

Ric Knowles

“THE EIGHTH FIRE”

The Anishinaabe people of Turtle Island [North America] have a teaching called the Seven Fire Prophecies, which clocks the history of our time on this land, from how we received our earliest teachings, through the arrival of the “light-skinned race,” through the loss of our ways. According to many of our teachers, we are now living in the time of the seventh fire, a time when there will be “a rebirth of the Anishinaabe nations and a re-kindling of the sacred fire.”

The eight fire is an extension of the prophecies, a suggestion and a wish that now is the time for the Indigenous people and the settler communities to work together to achieve justice, to live together in a good way.

—Yvette Nolan (Algonquin), *Medicine Shows*¹

In many disciplines where it has become apparent that scholarship has been one of the key technologies of colonization, complicit in the exploitation and decimation of the land and its human and nonhuman inhabitants, there has been a (re) turn to ways of knowing that are not about power/knowledge—naming, disciplining, categorizing, objectifying, and isolating elements—but about relationality, reciprocity, respect, and what Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson discusses under the principle, shared across many Indigenous cultures, of “relational accountability.”²

At the same time, over the past two decades and around the world there has been a resurgence of Indigenous peoples and of Indigenous scholarship in almost all fields.³ But Indigenous knowledges are holistic and relational, tending to eschew disciplinary compartmentalization as antithetical to the epistemologies and cosmologies of most Indigenous nations. For such peoples, knowledge is not best acquired in laboratory conditions and is not always congenial to the established methods and institutional protocols of the Western academy.⁴ I understand from Indigenous colleagues, in print and in person, that for them knowledge is seen not as something that is owned or “discover”-able (like the Americas), nor as static, universal, or “extractive.”⁵ Rather, it is personally and territorially situated (“wisdom sits in places”),⁶ nation- and place-specific, processual (provisional),

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performative (active), and shared for the reciprocal benefit of the researcher and the community. Much of this work is presented by Indigenous scholars and artists at Indigenous-studies associations and in their associated journals, and some of it has to do with theatre, performance, and related issues. How might our fields and associations such as ASTR, ATHE, IFTR, PSi, CATR, and ADSA, together with the major theatre and performance studies journals, be proactive in promoting Indigenous scholars and scholarship and Indigenous ways of knowing? This is not about Western scholars appropriating Indigenous methodologies but about Indigenous and settler scholars alike actively working to decolonize the field, the academy, and ourselves.

Accompanying this resurgence in Indigenous scholarship, a considerable and increasing body of Indigenous work in theatre, dance, and performance on Turtle Island and around the world has emerged in recent decades. In theatre alone in the land now called Canada, twelve Indigenous artistic leaders in 2014 compiled a “body of work” (they resisted calling it a “canon”) that consists of 288 new Indigenous plays produced over the previous thirty years.⁷ This is only a partial list from a very small part of the Indigenous world, and many of the works on it challenge or expand formal aesthetic and political boundaries.

What would it mean to start locating this scholarly and creative work more centrally than it has been to date? What would it mean for students of theatre history to approach theatre and performance through an Indigenous lens, through Indigenous understandings of time; of history, story, and memory; of space, place, and territory? How might theatre history be reconceived through Indigenous understandings of time and story? What might theatrical touring look like for peoples whose sense of self is intimately tied to their home lands and territories? What would it mean if theatre and performance scholarship were to draw on Indigenous conceptual frameworks such as survivance,⁸ tribalography,⁹ visual sovereignty,¹⁰ and transmotion¹¹ as well as on those of European theorists? This, I suggest, is the work of the next decade.

ENDNOTES

1. Nolan, *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2015), 117. In a footnote, Nolan says, “These quotations are from ‘The Laws of the Seven Fires,’” as told by Elder William Commanda, keeper of the Wampum belt, related to me through personal correspondence.” For a more detailed account of the Seven Fires prophecy, see “Teachings of the Seven Prophets: The Seven Fires,” Passamaquoddy website, www.wabanaki.com/seven_fires_prophecy.htm, accessed 7 February 2016.

2. Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2008), 77.

3. The work of Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson is among the most powerful and nuanced accounts of this resurgence, which is deeply grounded in the land, the language, and a specific culture. See especially *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbitrator Ring, 2011).

4. For accounts of Indigenous research methodologies within the academy see, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori), *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*

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(London: Zed Books, 1999); Margaret Kovach (Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux), *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Wilson.

5. See Kovach, 29 and *passim*.

6. See Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

7. Nolan, 4–5, 143–53.

8. See Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

9. See LeAnne Howe (Choctaw), “Tribalography: The Power of Native Stories,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 14.1 (1999): 117–25.

10. See Michelle H. Raheja (Seneca), *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

11. See Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15; and Simpson, 88–90.