

Questions & Answers with the Author

- What is the all-encompassing theme that you intended when writing this play?

Dang, this is a difficult question. If I were to boil this down to a single theme it would be: What are the best ways to fight racism, injustice, and inequality without amplifying the very problem we are trying to solve? The answer that speaks to me is Dr. MLK, Jr.'s approach of organized, aggressive, non-violent protest with a heavy dose of love and compassion. But is this enough? Brie would argue it is not, Addy would argue it is, I would argue it is (and that it is the only thing that has any hope of working), but is it? We have to solve this problem. I believe that violent protest always leads to more problems; I believe that aggressive non-violent protest, non-violent words and actions that channel our anger/grief/frustration/rage, an inclusive movement that demonstrates the ends via the means is our best path forward. I also recognize that the people who will bear the majority of the blows, who will be most tested and who will shoulder the greatest cost, will be communities of color. It is not my decision to make; the play leaves each audience member with the responsibility of making this decision. No protest is ever acceptable to society-at-large; but I would argue that aggressive non-violent protest bends the arc of history towards justice – that is the choice I will make. I hope it is the right one.

- Who did you intend for your audience to be?

The intent was for the play to challenge and entertain everyone in the audience, regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, or political leanings.

A good deal of the humor in the play has an extra dimension for a Native audience; but I tried to present it in such a way that it was funny for a non-Native as well (e.g. "...but I do like to snag, EHHH!!!"). The intent of that line is to be funny for a Native, but it is intelligible by context (and hopefully funny) to a non-Native; and gives them some insight into some modern Native vocabulary and humor. I am non-Native so the only way for me to do this in an honest fashion is to write what I know – from the perspective of a non-Native deeply embedded in a Native community with a strong set of Native friends.

For non-Native audience members the play is meant to give them an experience that Native and communities of color deal with all the time – the desecration of their sacred spaces, the disturbance and abduction of their human remains, and their loved ones being taken through police violence.

I hoped to challenge non-white audience members, and the political left, to examine their own biases. We are subject to forces larger than ourselves, but where does responsibility for one's own actions begin and end? In what ways are communities of color themselves racist? Complicit

in their own disenfranchisement? The play does not answer these questions, but hopefully it leaves the audience member asking themselves to answer it.

And for everyone, back to the main theme: what are the best ways to fight racism, injustice, and inequality without amplifying the very problem we are trying to solve?

- How many of these characters were based on real people within your life? Who were/are they to you? Who is Addy to you in real life?

I mostly addressed this in the other set of questions. Addy is based, in large part, after a longtime ex-girlfriend, with characteristics of memorable faculty members I have known on Haskell campus added in. She has an M.A. in Anthropology, and a J.D. in Law with a Tribal Law Certificate, and considerable experience with NAGPRA and issues pertaining to the repatriation of Native human remains. She was an excellent resource for discussion, obviously. The sense of mono-no-aware that comes when her and Luke last see one another, is one by-product, I think, of the ending of any heartfelt relationship.

- Do you think this play would have a different effect on people at the time that you wrote it compared to now?

I did not finish the final draft of the play until the months after the seismic 2016 election. It changed me, and it changed the play. In that sense it is fairly current.

- In the moment between Kaleb and Brie where they confess their feelings and give their heart to one another, what tradition does this come from? Have you seen this done before?

This just comes from my imagination. I had a crush on an incredible woman, had a wonderful day with her, and this is what I wanted to say to her. I'm glad I didn't; it would have aborted a beautiful friendship. It was all just a daydream, but I caught it on paper as best I could.

- Is all of the information that Luke discussed when explaining his background true for you?

Yes, I believe so. In the last couple of years I have learned my heretofore mysterious biological ancestry (as I suspected, European mutt).

- What is the significance of John's stage directions throughout this entire play? He is often given specific, subtle stage directions that the normal audience member may not notice. Why is this important to the storyline?

John changes more than anyone else in the story (with the possible exception of Brie). Most of the more subtle stage directions for John are trying to mark and motivate this change. One of the things that is true of some (emphasis on some) Native students is a tendency to deep, silent thinking. Sometimes it is a challenge for me to give that thinking space. John is a much deeper person than his external persona indicates. Sometimes he gets specific stage directions to emphasize his external persona (usually used as comic relief), other times he gets specific stage

directions to emphasize the depths of his thinking and of his character, as well as mark milestones in his progression from who we was at the start of the play to who he is at the end.

