



# LEARNING GUIDE

ON THE KREEGER THEATER STAGE  
APRIL 3 – MAY 4, 2025



BY LARISSA FASTHORSE  
DIRECTED BY MICHAEL JOHN GARCÉS  
PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH CENTER THEATRE GROUP





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Image: “Morning Star Scarf” by B. Yellowtail.



## Synopsis

Wynona is a Native American activist who runs N.O.B.U.S.H., a nonprofit organization dedicated to removing invasive plants from Los Angeles. She works in the same office complex as her opponent, River, who runs Indigenous Nations Soaring, a nonprofit dedicated to helping Native people. When they find themselves competing over the same grant money, their rivalry kicks into high gear as the women resort to spying, lying, and sabotage to win the cash. As their Native coworkers and Wynona's partner, Theo, are pulled into their schemes, the lies pile up until it becomes unclear who is right, who is wrong, and who is truly who they claim to be.

Through mistaken identities, prank phone calls, and DNA tests, this laugh-out-loud comedy takes an absurd look at what defines who we are, and the lengths that some people will go to change it.

**What defines who you are, and how far would you go to change it?**





## Time and Place

The present. An office building for Native American nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles.

**Land Acknowledgment.** The setting of Larissa FastHorse's play *Fake It Until You Make It* is in Los Angeles—ancestral home to the Tongva, Chumash, and many other Indigenous peoples. Arena Stage acknowledges, with deep respect, their memories, their lives, their descendants, and their continued and ancestral stewardship of this land.

We offer these acknowledgements with the intention to spark awareness and a desire to learn more about the history of the land we now call Los Angeles.

**What do you know about the history of this land?**

**How can you help to preserve and share the story of its Indigenous people?**



# Meet the Characters



Shyla Lefner

## Wynona

Mixed heritage but identifies culturally and racially as an enrolled member of her Native American Tribe. Female identifying, passionate to be heard.

*“I’m a real activist. I’ve been arrested tons of times.”*



Amy Brenneman

## River

White, female identifying, stylish, both commanding and non-threatening. Founder of an organization that does a lot of good for Native American people.

*“I know I’m seen as a well off white woman doing work for poor Native American people, but I really care.”*



Brandon Delsid

## Krys

Indigenous (to anywhere), gender fluid, fighting for American visibility of culturally Two Spirit folks.

*“I’m not scary. I’m all about love.”*



Burgandi Trejo Phoenix

## Grace

Native American, female identifying, activist martyr vibe. A proponent of race shifting.

