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**Adapted from:**

**“Collaborative Pedagogy Across Cultures: two instructors share their lived experience.” Paper-in-process by Michelle La Flamme and Annie Smith**

**Abstract:** Winter Session, 2005. Two graduate students, Annie Smith and Michelle La Flamme, initiate and fly with a first-time-ever course at UBC which they vision and birth: Thtr 325B, The History of Aboriginal Theatre in Canada. The course syllabus reads:

*Plays by Native writers in Canada have come into their own over the last decade. . . . Native writers have been challenging mainstream theatre with new visions, new voices and new forms of theatre. While Native theatre has a cultural role in the Native community, it also resonates with the wider problematic, multicultural, (post?)colonial Canadian community. Native theatre has charted its own course within the larger context of Canadian theatre. . . .*

Our desire was to bring attention to the work of Native theatre artists, to discover their various contributions to the (post?)colonial project of Canadian Theatre. We were bringing new aesthetics and new voices into the academy, challenging not just the subject of Theatre but also the ways in which Theatre is taught. As instructors, we visibly represented a mix of races (Germanic, Celtic, Native, Metis, African-American) and our students were racially mixed (European, Asian, Native, Metis, Persian). Our course material challenged us to face issues of racism, genocide, violence against women, stereotyping, and appropriation. As co-instructors, we had to face our own cultural biases, expectations and assumptions. We became aware that our students' knowledge and understanding of the issues addressed in plays by Native playwrights was widely divergent. We chose to use Native rituals in our classroom, to honour moments of great emotional turmoil, and to not shrink away from probing "white privilege" and "academic privilege" in our own reception of Native artist's work. Our journey has been extraordinary and we are excited to share some of it with you.

**Why did I want to teach this course?** In 1989, at the last Stein Valley Festival to be held at the Mount Currie Indian Reserve, I heard Tomson Highway read from his new play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. That was the beginning of my interest and growing passion for Native theatre. From 1998 to 2002, I was able to participate in some of the initial Canada-wide meetings that have culminated in the new Indigenous Performing Artists Association. I believe that theatre written and performed by Native people is the most vital and important theatre being produced in Canada today. As a theatre educator, I believe that our students need to learn about this theatre because it

is changing Canadian performance in exciting ways. As Reid Gilbert asserts: “new Aboriginal Drama is, in fact, creating a post-colonial, postmodern iconography, one which may free both its people and members of the non-Native Canadian audience from the patriarchal metanarrative in which Canada has, till recently, sought to form itself.” (Appleford, 2005, 58)

When I returned to UBC to do my doctoral degree, I went to the Theatre Department where I had done my undergrad., to see if I could teach a course in Aboriginal Theatre. The Theatre Department was interested in offering the course provided I could co-teach it with a Native scholar. As the course would be an academic theatre history course, I needed to find an Aboriginal person with the ‘right credentials’ and experience. Here I was stymied because, while I knew a number of Native practitioners who could co-teach this subject, none of them had a MA degree, which was the minimum requirement of the University.

Fortunately, at the Critical Race conference, here at UBC two years ago, I met Michelle La Flamme. Michelle, a Native journalist and theatre artist, is also a PhD student in English. I approached her with the idea of co-teaching a course on Native theatre in Canada. She was very excited to participate in this groundbreaking venture and the course was approved by the Theatre Department, with support from the English Department and the First Nations Studies Department.

One of the things that we both were excited about was our physical embodiment of cross-racial dialogue. Michelle is dark (also having African American heritage), and I am very obviously White. I have struggled for a long time with “white privilege” and my fear of appropriating cultural material that is not my own. My colour, my language, my upbringing all mark me and describe boundaries that are hard to transgress. My personal desire was to make visible the difficulties of understanding a culture you have not lived, but to also make visible that dialogue across cultures and respect for other cultural worlds is important in the academy. Also - artists, particularly actors, have a tendency to believe that they can portray any character no matter whether or not their life experience has encompassed that character’s experience. I wanted to trouble this.

Ric Knowles, writing about his analysis of the work of Native playwright Monique Mojica<sup>1</sup>, expresses the “White researcher’s dilemma” very well:

... I run the risk of reinscribing the colonial ... relationships and power differentials that Mojica’s work interrogates and exposes ... since I am in danger of appropriating - ... the work for my own advancement and sense of “discovery”. Not to undertake this type of analysis, however, ... would simply amount to “disappearing” the cultural work that plays such as Mojica’s can do in shifting power relationships in society, in the theatre and in the academy. Such an

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<sup>1</sup> Monique Mojica. *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots: Two Plays*. Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991.

attitude would also entail participation by omission in the colonial project.  
(Appleford, 2005, 107)

I think our collaboration was rich for us and for our students because we came to the course, not only with different skins, but also with different perspectives, strengths, and most importantly, the desire to allow the students to discover their own relationships to the work of Native theatre artists. Sometimes, though, it was hard to listen to their discussion when it seemed so very essentialist. This was a test for us - to trust to the collaborative process we had worked to nurture in the class.