- What did you intend to do with the arguments in the van scenes? How did you keep it interesting staging-wise?

I have addressed this to some extent in some of the other questions. The main purpose of the arguments in the van are to give the audience an opportunity to observe, and therefore participate, in a discussion between an extremely intelligent, ethnically diverse group of friends on the topics of race, racism, white privilege, and personal responsibility.

The characters are expressing nuanced, challenging ideas and positions that do not cleave to party lines, or the positions of clearly defined interest groups. They are saying things they would not be allowed, or in some cases would not allow themselves, to say in a more public setting. Ultimately, the actors investment in the ideas and their passion for expressing them is the best way to keep this scene interesting. This is not just an argument. They are really listening to one another, thinking very deeply, and trying to figure out exactly what it is they do believe. I am trying (and failing and failing! I have written and re-written this scene more than any other by far) to make this sociopolitical conversation at its very best. Making an argument for how we need to reshape the future, and how we need to reframe the discussion to reshape the future. Advocating for political engagement and self-alignment along economic boundaries (while maintaining an awareness of privilege granted by citizenship and skin color, at the same time recognizing our collective failure to take responsibility for our own actions).

This scene requires a lot out of the actors. They need to know their lines perfectly, and they are not easy lines to remember (hell, they aren't even easy lines to read with a script in front of you); but I believe they can be read well. I have read them all out loud a hundred times or more. I have included stress italics as suggestions for the actor. It is important not to go too fast, with the words stumbling over themselves as they leave the mouth.

All said and done these scenes go much more quickly than one might think (time it and see). Jokes, comic relief, squirrels, and gas stations break the discussion up into manageable chunks. Hopefully, the intrinsic complexity of the ideas and the positions, and the actors impassioned investment in those ideas, keep the audience engaged throughout.

One could try some experimental things wherein the person speaking moved around the stage, possibly even breaking the fourth wall to speak to the audience, before turning their attention back to the van. It might just confuse the audience and distract from the intellectual complexity though, I'm not sure.

- What do you think was written in Luke's letter?

He tells Addy what has happened, where everyone has gone, where he has gone (to the wetlands to bury the skull and that he will then go home), then, in a fey mood, adds a postscript that makes her eyes well with tears when the memory strikes her, even decades after the events in the play.

- What do you think happened with John's arrest? Was there a struggle as well?

John is to be questioned, but it is unknown whether he is ever arrested. No struggle – he is scheduled for deposition, that is all. He was never arrested in connection with the events. The police do not know he was involved except that he is a known associate of the others, and a member of the HBC. We do not know what he tells them, nor what happens to him. I like to think he is going to be okay no matter what happens. I like to think he tells them the truth, spits it in their eye in fact. That he goes to jail, but he writes letters and he reads, and he gives interviews from jail, as does Addy. That they get out, they go back to school, or go straight into social justice and near-celebrity advocacy, that they write and they write and they write, that they think, that they get people to the polls; and that they raise families and take care of themselves and the people around them.

- Where do you think Luke buried the skull? Do you know?

The Haskell-Baker wetlands, South of Haskell campus, in the path of the proposed South Lawrence Trafficway. There is enough in the script to know that, but exactly where no one except Luke knows. And since he dies no one will ever know where it is buried – most of that is covered in his soliloquy.

- Is there significance to Luke's shovel? He is constantly using it to help himself. Does this mean anything specific?

Not really, just a fun prop that's easy to obtain, that helps convey to the audience where Luke is (the wetlands) and what he has just done (buried the skull). Mud spattered boots and clothes, cardboard cutouts etc of marsh plants and such would all be nice, but a person could pull it off with a shovel, I think. Also, a death scene where you get to use the shove for support and to assist your collapse sounds like a lot of fun!

- Did you plan for the drum group to be on the stage for the entirety of the play? If not, then where were they positioned?

Everything here depends on the specifics of the stage and the venue. I left this as non-specific as possible to give the troupe as much freedom as possible to do whatever needed to be done. In my imagination the drum group was in front of and below the stage throughout the entire performance.

- The stage directions are vague in some areas, like in the car scenes, but extremely specific in others, like the final scenes with Addy and Brie. What was your reasoning behind this? Where did you learn this writing style?

