

I Just See Myself as an Old-Fashioned Storyteller

A Conversation with
Drew Hayden Taylor

Sandy Tait (ST): Can you give us a rundown on where you came from, and how you got to be where you are?

Drew Hayden Taylor (DHT): I was born on the Curve Lake First Nation, which is a small Ojibway reserve in Central Ontario, about two hours north-east of Toronto. I was raised there by my mother and my mother's family. I never knew my father. I was born there in 1962 and basically had a fairly uneventful childhood; I was a single child of a single parent and spent a lot of time by myself and as a result I read a lot and developed a very fertile imagination; it must have had something to do with my later career.

John Moffatt (JM): What sort of things were you reading?

DHT A whole bunch, some very surprising. I was always an avid reader, read anything and everything, but some of my favourites that I would return to were *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *The Wolf King* by Joseph Lipincott, and *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley, very boyhood kind of stuff, and oddly enough, the entire series (24 books I believe) of the *Tarzan of the Apes* series by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Speaking as a white-looking Indian growing up on the Reserve, perhaps I related to the fish-out-of-water existence symbolized by Tarzan, the ultimate outsider in his environment. And yet, he rose above it to be master of his world . . . but perhaps I'm over-analyzing. Anyway, I was there at Curve Lake until I was eighteen, when I moved to Toronto where I went to Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology, and gradu-

ated in 1982 with an Honours diploma in Radio and Television broadcasting. The rest of my career is quite sporadic and eclectic; I was a person with absolutely no idea of what I wanted to do with my life. I just lurched from contract to contract as a production assistant; it was always something to do with the arts. My first job out of college was doing the location sound on two half-hour documentaries on native culture funded by Health and Welfare Canada and we drove from New Brunswick to Vancouver Island in a car over five months stopping at about three reserves per province. And since then I did a bunch of things: I did a year and a half with CBC Radio as a trainee producer; I did six months with a television series called *Spirit Bay*, which was about a fictional Indian reserve in northwestern Ontario; I was casting assistant, production assistant, technical advisor; you know, I was like, 24, and they'd give me the scripts to read and ask me if they were accurate or not, and I'd say, yeah, Native people do eat toast (*laughter*) . . . and so I basically lurched with no real career aspirations from job to job until suddenly—when I was 24 I'd just finished working on *Spirit Bay* and I decided that I needed to make some money and stuff—so I decided to write an article about my experiences working on *Spirit Bay*, an article on how to develop Native-oriented stories into a television and film format. And I was doing it for a magazine called *Cinema Canada*. Hasn't been around in awhile, I don't think. I end up phoning up all the producers I could find in Canada who had a television series on Canadian television to see if they'd ever had a Native scriptwriter, and there hadn't been one, so I end up talking with a story producer for a series called *The Beachcombers*. And I don't even remember if it was me or her, but one of us suggested I submit some story ideas, just for the heck of it. I submitted two. They liked the first one, and at the age of 24 I wrote an episode of *The Beachcombers* that was the season-ender for the seventeenth season. And I thought, this is fun, I like that—especially when you consider that I'd never lived in British Columbia.

ST Or seen *The Beachcombers*?

DHT Oh, I'd seen *The Beachcombers* when I was a kid, but I hadn't watched it in about five or six years; I turned it on and it was practically a whole new cast. And then, I went back to doing various things. I worked for John Kim Bell and his organization [the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation] and I puttered around doing various other

different things. And then in 1988 I guess you could say my life changed. That's when I got a phone call from Tomson Highway. He had just got a huge grant from the Ontario Arts Council for a playwright-in-residence programme at Native Earth Performing Arts, of which he was the artistic director. And at that time there were a scant few working Native playwrights in Ontario, he being one and the other one being Daniel David Moses, who was the outgoing playwright in residence. So Tomson was desperate, and as often happens with many arts organizations—and I'm sure it's the same with education organizations—they hate to give back grant money. So he was desperate, and, being desperate, he went to the bottom of the barrel and there I was, passed out (*laughter*); and he offered me the position and I said, "No, I'm not really interested; I'm not really into theatre," and then he said, "This is twenty weeks work for a good salary," and I went, "Yeah, okay, I'm in." And that was my glorious introduction to theatre. I was playwright in residence for twenty weeks. So my introduction to theatre was sitting through rehearsals of this little play called *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, the original production. And afterwards I had to write a play, and I did, and we workshopped it, did a public reading, and after the reading I took it out into the backyard, put a bullet through the title page, and buried it. So that's my introduction to the world of theatre, and it got me where I am today.

