Abstract: There are similar characteristics in the writings of several Native American playwrights, regardless of their tribal affiliation or geographical location. One of the most prevalent of these characteristics is the incorporation of tribal tongue in the writing. The playwrights examined in this paper all appear to use their writing as a catalyst for reminding Native Americans of the value of certain important aspects of Indian culture, specific to this paper will be language. The word language will also be used to encompass both the expression of these Native playwrights through their words as dialogue as well as the use of specific tribal languages. This paper will examine how several Native American playwrights use tribal language in their dialogue and bring focus to the importance of continuing to make use of these languages, as well as how the way in which dialogue is written suggests about the characters that these playwrights have written.
Indian culture – language - and how each of the writers use it as a tool and bring focus to it. The works that will be examined are *The Independence of Eddie Rose* by William S. Yellow Robe, *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* by Drew Hayden Taylor, *Grandma* by Hanay Geiogamah, *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for a Deer Dance* by Diane Glancy.

Before one can delve into the deeper meanings of language as an art and form of expression, we must first look at language as it relates to the tool that a community uses to communicate with one another. Each of these playwrights examined uses their Native languages as an important part of Native culture through their writing. The playwrights examined each have incorporated tribal language into their writing in many ways; either as a major portion of the dialogue, in smaller bits and pieces or even by having their characters directly address the use of a traditional language. Despite the form or the amount of language that is incorporated, it all reinforces the playwright’s attempts at showcasing language as an important cultural aspect.

Strong clues to the reason these writers incorporate language into their writing is discussed by Geiogamah in the introduction to the anthology *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays*. Geiogamah points out a purpose of American Indian theatre, “They must work to help untangle the mass confusions that stereotyping, assimilation, and acculturation have created in the minds of Indians themselves.” (5) Language was one of the many cultural characteristics of Native American life that was nearly eradicated due to the banning of them near the end of the 19th Century (1). That is why today those that can speak a tribal language are not very common, and all the more precious because of their rarity. As Geiogamah points out, because of assimilation and loss of culture, American Indian theatre can serve as a tool to remind people of culture and customs that were lost. The Native playwrights examined here do adhere
to this function of American Indian theatre. This is especially prevalent when the writers talk about or use tribal languages; they are reminding people about their tribal identity.

The play *Grandma* is a one-act, one character play written by Hanay Geiogamah. It is meant to be performed with its companion piece *Grandpa*. It was first performed in 1984 by the Native American Theatre Ensemble, and directed by Geigomah. The character, Ella, is described as “An Indian grandmother, in her seventies. She is sprightly, energetic, humble and good-humored.” (316-317). It is a show that is in direct address, and the character is talking about a naming ceremony that she is attending later that evening for her grandson.

In *Grandma* the character of Ella speaks about the loss of the language, “I’m going to give a little kind of speech in tribe’s language over there tonight. Mostly just us old folks know it now.” and later she talks about being forced to speak English, “I’d tell her, ‘I spoke-ded Kiowa.’ And she would say back, ‘No! No! You say, I spoke Kiowa before I came here, and I speak English now!’” The character then reinforces the importance of not losing the Kiowa language when she says, “Here’s my first language book for you Grandson.” (321). By having the character of Ella speak directly about the lack of people that speak Kiowa, the writer is reminding people of the very real possibility of the language completely dying out with the older generation. Related to that, when the character talks about giving the gift of a language book to her grandson, the writer appears to be reminding people about a responsibility of passing on the language to the younger generation.

The Ojibwe language is used in the play *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*. This play tells the story of two sisters, one who grew up on a reservation surrounded by an Indian way of life, and the other who was adopted off the reserve (she was forcibly taken by children’s aid workers, which was a common occurrence in the 1950s and 1960s on the Canadian reserves) and
grew up knowing nothing of her cultural background. In one memorable scene the sister from the reservation, Barb, attempts to teach the other sister Janice how to speak Ojibwe at Janice’s request. “Do you speak this Ojibway language? Then if it’s so important to you, teach it to me.” (252). Again, the writer reminds their audience of the importance of their native language. Unlike *Grandma*, however, this play does not talk about the difference in the older and younger generation, but rather deals with the difference between those who are immersed in Native culture and those who live completely separate from that culture.

It is significant to recognize the importance of the language in these plays as the voice of the playwrights, not just the native tongue used in the plays. The language used by these playwrights is both stunningly beautiful and perfectly appropriate to the various characters and situations. Theatre in its earliest form was simply storytelling, and as Native culture has always relied heavily on storytelling as a way to communicate our histories, mythologies, and culture, it is consistent with the storytelling legacy that these playwrights write with such beauty, purpose and clarity. In an artist’s statement for *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, Taylor says the following, “I like to think of myself as carrying on the tradition of storytelling that our Elders have shared with us. As the times change, we find ourselves going from telling stories around the campfire to telling stories around the stage….It is my sincere wish that the heart and essence of storytelling experience come from the same place.” (203).

