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## Hunger for Culture: Navigating Indigenous Theater

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### Introduction

Two young Indigenous performers stand on a small, raised stage, under a bridge near a concrete-encased river in downtown Los Angeles (DTLA). The DTLA skyline in the south and the Los Angeles gold line metro train on the overhead bridge, connecting Chinatown and Lincoln Heights to the north. The young man is a slim, handsome, and energetic performer. The young woman is slightly older, but not by much, and she has a short build with straight dark hair and a determined face. They turn to each other, take a deep breath, turn to face the crowd, and shout, "HUNGER FOR CULTURE!"

The two performers were Kenneth Ramos and Jennifer Marlowe, two professional actors cast in the 2016 world premiere of *Urban Rez*, written by Larissa FastHorse, directed by Michael John Garcés, and produced by Cornerstone Theatre Company (CTC). At the time, the circumstances of an Indigenous-led production, like *Urban Rez*, were somewhat a rarity. *Urban Rez* represented a keen moment in American Theater where a predominantly Indigenous cast performed a play written by an Indigenous playwright. *Urban Rez* was distinctive from other American theater shows in production style, narrative form, and community engagement methodologies, especially for Los Angeles.

In the seventh installment of CTC's "Hunger Cycle," the *Urban Rez* production undertook the task of crafting a response to the yearning for culture in Los Angeles County. The metropolitan area of Los Angeles often boasts a culturally diverse and LGBTQ+ inclusive landscape but regularly erases Indigenous populations. Los Angeles

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also holds the highest percentage of urban-based American Indians in the United States but has frequently forgotten to include non-federally recognized tribes in the region, including Tongva, Tataviam, Acjachemen, and Chumash communities. *Urban Rez* draws attention to the multifaceted ways Indigenous populations might hunger for culture, while it also utilizes theater-based practices.

Our essay looks at the *Urban Rez* show as a theater production that demonstrates how an Indigenous play offers a queering of US-based performance. *Urban Rez* utilizes sovereignty to discuss belonging, relationship to place, and representation. First and foremost, *Urban Rez* operates within the limitations of a white heteropatriarchal theater landscape that often erases Indigenous narratives. We demonstrate that the 2016 *Urban Rez* production established a queer Indigenous presence within a colonial theater space. The *Urban Rez* production disrupts the linear models defined by American theater, which do not allow for the complexities of an Indigenous experience, let alone a queer Indigenous experience. Overall, the experience of *Urban Rez* not only challenges narrative expectation but disrupts the audience, cast, and crew production experience beyond heteropatriarchal structures.

Our analysis of *Urban Rez* weaves together an opportunity to understand a theater experience not grounded in the confines of settler logics, with one of understanding Indigenous theater as a space for inclusive and relational representation. Like the groundbreaking works produced by Indigenous performance artists and Indigenous-led theaters such as Spiderwoman Theater in the 1970s, the *Urban Rez* experience brings attention to assimilation, political oppression, and settler confinements while also including significant LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit narratives. The production experience explores ideas of relationality as defined by being a *Kuuyam*, meaning "guest" in Tongva, as theorized by Charles Sepulveda. Overall, the play's

premise challenges audiences to think about the impact of the myriad of settler colonial projects of North America.

This essay is a collaboration between three performers from the show. The authors have all grown up on our home reservations outside of Los Angeles city limits, and we all identify as queer, Two-Spirit, or trans. Two co-authors joined the *Urban Rez* processes in the early moments of the production timeline through their involvement with the American Indian Community Council and a local university. The other co-author joined later in the production through their involvement with the Red Circle Project (a defunct Two-Spirit health organization in Los Angeles). Through our friendship, artistry, and collaboration, we address the ways *Urban Rez* offered a shift in our discussion of performance, theater, community work, queer, and self-representation.

### **Hunger for Analysis**

A young Apache woman enters the audience space. She is wearing a beautifully crafted Rainbow headpiece; she begins to dance. She is deliberate in her movement. Each drum beat—a recording played over the main speakers—guides her in gentle, rhythmic dancing. She slowly ends the dance, and the play resumes as she exits the staging area. The audience just witnessed the first time a trans-woman and Apache performer had performed the Rainbow Dance in public. Before the performance, the trans-actor never had the courage or the support required for this endeavor. As an Apache trans-woman, she struggles with settler colonialism's lasting impact and legacy on her cultural dances. As a trans-woman, she had never found a safer space to perform such a dance, and without the support of the cast, crew, writer, and director, she would not have ever attempted the dance.