I had not really noticed that, previously. There is a lot going on with Addy and Brie, they are communicating on so many levels, there is so much emotional yo-yo-ing happening, I did not think it was enough to just script their written words but felt the need to script some of the non-verbal communication as well. This is possibly over-prescriptive on my part. Some of this I may

have been better off just trusting the actresses playing Brie and Addy to know their characters. I'm not sure, really.

Most of the time, in the other scenes, the emotional tone and the emotional state of the characters is more consistent so less stage directions is sufficient. Both Addy and Brie, however, have sweeping emotional changes back and forth and forth and back again, all in the same scene.

Where did I learn this writing style? This is not the first thing I have ever written, but it is the first play I have ever written. To prepare I read a lot internet blogs on playwriting, books on playwriting, and I read plays. There is a lot of good information out there, some of it contradictory, but even then it is worth thinking about. I did my best to implement a personal style in a consistent fashion across the script; but that is a hard thing to do, and was imperfectly done.

- What was the first thing that you did when you began writing this play?

It started as a screenplay. I downloaded Celtx and just started writing. Wondered if it had a better chance of production if it was a play; thought about it, and decided that the restricted character format of theatre would allow me to focus on the central themes and ideas. Opened up a new file and started writing. Then I went to the library and checked out books on playwriting.

- How did you know that you were finished?

Readers Theatre in Wichita, KS, hosted a staged reading of the play in November of 2016, I believe. The 2016 election had me thinking already. I attended the rehearsals and the performance with script and red pen in hand, and took as many notes as I could. I then spent a few dozen hours revising the script. Mostly it was the road conversation scenes and the scene between Addy and Brie that needed the most revision. Once I could read through those scenes several times in a row without feeling the need to change anything I felt like I was done.

- What was your process when writing this play?

For nearly a decade before writing the play I took notes of funny things my students have said, and funny imaginary conversations and events that have come to me. Then, for several years I spent a couple of hours a day, most days, drinking coffee and writing. Sometimes I wrote on the play, other times I did ancillary writing and writing exercises, meant to inform my understanding of the characters and the story. I wrote complete backstories for each of the characters, for instance. I supported the writing with reading as best I could: I tried to keep up with current events, I re-read a great deal of MLK's writings, I read plays and books and newspaper articles. I had a group of friends do a staged reading of the first scene (this was fun and encouraging). I took lots of notes every time the play was ever read, and then incorporated that feedback into revisions.

- Do you intend to write any more?

Yes, I am currently writing a novel (described in more detail in one of the other questions). I have an idea for another play; maybe I will take that on after the novel, but that's too far in the future to predict. God willing and the creek don't rise, I guess.

- During Luke's dying scene, how did you see this physically planned out with the blood?

The blood is unnecessary. It could probably be done with blood capsules and a little sleight of hand timed with a cough, but it is unnecessary.

- How old is everyone?

Kaleb = early/mid 30s

Brie = mid-late 20s

Luke = early-mid 40s

Sol = early 30s

John = early-mid 20s

Addy = early 40s

Students at Haskell are often non-traditional, and arrive at university from a lot of directions. The backstories for these characters are all fleshed out in ancillary writings I used as preparation for the script itself.

- What inspired your passions for Native American justice?

Working at Haskell and spending so much time around Native people. After a while, if one is paying attention, it becomes very clear exactly how much injustice there is to push back against.

- Why did you include mixed characters, specifically half black and half Native American?

Mixed ethnicity is very common in the Haskell student body. Culture and identity are complicated, and becoming ever more so. We are familiar with the phrase Black Lives Matter, and some of the underlying issues that it represents; Sol serves as a bridge to remind us that Native communities are also subject to police brutality. Additionally, I did not want the play to devolve into an us vs them dynamic, but instead wanted it to represent a nuanced conversation about race and identity. This is easier with a multiracial group of friends, and easier still with the

addition of multiracial characters who have an internal motivation to see multiple sides of every question.

- How did you learn of the Bush family stealing the skull of Geronimo?

I cannot even remember! It was a long long time ago. The idea for the story came to me probably at least 10 years before I wrote it.

- What is the significance of the Earth Spirits? How does this tie into Native American culture?