*“It’s not a choice. I came to realize that I was born this way.”*

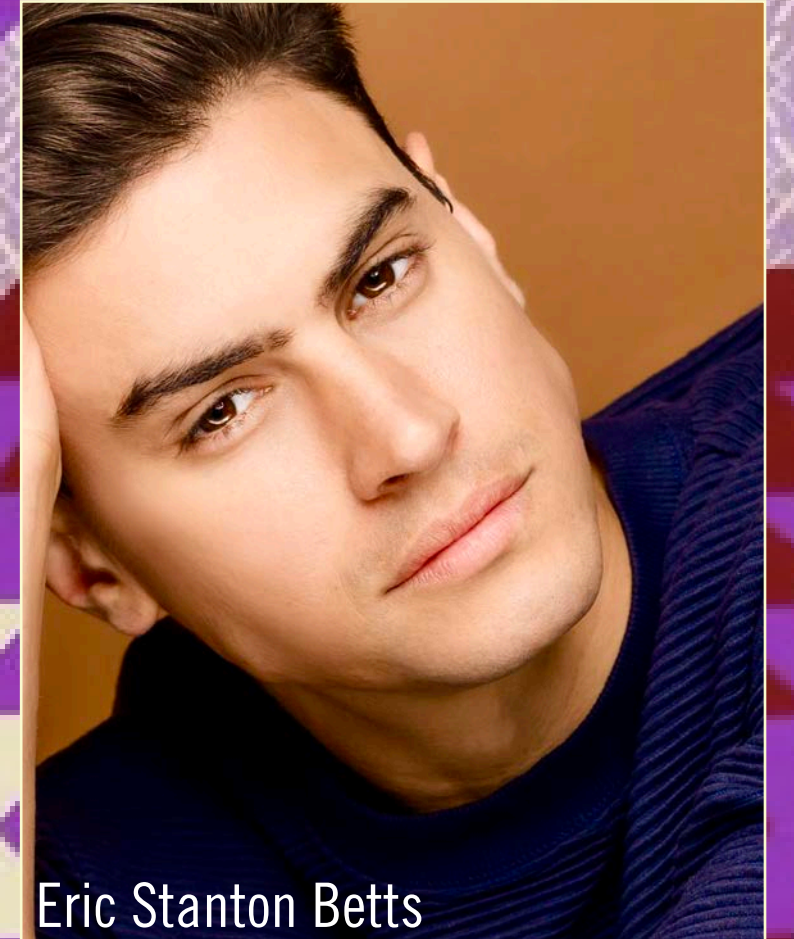


Noah Bean

## Theo

White, male identifying, biological activist and Wynona’s partner. Totally in love.

*“Yeah, and it hurts mine that you won’t marry me just because I’m white.”*



Eric Stanton Betts

## Mark

Native, male identifying, attractive, sincere, good guy who identifies as Two Spirit.

*“In my culture, making amends is essential to the path of a warrior. I cannot go forward on my path until I do so.”*



# Meet the Playwright

**Playwright Larissa FastHorse** is a member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, 2020 MacArthur Fellow, multi-award-winning playwright, and choreographer. She is also co-founder of Indigenous Direction, a consulting firm for companies and artists who want to create accurate work about, for, and with Indigenous Peoples. As a playwright, her stories use comedy to make biting social commentary about the dark history and lasting effects of the genocide and displacement of Native communities in the United States.

Larissa grew up in South Dakota, where she began her career as a ballet dancer and choreographer who found her artistic home as a playwright. *The Thanksgiving Play*, one of the top ten most-produced plays in America in 2019, was produced on Broadway in 2023.

She is the first known Native woman playwright to be produced on Broadway.

Drawn to her Native-centered work, Center Theatre Group commissioned Larissa to write a play which became *Fake It Until You Make It*. For this production, Larissa is working with her long-time collaborator, director Michael John Garcés, to bring the world of her play to life.

*“The complete melding of comedy and tragedy in our lives is with us every single day and has been for centuries. So that is our tone: Our tone is comedy and tragedy, those things all mixed, that we can see something incredibly gruesome and laugh really hard and then cry and help each other and then laugh again.”*

—*Larissa FastHorse, American Theatre Magazine*





## Meet the Director



**Director Michael John Garcés** is an LA-based director and playwright and a professor of practice at Arizona State University. He recently directed the CTG:FWD Taper Legacy Reading of *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*.

As the former artistic director of Cornerstone Theater Company, a nationally recognized community-engaged ensemble that makes new plays with and about communities throughout Los Angeles and beyond, he directed new plays by many writers including Mark Valdez,

Juliette Carrillo, Alison Carey, Lisa Loomer, and three by Larissa FastHorse: *Wicoun*, *Native Nation*, and *Urban Rez*. As longtime collaborators, Larissa and Michael spend years on each project in an Indigenized community engagement process.

The plays he has written include *TOWN* (Theatre Horizon) and *36 Yesses* and *Magic Fruit* (Cornerstone). He is the recipient of the Doris Duke Artist Award, Princess Grace Statue, and SDC President's Award.



# Genre of the Play

*Fake It Until You Make It* is a door-slamming, mistaken-identity satirical farce.

**Satire** uses humor, wit, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule with the intent of shaming the flaws of individuals, government, or society itself into improvement. It is a genre whose overall purpose is to offer constructive social criticism to draw attention to issues in society.