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Through the work of Indigenous creatives and allies, *Urban Rez* mobilized narrative and performance styles that demonstrated and asserted self-representation in the face of aggressive settler colonial frameworks. When we reference settler colonialism, we utilize Indigenous Studies scholars like J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, Scott L. Morgenson, Mark Rifkin, Shannon Speed, and Patrick Wolfe. Settler colonialism within a theater context reflects the hindrance of heteropatriarchy, the erasure of other-than-human kinship, and the uplifting of stereotypical Indigenous characters. *Urban Rez* continues to grow in our imagination. Every time we re-evaluate the experience, we remember the show's profound impact on shifting and expanding our understanding of settler logics.

The Indigenous community experience in Los Angeles differs depending on our positionality. As Indigenous settlers in Tongva territory, our approach to land and story varies from the LA Native communities with ancestral ties to specific geographic places. *Urban Rez* continued to mold and craft conversations of Indigeneity as a "counterpart analytic to settler colonialism" (Kauanui xiv). However, not a main character, the presentation of a trans-Apache woman as a part of everyday *Urban Rez* life is a prime example of how community experience in the production reflects our queer lives. As the tactics of settler colonialism are one of erasure, the narratives created and recreated for the show included queer conversations and conversations with land and place.

We also utilize terms like Two-Spirit and queer because our journeys through self-identification continue to shift and grow. As a result of the politicization of Indigenous identities and communities, co-authors have experienced the forced removal and isolation from settler LGBTQ+ spaces. We come to Two-Spirit identities from the activism of Indigenous communities in the 1990s. We use the term similarly to how Qwo-Li Driskill outlines it in their scholarly work (84). We utilize the term queer,

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especially articulating the interventions of Indigenous feminist scholarship and queer affect as they have appeared in the work of Joanne Barker, Sarah Deer, Jennifer Denetdale, Dian Million, and Melanie Yazzie, et al. Our queerness and Two-Spirit identities came out of necessity. We first and foremost identify as Apache, Kumeyaay (Iipay), and Lakota.

We would further posit that the *Urban Rez* production is a queering American theater space because the production employs community-based, interactive, and reciprocal work through the writing, rehearsal, production, and outreach process. Queer affect from Indigenous feminist scholarship offers a critique of non-settler normativity (Barker 6). By Indigenous, we mean culturally grounded, culturally relevant, and culturally conscious protocols and perimeters defined through tribal accountability. And by feminist, we mean encompassing a gendered understanding of the world that opposes heteropatriarchy. As we consider what the play itself produced for and with the community, the research was produced for and with the community.

The nuances of sovereignty on stage create a way to contend with western art spaces that force Indigenous artists into an identity-driven practice. Within the context of our analysis, sovereignty addresses both the complications of artistic representation and the issues faced by the *Urban Rez* characters, cast, and playwright. In her 2011 article, Jolene Rickard unpacks visual sovereignty, shifting the focus of a colonial interpretation of Indigenous art into transforming the growing space of sovereignty to include an intellectual scope for aesthetic theorization (478). Rickard uses visual examples to demonstrate that sovereignty is bound to concepts of power. The power structures within spaces like theater indicate that federal policy regulates Indigenous visibility, complicating a lack of relationality or reciprocity.

In our view, *Urban Rez* counters possessive logic and disrupts the nation-state. The production occurred in two different places in the city of Los Angeles: one in stark

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contrast with the downtown area and the other nestled by a practically hidden freshwater spring on the west side of the city. The balance of the two performance sites reflects a resistance to the conceptual idea that settler colonialism—as a structure—actively destroys tribal ideology, place, language, culture, etc., to replace it with the dominating society (Wolfe 388). By reimagining relationships with these places, *Urban Rez* actively resists colonization while also rejecting the logics of possession, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson theorizes through the domination of an oppressed nation (xii). Not only were voices of queer Indigenous people uplifted and put in the center of a performance, but the physical land was reimagined again as Indigenous space.

