Region) by adoption, and she engages in the land-based projects related to these specific cultural areas. Similar to Favel, Mojica offers a land-based research methodology which is an embodied, practice-based research process. Being an urban Indigenous theater artist, she is committed to long-term land-based theater projects which also involve archival and studio research. She privileges, however, the land-based embodied experience, a physical interaction with the land and the embodied exploration of traditional elements of cultures she is related to. This theater process requires ample traveling to distant locations, but this is where she enters into the relationship with the land in specific Indigenous sacred areas, where she performs deep listening to stories of the land, reclaims them, carries in her body to the studio, and eventually transforms into a script or performance text. Apart from entering into a relationship with other human participants of theater research projects, she also builds a relationship with the land and rivers (“Inscribed Earth”). She explains that she practices “an Indigenous artistic research methodology that speaks to the embodiment of place,” and her statement about her relation to the land sounds like a manifesto of a land-based performance practice: “[t]he land is our archive and our embodied

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15 To see examples of Indigenous architecture—the sacred space for Aboriginal storytelling and performance, see the website of Favel’s Sarasa Performance Laboratory: <https://sarasaperformancelab.com/about/>.

relationship to the land defines Indigenous identities, history, science, cosmology, literature—and our performance” (“In Plain Sight” 219). And again, similar to Favel, she has been working on decoding “performance principles in theory, process and practice, and in the practical application of these investigations and principles as the structural base from which to construct a performance, design a set or dramaturge a script” (“In Plain Sight” 219).

Mojica’s published work and interviews show her development as an Indigenous theorist and scholar. She started her decolonizing practice with the publication of *Princess Pocahontas and Blue Spots* (1991), but she soon moved to the land-based theater practices. She participated in several research projects that aimed at recovering Indigenous epistemologies encoded in pre-contact cultural forms and practices which were to be used for the development of contemporary Indigenous performances, each of them based on different cultural forms of specific Indigenous regions.<sup>16</sup> Her performance *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*,<sup>17</sup> for instance, was developed on the basis of her research into structures and principles abstracted from the textile art of Guna people, the mola<sup>18</sup>. The storywork was a therapeutical process for Mojica, and it involved her reconnection with the Guna community and the land of her ancestors; she performed research not only into the traditional art form of mola, but also into Kuna healing medicinal chants, and the contemporary art of Oswaldo Kantule. She reclaimed the culture of image and sound, whose structural elements became the basis of her performance text. She integrated them into performance using a story-weaving principle. Visual principles abstracted from molas, such as abstraction, duality, repetition, metaphor and multidimensionality (Mojica “From the Grounds”), were used by Mojica to devise her script. She believes that the multidimensionality of knowing inscribed in mola is the central feature of her dramatic writing. In this theatrical process, Mojica transformed tradition into performance and reclaimed and affirmed Indigenous knowledges.

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16 See, for instance, the project “Indigenous Knowledge, Contemporary Performance” described on the website: <https://www.uoguelph.ca/arts/sets/indigenous-knowledge-contemporary-performance>.

17 Unpublished script; see Mojica’s comments on the project in “Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way” and the most recent publication with Brenda Farnell, *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way: Mapping Embodied Indigenous Performance* (2023), which is an excellent documentation of the long and complex embodied research project and performance practice.

18 Molas are pieces of textile art worn on the clothes of Kuna women living in the Kuna Yala area of coastal Panama—they are layered, embroidered; they contain stories/narratives.