JM How do you find that the portrayal of Aboriginal life on mainstream television, at least in Canada, has evolved since the days of *Spirit Bay* or *The Beachcombers*?

DHT I find it interesting that the image of Native people on television has metamorphized somewhat. Ten, fifteen years ago, the dominant image of Native people in America and Canada was one of substance abuse, violence, social injustice, sort of a victimized people. Today, if you watch mainstream television, especially in America, the only reference you see to Native people is in direct relationship to casinos. In America, all Indians are connected to casinos; that's the only contextualization presented on television. I wrote an article on this perception in my last collection of articles ["57 Channels and No Indians On," in *Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (Theytus, 2002)].

ST What is your favourite thing of all the things you do?

DHT Of all the things I do?

ST Directing, acting, writing . . .

DHT Well, I don't act. The only acting I do is in singles bars . . .

ST Oh really?

DHT It's hard to say . . . my standard line is that I'm married to theatre, but I have many mistresses. So through a weird, bizarre sequence of events I've become a playwright. Growing up on the reserve, theatre was all dead white people, and I never thought that I would be in this world, and here I am. The best explanation I can give is that I remember when (and I'm using a bad analogy here) Sting began doing his funky jazz sort of stuff and he got a couple of really well-known jazz musicians to play on his tour and they said, "Why are you going with Sting? You guys are very well-respected jazz musicians." And one of them said, "Hey, I love Italian food but you can't eat it 24 hours a day, seven days a week." So, same with me, when I write a play, I'm done with that; I go write an article, go write a television show, go work on a documentary, or write a short story, write a radio play, or any of a number of things. It's the mixture of genres and methods of expression that I find quite pleasurable. I mean, who wants to make love to the same woman twice? (*Laughter*)

ST That'll be good for the article. Have you done other documentaries besides *Redskins*, *Tricksters*, and *Puppy Stew* (National Film Board of Canada, 2000)?

DHT Yeah, but this one is my tour de force. The others were *projects*; I did a documentary on an elder from the Maniwaki Reserve in Quebec (*Circle of All Nations*, about Algonquin elder William Commanda) and I worked on those profiles years ago, for Health and Welfare Canada, but this one was my baby, and this is the one I'm most proud of.

ST Why did you want to make this one?

DHT I actually was approached to do it; it wasn't my idea. I had no real background in documentary directing. The National Film Board had been negotiating with another company called Lockwood Films to do something like this. The NFB felt—they liked the idea—but they felt that it should be done with a Native director and in the world of Aboriginal arts the number of people involved in Native humour could sit around this coffee table. And the number of people involved in Native humour who had some experience with documentary film-making could fit on the table. So they did some research and found that I had done some stuff before in both categories, and they offered the job to me. And I turned it down twice. Because when I was

younger, when I was fresh out of college, you heard me say I did the sound on two half-hour documentaries, and it was real low-budget stuff. We drove across the country; we slept five to a hotel room. We would take the beds apart, and the guys would sleep on the box-springs and the women would sleep on the mattresses. And I thought man, I'm, well, at that time I was like thirty-eight, thirty-nine and I thought, I'm too old to do that, I don't want to do that anymore. Thank you, but no. And it didn't occur to me that somewhere in the world organizations have budgets. And I expressed this to them, and they go, "Oh no, you'll have your own hotel room, you'll be flown everywhere," you know, because we shot in Whitehorse, and I'm not gonna drive to Whitehorse. (*Laughter*) And they explained this to me, and basically I didn't realize it, but it wasn't going to be a poverty-driven production and it was an opportunity for me to go and hang out with all of my friends and have fun. So once that was explained to me I thought, all right, now you've got my attention, let's go do this. Let's go have fun.

ST It looked like it was fun.

DHT It was a hoot.

ST How long did it take?

