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

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the work of selected Indigenous women playwrights from the United States and Canada in the twenty-first century, positioning their theatre as a critical platform for decolonization and self-determination. It argues that these playwrights challenge patriarchal and colonial narratives that have historically marginalized Indigenous women within legal and political frameworks. The study demonstrates how theatre serves as a vital space for Indigenous women’s activism, enabling them to critique colonial legal systems while advocating for alternative visions of justice and sovereignty.

By analyzing three case studies – *Sovereignty* by Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee), *The Unplugging* by Yvette Nolan (Algonquin), and *Antikoni* by Beth Piatote (Nez Perce) – this study examines how these plays address colonial legal practices that have led to crises such as the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, the dispossession of Indigenous women from their communities, and cultural appropriation. It explores key colonial legal practices and their impacts on Indigenous women, using these analyses to interpret Indigenous women’s dramatic texts as responses to these challenges.

The dissertation employs a methodological framework that incorporates Indigenous feminist theory, Critical Race Theory, and the concept of “two-eyed seeing”—a perspective that integrates both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. This approach emphasizes the limitations of Western-centric legal interpretations while foregrounding Indigenous perspectives. By juxtaposing legal case analyses with dramatic works, the study highlights the role of Indigenous women playwrights in social and political activism, revealing how their plays critique and reimagine legal norms.

Furthermore, the study argues that these plays function as legal narratives themselves, offering expressions of Indigenous legal orders that endure despite being undermined by colonial frameworks. They maintain the tradition of oral storytelling, using theatre as a medium to preserve and adapt Indigenous legal traditions. This perspective challenges the dominance of Western knowledge systems and creates space for diverse epistemologies, recognizing the role of Indigenous women’s theatre in fostering collective legal and political consciousness.

By building on scholarship in Indigenous legal theory and Indigenous and Native American literary studies, this dissertation contributes to the broader movement of restoring Indigenous legal traditions through modern artistic expressions of sovereignty. It emphasizes the importance of storytelling, oral traditions, and community-based justice as alternative legal frameworks, positioning Indigenous women’s theatre as a powerful medium for decolonization and cultural renewal.

Keywords: Indigenous Studies; Native American Studies; Indigenous and Native American Women’s Theatre; Indigenous Feminism; Indigenous Feminist Legal Theory