

Opalanietet

In this article, I focus on how the specificity of materiality in Ty Defoe's Skeleton Canoe Indigenizes the puppets and enhances the anthropomorphization of the characters, thus forming a cornerstone of contemporary Native puppet theatre. I will explore this Indigenizing materiality through three distinct characters in the play whose function and movement directly relate to the essence of life that is water: Rainbow Trout, Turtle Activist Grandma, and the River itself. Water assists in crystallizing the reciprocal relationship between human and non-human that is intrinsic to Anishinaabe and Algonquin values. If we are good stewards to the animal, plant, and element life around us, they will all, in turn, be good stewards of us. If, on the other hand, we massively consume without giving back, then we collectively will bear the consequences of our actions. It is this reciprocal relationship that underlies the materiality of the puppets in Skeleton Canoe and the process by which they are created. Thus, we see through this bedrock value of reciprocity how the puppets in Skeleton Canoe are not only anthropomorphized by the Indigenous materiality, but also how we as human spectators are ultimately reverse-anthropomorphized and are one with our environment. I explore this theory through an analysis of the puppets described above, interviews with Anishinaabe artist, Ty Defoe, as well as a dialogue between the work of Potawatomi botanist and author, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and theatrical scholars of our time such as Claudia Orenstein, Peter Eckersall, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy.

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“Puppetry is already there, in cultural dances, trees.” (Defoe 2025, 1:12:32)

This quotation from Anishinaabe theatre artist, Ty Defoe (also called Giizhig in his Indigenous language), encapsulates the organic energy exhibited in the natural world around us that is intrinsic in the craft of puppetry. Yet how does one harness that raw organic energy from the natural world and distill it into what we would consider Native puppet theatre? The first, and perhaps most important, step would be to “Indigenize” the puppets. This is exactly what Ty Defoe demonstrates for us in his puppet theatre play, *Skeleton Canoe*, created with All My Relations Collective^[1] and the Great Lakes Life Ways Institute. *Skeleton Canoe* is a journey of awakening for the character of Nawbin, a young seeker, who meets and befriends Jimaan, a birchbark canoe who has been buried beneath the water for a very long time. Together, Nawbin and Jimaan, arouse stories accompanying the river, pilot through turbulent weather, and relish each other’s company. Theirs is a relationship that assists in resurrecting a healthy equilibrium with all our relatives of the Earth, evoking within us the sentiment that convalescence is achieved through recollection, relationship, and reciprocity. Before we go any further, however, we must unpack what it means to “Indigenize” something. One way to consider Indigenous, or Indigeneity, is under the guise of the people originally from a place and their right to self-government, or sovereignty. Dennis Claude discusses this in his book, *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity*, where he appears to prefer the term, “First Nations,” as opposed to “Indigenous” or “Native.” Claude simply states: “First Nations occupied this land first and therefore were sovereign self-governing societies, and that they never gave up their sovereignty” (Claude 1997, 20). With Claude’s emphasis in mind, one way to think of “to Indigenize” something would be to bring it under the influence, or control, of the sovereign government of the people who were there on that land first. I believe that to be true, yet, culturally, what is it about the sovereign government of the people who were on that land first that makes “to Indigenize” something noteworthy? It is not necessarily about the government per se, but a value system and epistemology that cosmologically brings Indigeneity to the

forefront. For this, I turn to Jerry Fontaine and Don McCaskill, who, through their book, *Di-bayn-di-zi-win (To Own Ourselves): Embodying Ojibway-Anishinabe Ways*, talk about other aspects of Indigeneity when discussing the process of research. They express that “some approaches (to research) are grounded in Anishinabe ways of doing and knowing and emphasize the importance of respect, reciprocity, relationship, protocol, holistic knowing, relevancy, story, interpretive knowing, and the experiential related to place, language, and kinship systems” (2022, 101). (I use the spelling, “Anishinaabe,” at the request of Defoe, as it assists with the correct pronunciation.) In this article, I will focus on how Defoe uses Anishinaabe ontologies and epistemologies of relationality to inform the specificity of materiality in *Skeleton Canoe*. This materiality Indigenizes the puppets and enhances the anthropomorphization of the characters, a process that is a cornerstone of contemporary Native puppet theatre; and I will explore this Indigenizing materiality through three distinct characters in the play whose function and movement directly relate to the essence of life that is water: Rainbow Trout, Turtle Activist Grandma, and the River itself.