1491s



Black Lady Sketch Show

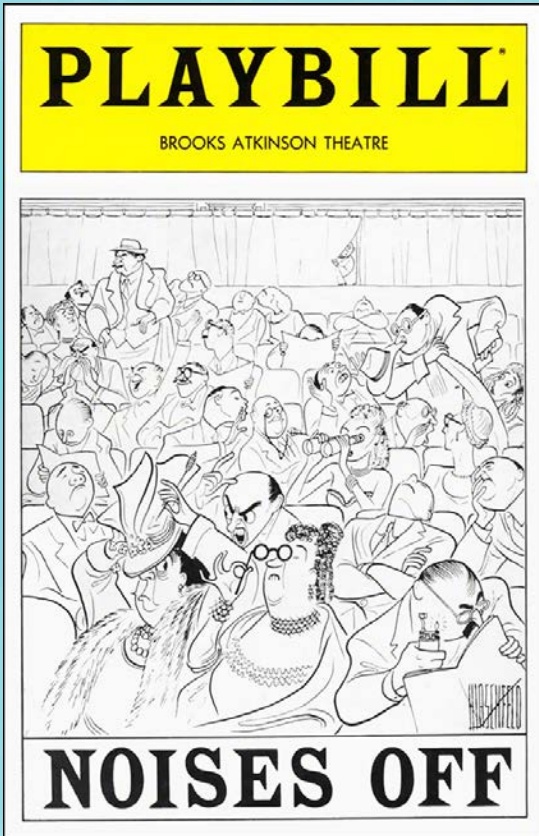


The Simpsons



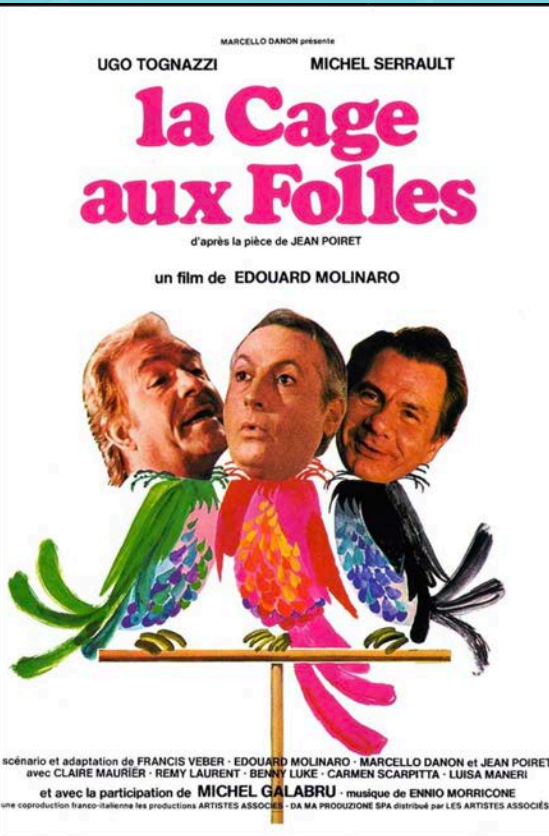
Key and Peele

**Farce** is a comedy that uses absurd, highly improbable situations usually involving some kind of deception or miscommunication. Using slapstick and physical comedy, events happen quickly so comedic timing matters.



*Noises Off* by Michael Frayn  
Synopsis: Doors slam, sardines fly, and trousers drop in this British farce about a theater company desperately trying to get its act together.

*La Cage aux Folles (The Cage of Madwomen)*  
by Jean Poiret  
Synopsis: Laurent, the son of a Saint Tropez night club owner and his gay lover, brings his fiancée's ultraconservative parents for dinner.





# The World of the Play

The play takes place in Los Angeles, the original home of the Indigenous/Native American Gabrielino/Tongva people. Their Tribal citizens live throughout the City and County of Los Angeles today, more than 700 in number.

California was home to thousands of people before Spanish settlers arrived—around 350,000 across the whole state—and the Los Angeles Basin was home to the Gabrielino/Tongva people.

Their footpath through the Sepulveda Basin was the original 405 freeway. The Los Angeles State Historic Park was formerly a fertile basin within a mile of Yaanga, the Tongva people's largest known village in the area now Downtown Los Angeles. The Hahamog'na, a band of the Tongva peoples, settled along the Arroyo Seco River, which now comprises Northeast Los Angeles.

Edited version of Tongva map from *LA Times*





# The World of the Play

In 1994, the State of California officially recognized the Gabrielino/Tongva Tribe and a unified Tribal constitution was adopted in 2007. The United States federal government still has not recognized the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation as a Tribal sovereign nation.

