

# CSWS Research Matters

## The Women and Rivers Project

A CSWS faculty research grant supports a collaborative creative project that explores the relationships—both historic and contemporary—of women in the Pacific Northwest to the many rivers of our region.



Theresa May

BY THERESA MAY, Associate Professor, University of Oregon, Department of Theatre Arts

From 2004 to 2006 I worked with a group of women from the Yurok, Hupa, and Karuk Tribes of northern California to form the Klamath Theatre Project (KTP). We developed and produced a performance entitled *Salmon Is Everything* that focused on the significance of salmon in the lives of Lower Klamath River communities and the ecological and political issues facing both salmon and humans. Although the project did not originate as “women focused,” the Native faculty, community members, and students involved were primarily women, and several elders remarked on the important role that women play—now and in the past—in the tribes’ relationship to the Klamath River. The elders were pleased to see that the young women participating in the play development became more empowered to speak for their tribes’ perspective regarding the salmon.



I have continued to collaborate with several of the Native women involved and in spring 2009 I brought to campus a panel of Native women theatre artists to do a reading of *Salmon Is Everything*, together with a panel on Native theatre at the Earth Matters on Stage Festival, which I conceived and directed for the Department of Theatre Arts at University of Oregon. This panel was funded in part by a cosponsorship grant from the UO Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS). In Spring 2011, the UO Department of Theatre Arts supported a full production of *Salmon Is Everything*, with auxiliary events and speakers supported by the Many Nations Longhouse, Oregon Humanities Center, and CSWS. The play, along with reflective chapters by myself and Karuk/Hupa/Yurok collaborators, was published by Oregon State University Press in Spring 2014 as part of the First Peoples series.

The Women and Rivers Project now underway is really a continuation as much as an outgrowth of this earlier work. Both community-based performance and Native/First Nations theatre are growing and intersecting movements. Native/First Nations Theatre has emerged in the past two decades as an important creative and scholarly field, one that incorporates both traditional and innovative contemporary performance forms, as well as critical and social theory that leverages for social justice.

I am working closely with Native faculty, staff and students to shape the direction of the Women and Rivers Project in ways that serve Native students and the surrounding tribal communities. At University of Oregon, the project provides a forum for Native theatre artists with national reputations to collaborate with the Native women from UO student, staff and faculty, along with local tribal communities. This reciprocity is fundamental to community-engaged research, of which community-based theatre is a subset.

Community-based theatre is a methodology that makes use of the art of live performance to amplify the stories and voices that may be missing or marginalized in some public debates. The long-range aim of the Women and Rivers Project is to use community-based theatre to explore and document the contributions of Native and non-Native women of the Pacific Northwest to the health of their communities and environments by using the unique form of creative inquiry of theatre. The project seeks to explore and give expression to the varied experiences, knowledge, and leadership of Native women whose communities have long lived in partnership with rivers of the Pacific Northwest.

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## Research Matters

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The importance of the intersection of ecological and social justice issues is brought home to us nearly every day as we witness communities worldwide impacted by the many faces of climate change and environmental degradation. In the face of these seemingly insurmountable challenges, women have demonstrated both significant knowledge and power when working on a local level (see Gottlieb). This project documents the contributions of Native women to the health of community and environment, and its dual final product—both performance and publication—will serve as a model for future projects.

Women and Rivers is collaborative in spirit and form. The methods model a collaborative creative process to participating students. Theatrical work will follow the models outlined as best practices in the field of community-based theatre (see Cohen-Cruz, Kuftenic, and Haedicke), including egalitarian formats for idea generation, shared leadership, and collaborative creative work. We will make use of collaborative tools including blog and video conference. The workshops, which will use visual art, creative writing, movement, and improvisation, will take place at an accessible location allowing for full participation. Assessment will also be conducted in a transparent and open forum in which all those who participated in the project have an opportunity to speak. The project will demonstrate a



commitment to include the perspectives and participation of Native students, faculty, staff, and community members.

The creative work focuses on the long-standing relationship between indigenous women and rivers, a relationship that encompasses both traditional roles and contemporary activism. Artists, students, and community will investigate questions such as: What are the historic relationships between women and rivers in tribal communities, and how have those relationships changed? How have young women taken a leadership role within their communities in regards to watershed issues?

My 2014-15 CSWS Faculty Research Grant supports the first step of this project, the residency of a prominent Native theatre artist, Muriel Miguel.

### **Muriel Miguel Residency: May 8-19, 2015**

Muriel Miguel (Kuna, Rappahannock) is cofounder and director of Spiderwoman Theatre <<http://www.spiderwomantheater.org/index.htm>>. A choreographer, playwright, actor and educator as well as director, she has directed almost all of Spiderwoman's shows since their debut in 1976. She is a pioneer in the development of a culture-based methodology for the training of Indigenous theatre students and

is an instructor of Indigenous performance at the Centre for Indigenous Theatre full time program in Toronto. She was also program director for the Aboriginal Dance Program and an instructor of Indigenous performance at The Banff Centre for the Arts for seven years.

In addition to working with UO faculty, staff, and students and community members in a series of story-weaving workshops, Ms. Miguel will give a Lecture Retrospective of Spiderwoman Theatre's work on Friday, May 15, in the Hope Theatre on the UO campus. A full day story-weaving workshop open to community members as well as students, faculty, and staff, will be on Saturday May 16, with a presentation in the evening. Visits to Lane Community College and Grand Ronde are also being planned. ■

### **References**

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