### **Hunger for Native Theater**

The theater production was not ordinary. During the rehearsal, we shared tears during the rehearsals, mostly when we connected with historical and intergenerational narratives of trauma and pain. But we also shared more laughter than not. *Urban Rez's* narrative form challenges American Theater to consider what constitutes "good" theater by centering (Los Angeles) and continuously refocusing on local communities. We hungered for new ways to connect beyond the stage. The multivocal production experience often left the crew and production company unsure about the final result. The disruption of settler logics, done by infusing gendered, queer, Indigenous, and community-focused material, was often hazy theoretically discussed. But the moment the play started, the simultaneity of the story and performance experience opened new opportunities for expression for the audience, cast, and crew.

Indigenous theater, or Native American theater, or American Indian Theater—the terminology depends on the decade—covers a broad intervention of storytellers that approach the medium of American theater to tell stories of Indigenous content. Indigenous theater can range from ancient modes of oral storytelling to cultural modes

of expression through song and dance or professionally staged productions. Indigenous performances can include current spaces—such as intertribal pow wows, the recent wave of social media platforms—and highlight the diversity of cultural performances. Indigenous theater has permeated American theater in various forms that have ebbed and flowed with changing dynamics of the theater landscape in the past fifty years.

Indigenous-centered ensembles, production companies, and a wide range of Indigenous playwrights have made their way into mainstream circles. The attempt to operate within the mainstream theater landscape can often mean neglecting essential narratives or characters for the sake of mainstream non-native audiences. For example, a trans character on stage is a plot point or oddity, but we were simply auntie and cousins in the *Urban Rez* landscape. The push to make an Indigenous character legible to a non-native audience continues to be an issue with mainstream theater that does not include Indigenous trans-characters. We, as Indigenous performers, have all, at one time, played into a trope on stage. The reasons are numerous and would warrant an entirely different essay.

Theater roles continue to be limited and opportunities scarce. The only Equity Indigenous theater company in the United States is Native Voices at the Autry (“About Native Voices”).<sup>1</sup> Native Voices was established in 2014 “to more fully support the extraordinary talents of its Native actors, writers, musicians, directors, designers, and producers” (“About Native Voices”). With Indigenous production at the core, Native Voices caters to a predominately white audience as frequented by the Autry Museum of the American West. Like Native Voices, other Indigenous theater spaces continue to function as a medium motivated by members of or descendants of tribal communities in North America. However, Two-Spirit representation still operates at the fringes of dominant theater spaces and rarely within mainstream Indigenous narrative making. A

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queer character is rarely a main character; so, even if our main character *Max* presented as a cis-heteronormative body, his queerness was important to us. That is not to say Two-Spirit performers are omitted but often play straight characters or present a straight persona in public.

The Native Voices Theater Company, as the premiere Indigenous theater in the United States, is often used as the go-to company to engage with Indigenous performance and content. However, they rarely produce Two-Spirit narratives, showcase queer characters, hire openly gay actors, or create collaborative productions with the community. They host an annual short play festival that solicits new plays from the larger North American Indigenous playwriting community, but the call for scripts often frames similar themes of Indigeneity. We do not mean to dismiss the extensive work Native Voices has done for theater on the American landscape. Still, we continue to see limited Two-Spirit representations on mainstream theater stages.

*Urban Rez* firmly demonstrated a positionality grounded in relationality in two ways that also differs from a typical mainstream theater playwriting process. First, the approach to gathering communal narratives required a deep reflection of place and positionality. The story circle method employed by Cornerstone Theater Company calls for community members to join in a group gathering to share personal narratives where each participant answers a general question or responds to a specific theme. For example, the playwright asked *Urban Rez* participants to describe their individual and collective experiences as Indigenous people in Los Angeles. From these stories, we were able to see our trans auntie embodied in "Tasha" as a character on stage. The story circles—conducted by the playwright, Larissa FastHorse, and CTC staff—happened with various groups, including local tribal communities and urban relocated communities.

Each line of the play eventually reflected a story FastHorse utilized from the story circle method, unlike the classic narrative form of American theater, which includes three linear acts in episodic and climactic form. Our stage was not stagnant. The *Urban Rez* often presented stories simultaneously, across and around audience members (Arcos). Again, the interweaving of stories throughout the production demonstrated the simultaneity of our queerness interwoven into the plot without making our queerness an oddity. Our characters were seen not as queer characters but as complex relatives. Performers weaved in and out of a predominantly standing audience. The playwright was strategic in highlighting moments of sovereignty, uplifting diverse representation, and demonstrating through the collaborative writing process that addressing issues like federal policy and oppression can result in a different type of autonomy on stage.