Specific language styles are used with different characters by many of the playwrights, giving us a clue both into what these language styles say about the character, and what they may say about American Indian life in general. In both the *Independence of Eddie Rose* and *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for a Deer Dance* the dialogue of the characters varies in very specific and distinct ways. Fascinating is the way that some Native Playwrights use
language to show the difference between characters. To clarify, some of the playwrights write the
language of their characters specific to that characters place in life. The characters who are
removed from the tribal traditions often speak very differently than those that are very connected
to their cultural heritage. The characters without tradition tend to use negative language that is
angst filled and focused on questions. With the connected characters the sentence structures
seem more flowing and poetry like, giving clear homage to our storytelling heritage. Whereas
the less connected characters tend to speak in short, harsh sentences that gives the audience
insight to their struggles with self-identification.

In the play *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for a Deer Dance*, there is a
touching dialogue between a Grandmother and her Granddaughter as they each try to understand
each other’s path in life. This play in particular shows the difference between the characters
through the language as mentioned previously. The character of the Granddaughter asks
questions over and over throughout the piece, and uses words like can’t and don’t, diffuse with
anger. Granddaughter, “I already know I don’t fit anywhere – I don’t need to be reminded – I’m
at your house Grandma with my sleeping bag and old truck – I don’t have anyplace else to go-”
(196). In this one short paragraph the character uses the word “don’t” three times. When the
character says that she does not fit in anywhere and has no place to go, she is letting us into a
seemingly hopeless situation that could be a commentary by the playwright on the plight of some
young Indian people. The character of the Grandmother shows us that she is filled with anger
and sadness too, but it comes off in her dialogue in more of an accepting way, and again, in a
very poetic way. Grandmother, “The leaves only get to be red for a moment. Just a moment and
then the trees grieve all winter until the leaves come back. But they’re green through the summer.
The maple waits for the leaves to turn red. All it takes is a few cold mornings. A few days left
out of the warmth. Then the maple tree has red leaves for a short while.” (197). Note that these two monologues by the granddaughter and grandmother respectively differ in punctuation as well. Whereas the granddaughter speaks in short, tense statements separated by dashes, the Grandmother speaks in complete sentences. By the end of this play, as the granddaughter comes to accept her heritage in the Red Deer Dress, she begins to speak more poetically like the grandmother. Granddaughter, “My grandmother was a deer. I could see her change before my eyes. She caused stories to happen. That’s how I knew she could be a deer…I’m sewing my own red deer dress. It’s different than my grandma’s. Mine is a dress of words.” (288).

So it is too with *The Independence of Eddie Rose*. As in the Glancy play, the main character Eddie often speaks in short tense sentences, imbued with sadness and a very negative language, “I’m all alone, Aunty Thelma. I have no one.” (74). It seems to be the same as the dialogue of the granddaughter in the above mentioned play. The character of Aunty Thelma tries to teach him about the culture and in doing so speaks the following beautiful dialogue, “I’m going to show you something. Something that you can do so that you will always have someone with you. You will be able to make it through the days. It isn’t hard. It will help you. Because from now on you will always have your people in your heart.” (74). (She goes on to show him how to burn sage and wash himself in the smoke). Note how there is no negativity in this passage of language spoken by Aunty Thelma, and how, particularly in the last sentence, the language is crafted very beautifully.

Another commonality in the language used by these playwrights is a deep and personal writing style that the Native audiences it is intended for can connect to. Geiogamah points out, “The most important function of the Indian dramatist is to communicate with his own people.” (5). In no place does this seem to be more important than in the language that the playwright
uses. The writers examined here write about things that are important to Native people, in a clear way that is easily understandable to its audiences, that is able to make fun of themselves, and they saturate their work with a storytelling feel that is very much in sync with the Native storytelling tradition.

What can be proved by examining these works is simply that these specific plays all use language to remind Indian people of their cultural identity. Language is used in the very literal sense as in the tongue that tribal members used to communicate, and in the more broad sense as an art form and the voice of these playwrights. The language as an art form serves this function as well because it is so easily identifiable and relatable. While many of the stories are about the modern day Indians and their struggles, and not specifically about culture, they all seem to be imbued with various traditions and customs. Through the examination of a single work from different Native playwrights, it is really impossible to draw conclusions about all Native American playwrights. However, these playwrights do appear to incorporate language as a tool for reminding viewers of the importance of preserving their cultural identity. Perhaps it is simply impossible to write about native people without talking about the cultural aspect of being Indian.
Works Cited