To anthropomorphize, according to Merriam-Webster, means “To attribute human form or personality to things not human” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2025). Gary Steiner implements this definition into his exploration of the Western,^[2] or Eurocentric, judgement of the status of non-human animals in his book, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy*. Insinuating it as a more “animal-friendly philosophy,” Steiner explains: “Moved by the desire to establish a more edified view of the moral status of animals than the sense that has prevailed in the Western philosophical tradition, an increasing number of ethologists and philosophers have marshaled insights concerning the evolutionary continuity and physiological similarity between animals and human beings to argue that many animals are conscious, sentient beings that deserve substantial moral consideration” (Steiner 2005, 3). According to Steiner, utilizing the pronoun “who” is a method by which to anthropomorphize the puppets, which thus brings forth the familial attributes that are understood to be inherent (not merely philosophical) in all living things, according to Anishinaabe and many other Indigenous communities. I lean on

Robin Wall Kimmerer’s explanation of this belief system as I feel she best contextualizes this worldview in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Kimmerer references the fact that in the English-speaking world, we typically do not refer to a member of our family with the pronoun “it.” That would be considered an insult and a sign of disrespect. Kimmerer takes that social rule and demonstrates how and why many Indigenous communities extend that respect to include members of the natural world. Kimmerer says, “It robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family” (2013, 55). Yet what constitutes “the living world,” one may ask? The living world is even more expansive than one may initially imagine. Kimmerer explains:

In Potawatomi 101, rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even stories, are all animate. The list of the inanimate seems to be smaller, filled with objects that are made by people. Of an inanimate being, like a table, we say ‘What is it?’ And we answer *Dopwen yewe*. Table it is. But of apple, we must say, ‘Who is that being?’ And reply *Mshimin yawe*. Apple that being is. *Yawe* – the animate *to be*. (2013, 55-56)

The materiality in *Skeleton Canoe* is a mixture of materials, some of which, like birchbark and porcupine quills, Kimmerer would consider animate, and others, such as plastic bags or recycled materials, that would fall into the inanimate category. Either way, however, given how the materiality is utilized within the play, human form and personality (i.e. anthropomorphization) is endowed onto the puppets, thus enabling them to effectively and respectfully represent some of our non-human family members to a human audience.

Relationality is the essential concept that must be developed when discussing

contemporary Native performing arts, whether it be engaging in anthropomorphization with one's puppets and objects, or developing a dance piece as Jacqueline Shea Murphy theoretically describes in her book, *Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation*. While she focuses on the transformational process in Indigenous dance, I believe both the ideological and performative epistemology she discusses directly relates to the foundations of contemporary Native puppet theatre. Murphy states: "the Indigenous dance artists discussed in this book, as I have come to perceive, create dance works that manifest out of ways of being in which relationality undergirds everything. They create these dance works physically and experientially, via human bodies coming and being and moving together in interconnection and exchange" (2022, 1). It is essential, I would argue, to first establish this relationality with one's own species, fellow human beings. If we cannot establish and experience the agency within our neighboring humans, how can we begin to be interconnected with other living organisms and objects? I believe this is the first step in hosting and utilizing a counter ideology that doesn't look at our fellow humans as competitors or instruments through which we can obtain something or achieve an objective, but as collaborators in creation and stewardship. Once this concept is developed and accepted, it may then be possible to expand this creational capacity beyond our species. Murphy continues: "it happens in relational interconnections with human as well as with more-than-human beings, like plants and water and ancestors" (2022, 1). Returning to Kimmerer, she assists in crystalizing this relationality when referencing our pronouns for our more-than-human kin: "Saying *it* makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice" (2013, 57). This relational interconnectedness with our fellow non-human beings and entities is foundational for all the characters in *Skeleton Canoe*.