DHT It took about a year and a half. There were six months off in the middle, because the NFB and Lockwood had a falling out, and they had to decide how to divide ownership of material, stuff like that, so that had to be rectified before we finished off the rest of the shooting.

JM In one of the essays in your third collection, *Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*, you mention that *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* (Talonbooks, 2000) is your favourite play. Why is that your favourite play?

DHT I often get asked what's my favourite book, and I always say that's hard to say, it's like saying which is your favourite kid, right? But for some reason *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* is different from all my other stuff. It's darker. It has a bitter quality to it. It's almost bleak and, I mean, comparing that with *The Baby Blues* (Talonbooks, 1999) or *The Bootlegger Blues* (Fifth House, 1991), it's like the opposite end of the spectrum. And it has a magical quality to it. Every time I read it, because at one time it was published in *The Drama Review*, in the States, and then it was published in its own book form, then it was published in an anthology [*Staging Coyote's Dream* (Playwrights

Canada Press, 2003)] that has recently come out edited by Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, and every time I read it I just sit back and go, “Wow! I wrote that.” It’s so different from my other stuff. It’s almost a dance-theatre piece. And I don’t know dance theatre. It just seems to have come from a more poignant, sadder part of my soul, you know, because I’m known as a humorist, and to a certain extent I foster that. I do lecture tours like this one. I write serious dramas; *Someday* (Fifth House, 1993) and *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* (Talonbooks, 1998) are about the Scoop-Up. I write serious probing articles, some of them, but when I go and do stuff like this lecture tour, people want to hear the humour, so I tend to concentrate on humour. Let’s go have fun, I usually say. So people have this expectation of me that I’m here to make them laugh. Which is fine. But with something like *Girl Who Loved Her Horses*, like I said, it’s when you do something and you have no idea how you did it or where it comes from, and I just feel so sad for that little girl, seriously. It just sort of makes me wonder what happened to her.

JM You’ve also written both *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* and *Someday* as short stories. Can you tell us a little about the difference between imagining those stories in dramatic form and imagining them as short fiction?

DHT I refer to the book *Fearless Warriors* (Talonbooks, 1998), my collection of short stories, as my catalogue of future plays. It’s really interesting. I started writing television and theatre, primarily because it’s dialogue, and I’m not well-educated. I’ve never been to university and to me the supreme irony is that I do a whole whack of university lectures in places that wouldn’t allow me to attend, right? There’s a line in one of my plays, I think it was *Only Drunks*, that says “my only connection to University is when I was sixteen and I got to paint the residences.” So, writing prose has always been difficult for me. Not the articles or essays, because I can wing those off, because I’m talking—I, myself, this is what I think. Those are easy. But writing a short story that is prose has always been very difficult. I wrote one a year for nine years until my publisher wanted to publish them but wanted three more stories, and I had to write one short story a month for three months, and I don’t know, I’ve sometimes wondered if the quality suffered, if “The White in the Woods” is as good as it could have been. Writing these stories, it’s like jumping into a lake of cold water. I have to steel myself

before I jump in and write the short story, because I know it's going to be like wading through a swamp, since there are so many words involved in prose and I've never been comfortable with that. But it's a unique opportunity. It's almost like an outline for a play, but in the aspect that your characters are three-dimensionally drawn, your story's three-dimensionally drawn, and the atmosphere is there. So taking it and putting it in play form is disgustingly easy and simple; you don't have to worry about the structure: the structure's there, the characters are there, and it's . . . I want to say it's disgustingly easy but it's not, because when adapting anything you have to figure out what to add in and what to take out. I remember when I was doing the first draft of *Someday*, there's a scene in the short story where the central character sees what's happening through the window and thinks wonderful things are happening, until she comes out and says I'm leaving, and that's the shock. I tried to put that into the original play, but that would have been the whole second act: the whole second act is what's happening through that window, and so I had to go in and do that, because I loved the mystery or the twist of the guy thinking that everything is happening wonderfully and then she comes out and he discovers no. I love that, but it wouldn't work dramatically. I showed the short story to the people at Theatre Direct Canada, and they loved it and they commissioned me to do a play.