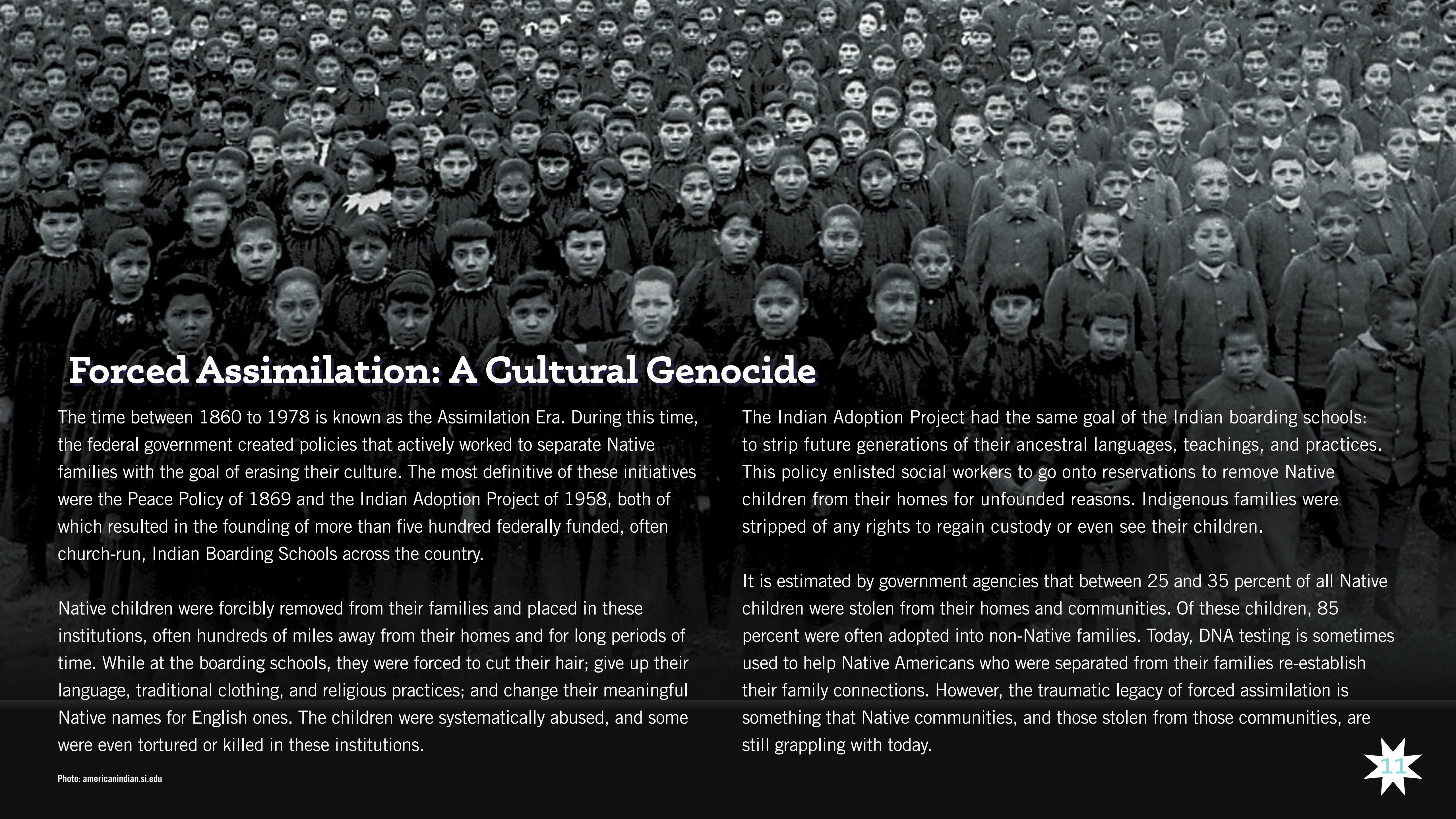
Unlike other Tribes in California and across the country, the Gabrielino/Tongva do not have designated land to establish a reservation which provides a centralized home for their people. The fight for federal recognition, Tribal sovereignty, and associated benefits is ongoing.



Designed by former Supervisor Kenneth Hahn and drawn by Millard Sheets

At the center of the Los Angeles County Seal features a Native American woman standing alone on the shore of the Pacific Ocean with the San Gabriel Mountains in the background. The seal also includes a depiction of the San Gabriel Mission where the Spanish settlers and missionaries enslaved the Tongva peoples starting in 1771. The dual name of Gabrielino/Tongva comes from the forced assimilation at the hands of the San Gabriel missionaries.