Defoe achieves this transformation to relational interconnectedness through what he calls, "Western puppetry and Anishinaabe values and ways of being" (Defoe 2025: 1:18:30). What exactly could be meant by "Western puppetry"? To start, Stephen Kaplin's 1999 article, "A Puppet Tree," provides a basic definition of a puppet:

Unlike actors, puppets are objects, defined by Frank Proschan as ‘material images of humans, animals or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated.’ These material images reflect an ‘iconicity [...] between a material object (sign vehicle) and the animate being for which it stands” (1983:4). But while actors animate a sign vehicle from the inside out, using their own feelings, bodies, and voices, puppet performers must learn to inhabit the sign vehicle from the outside in. (1999, 29)

There is a lot to unpack here. Yes, most of the puppets in *Skeleton Canoe* are, as Kaplin refers to, material images of animals that reflect an iconicity between a material object and the animate being, but the specific materiality used in *Skeleton Canoe* (for example, the birchbark used for Jimaan or the fan used for Rainbow Trout) that in many ways reflect Anishinaabe values and ways of being, make the puppet itself iconic, not just a reflective image. In addition, it is the specific materiality of the puppets in *Skeleton Canoe* that comes from embedded and transferred knowledge from one’s community and ancestors that I argue complicates the binary of the “inside out” and “outside in” that Kaplin refers to. One example is birchbark, used for the character, Turtle Activist Grandma, which I will explore in further detail later. While the operating of the puppets may be “outside in,” the creation of the puppet is inspired from the “inside out.” When speaking about puppetry from a potentially more “Western” perspective, I turn to Edward Gordon Craig’s essay, “The Actor and the Übermarionette,” as referenced by Victoria Nelson. Here, Craig gives a description of what we conventionally think of puppets in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Craig explains: “To speak of a puppet with most men and women is to cause them to giggle. They think at once of the wires; they think of the stiff hands and the jerky movements; they tell me it is ‘a funny little doll’” (quoted in Nelson 2001, 24). Since Craig originally made that statement in 1908, one may believe that it is a diachronic perception of a puppet that ceases to exist a century later. Steve Tillis appears to disagree with the sentiment that Craig’s statement has ceased to exist in his book, *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art*. Tillis reminds us, “the signs deployed by the puppet are as intentional as theatrical signs can be; their

intent, whether or not this is acknowledged by the puppet-artist, is to lead the audience to imagine life while it perceives an object” (1992, 115). The object may not be “a funny little doll” as Craig states, but it is still “an object,” according to Tillis, by which we, the audience, “imagines” life. Yes, the puppets in *Skeleton Canoe* may contain wires and are operated through manipulation, but through the specific materiality from which the puppets are made, they become not just images, or even “Images” in the likeness of the Creator, they are manifestations of our non-human kin here on Turtle Island. We do not have to imagine life based on the signs presented by the materiality, for in Native puppet theatre, the materiality often *is* life; and even in the instances when the materiality itself is not alive, it is specifically utilized to accentuate a life-like characteristic that is critical in an Indigenous story or life lesson.