The performance principles and structures based on her embodied research into pre-contact earthworks, which Mojica formulated with a group of researchers, is one of the most distinctive processes in her theater work. This research reclaims such cultural texts as Indigenous mounds and earthworks on the territory of North America, which Chad Allen considers an Indigenous writing system, the first Indigenous literature on the land (*Earthworks* and *Trans-Indigenous*). Mojica's performance project titled *Circus Freaks and Sideshow Injuns* involved an extensive research into various types of Indigenous earthworks and mounds, some of which are effigy or burial sites. It allowed her to reflect on the colonial history of her family in the context of the erased history of Indigenous people from the landscapes of America,<sup>19</sup> which, however, has been inscribed on and in the land. Mojica performed a mound embodied research which required walking on the land, feeling it, smelling it, entering into a relationship with it, talking to the rivers and allowing the mounds to speak. She received songs and stories from the mounds, as she made herself available as a conduit to what the land was telling her. From that embodied research she went into the process of deep improvisation from which eventually a text was generated ("From the grounds"). The research into mounds shows that they were built with a deep awareness of cosmology and astrology, by layering different kinds of soils one upon the other; and this deep structure of mounds has been used as a structural base for her dramaturgical model, which renders several levels of reality, the pluriverse. The principles abstracted from the mounds have become the foundation of the theater process, which has been encapsulated by her and the team of researchers working on the project "Indigenous Knowledge, Contemporary Performance," in the following terms: duration, alignment, frequency, convergence, integration ("From the grounds"). The storyscape and the structures of the ancient earthworks were applied to scriptwriting and performance "in order to reanimate Indigenous ways of knowing" and to "dislodge the colonizer's gaze" ("Performance"), and in this way to push aside the traditional structures of western theatre and achieve a goal of Indigenous theatrical sovereignty.

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19 Mojica's family performed in amusement parks and danced for tourists. Many Indigenous people were used in exhibits in savages section. They were marked as freaks and exotics, objectified, culturally othered and exploited like human freaks in the shows popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## KIM SENKLIP HARVEY'S LAND-BASED PRACTICES

Harvey's theater research process is also rooted in the land. The artist's interviews reveal that her theater practice entails frequent trips to the land of her ancestors to reclaim the sacred bond between her and the land, to reclaim the knowledge the land carries and which the elders epitomize in a phrase "we are the land" (*Kamloopa* 3). Such knowledge entails important responsibilities and respect for the land and hence to all Creation. The land in Harvey's work features as a storyscape, which is conveyed, for instance, in her statement about the land "drenched with the stories of our Ancestors [...] where the Ancestor glaciers mix with the Spirit of the mountains" ("The Mystics"). The land is then an archive of stories and an archive of Salish knowledge.

Harvey's theater methodologies are inspired by her strong relation with the land. She uses the term 'Salish Earthing' to refer to her theatre process which she describes as a "Relational and Land based creation methodology," which for her is "[a]n approach that embraces full body listening, courageous exploration, and centers relational responsiveness to explore and deepen our ability to listen to the land to conjure ideas from physical and ideological earthing sessions to steward in stories" ("Salish Earthing"). In *Kamloopa*, for instance, she introduces a trickster to teach about the need to reconnect with the land and ancestors. The structure of the play is guided by the awareness that the land is sentient and living. The land features as one of the characters in the text, and the titles of its several sections are related to the land as a living body, e.g. The Land Breathes, Embodied Land, Landing Together (v). The Ancestral Matriarchs are presenced<sup>20</sup> as embodying the land: "We are the mountains, the rivers, the sky, the animals, the wind, the breath of our worlds [...] We are the Land, our home for you to return to" (*Kamloopa* 3).

Harvey's 'Fire Creation Methodology' also rests on one of nature's elements. The artist designs the artistic ceremony of Indigenous theater as a fire ceremony, because, to use her words, "fire is connected with one of the oldest ceremonies which is telling a story," it "opens a portal between us and the cosmos" and it "may be one of our oldest partners" ("Merendiando"). The outdoors ceremony allows to connect to the earth. Harvey uses the concept of fire for her unique vision of a land-based theatre. She provides new definitions which indigenize the western concept of theatrical practices. In the new terminology, Indigenous theatre is a Fire Company with such positions/functions

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20 The word refers to presencing as described in the footnote 13.



as Fire Creator (playwright), Fire Tenders (playwright, directors, producers, dramaturgist), Fire Holders (actors, technicians), and Fire Igniters (the design team) (Harvey “Indigenizing theatre”). What is important in this relational dramaturgy is the creation of “a reciprocal relationship with the land and its people” (Harvey “Land based”).