The simplicity of having queer actors, trans-actors, and characters on stage was not always a possibility. The founding of Indigenous theater ensembles and theater companies have continued to focus on the infusion of Native characters that frequently rely on stereotypical characterization. Furthermore, American playwrights include Native characters that continue to perpetuate these stereotypes to be seen by a mainstream audience. Critiques of the "American Indian" image emerged across academic fields but rarely within popular culture. In the 1970s, Robert Berkhofer, Jr. demonstrated a connection between federal Indian policy and the impact on the idea of the American Indian in the American psyche. More recently, within psychology studies, Fryberg et al. document that racial mascots impact the self-esteem of American Indian youth. Many other scholars emphasize the negative impact of "playing Indian," as theorized by Phil Deloria (2007). Yet again, Two-Spirit critiques are not at the forefront of media or theater discussions.

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### Hunger for Representation

At the end of an *Urban Rez* performance, where we had a high concentration of local tribal community members, a Tongva Auntie approached us.<sup>2</sup> The Auntie thanked us for the performance and said, "I'm so glad this wasn't Indian Romeo and Juliet"<sup>3</sup> We all laughed in response. When we asked her to explain further, she clarified that most theater performances in Los Angeles with an Indigenous narrative continue to position Indigeneity as a deficit. She explained that the shows she recently watched centered life or death relationships, presented a coming-of-age story or coming-of-identity narrative, or presented a historical account of Native characters. Her comment was a high compliment. We thanked her for supporting our show and felt confident in *Urban Rez* not reproducing an "Indian Romeo and Juliet" trope.

Playwrights, like FastHorse, continue to craft stories that challenge stereotype characterizations. When thinking of Indigenous stereotype characters within dominant society popular culture, phrases like "noble savage" or "Indian princess" might come to mind and have also been perpetuated in the theater. In her book *Celluloid Indians*, Jacqueline Kilpatrick explains three ways of understanding Indigenous stereotypes in films. Kilpatrick highlights mental, sexual, and spiritual representations and issues that continue to reside in new media. Audiences can view the mental stereotype as the encompassing of the other two tropes since words like "stupid" or "dumb" are replaced by "filthy" or "noble." In American theater, we see this in stereotypical characters like "Tiger Lily" in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), or the nameless American Indian characters in Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946; both shows are still produced on Broadway, nationally). Stereotypical characters place the Indigenous individual inferior to the settler, enabling the over-sexualization or damaging view of the "primitive heathen."

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Unfortunately, stereotypical characters specify the lack of American comprehension and creation of “otherness” on stage, even in Indigenous-focused performances. We hunger to break free from Indigenous stereotypes. Frequently there is a drive within mainstream theater landscapes to create legible characters by including narratives that contain some version of an Indigenous stereotype (Brandes). *Urban Rez* did not utilize tropes and created many characters that counter these ahistorical stereotypes. The characters and performers ranged in tribal affiliation, age, sexual orientation, gender, and experience. FastHorse demanded predominantly Indigenous performers and characters, which resulted in a 15-person cast representing 14 different tribal Nations. The play did not have an Indian princess, a noble savage, or any characters still seen in mainstream media or theater.

Our ancestral identities were at the forefront of how we experienced and continued seeing the world. We want to exist outside the gaze and performance of stereotypes simply. As queer and Two-Spirit community members, we recognize our own “ongoing radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation” (Driskill 69). Our queerness—tied to our ancestral identity—became secondary rather than being dissected and looked at through a colonial or a Eurocentric lens of gender and sexuality. As a theater production, *Urban Rez* provided intellectual and emotional space for radical imagination that engaged with the decolonization process, not as a fixed finality of the process (Driskill 70). Max and the other queer character were central to carrying the storyline forward, and both were continuously rooted in an ancestral identity that connects to self, place, and community.

We do not want to romanticize Indigenous communities but continue to produce research that serves the community differently. The work of *Urban Rez* was at

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times uncomfortable but ultimately actively working to meet the community where they needed stories told. We observe that the process of crafting *Urban Rez* provided a safe and open space to create beyond the confines of the typical American theater. Max, the main character, reflected a similar experience to those our urban and local communities face with the settler logics of erasure. *Urban Rez* was a shift because it was the first experience where we did not adjust gender presentation or physical identities to conform to the American theater standard.