In *Skeleton Canoe*, these non-human kin guide Nawbin, a young seeker, on a transformational adventure. On this journey, Nawbin encounters Jiimaan, a birchbark canoe long embedded under the water. The two bond in friendship as they uncover stories along the river, weather storms, and enjoy each other’s company. As Defoe says: “Together, they restore balance with the beings of the Earth, reminding us that healing comes through remembering, relationship, and reciprocity” (personal communication, July 29, 2025). The emphasis is not on conflict, as is often presupposed in Western storytelling, but on a life journey. We start our journey with the river, as it is the most crucial element in *Skeleton Canoe*. There is no story and there is no performance without River. While one can certainly argue with legitimacy that rivers provide the essentials for life for civilizations throughout the world, rivers are looked upon as living, breathing relations for many Native/Indigenous communities, including my own. Yet, how does one transform the Western, colonial, Euro/American concept of a river as primarily a watery avenue used to transport products and further commerce into a sentient relative capable of sharing cosmological knowledge with us? The relational interconnectedness that we have discussed is the foundation through which a river can be looked upon as a living, breathing relative and not a mere tool used to achieve an end.



Figure 1. Nawbin, Jiimaan, and characters in stories arise along the river. (Photo: Alex U. Griffin, courtesy of Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival)

River is not what we (and Kaplin) typically refer to as a human, animal or spirit. But they are alive, have agency, and are a crucial part of our community. In the show, the materiality of River consists of recycled materials, such as plastic bags and aluminum cans, as an example, which both acknowledges the importance of our climate crisis and the urgency to protect River, while also permitting River to flow, ripple, and provide a home for the other puppets. The craft of puppetry in *Skeleton Canoe*, including River, may be informed by what Americans consider to be Western. But it is the Native values, in this case Anishinaabe, that inform the materiality of River, and thus enable River to ontologically function in a way that makes the audience a vessel for River's stories rather than the other way around. We fundamentally need River more than River needs us, and it is this humble understanding that allows a reciprocal relationship that is critical in Native puppet theatre to exist.

This reciprocal relationship becomes visceral when we see different characters in the play, like Nawbin and Turtle Activist Grandma, each attempting to engage in one of the most fundamental activities regarding water: taking a drink from River. When Nawbin goes to River's edge to have a drink towards the beginning of the play, they let out a cry as they pull a plastic bag from River. They exclaim it is gross and announce that they will attempt to take out every plastic bag from the river. Nawbin proclaims themselves as a water protector, and thus, the relational interconnectedness that Murphy speaks of is implemented by Defoe and endowed onto what otherwise would be deemed as inanimate objects.



Figure 2. Turtle Activist Grandma engaging with River. (Photo: Alex U. Griffin, courtesy of Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival)

Rainbow Trout is one of those other puppets who has a home in River. A colorful fan forms the foundation of Rainbow Trout, providing both the aesthetic and functionality of the puppet. The spectrum of color emanating from Rainbow Trout gives authenticity to

its name, while the flexibility of the fan enables the fish to swim, flutter, and dance convincingly. The colors of the rainbow and the ease and freedom of movement assist in making Rainbow Trout a character who serves as a metaphor reminding us of the role of Two-Spirit members in Indigenous communities: bringing love, light, joy, and gratitude to our culture. VK Preston's reference, in "Queer and Indigenous Art: Performing Ice Times in Climate Crisis," to the symbolic importance of a map in a performance centering familial locations combined with music from a Two-Spirit composer, and the way in which those elements solidify the emotional attachment to place, remind me of Rainbow Trout's power in *Skeleton Canoe*. Preston states: "participatory conversation on place inaugurates an epistemic shift of placemaking. This centers and genders pluralism, reclaiming nonbinary gender, partnering, and community's solidarity in queer Indigenous activism" (2020, 150). According to Preston, the reclamation of geography and gender from binary, colonial classification liberates a plurality of meaning, learning, and kinship. Rainbow Trout, having their home in the river, enhances River as an important place of epistemic knowledge. Rainbow Trout swimming and dancing with a rainbow fan representing Two-Spirit members of Indigenous community centers' "gender pluralism," and even though it may be subliminal to some and not so subliminal to others, fosters solidarity within queer Indigenous wisdom.

