

**University of Silesia POLAND - Evaluation of the doctoral dissertation of Ms. Sara Riccetti**

**Title:** “‘Sovereign Performances:’ Indigenous Women's Theatre and the Legal and Political Work of Decolonization in the U.S. and Canada”

**Date:** December 10, 2024

“Sovereign Performances” by Ms. Sara Riccetti represents a superior work of scholarship exploring the relationship between Indigenous women’s theatre and case law. It is excellent by all measures associated with a first-rate dissertation in the humanities: in the quality of its writing, in the breadth of its engagement with the scholarly field, in the interdisciplinary methodology and comparative analysis that organizes its research framework, and in the coordination of engagement, critique, and analysis across a broad range of texts and scholarly positionings that support its findings. The dissertation represents an original and sophisticated contribution to the field of law and humanities research. In demonstrating how Indigenous women’s political theatre restores Indigenous women’s voice and agency through artistic craft to create a platform from which to express and engage with Indigenous legal traditions, the study provides an insightful examination of Indigenous women’s cultural texts, contributing to our understanding of Indigenous women’s activism in the post-civil rights period. The published version of this dissertation promises to transform scholarly recognition of the intersections between theatre and law in ways that advance the boundaries of both scholarly disciplines.

**Scope:** The dissertation deals with the complex nexus of entanglements that exist among settler-colonial countries and Indigenous peoples. It explores how law and literature have contributed to these entanglements by focusing on the ways that legal cases have directly impacted or participated in generating a broader discourse in which the inferior status or withering away of Indigenous peoples is naturalized by colonial discourses. In showing how both Canada and the United States contribute to these practices, it also highlights how law and literature contribute to settler-colonial discourse’s undoing. The study focuses on the innovative and contestatory writings of three important playwrights from the United States and Canada—Mary Kathryn Nagle, a lawyer and citizen of Cherokee Nation; Yvette Nolan, an Algonkian playwright, dramaturg, and former director of Native Earth Performing Arts; and Beth Piatote, a scholar, author, and associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and an enrolled member of the Nimi:pu: Nez Perce tribe. The study’s comparative analysis of theatre and law aligns plays by these writers with case law that has had a deep impact on Indigenous communities to show how the issues raised by these cases undermine the legal practices, kinship networks, cultural traditions, and tribal worldviews that are synonymous with Indigenous sovereignty and tribal wellbeing. Each chapter, by turn, assesses the contributions of these playwrights to a transnational and Indigenous feminist platform that challenges legal misconceptions and dispossessory logic. Artistic expression is shown to be an invaluable form of public expression that helps us to unthink and to enact otherwise relations with Indigenous peoples.

**Structure:** The dissertation is well structured. The introduction lays out the research questions that motivate the project, showing how Indigenous women’s theatre represents a tool for feminist and decolonial activism, and locating each playwright as a distinct figure contributing to and engaging with the problem of systemic marginalization that accompanies Indigenous women’s

political status. Each playwright is accorded a distinctive voice and critical location from which to ground the literary-critical analysis that follows. Chapter One offers a rich and insightful reading of Mary Kathryn Nagle's plays *Sliver of a Full Moon* (2013) and *Sovereignty* (2018), contextualizing the political and legal contexts that support each play's vision and showing the cohesion that exists across Nagle's literary activism with her status as an intervenor in *Dollar General Corp. v. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians* (2015). Chapter Two analyses Yvette Nolan's rewriting of an Athapascan traditional story to show how the legal erasure of Indigenous women from the political stage is accompanied by other forms of silencing and erasure that impinge on forms of Indigenous cultural expression. Chapter Three explores how legal appropriation occurs on tribal lands, highlighting the ways in which Beth Piatote's Nez Perce tribal point of view permits her to write against the conclusory logic of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act that pits Indigenous peoples against the state in *Bonnischen v. United States* (2004). The chapters follow a similar pattern of legal and literary analysis, with their main findings restated to achieve cohesion and cumulative force. The conclusion highlights the key innovations and transformative vision of Indigenous women's theatre that accompanies the dissertation's distinctive features in focusing on Indigenous women's artistic forms of resilience and self-determination through theatrical production.

**Methodology:** The dissertation's methodology is comparative and transnational in aligning case law and literary texts. Its comparative reading practice highlights the distinctive contributions of Indigenous women playwrights while also noting the field-building opportunities associated with constituting Indigenous women's theatre as a stand-alone research field in need of greater scholarly attention. The conceptual framework of settler-colonial studies is complicated in important ways through the study's theoretical insights associated with "critique," "affirmation," "decolonial practice," and "counter-storytelling." An especially productive recourse to the work of Bonnie Honig and her theorization of "antagonistic humanism" demonstrates the strong methodological and theoretical reach of the research and the original contribution it makes to Indigenous studies as it advances the field of Indigenous women's theatre studies.

**Findings:** The dissertation's rich comparative framework shows how Indigenous women's activism through theatre adds nuance to our understanding of the impacts of colonial law and patriarchal structures, making a strong case for performance studies as a key area of innovation that advances and contributes to the fields of law and humanities studies, Indigenous studies, theatre criticism, and Indigenous theory. The dissertation's findings demonstrate how gender critique can expose and help eliminate the isolation of Indigenous women's voices, creating a platform for wider recognition and engagement with settler-colonial dispossessory logics. As a contribution to the field, the dissertation is exemplary in expanding our understanding and appreciation for the voices and activism of Indigenous women playwrights. In attending to the voices of Indigenous women, the research is exemplary in showing the rich and sustaining ways in which creative work and scholarship can achieve an integration that is powerful, engaging, nuanced, and transformative.

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