## Forced Assimilation: A Cultural Genocide

The time between 1860 to 1978 is known as the Assimilation Era. During this time, the federal government created policies that actively worked to separate Native families with the goal of erasing their culture. The most definitive of these initiatives were the Peace Policy of 1869 and the Indian Adoption Project of 1958, both of which resulted in the founding of more than five hundred federally funded, often church-run, Indian Boarding Schools across the country.

Native children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in these institutions, often hundreds of miles away from their homes and for long periods of time. While at the boarding schools, they were forced to cut their hair; give up their language, traditional clothing, and religious practices; and change their meaningful Native names for English ones. The children were systematically abused, and some were even tortured or killed in these institutions.

The Indian Adoption Project had the same goal of the Indian boarding schools: to strip future generations of their ancestral languages, teachings, and practices. This policy enlisted social workers to go onto reservations to remove Native children from their homes for unfounded reasons. Indigenous families were stripped of any rights to regain custody or even see their children.

It is estimated by government agencies that between 25 and 35 percent of all Native children were stolen from their homes and communities. Of these children, 85 percent were often adopted into non-Native families. Today, DNA testing is sometimes used to help Native Americans who were separated from their families re-establish their family connections. However, the traumatic legacy of forced assimilation is something that Native communities, and those stolen from those communities, are still grappling with today.



# Tribal Sovereignty

*“It doesn’t change anything. Tribes are still sovereign nations with the power to determine their own citizenship.” —Wynona*

A federally recognized Tribe is a sovereign Nation with the inherent rights to self-govern all matters involving their members. These matters include things like education, the creation of civil and criminal laws, healthcare, housing, and environmental protection as caretakers of Mother Earth.

Recognized Tribes are also eligible to receive U.S. federal benefits, services, and protections because of their legal relationship with the United States.

Tribal members are citizens of three sovereigns: their Tribe, the United States, and the state in which they reside. There are 574 federally recognized Indian Nations (variously called Tribes, bands, pueblos, communities, and Native villages) in the United States. The self-government that sovereignty gives these Nations is essential for Tribal communities to continue to preserve their rich history, unique cultures, and distinct identities for generations to come.



“Indian Country Map” for the FX show *Reservation Dogs* by Bobby Dues Wilson.



# Tribal Member Recognition

*“I am the real Mark Short Bull. And here is my enrollment card, issued by my Tribe, proving that I am a legal citizen of a sovereign Indian nation.” —Mark*

There are tangible benefits to belonging to a federally recognized Tribe. Tribal sovereign Nations provide their members with benefits such as childcare, housing assistance, or annual payments from casino revenue. Additionally, the federal government provides health care from the Indian Health Service and grants set aside for Native students.

Tribal sovereign Nations have the right to determine their own citizenship requirements. Because every one of them is different, they each have their own distinct criteria for membership. For example, the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma mandates that an ancestor be on its 1937 “base roll,” a list of recognized Tribal

members, and have an eighth Pawnee blood. Whereas the Cherokee Nation, one of the two largest Native groups in the United States, will accept anyone who can prove some lineal descent in specific records.

Only a fraction of the ten million people who selected the racial category “American Indian or Alaska Native” box on the 2020 census forms are enrolled in Tribes recognized by states or by the federal government. Therefore, the number of people who identify as Native is far greater than the number of people who are officially recognized as such by the United States government.





# Blood Quantum

## MOST COMMON BLOOD QUANTUMS

“We aren’t having this discussion again. I can only have kids with a Native guy or they won’t have enough Native blood to join my Tribe.” —Wynona

Blood Quantum is a strategy used by the government and Tribes to authenticate the amount of “Native blood” a person has by tracing individual and group ancestry. The amount a person has is measured in fractions, such as one-fourth or one-half. This measurement can affect a person’s Tribal membership and identity.

In the 1970s, the federal government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs began issuing a document known as the Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood, which functions as an official validation of a person’s blood quantum. In the present day, the C.D.I.B remains a requirement to access certain federal benefits, and some Tribes mandate the document as a precursor for enrollment.