The land-based Indigenous theater processes and practices examined in this study can be read as a declaration of theatrical sovereignty by the discussed Indigenous land-based theater artists. They developed dramatic techniques that are informed by their holistic concept of the land, and grounded in their specific cultures. They focus on embodied research and embodied knowledge that reconnects humans with their community, with the natural world/landscape and ancestors. Their decolonizing and indigenizing theater methodologies, developed on the basis of Indigenous traditions, philosophies and knowledges reclaimed from the land, are a significant contribution to the global theater scholarship. Not only do their artistic projects challenge the western traditional theater misrepresentations of indigeneity, both thematically and in terms of the structural approach to storytelling, but they also offer philosophical insights of crucial importance to humanity at the time of contemporary global social, environmental and spiritual crises. Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica and Kim Senklip Harvey have been working on holistically oriented projects which aim at the re-indigenization of the world, understood in a broad sense of the word: including respect for the land and all creation, and the acceptance of pluriversal perspectives which honor Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

*Abstract:* The article focuses on the problem of Indigenous theatrical sovereignty which is examined on the basis of theater/performance theories and practices by such Aboriginal artists/theorists/performers from Canada as Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica and Kim Senklip Harvey. The theoretical framework of this study focuses on the decolonization and indigenization of theatrical practices, and specifically on theater as artistic ceremony and theater as a research methodology. The selected artists vehemently oppose colonial violence, exploitation and marginalization of Indigenous populations, their lands and cultures. They are interested in the reclamation and revitalization of Indigenous philosophies and traditions *via* theater/performance. They explore the development of dramatic techniques informed by Indigenous philosophies rooted in the Indigenous holistic concept of the land as sacred, as a living entity, and an archive of stories. They believe in the plural nature of reality, and they honor non-anthropocentric perspectives and relational worldviews. Each of the artists is discussed with reference to theories and methods informed by research into their specific cultures and knowledges, which they reclaim and transform into performance. Favel is discussed as a pioneer of Indigenous dramaturgies whose principles were abstracted from selected elements of his

Plains Cree cultural traditions. His “Native Performance Culture” is the first documented theory and method consciously created from Aboriginal heritage. Mojica’s methods are shown as developed from her research into structures and principles abstracted from mola, the textile art of her ancestors, Kuna people, as well as from her embodied research into pre-contact earthworks and mounds. Harvey’s innovative theater methodologies, “Salish Earthing” and “Fire Creation Methodology,” are reflected upon as grounded in her strong relation to the Salish land. The artists challenge the Western theatre conventions, and replace them with sovereign land-based Indigenous theater/performance processes and methodologies, aiming to create the acts of healing, community making, resurgence, survivance, as well as the respect and care for the land and all creation. They offer hope at the time of diverse global environmental, social and cultural crises.

*Keywords:* decolonization, indigenization of theater, land-based theater, theatrical sovereignty, First Nations, Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica, Kim Senkclip

*Bio:* Eugenia Sojka, Ph.D., D. Litt., Associate Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies, and Institute of Culture, University of Silesia in Katowice (US), Poland, former Adjunct Professor at the Department of English, University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), Canada and vice-President of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies. She holds a Ph.D. in English with a specialization in Canadian literature from Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). Her scholarly and publishing interests focus on Canadian Indigenous and minority literatures and cultures, and specifically on Indigenous drama, theatre and performance, and decolonization and indigenization processes in literary and cultural discourses in Northern America (ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8467-1562>). She was a visiting and guest professor in Polish and foreign universities (MUN, University of Ottawa, University of Alberta, University of the Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island University, University of Northern British Columbia (Canada); Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Germany) and University of Essex (Great Britain)). She is a co-founder of the research group Trans-Indigene: International Studies in Indigenous and local performance (2020). She pioneered teaching of Canadian Studies at the US and the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland, and was a founding Director of Canadian Studies Centre, Institute of British and American Culture and Literature, US (2000–2020); she organized annually Days of Canadian Culture, workshops, conferences, as well as lectures and readings of many international scholars and writers, including representatives of diverse Indigenous cultures. She is the initiator and coordinator of “Discover Canada,” the nationwide contest on Canadian culture for Polish high school students, and she also assisted in introducing and developing a Canadian Studies program in Karol Miarka High School. The co-operation with the UFV, Canada, which she developed, led to an active student and faculty exchange between US and UFV.

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