The human artifact that is the colorful fan anthropomorphizes the puppet of Rainbow Trout, thus allowing the character to foster Two-Spirit wisdom, and thereby furthering the interspecies communication that is essential to this Native story. As Claudia Orenstein writes in *Reading the Puppet Stage: Reflections on the Dramaturgy of Performing Objects*: "objects and materiality can have their own emotional trajectories constructed into them, and we can experience these physically" (2024, 38). We experience the beauty of Rainbow Trout through the vivid brightness of the colorful fan, and freedom through its movement as it appears to swim and dance effortlessly. Swimming and dancing appear synonymous as the stick that initially permits Defoe to control Rainbow Trout's movement changes to a string that liberates Rainbow Trout to make much of the stage their dance floor as Defoe circles the string around his body and over his head. The puppet's movement allows us to experience

both a watery environment and a dancing stage, even when it is not in physical water or a disco. Rainbow Trout's freedom of movement enables interspecies communication by allowing the other swimming puppets and air-breathing mammals, such as a human actor, to speak with Rainbow Trout directly.

When interspecies communication does take place, endowing the puppet with Anishinaabe language reinforces the concept of the puppet being alive through anthropomorphization, also referred to as "breathing spirit into the object" (personal communication, April 15, 2025). The combination of Anishinaabe language along with materiality, such as jingles from a jingle dress^[3] placed inside Rainbow Trout, collaborate to Indigenize the puppet with the ability to relay Anishinaabe lifeways and ideology onto a captivated audience, whether they be Native or not. Returning to Preston, they say "that settlers' interest in interpreting Indigenous practice as performance fails to apprehend songs' or dances' ontologies otherwise, as law, being, or medicine, erasing and thereby also doing epistemological violence" (2020, 148). The jingles inside Rainbow Trout are an antidote to the epistemological violence that Preston is talking about. They represent medicine and restoration. By placing the jingles inside Rainbow Trout, Indigenizes the puppet in one of the most fundamental ways, one that is not just entertainment, education, or even resistance, but one that is restorative in the transferring of cosmological and epistemological knowledge.

Birchbark, however, is the most important aspect of materiality in *Skeleton Canoe*. It is the material from which the main character in the play, Jiimaan, a canoe, is made. Birchbark serves as a tool to make food and supply transportation, in addition to being the material that would support etchings and writing, which makes it a foundation for communication. Thus, having Jiimaan be made from birchbark is imperative for the play. Birchbark from the tree, in and of itself, contains much knowledge and many stories. Constructing the canoe with birchbark endows Jiimaan with that same knowledge. Defoe says that Jiimaan can be buried and spend as long as four hundred years in the ground. Many stories and much knowledge can be accumulated during that time for living beings, including humans, who are willing to listen and learn. Theresa May, in *Salmon is*

Everything: Community-Based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed, describes the significance of these transferred stories when sharing her experience creating a theatre project with local Indigenous communities. May talks about how theatres serve as “forums where stories, and the wisdom and knowledge they carry, are given authority. Stories preserve and disseminate wisdom, provide historical context, and transmit feelings that have the power to change the listener, easing long-standing social and political polarization” (2018, 7). That is the influence that these stories possess, and it is the materiality that represents the manifestation of the stories in a tangible and sensorial fashion.

It is with this knowledge and storytelling ability in mind that the birchbark is seen to contain its own agency. Megan De Roover discusses agency with trees in her 2019 article, “Beyond the Scenic: Trees as Participants in Theatre and Performance.” De Roover begins by unpacking Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory,” which exposes the moment when “objects” become “things.” De Roover states: “Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’ illustrates this invitation, as he argues that when *objects* cease to function in predictable manners, they become *things*, asserting a peculiar kind of power into our interactions with them. In the same way, when trees no longer function as *objects* (which conform easily to our desires), they shift into *things* (which can resist)” (2019, 333). I am not insinuating that the birchbark of Jiimaan is “resisting” in any particular fashion, but that the birchbark, through its symbolic and dramaturgical usage, is becoming, according to De Roover and Brown, a “thing.” De Roover elaborates further: “Our relationship to the tree as an *object-now-thing* transforms from one of control to one of participatory exchange – a transformation that has the potential to alter (however slightly) the norm of unilateral engagement” (2019, 333). The multi-usage and significance of the birchbark to the Anishinaabe people, which then forms the materiality of Jiimaan in *Skeleton Canoe*, transforms the birchbark, according to De Roover, into a “thing” that defines the relationship with the birchbark into “one of participatory exchange,” not only between the Anishinaabe and the birchbark, but also between Jiimaan and the audience. De Roover concludes “that meaningful encounters with trees as *things* enables [*sic*] a relationship *with trees*, rather than a relationship with *stories about trees*” (2019, 345).