As demonstrated by Auntie's relief in our production, the community wanted fewer stereotypes and a more well-rounded representation. We did not have an "Indian Romeo or Juliet." The opportunity to perform fully realized characters quickly taught us and reminded us of who we are, where we come from, and the ancestors that connect us to the land. To perform in *Urban Rez* meant that our identities were simply understood instead of being dissected to fit the confines of current American theater stereotypes. The character formation was tied to a demonstration of relationships, not just showing the failure of those relationships.

The three co-authors were bemused when we first discussed *Urban Rez's* idea as a queer theater production. We have all had to justify or defend our queerness in other performance spaces, including drag, student leadership, or community organizing. Although we live as queer, Two-Spirit, and trans people, those parts of our lives are sometimes under a microscope. But in the *Urban Rez* landscape, we did not have to perform ourselves on stage. The ability to engage as a whole character, operating outside the confines of stereotypes, allowed for nuanced representations of our experience in the show. We were seen as relative and self-determining, occupying Indigenous space wholly.

### **Hunger for Sovereignty**

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A man dressed as Uncle Sam yells from the back of the crowd, "...only the federal government is empowered to recognize tribes as legitimate or not." The crowd responds. Some people are surprised; other audience members nervously laugh. One man whispers loudly, "let's tie him to the train tracks." An Auntie character asks, "Who invited the federal government?" The Uncle Sam character responds, "The American government does not need to be invited. We're old friends."

Articulating visual sovereignty to a non-native company was difficult. However, CTC continued to support the work and challenge themselves as a non-native organization to show up, listen, and support. They hungered to support an Indigenous process, supporting and uplifting particular types of sovereignty expression as theorized by scholars like Vine Deloria, Jr, Gerald R. Alfred, Audra Simpson, and many others. The company continued to be patient and let Indigenous voices be a driving force of the production.

The narrative and characters of *Urban Rez* addressed sovereignty in two ways. The first way was to address the day-to-day dealing with the federal government regarding tribal citizenship. The plot centers on the experience of the main character Max, a non-federally recognized California Native artist dealing with garnering federal recognition from the United States government. Max wants to sell his art, and yet, according to the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) of 1990, only individuals enrolled in federally recognized tribes can sell "authentic" American Indian arts and crafts ("Indian Arts and Crafts"). The second way was through an act of visual sovereignty, as introduced by Jolene Rickard. Visual sovereignty provides an encompassing approach for understanding the intersecting gaze of empire, the disentanglement of representation, and Indigenous narratives.

Within the play, Max struggles to sell his work and negotiates with the "federal government" to accomplish the impossible task of gaining federal recognition for his

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small tribe. Max's character brings up gaming, blood quantum, and sovereignty to comply with the government and convince his family members to join the cause. The harder Max tries to comply, the more he struggles. The play utilizes the real-life experiences of community members to craft a narrative centering on federal Indian policy and personal relationships with governmental laws. Throughout the performance, different moments of discussion highlighted the impact of the Marshall Trilogy by addressing citizenship, land, and trust responsibility (Fletcher 3). As the play progresses, policy and law issues come into stark contrast on stage.

As Max spirals further in his quest for federal recognition, he falls further and further away from tribal connections to land, community, and culture. Although Max does not directly state his struggles with a federal definition of sovereignty, the audience can see his conflict. Max can never maintain or achieve the sovereignty that the federal government demands (Maaka and Anderson 325). By the end of the play, we see that relationships to Indigeneity from a tribal-specific perspective are more critical for Max than federal recognition.

Sovereignty can be a complicated concept and can mean many things for tribal nations. As a European term, sovereignty can be helpful when navigating colonial systems but has little use within an Indigenous context (Alfred 54). The federal government forces colonial relationships with the land, citizenship, and Indigenous history to become complicated for many tribal nations. The process of creating *Urban Rez* addressed the limitations of attempting to work within a colonial structure while also undoing the visual limitations of colonial expression.

FastHorse's script and process led audiences to a new way of engaging with Indigenous stories that include queer representation. In the introduction to *Critically Sovereign*, Joanne Barker states that "We do not know whether the stories are true, only that they tell us who we are" (1). The sovereignty we reflected in our *Urban Rez*

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characters ensured that we did not compromise who we were or continue to be. The stories created a shift, not only for the characters but also for performers. It was the first experience where we did not have to compromise our Indianness or queerness. We did not even have to talk about it to establish our queerness on stage.