The most important thing I have come to value as a teacher is trust: my trust of myself, of my collaborators, of the students and of the material. The material, I knew I could trust - though it was often risky content in its exploration of issues of abuse and oppression. I knew that I could trust Michelle because we had shared so deeply the planning of the course. It was important to build a trusting relationship within the classroom so that difficult issues could be tackled without fear. It was important to me to use rituals, drawn both from theatre training and Native culture, to contain the class. The most important of these rituals was that we always sat in a circle. When we were dealing with a play that had difficult content, particularly violence against women, we used a talking circle and smudged. After working with the play *Annie Mae's Movement*<sup>2</sup>, which is about the death and mutilation of Anna Mae Aquash by the FBI at Wounded Knee in 1973, we asked Alannah Young at the Longhouse, to give a healing workshop for the class. This workshop was foundational for developing trust within the class.

I would like to share some of the student's testimonies about the workshop:

"I am more connected to what we're studying, where characters are coming from."

". . . I want to trap it in time; it stayed with me for the rest of the day. I wrote a poem so that I can recall the sense of surrender, of being safe and connected to community."

"The workshop showed how much knowledge your body has - we worked on a different level."

"It is a really important part of the course - and where it comes in the course after reading all the violence. It was liberating."

On the one hand I talk about trust, and yet the academy is a competitive institution in which we are implicated, especially when it comes to marking our students. This was an area where we came in with different expectations and demands. Michelle, as an English PhD student, had very clear expectations about how an essay should be structured. I focused more on what the students were thinking about than on their essay writing skills. We ended up reading every paper and exam, making comments

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<sup>2</sup> Yvette Nolan. *Annie Mae's Movement*. Toronto: Playwright's Canada Press, 1999.

and discussing how to average marks that between us were widely divergent. It was a lot of extra work, since we were only being paid 1/2-time contracts! I learned so much from that process though, and I think that the students also benefited from getting two perspectives on their writing. It was also a good check for us to recognize our own biases - both in favour of and against certain students.

When I think of evaluation, I am thankful that we allowed the whole last week of the course to be held open for the class to evaluate their own work - individually and collectively. Right from the beginning, we had stressed that we were breaking new ground with this course, that we were creating a collaborative understanding of Native theatre in Canada. The final evaluation project was fun and insightful. When we shared our final talking circle about the course, I was moved to see and hear that the students had made personal journeys through the work and the process of the class. One student wrote to us about how the course had affected her:

i must say that i learned so much about native theatre in general, but also i also learned specifically about myself. before this class, i only had the courage/strength to be vocal about my heritage in certain circumstances, and let me tell you, a classroom situation was not one of those circumstances. after exploring themes of white guilt, racial hybridity and ethnic purity, i was able to find my voice. ... i know that both of you and this class were influential in helping me to achieve this grounded sense of self.

it's funny -- i thought that by college/university, let alone by 25, i'd have already finished questioning my beliefs and re-defined who i am through my adult self. ... i was being inundated with so much raw, real and relevant information that i couldn't process until i was outside of class. i had tears in my eyes, if not cried outright, 9 classes out of 10. i was so moved in so many ways that i just loved coming to class - i was emotionally invested in the course, and this was all a new and wonderful experience for me.

Our final "mapping" project helped put the course into perspective. The idea of community mapping was one that was first taught to me by a community theatre group from Tokyo. We used the concept to allow the class to divide into small groups to discuss with each other their journeys and to draw maps, using symbols, writing, whatever was appropriate for their experience. Each group then shared their maps, building a collective class experience.

My closing thought on this teaching experience is that I am profoundly grateful for Michelle's willingness to collaborate with me in bringing very important work into the academy. It was a continually humbling and exciting 13 weeks and I didn't want to miss a class. When I see students from the class we have such a connection and often spontaneously hug each other. I also have a feeling, that for many of the students, their world has expanded to at least appreciate the creative work of other cultures, to respect

that work, to know that there are some things that can never be known but that there are many things that can be shared.

Works cited:

Gilbert, Reid. (2005) "Shine on us, Grandmother Moon': Coding in Canadian First Nations Drama," *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre: Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English, volume one*. Rob Appleford, ed. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 49-60.

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