This describes a cornerstone of Native puppet theatre, one in which the materiality of the natural world is being granted its full agency and one where an equal reciprocal relationship is manifested. Thus, when the materiality is granted its full agency, so is the puppet which is constructed from that materiality. That reciprocity can only happen when the interaction with the natural world is as a “thing” with agency and not an “object.” Once our relationship with the natural world is as a “thing” with agency, we then possess the ideology that they are our fellow “kin” with a proper pronoun (as Kimmerer suggests) and not an “it,” an object ripe for exploitation at our whim.

The monumental material of birchbark represents so much to the Anishinaabe people that, in the show, it also forms a basket that serves as a shell for the elder character, Turtle Activist Grandma. For many Native communities, including my own, Lenape, as well as Anishinaabe, what Americans frequently refer to as the continent of North America is actually Turtle Island, a vast tract of land that sits on the back of a giant turtle. I, personally, am a member of a Lenape Turtle Clan. The cosmological importance of the turtle and its shell is imperative to many Native creation stories. Thus, having the turtle shell be a basket made out of birchbark Indigenizes the puppet of Turtle Activist Grandma in a way that nothing else would or could. This makes it an ideal material for a puppet who, as Defoe, articulates, is “Creating an environmental movement for a connection between humans and nature” (personal communication, March 12, 2025). While cleaning the water in the play, Turtle Activist Grandma reminds us of one of the most important realities of existence by pulling out a flag that communicates, “Water is life.” Through utilizing her birchbark shell to remove trash and waste from the water and River’s shore, Turtle Activist Grandma represents the significance of environmental stewardship, and that the well-being of the people is synonymous with that of the environment. Having both Turtle Activist Grandma and Jiimaan be associated with the materiality of birchbark (recycled birchbark in the case of Jiimaan), they remind us of the importance of sustainability and the interconnectedness of our shared destiny.



Figure 3. Water is Life. (Photo: Alex U. Griffin, courtesy of Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival)

The use of birchbark as materiality for Turtle Activist Grandma is a prime example of dramaturgical methodology put into practice in order to bring awareness to the current climate crisis. It is an example of Lisa Woynarski's urgent call for ecologically relevant dramaturgical practice in her book, *Ecodramaturgies: theatre, performance and climate change*. Woynarski writes: "Intersectional ecologies analyses [*sic*] the ideologies of conquest, colonialism, accumulation and individualism that shape capitalist patriarchy and ecological exploitation" (2020, 35). Woynarski continues with how ecodramaturgy, a product of intersectional ecology, can be an antidote to the separatist individualism of colonialism. She continues: "Ecodramaturgies can counter the abstraction and reduction of these issues (power relations that create injustice) by locating them in potent stories, missing histories, forgotten people and places, and human and more-than-human bodies" (2020, 38). Turtle Activist Grandma wearing a shell made out of birchbark, which is substantive and symbolic for the Anishinaabe people, and having that be juxtaposed with her performing the act of cleaning a river made out of recycled