During the time of the allotment period, which was between 1887 and 1934, a one-fourth blood quantum determined who was eligible for

an allotment of land. This mandate reduced the Indian holding of land and opened allotments to homesteaders and corporations. Over 90 million of the 138 million acres originally designated as Indian territory were lost, displacing thousands of American Indians.

According to The Indigenous Foundation, if the blood quantum limit is set at one-fourth for Tribal enrollment and intermarriage proceeds, Natives will eventually face being defined out of existence. Another consequence of blood quantum is that it leads to Natives questioning if they’re “Native enough.” Not being able to meet these standards potentially gives them the label of being a “pretendian” or someone who falsely claims to be Indigenous.

Unlike any other ethnic group in the United States, Native Americans must continually prove their identity.

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3/8	3/16
7/16	7/32
1/2	1/4
9/16	9/32
5/8	5/16
11/16	11/32
3/4	3/8
13/16	13/32
7/8	7/16
15/16	15/32
4/4	4/4
1/32	1/64
3/32	3/64
5/32	5/64
7/32	7/64
9/32	9/64
11/32	11/64
13/32	13/64
15/32	15/64
17/32	17/64
19/32	19/64
21/32	21/64
23/32	23/64
25/32	25/64
27/32	27/64
29/32	29/64
31/32	31/64

PARENTS	
N.I.	
1/16	1/32
1/8	1/16
3/16	3/32
1/4	1/8
5/16	5/32
3/8	3/16
7/16	7/



# Race, Ancestry, and Ethnicity

The term “race” was originally used to describe a group of people who shared a common ancestor or were members of the same family. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, race became a social construct used to classify human beings according to physical or biological characteristics to suit prejudices and maintain systems of power. The false notion that white people were inherently smarter and more human than nonwhite became a justification for European colonization and the enslavement of people from Africa.

Today, scientists prefer to use the term “ancestry” when examining human variations. This concept more fittingly focuses on geographical origins and the history of one’s ancestors. For instance, instead of describing populations as simply

Black or white, they may specify sub-Saharan African or Northern European.

“Ethnicity” is a person’s cultural background which can include their ancestry, language, customs, practices, and beliefs. People of different races may share the same ethnicity. People of the same race may be of a different ethnicity. Distinctions are not exact, and today many people use these terms interchangeably, but they continue to shape our perceptions, experiences, and opportunities.

*“Don’t be stupid. DNA interpretation is based on biased, dominant white narrative science. And being Native is more than DNA.”*

—Wynona



# Pretendians

*“We fight against Pretendians for taking resources from real Natives.” —Wynona*

The number of people who identify as Native American on the U.S. Census has soared in recent years by 86% from 2010 to 2020. That is a much bigger jump than can be explained by birth rates alone. This large increase has raised concerns in Native communities that people are falsely claiming a Native identity to take resources from real Native peoples.

The popularity of home DNA test kits has given some people a way to prove that they’re Indigenous and claim a Tribal affiliation. Others say they were told of a distant ancestor of a Native Tribe and choose to build an identity around what turns out to be just an

old family story. Native communities often label these types of people as “pretendians:” those who falsely claim to be Indigenous or descended from Indigenous ancestors.

However, this term doesn’t recognize the historical complications of Native identity in this country due to centuries of colonization, displacement, and forceful assimilation. There are also people who are involved in Native culture and are Native biologically but were not enrolled as a member for various reasons, including the pressure to pass as white.



Iron Eyes Cody was actually an Italian American whose birth name was Espera Oscar de Corti.

People start pollution.  
People can stop it.

Keep America Beautiful  
Advertising contributed for the public good





Family Photo

## Race Shifting

The term “race shifting” was coined by anthropologist Circe Sturm in his book *Becoming Indian: The Struggle Over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*. He uses this term to describe “individuals who have changed their racial self-identification on the U.S. Census from non-Indian to Indian.”

Race shifter claims to Indigenous descent have predominately helped those of white racialized identity to prominent positions in academics and government. U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren once falsely claimed Cherokee identity and then apologized for doing so.

Rachel Dolezal, a former NAACP chapter president, presented herself as a Black woman despite being born to white parents. When she was exposed in 2015, Dolezal acknowledged she was “born white to white parents,” but maintained she self-identified as Black.

Race shifting, with its dismissal of the authentic presence of Indigenous, Black, and other people of color, is considered a form of cultural appropriation.