And *Someday*'s origins are unique. I think it's written up somewhere, but in 1990 I was approached by the *Globe and Mail* to write their annual Christmas short story. And I said, "Well, I don't write short stories," and they said, "Well, we've been following your career, and we think you can do it, and we'd like to commission you to do it." And I said, "Do you have any special requirements?" And they said, "Just two. Make it around 3700 words and don't make it too depressing." (*Laughter*) And I said, "What do you mean, too depressing?" And they said, "Well, the woman who wrote it last year ended it with the protagonist going down into the basement and hanging himself." (*Laughter*) So I wrote it like that, and that was all fine and dandy, and it was published on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* on December 24, 1990. I'm told it was the first piece of intentional fiction ever published on the front page of the *Globe*, and my mentor, a man named Larry Lewis, who had dramaturged and directed all six of my earlier plays and all of Tomson Highway's stuff, read it—he was the artistic

director of a Native theatre company on Manitoulin Island called De-ba-jeh-mu-jig—he read it and he phoned me up and he said, “Drew, I’ve just read your short story. Who owns the rights to that?” And I said, “I do,” and I said, “Why?” And he said, “This would make a really great play.” And I laughed and I said, “It’s a short story,” and he said, “No, no, no, no, read it again, read it objectively and read it with dramatic eyes.” So I sat down and I reread my own story and I thought, oh my gosh, he’s right, this would make a great play. And so, based on his inspiration, that spring we went to Banff School of Fine Arts, to their playwrights’ colony, and I wrote *Someday* there.

I’m thinking of turning another piece from *Fearless Warriors*, “Ice Screams,” into a radio play, for CBC. They’ve approached me; they’re doing a ghost story series this winter called *Winter’s Tales* and they’ve asked me to adapt it into a radio play,¹ but I’m also thinking of turning “Heat Lightning” into a play.

JM In the short-story version of *Someday*, the narrator, Andrew, is both observer and participant in the action. Is there a relationship between Andrew’s reactions as you describe them in the stories, and the ones that the actual audience of the plays might ideally have to the situations, at least on an emotional level?

DHT I can’t really answer that. You know, there’s the old saying about never blame the writer for what his characters say or do. I’ve written the characters’ actions as best perceived by me in that situation. I’m not skilled enough a writer to estimate what the audience will feel, should feel, or any of that sort of stuff. So, I can’t answer that.

ST Do you have any hopes about what they’ll feel?

DHT My whole philosophy as a writer is to create interesting characters, with an interesting story, and to take the audience on an interesting journey. That is the simplest explanation of what I do. People like Daniel David Moses and Tomson Highway, who have, like, Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in English Lit, they create what I seriously consider art, where every story, every page has three or four different metaphors, different lines of understanding, or subtext. I just see myself as an old-fashioned storyteller. That’s all I want to do, tell a good story. And if I do that well enough, if my characters are interesting enough, I’ll achieve something with the audience. I mean, I started off doing a lot of humour because for some reason I’m very good at it, and people like it, and I always have fun with it, and it’s a great rush to

see the audience laughing where I want them to laugh and to tickle them and stuff like that. But then with *Someday*, I learned the power of tears and of darker emotions and sadness, and at the end of *Someday*, when I saw my audience literally crying when Janice walked out, I was sitting there and I'm going, this is a completely different feeling, but as the creator, it's as powerful and as intriguing a feeling as the laughter is. It was an amazing experience for me.

JM In a couple of the essays in *Furious Observations* you talk about some of the reaction, and the controversy, that greeted *alterNatives* (Talonbooks, 2000) in Vancouver when it was first performed; and in one of them, "White Like Me," you talk about how it was felt that so far you'd only created "nice" characters.