materials, both anthropomorphizes the puppet and includes the dramaturgical intersectionality Woynarski is referring to. A Western style puppet consisting of Anishinaabe materiality with Indigenous storytelling is intersectional in a way that reaches a diverse audience, while at the same time enabling the climate crisis to be an issue that is both universal and relatable. It is also an example of what Peter Eckersall, in *Dramaturgy to Make Visible: The Legacies of New Dramaturgy for Politics and Performance in Our Times*, calls slow dramaturgy, as “a way to describe how the theatrical forms themselves, as dramaturgical agents made from interactive systems, make visible to spectators the experience of ecological crisis” (2024, 13). Denise Varney, in “Caught in the Anthropocene: Theatres of Trees, Place and Politics,” succinctly summarizes Eckersall’s slow dramaturgy: “a dramaturgy that ‘foregrounds time’ and ‘reorients perceptions’ towards a materialist or political consciousness of non-human agency” (2022, 10). I argue that the sequences with Turtle Activist Grandma harmonize with both descriptions of slow dramaturgy in that the sequences are timeless in regard to the Anishinaabe tradition of birchbark that goes back centuries, as well as current when referencing the critical status of human-induced climate change.

The anthropomorphization of the puppets, enabled by the specific material dramaturgical choices, such as Turtle Activist Grandma using her birchbark shell in order to assist in cleaning up River, makes the present ecological crisis both visible and visceral. It also, to channel Varney, “reorients our perception toward a political consciousness of nonhuman agency” by having a turtle clean River up after us. River may be Turtle Activist Grandma’s home, but having her clean her home after human irresponsibility endows this non-human with agency that one would typically assume that we, as humans, would have. This actually implicates the human audience and makes them question whether we as a human race have agency to modify our priorities and fundamentally alter our behavior for a more climate-responsive value system. In this way, the birchbark transfers conventional anthropomorphization from the human audience to the turtle.

In order for Native puppet theatre to create an environmental movement for a

connection between humans and nature, the relationship between humans and the natural world must go beyond mere transactional reciprocity. Its potential, to quote Varney, can “be a model for non-human-centered ecological theatre, one that features the environment as the foundation of human life and creativity” (2022, 11). By centering the environment, Native puppet theatre can reach into the essence of our identities as living organisms, through the specific materiality of its characters. The materiality of the puppets in *Skeleton Canoe* is a mixture of items that are symbolic to us as contemporary Americans as well as essential to the traditional culture of Anishinaabe people, all the while centering the environment and its ecological relationality in their usage. This blend of materiality specifically crafted for certain characters anthropomorphizes the puppets in a way that intrinsically makes them a part of us, while simultaneously, through our wonderment at seeing the natural world alive through our creations, makes us a part of them.

Notes

[1] “All My Relations is a profound concept and artistic collective that I (Ty Defoe) co-created. All My Relations is rooted in Indigenous worldviews. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all human and non-human beings and underscores a reciprocal responsibility to the land, ancestors, and future generations. This philosophy is central to various Indigenous-led arts collectives that aim to foster community, healing, and cultural revitalization through creative expression.” Ty Defoe, email message to author, April 15, 2025.

[2] I use the term, “Western,” in this article to connote the cultural paradigm that typically refers to anything thought of as colonial and Euro/American.

[3] “The Jingle Dress originates from the Anishinaabe people and is rooted in stories of healing. According to tradition, the dress was first created for a young girl in the North who was gravely ill. A vision came to her family instructing them to sew a dress adorned with 365 metal cones—one for each day of the year—and as she danced in it, the sound

of the jingles would offer healing. Each cone represents a prayer, an intention, a step toward restoration. Today, jingle dress dancers continue to appear at powwows, community gatherings, protests, and ceremonies—dancing not just in regalia, but in remembrance, resistance, and restoration. The Jingle Dress Dance embodies healing—physical, emotional, and spiritual—and stands as a testament to cultural resilience, the endurance of language and tradition, and the power of community. This is not just performance; it is a ceremony guided by protocol, responsibility, and prayer. Jingle dancers often carry the prayers of those who cannot dance themselves, offering their movement as a gift of collective strength.” (Defoe, personal communication, April 17, 2025.)

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