*“I was given that identity at birth, yes. But race is a construct. I believe in our right to choose another construct. I, personally, have chosen several race identities.” —Grace*

Background image: “Morning Star Scarf” by B. Yellowtail.

John Makely / NBC News



# Cultural Appropriation / Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appropriation is the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another more dominant people or society. It is usually at the expense of the original culture for the dominant group's gain.

Cultural appreciation champions cultural aspects of a marginalized group to be recognized and celebrated, even when white and dominant identities are not included in these cultural practices. It also gives proper credit to those from marginalized communities whose cultural aspects are the origin.

The harmful action of cultural appropriating marginalized groups' cultural practices and objects for profit stereotypes, minimizes, or removes important cultural context. It can be seen as continuing the cycle of colonization and using Indigenous people and culture for the gain of white settlers.

## Examples of Cultural Appreciation

- Attending performances created by Native artists
- Buying Native-made cultural art
- Visiting local Tribal cultural centers or museums

## Examples of Cultural Appropriation

- Wearing stereotypical Native costumes for Halloween
- Buying prominent cultural objects as fashion accessories
- Using Native names or images as sports team mascots



Hand-beaded Christian Louboutin shoes  
by Shoshone-Bannock and Luiseño artist,  
Jamie Okuma.



# Two Spirit People

*“To be clear, my organization is about prioritizing two spirit identity, which doesn’t necessarily mean changing anything.”*

—Krys

Two Spirit refers to a person who embodies both a masculine and feminine spirit. Traditionally, Native American Two Spirit people were male, female, and sometimes intersex individuals who combined activities of both men and women. In most Tribes, they were considered neither men nor women. They occupied a distinct, alternative gender status.

There were important variations in Two Spirit roles across North America but historically, it’s been used to describe common traits including gender variance, specialized work roles, same-sex attraction, and spiritual identity. In many Tribes, Two Spirit people filled special religious roles as healers, shamans, and ceremonial leaders.

Colonization disrupted many Native traditions. Two Spirit roles were condemned, and many times were confronted with violence. This resulted in Two Spirit traditions and practices going underground or disappearing completely in many Tribes.

Today, Native people of the LGBTQIA+ community throughout North America are reviving the Two Spirit role and its traditions. National gatherings of Two Spirit people have been held since the early 1990s, and regional gatherings are held in many parts of the country.





# Nonprofit Organizations

*Fake it Until You Make It* is entirely set in an office building for nonprofit organizations supporting Native causes.

Nonprofit organizations generally operate for the public good rather than to make money, like a corporation. They often have humanitarian or environmental missions. While nonprofits work to address the needs in our society, it's worth noting that many of these unmet needs are the direct result of colonization, slavery, and other manifestations of white supremacy.

Nonprofit programs are often funded through grants: sums of money awarded by state or local agencies, private foundations, or corporations. To receive a grant, organizations must compete for funding through an application and evaluation process.

Nonprofits serving Native American communities face significant underfunding due to the lack of awareness and

understanding about Indigenous people from mainstream grant organizations. Many grants designated for Native causes are distributed to larger organizations, such as universities and museums, that may not provide significant benefit to Native communities.

Leaders of Native-led organizations, whose mission is solely focused on serving Native American people and communities, have reported that scarce funding has led to competition for the survival of their nonprofits. This scarcity has created infighting in the Native-led nonprofit sector.

*“We apply for all of the same grants and every time they throw the money at the white woman, who is putting us into a drought, while real Indians who are trying to save the earth can barely keep the doors open.”*  
—Wynona





# The Butterfly Bush

*“It’s an acronym, Natives Opposing Buddleja and Uplifting Sovereign Habitats. It’s pronounced, N. O. B. U. S. H. Although sovereignty is obviously always political.”*

*—Wynona*

Led by the character Wynona, N.O.B.U.S.H. is the fictional nonprofit organization dedicated to removing the butterfly bush, or buddleja. The invasive species in North America, also known as buddleja, originated in central China and migrated across Asia and to the Americas. It was introduced to the United States around 1900 as an ornamental plant to attract butterflies and other pollinators.

Over time the butterfly bush escaped cultivation to become invasive in wild areas in at least twenty states across the country. It effectively crowds out the Native plants that provide essential food for butterflies, birds, and other wildlife. Planting the butterfly bush is controversial because it can harm the local ecosystem.