DHT "Sympathetic" characters. Yes, I'd had a bunch of actors and people who had seen a lot of my plays saying that I'm such an easy-going guy and a nice guy that even though my characters are sympathetic or understandable, I'd never written a bad or nasty character. And I sat back and I said, "Yeah, I guess you're right, that's true." I was looking at *Someday* and *Only Drunks*, and of course the comedies, and they're all pretty likeable so I thought, ok, that's a fair enough criticism. So I sat down and I thought well, let's just throw everything to the wind; we'll take a whole bunch of different issues that I'd wanted to touch on but which are not worthy of a whole play themselves, and so I threw everything into the pot, and came up with the casserole of *alterNatives*, where I wanted to make all the characters deeply flawed, equally unsympathetic, and so they all had faults within them, you know. The irony was that the very nature of the flaws, for those not knowing what to expect or what to look for, prejudiced the audience. There are six characters. The play portrays an interracial relationship between a young Ojibway writer and an older Jewish woman who's a professor of Native Lit. She wants him to write the Great Canadian Aboriginal Novel, and he wants to write science fiction. They have a dinner party because they've just moved in together, and she invites her two best friends and takes the liberty of inviting his two former best friends. And that's where things happen because her best friends are these two politically correct white vegetarians, and his former friends are these two politically motivated, aggressive people who call themselves the AlterNative Warriors. And I put them in an environment where the flaws of the white characters were that they are very politically correct,

very curious about Native people but often saying the wrong thing. They had an almost submissive but very accommodating type of flaw whereas the Native characters' flaw was being very aggressive, being a pain in the ass, to the point that everything comes down to a political or social statement. Basically, because their flaws were physically and mentally stronger than the white flaws, it looked like the Indians were picking on the white people, although the very fact that the Native people were picking on the White people was part of their flaw. When a Native friend of mine saw that, she said, "Is that what you really think of Native people?" (*Laughter*) Then a reviewer in Vancouver, and whoever made the bomb threat, basically thought it was "witless white-bashing," making fun of white people. So, yeah, I was damned if I do and damned if I don't.²

JM It's interesting if you look at Michelle in that play, and her particular brand of political correctness, and compare her with somebody like The Warrior Who Never Sleeps in *The Buz'gem Blues* (Talonbooks, 2002).

DHT But Michelle is more realistic. I mean, the comedies are just like farces or celebrations of silliness. I've met more Michelles, although you do see Warriors Who Never Sleep: they do exist out there, but I've kind of filtered them through my tongue-in-cheek, whereas Michelle is filtered through my consciousness.

JM With hindsight, I get a sense of her providing a kind of profile of the person who made the bomb threat, who might think, "I'm a Michelle-like person, that's why I'm here watching this play about Native issues, so why are you laughing at me? You're not supposed to be making fun of me! You're supposed to be making fun of somebody else."

DHT Yeah, the more right-wing people (*Laughter*).

JM We've talked a little bit here about stereotypes and things like that. Is it a stereotype or a cliché to ask about oral tradition if I'm approaching you as a writer from a First Nations tradition?

DHT I grew up in an environment of sitting around and telling stories out in front of my grandparents' house. There was a big old willow tree and a couple of chairs and a firepit and we'd sit there. I'm not talking oral tradition in terms of Nanabush legends or "Legends-of-my-people" or that type of thing, but more stories about funny things that had happened in the community, just talking late into the night—I think that's where I got my concept of oral narrative and also the structure of

humour, and the structure of how to write, because, you know, a good story has a simple structure. It has a set-up, it has the middle, and it has the ending. And that is the basis of any play, any novel, any essay, anything. A beginning, a middle, and an end. And it sounds so simple, but I'm sure you guys know as writers, that oftentimes that's the hardest thing to nail into a student's head. Where does your story start? Where does it end, and how does it get there? And so, by deconstructing any good story or any good joke that's told by a half-decent joke-teller, you have the structure you need for, I'd say, 80 percent of all good writing. Boy, it almost sounds like I know what I'm talking about. (*Laughter*) Can I get one of those honorary degrees?

JM Can you recall your first experience of meeting First Nations literature of any kind in print?

DHT It's hard to say, that would probably be in my early 20s, the early 1980s, I remember coming across one of W.P. Kinsella's books and being amazed that somebody was actually writing about Reserve life. Other than that, Native literature was a slow drip into my consciousness. Hard to give you details. By the late 1980s, I was swimming in the stuff.

JM Any writers whom you're reading these days whose work you'd like to comment on?

DHT I'm a huge fan of early Sherman Alexie, though I think his work has become a little too serious and dark, unlike a lot of his early work. Leslie Marmon Silko is very good, loved her *Almanac of the Dead*. And of course there's Tom King.

JM Your non-fiction output is considerable. Who are the non-fiction writers whose work you like or whose style you particularly enjoy?