The 2016 production created a unique process of having each performer imbue their attributes into their characters on stage. We made our characters specifically queer, trans, or Two-Spirit, although the script did not call for it. In the play, the audience witnesses multiple queer, gay, Two-Spirit, and trans-actors and characters on stage. We did not have to wave pride flags on stage to represent ourselves as a part of multiple communities. The complexity of each individual was accepted and shared fully on stage.

We recognized the nuances of our representation in FastHorse's weaving of our words; as queer performers, we had not seen our everyday-ness demonstrated adequately in other theater work. As performers, we could embody so many parts of our Indigenous selves openly without performing a settler version of queer. The play uplifted our intersecting voices and was the first time some of us felt like our stories and narratives took center without being a deficit relationship to other identities (Clemenco). The narrative honored the queer, reservation-bred, and complicated story of ourselves by showing up and listening to our Indigenous voice, our queer voice, and our gendered voice.

### **Hunger for Relationality**

Two women adorned with weaved basket hats, multi-stringed abalone necklaces, tanned deerskin tops, and tule weed woven skirts stand before a slender Lakota woman named Larissa. The women stand surrounded by the cast, crew, and audience of *Urban Rez* in the beautiful production setting of the Kuruvungna Springs in West Los

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Angeles (Gabrielino Tongva Springs Foundation). They hand Larissa a wooden instrument called a clapper stick used in Tongva song making. Acjacheman community member Jacque Nunez, one of the two women, posted a statement about the experience on Facebook, "Gifting her with a clapper. I loved the truth, humor, and accuracy of our journey as an unrecognized California tribe. It was painful but comforting to see our truth articulated so well." The memory of the image still brings a heightened emotional response.

The accountability we demonstrated through the production considers the engagement of reciprocity between the playwright, cast, crew, and audience. We hunger for relationality. Framing a reciprocal relationship between the community and land requires acknowledging positionality through a lens of cultural norms that broadly engage with community-based knowledge. In his book *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson states, "an Indigenous methodology must be a process that adheres to relational accountability" (77). We were accountable to each other. As insiders/outside to the urban Indian community, the privilege of writing about the *Urban Rez* production establishes how our responsibility to the urban community informs our work and how we continue to serve the local tribal communities in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the production demonstrated a sustained relationship as a guest and then relative to place.

The *Urban Rez* experience unsettles the performance of the nation-state while also unsettling what it means to belong. The creative process of the *Urban Rez* production demonstrates ideas of kinship and being a guest, as theorized by Acjachemen/Tongva scholar Charles Sepulveda (52). We introduced the theoretical concept of being a "guest" to guide and focus our discussion on *Urban Rez*. Sepulveda introduces "Kuuyam [as] an Indigenous theorization that disrupts the dialectic between Native and settlers through a Tongva understanding of non-natives as potential guests

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of the tribal people, and more importantly—of the land itself” (41). Kuuyam frames a broad Indigenous methodology to center a specific geopolitical community. The play is for and about communities in the Los Angeles basin, and so too is the research.

Each performance was at a place of importance to Tongva communities. The first half of the production occurred in downtown Los Angeles (DTLA) near the LA River and the Tongva village of Yaangna, one of many Tongva village sites. During the initial occupation of Yaangna (ancestral name of LA), Spanish settlers enslaved many Tongva tribal members to work in agricultural fields near the river (Bogany). As we began rehearsals at our first location, many Tongva tribal members reminded us that these locations were places of violence (Kudler). During the (re)occupation of these spaces, especially in DTLA, Indigenous voices created a moment of physical resistance.

In the grand opening of our show, we asked a Tongva community member to help us welcome the performance into the space and provide community care for the show. Craig Torres sang a coming home song for the land and stories shared throughout our performance. Torres spoke of the healing we were bringing to the space. He told us that he was calling the ancestors to the place. *Urban Rez* demonstrated that “indigenous peoples exist, resist, and persist” (Kauanui 1). Although never explicit, our goal became to occupy the land in disruption of settler logics physically. The performances created new meaning and recreated relationality in places of erasure.