# Invasive Species in California

Prior to the Spanish settlement in the 1700s, few non-Native species had been introduced to California. However, with the beginning of European settlement, many were carried here attached to the hull of ships or carried along in shipments of grain.

In present day California non-Native invasive species are introduced in various ways both unintentionally and intentionally. Animals, like the fox squirrel, can also be counted as invasive species. These animals brought into California as sources of food, fur, or pets have become detrimental to the Native environment.

Invasive species threaten the abundance of Native species by competing for resources, interbreeding with Native populations, and changing the invaded habitat. They can clog water delivery systems, damage crops, and introduce diseases to animals. They may go easily unnoticed until they progress into a large population that is hard to control.





# .....Connection:..... Identity

*“How screwed up is it to base all of your identity on the fact that you managed not to succumb to genocide? Why do I want to be that?” —Grace*

This play explores how Native identity has been shaped or dictated by how others, namely white people in the federal government, see and choose to define them. Identity is a constantly shifting intersection between how we see ourselves, how others see us, and what these perceptions signify within our culture and communities. With this in mind, reflect on your own identity and how it relates to the world that you live in.

**What identities do you choose?  
What identities do you claim?**

**What power does your identity give  
you and how do you wield that power?**

**Have you ever felt “not \_\_\_\_ enough” in a  
community you identify with? For example,  
not Native enough, Black enough, or Latine  
enough? Who gets to decide who is enough?**



# .....Connection:.....

## Deception and Lies

*“I hear you Mark, but you sorta lied about who you are too.” —Krys*

Farce usually involves some kind of deception or miscommunication that stems from a mistaken or threatened identity. At various points in the play, characters choose to lie about who they are to achieve their goals that benefit either themselves and/or the charitable causes of their nonprofits. However well-intentioned some of these lies may be, they cause chaos and disruption in the world of the play.

When do you lie and why?

Is it possible to do good with a lie, or is it inherently self-serving?

Do you think it's ever okay to do something wrong in order to do something good?

Do you think it's more harmful to lie to someone else or to yourself?



# .....Connection:.....

## Invisible Antagonists

*“River is using Mark to get even more of the money she has been disproportionately taking for years. That is blood money made on the graves of Native people. That’s not fair.” —Wynona*

Most plays have protagonists: the main characters that drive the action of the story. They are the emotional heart of the story, and we root for them to overcome the obstacles they face as they try to achieve their goal.

Those obstacles are often created by the antagonist: the person who actively opposes and is hostile to the protagonist. Sometimes an antagonist is not a person, but an opposing force or system that can be felt but can’t be readily seen. These are invisible antagonists.

The invisible antagonists in this play are colonialism and white supremacy. The lasting effects of these systems work against the interests of the Native communities. In the stories of our lives, there can also be invisible antagonists that are working against our best interests.

Background image: “Morning Star Scarf” by B. Yellowtail

**What are some invisible antagonists you feel in your life?**

**How do these invisible antagonists actively oppose what you want to achieve?**

**What are ways that you can oppose or overcome the obstacles these antagonists present?**



# .....Connection:.....

## Laughing about Hard Things

*“...that’s why I use laughter in my stuff. Native people always say: You have to laugh or cry. So, we choose to laugh.... It’s kind of our secret weapon to life, and I’m really thrilled that I get to employ it in this way and help people also to laugh.”*  
—Larissa FastHorse, *American Theatre Magazine*

Larissa uses humor to tell stories about hardships such as colonialism, displacement, and white supremacy that continue to negatively affect Native communities. Laughter is a powerful tool to cope with the hardships of life, and many find relief in watching comedic stories told in theater, television, or in the movies. Sometimes, these comedies deal with dark themes by shining a light on the absurdities, helping us to process the stories in an easier way.

Have you ever found yourself laughing about something bad or embarrassing that happened to you? Did laughing change how you felt about the event?

Comedy is sometimes described as “tragedy plus time.” Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not?

Do you think there are things that are not right to laugh about?



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Earring by Native jeweler Keri Ataumb  
Photo: Ataumbi Metals





*“Being Native is more than DNA.”  
—Wynona*

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Photo: THE ZENITH, Imagining Indigenous Futures collection. By Cara Romero.