DHT The one that immediately comes to mind is the non-fiction work of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I always found his various collections of humorous/serious essays very interesting. Isaac Asimov's book *Gold*, which is a collection of his best short stories and best essays on Science Fiction were interesting too.

JM There's something that comes up in a lot of your work. In all the different genres, there's a test or quiz as a motif. Often in some of your essays there's a quiz to see if you're a hip indigenous person. The characters in the plays sometimes quiz each other, and there's that anecdote in your essay "Pretty Like a White Boy" about the child who offers you tea as a test of your "Indianness" [*Funny, You Don't Look Like One*, Theytus, 1996]. What do you like about this device?

DHT It does pop up, not as much any more, but yes, it used to and I guess it's just a device to stimulate conversation or stimulate the advancement of an idea, so I think it's just a process that I used to embrace when I was stuck. Actually, I shouldn't say that, because in "Pretty Like a White Boy" the tea thing, I wasn't stuck, that was a valid observation, that happened, but I don't know . . . I'll have to ponder that.

JM What does it mean when a white guy like me scores well on a Hip Indigenous culture quiz?

DHT It means that you've been paying attention. Trust me, most natives wouldn't get that. They couldn't remember what Kirk's name was in the "Paradise Syndrome" episode of Star Trek. I mean, that sort of stuff is just fun to sit down and put together; there's absolutely no validity to it. I'm just sitting around thinking of all the obscure Native pop culture stuff I could come up with in my head; you know, what was The Lone Ranger's real name? John Reid. You know, stuff like that. And what was the real name of Jay Silverheels, the actor who played Tonto? Harold Smith. I soak that stuff up. Did you read the one about the Seven C's of Colonization? I'm a firm believer that God, the Creator, Mother Nature, whatever, is a far funnier writer than anything I could ever create. And my only talent is being able to acknowledge that, and read it, because in the essays very little, none of that stuff, I've made up. It's all real! And my only talent is recognizing that, and bringing it up. Not many people realize the humour in the fact that Pocahontas's boyfriend was named John Smith. Would you let your daughter go out with a man who calls himself John Smith? (*Laughter*)

JM I'd like to look a bit more closely at this issue of cultural and cross-cultural knowledge. One of the most disturbing moments in *alterNatives* occurs when Angel asks Colleen to translate a number of English words into Ojibway. She rhymes the words off, and then he says, "How do you say the same words in Hebrew or Yiddish?" and she's stumped. The suggestion is that she's trying to use Ojibway culture to fill the gap, to compensate for her lack of connection with her own roots.

DHT Because she's what, third-generation secular, she says.

JM Yeah. But, to be purely speculative, what if she had been able to answer in Hebrew or Yiddish? What would her knowledge of Ojibway have meant in that case?

DHT I think the fact that she didn't, and Angel knew that, is why he asked, and so probably if she could've rhymed it off, he wouldn't have asked

that question. The interesting thing about that, though, is a really interesting discussion I had with some people around the time when *alterNatives* was originally produced, in Kincardine, in Ontario. That weekend in Toronto there was an ATHE conference, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education; it's an American and Canadian thing, and they were having a big yearly conference in Toronto of all places. So there are three hundred university theatre professors in Toronto, and three of them I'd met in my travels in the States. I was invited to come and meet them for drinks, and they said, "You know, we'd really like to go and see some native plays. Is anything happening up here?" Because, as you know, Canada's 15 years ahead of anything in the States in terms of Native theatre. And I said, "Ironically, one of my plays is being produced an hour and a half due west of here." So they skipped out for 24 hours, and came out to Kincardine. One of them was Jewish. They watched the play, and the American one basically said that she loved it, but she had philosophical problems with the fact that Colleen didn't know any of the Yiddish or Hebrew, because she says, "Where I come from in the States, everybody I know who's Jewish can speak some Yiddish or Hebrew." Yet, the woman who was the actress, Sharon Birnbaum, was vehemently arguing: "Well, maybe, but this is Canada, and I don't know Yiddish, I don't know Hebrew, most of my friends don't." So she says it's a viable thing up here. So it was an interesting little juxtapositioning over the usage of Yiddish and Hebrew in a Native play. *Oy vey!* (*Laughter*)