In the second production location, we performed at the Kuruvungna Springs site in West Los Angeles. These natural springs are a historical and cultural site for Tongva and other California Native communities. The performance at Kuruvungna brought an entirely different feel to the production. In one instance, the Springs, located on the campus of University High School, are a point of pride for the primarily non-native institution. Yet, the nearby apartment complex would continually call in noise

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complaints to the local police department in the next moment. As Scott L. Morgensen posits in their text, "the processes of settler colonialism produce contradictions, as settlers try to contain or erase Native differences so that they may inhabit Native land as if it were their own" (123). Another critical essay could be written about public land use for the performance, including class, income, and ethnic demographics for each space. Performing at Kuruvungna Springs created beautiful moments of contradiction.

As Lakota, Kumeyaay (Iipay), and Apache relatives, we have had to think about our positionality in the play and on Tongva lands. We consider our essay a demonstration of inter-reflexivity as theorized by Yazzie and Risling Baldy. Inter-reflexivity between the co-authors, the playwright, cast, crew, and the community became making and remaking our understandings of representation, relationships, and reciprocity. We imagine our queer and Two-Spirit narratives as accountable to being a guest on Tongva lands while also profoundly reflecting on how to relate to each other as Indigenous kin, characters in the *Urban Rez* production, and guests living a particular Los Angeles experience.

We were challenged and welcomed by the local tribal communities and the diverse Indigenous Urban community. We had multiple audience members come to both production sites. Their perspectives and our perspectives were a challenge and a gift. The challenge is to understand the audience's positionality and how a performer might interpret the narrative. We had a wide variety of tribal communities visit, and many audience members attended multiple shows at each location. The co-authors never experienced questions about our queerness, nor was the production challenged about having Two-Spirit characters on stage. *Urban Rez* allowed the space to explore ideas of Indigeneity because we were *Kuuyam* (guest) first.

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### Hunger for our queer selves

Max stands confused and frustrated, opposite the government official. Their application for federal recognition is denied; Max is defeated. His community on stage rallied around him, all speaking words of encouragement and belonging, "You want to be a part of something. To know that you're not alone, we're our own tribe today; we are all a part of the circle..." Max turns to his community and reiterates, "It gives all of us a place to belong." The *Urban Rez* community turns to the audience and sings a round dance song, inviting everyone to join. At the end of the song, the crowd erupts with celebration and embraces.

We continue to face challenges as we struggle to articulate the nuanced conversation of *Urban Rez* but are ultimately searching to express how we can exist as whole characters on a performance stage. On the one hand, we address theater history to communicate ideas about representation, narrative form, and audience engagement. Yet, we have often only engaged with performance space as straight characters or in drag. On the other hand, we engage with broad Indigenous studies concepts to understand the intersections of sovereignty, federal policy, and settler colonialism. But are reminded that issues of Two-Spirit representation historically have been pushed out of heteropatriarchal structures like the United States government. We turn to queer theory and queer representation to tease out and fill in the gaps.

The *Urban Rez* narrative asserted self-representation in opposition to settler imaginaries to define and establish an alternative to heteronormative, sexist, and exclusivist frameworks. For example, Indigenous writers exercise self-determining actions and reflect a queering of stories to radically reimagine Indigenous futures that see Indigenous and queer communities as central to existence. The stories of *Urban Rez* draw visibility to queer, Two-Spirit, and trans relatives that did not have to separate themselves or perform to be part of a narrative that reflects deep histories and tribal

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consciousness (Ramos). The affirmation of queer, trans, and Two-Spirit characters and actors on stage uplifts self-representations not defined by settler logics.

We have not argued extensively why other theater companies do not employ queer practices of creating theater within an American context. Partially because the narrow representation of characters on a theater stage often reduces a persona to a single type of character (i.e., queer or Indigenous), reflecting stagnant American storytelling. We posit that *Urban Rez* "directly denaturalize[s] settler colonialism and disrupt its conditioning of queer projects by asserting Native queer modernities" (Morgensen 11). We focus on Max because his queerness on stage was through the lens of a nephew, cousin, and leader of the *Urban Rez* landscape. In addition, the building of interrelationships on stage results in a perceptivity central to imagining the peoplehood of the region, harkening back to ideas of maintaining being a good guest and relative in Los Angeles (Rifkin 35). The diverse *Urban Rez* characters result in nuanced relatives on stage rather than a narrowed reflection of a settler imagination.