JM I was listening to something on the CBC a few months ago, an interview with Nancy Huston, the novelist, who lives in France and writes in French, although she's an anglophone who comes from Calgary. She spoke at some length about being what she calls a "false bilingual"; she's somebody who, as opposed to being someone who grew up with one parent who spoke English and French and just grew up naturally having two languages, she acquired the second language and culture as an adult, by choice, and so a "true" bilingual or "true" bicultural is somebody that this just happens to, so you're always a false bilingual if you learn a language by choice. Now, some of your work looks closely at non-natives who have chosen to learn Aboriginal languages; I'm thinking of somebody like Colleen, or somebody like Summer in *The Buz'gem Blues* . . .

DHT Who speaks three languages?

- JM Yeah. There's that line where Ted/Warrior Who Never Sleeps says to Summer, "What could possibly be untrue about speaking Cree?" Is this "false bilingualism" or false biculturalism only a problem when it eclipses "real" identity, as in Summer's case before she talks to Marianne?
- DHT I have no idea, because I don't understand that. (*Laughter*) It's a little too academic for me; it's beyond my simple rez beginnings.
- JM I guess I'm thinking about the difference between the way we respond to somebody like Colleen and the way we respond to somebody like Dale, for example, who's kind of benevolently ignorant, and who finds at the end of the play, when he and Angel sit down . . .
- DHT They bond over science fiction and moose.
- JM So there's that contrast between Dale, who's curious, as you've said, but doesn't really explore these things, and Colleen, who explores . . .
- DHT Who overexplores and appropriates.
- JM Are there lines to be drawn here between exploring, overexploring, and appropriating? How clear are they?
- DHT Oh, I'm sure there are lines to be drawn. The whole cultural appropriation issue is one that's been burning up for fifteen years and I think everybody has their own perception of where that line is. Everybody does . . . I have. W.P. Kinsella has, everybody does, and so, yeah, there are lines there, and in my characters, all my characters have different lines, you know. I'm sure Colleen would hate Summer. If she ever met Summer, she would think Summer was the worst practitioner of that kind of appropriation ever, but she would not see it in herself.
- ST Do you like your characters?
- DHT Yeah. Yeah, I do. I like my characters. You know, it was so funny, a lot of my friends in Toronto think there's a character based on me in every one of my plays and almost everybody is convinced that Rodney is me. I remember seeing a production of *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, and watching Rodney, and I remember just thinking, My God, if I was in a room with Rodney for an hour I'd want to kill him. (*Laughter*) He's so high-energy, inane, and so full of pop culture that you want to give him a valium. But then I think of something like *alterNatives*, where I don't know if I would get along with Bobby or Yvonne. There's a nasty edge to them; they enjoy inflicting chaos. And so obviously, that's the one where I was trying to create unsympathetic characters and I think maybe I succeeded! (*Laughter*) Yet again, I

remember, it's so interesting, when that play came out, I had so many people come up to me and say, oh, I know Bobby through and through.

JM Your third collection of essays is called *Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*. What are you going to be next time around?

DHT Futile! It comes out in March. *Futile Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*. (*Laughter*) It's *Futile*, and then possibly *Fabulous* or *Fantastic*. All the F-words you can come up with.³

ST In mixed company, with children. (*Laughter*)

DHT Yeaahhh. *Feminist Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway!* (*Laughter*)

ST You're bound to get that honorary doctorate.

DHT I was actually offered one about three years ago, but for some reason it just evaporated. Sigh. Oh well.

JM But your name has become a recognized pejorative in some circles.

DHT "That Drew Hayden Taylor Métis Half-breed Wannabe." (*Laughter*) Thank you, thank you. I'm here all week; try the veal.

NOTES

- 1 "Ice Screams" was broadcast as a radio play 25 January, 2004 on *In Performance* on CBC Radio 2.
- 2 In 2000, an anonymous caller threatened to bomb Vancouver's Firehall Arts Centre in response to the perceived racism of *alterNatives*. For more details on the incident and the critical response to the play, see the essay "White Like Me" in *Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (Theytus, 2002), 86–88.
- 3 *Futile Observations* appeared in August 2004