Near the end of CTC data gathering, Larissa asked what was missing from the play. Now fully embedded in the early production stages, a co-author automatically suggested she needed more Two-Spirit representation. Without a pause, Larissa and CTC immediately began to organize a story circle with The Red Circle Project (RCP), which resulted in two trans characters, "Tasha" and "Arianna." At the time, RCP was the only HIV prevention and AIDS education program in Los Angeles County that specifically targeted the Two-Spirit community. The engagement with RCP reflects the legacy of how Two-Spirit communities continue to grow and change with "Indigenous community formation" (Driskill et al. 15). The inclusion of Two-Spirit narratives aided in the richness of the experience.

Before *Urban Rez*, themes of Indigeneity in American theater have relied on stereotypical character and plot paradigms that echo stereotypical representations of

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tribal communities. Driven by community voice, the story of *Urban Rez* was a push to decentralize stereotypes to focus on narratives by and for Indigenous people to provide alternatives to the limitations imposed by settler colonial subjectivity (Morgensen 46). Instead of recreating the same stagnant stories of the struggle of an LGBTQ+ experience in the community, *Urban Rez* viewed our characters and ourselves as whole and integral. By utilizing queer community voice, *Urban Rez* captured the communities' often complex issues within broad American Indian metropolitan culture.

We did not, and do not, want to see a fractionated version of ourselves on stage. We must reimagine our relationships to place, community, and narrative and address the emplacement of heteronormativity on articulations of Indigenous peoplehood (Rifkin 10). Through our participation in the *Urban Rez* experience, we attempted to address the complicated ways Indigenous narratives have been removed, shifted, adapted, or rendered invisible by settler colonial formations (Rifkin 315). We want to be a part of the circle as the gay Kumeyaay (Iipay) cousin, the Two-Spirit Apache sister, and the queer Lakota auntie.

### **Conclusion: Hunger for a Future**

The *Urban Rez* experience was an interactive and multivocal theater process that we continue to validate and analyze as an Indigenous and queer methodological and theoretical model to address the limitations of American theater. We used Indigenous studies concepts to center our positionally as guests on Tongva land and to challenge our work to be accountable to each other and the community. Utilizing queer theories, we demonstrated that the *Urban Rez* production presented an opportunity to express ourselves as nuanced Indigenous characters on stage. Finally, our co-authorship reflects our relationship as guests and then relatives through the *Urban Rez* experience.

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We consider our collaborative writing process a reflection of being a guest, especially queer Indigenous guests. Sepulveda's theorization of Kuuyam focuses on the relationship to rivers and land while also critiquing the deficits of western academic methodologies. We see our multilayered relationship as queer performers, queer academics, and queer guests to hold our writing accountable to the land and other-than-human kin. The writing process provides a place for us to share and hold each other culpable to the Indigenous narratives of *Urban Rez* beyond the confines of the performance space.

Through Indigenous feminist and community-based methodologies, a reciprocal relationship establishes a framework of self-reflective positionality that we employ generously. The co-authors experienced moments of reclamation that stemmed from the production. We found a theater community that was not reacting to or upholding white supremacy. We found the support to come fully into our queerness and transness as Indigenous people. The production continues to be a touchpoint for the safety of our identities.

Academic writing is often an isolating process, and historically, we would have told stories together. Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Shawn Wilson provide models of navigating insider/outsider research issues. We attempt to model how to conduct research as a guest to Tongva land together as insiders and outsiders to both the American Theater stage and settler academia. Indigenous Education studies scholar Bryan Brayboy demonstrates that collecting the experiences of communities and honoring their beliefs provides an entree for educational anthropologists to rethink traditional fieldwork methods (22). Similarly, we imagine our project has moved forward with a collective framework honoring Kuuyam and reimagining queer kin beyond the stereotypes.

In conclusion, Indigenous queer narratives within the larger American theater context are challenging because of time, convenience, and reception. *Urban Rez*, fortunately, allowed for engagement with the Indigenous community in a way that benefits the indigenous research narrative and presents a long-term commitment to queering American theater. We try to imagine how to better navigate art and performance within the larger framework of Indigenous studies. *Urban Rez* continues to be an entry point in understanding the complexities of our identities as reservation-raised yet urban living performers

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Actor's Equity Association is a union that represents more than 51,000 professional Actors and Stage Managers nationwide.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term "Auntie" as an honorific for a respected female older than us but not yet in their elder years.

<sup>3</sup> We also use Native, Indigenous, and Indian terms interchangeably to reflect the current dialogue within our communities.

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