This is a tough one. I am personally drawn to fantasy, science fiction, and I am always always a fan of the occult/supernatural and the fey. Variants (emphasis on variants) of the Earth Spirits depicted in the play are common in a number of Native cultures; but they are represented in the mythology of a great many non-Native cultures as well. These could just as easily be proto-Celtic Earth Spirits as Native ones. The inspiration for these are to some extent from stories my Apache friend, Erik, was telling me, late night reading of Shakespeare (Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Hamlet, in particular), and a childhood full of ghost stories and fairy tales.

The supernatural component of the early scenes of Act III seem like a natural byproduct of it being nighttime, a graveyard, grave robbing, and Luke being so close to death (Kaleb and Sol as well, little do they know it). Three of them are at the door of death; it makes sense to me that the veil would lift a little.

Perhaps most importantly, it is also flipping the script on the "Indian Graveyard" trope. Often in fiction to disturb an Indian graveyard is to bring disaster down upon one's self or family (watch the movie Jeremiah Johnson for a memorable example of this). In my mind the desecration of any graveyard is a heinous act, whether it be a Native, non-Native graveyard, the Haskell wetlands (where a number of Native children are buried), or otherwise. I wanted to drive this point home from every direction -- this is not okay -- not okay to put a road through the wetlands, not okay to have disturbed Geronimo's grave (and countless other Native burial places), and not okay to disturb a non-Native's grave either.

- What is the significance of the drumming at the beginning and end of each scene? What types of drums are they? What kind of rhythm are they? Is the style of drumming open to interpretation or is it specific to Native American culture? Does the drumming change within each tribe of Native Americans?

This is one of those questions that would not need to be asked by a Native audience. Drumming is part and parcel of Native culture; although each tribe and region has its own style. Styles of drumming and the associated singing are very specific to each of the vast array of Native cultures (notice the plural □ there are more distinct Native cultures than I could possibly name).

For an excellent example, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oP-bC7QUa4>

Drumming and singing is so spiritual and prayerful for many Natives that there is no way for a non-Native to navigate it properly. The best way, in my opinion, to deal with this is to secure the assistance of a Native drum group similar to the one in the video, integrate them into the heart of the production, and work closely with them to choose the proper styles of drumming and song choices for each of the scenes in the play.

To be clear, however, what I was envisioning is similar to what you see in the above video. Five or more Natives striking a single large drum just off stage. In my imagination they were in front of the stage to the left, right, or in the orchestra pit.

- If Luke is modeled after yourself, what is the significance of Luke dying of cancer?

Luke is very much modeled on myself, with a few significant changes (cancer, to my knowledge anyway, being one of them). The major reason for the cancer is to properly motivate why an otherwise intelligent, responsible faculty member would do something as epically stupid as go on a roadtrip to dig up a grave. And to also motivate why he would, once the time came, be unable to stop the students and Kaleb from following through with it. If Luke had been in full health, given how I imagine him, this chain of events would not have been possible.

- What was your thought process when creating the set and staging of your play?

I wanted to keep the set and the staging simple; primarily to increase its chances of production (not possible to emphasize this enough). As best I could I tried to leave as much of these decisions up to the Director and the Actors; only providing set and staging instructions when it was otherwise important to character development and the logic of what was happening on stage.

- In the van scenes, how did you picture or imagine those scenes playing out in front of an audience?

In my imagination it was just four chairs set at an angle to the audience, possibly with a bit of cardboard cutout to indicate the van, etc (if it did not otherwise distract from what was happening between the characters).

If the actors really, reallllly know their lines the lengthy and difficult bits of dialogue do not take a lot of stage time. (That said, I have found that in staged readings most actors rush through these lines, ignore pauses, and generally rush too much.) There are several comedic lines and interactions, scene breaks, etc, to break up what would otherwise be a heavy stream of dialogue.

This set of scenes was one of the most difficult in the play to write, and I think it is important. How often do most people have the opportunity to watch or participate in a private conversation between friends about race, racism, and police brutality? Almost never. Most of these conversations happen in ethnic and socioeconomic echo chambers; or they happen online or in the public sphere where the public nature of the discussion fundamentally distorts it □ people become too timid or too angry, too inflexible, spend too much time shouting rather than listening, never stray from talking points or party positions when they are discussing something publically. This scene is one of the things I love about theatre □ it gives the public an opportunity to look in on what would otherwise be a private conversation between friends about a difficult topic.

- What inspired you to write this show?

First, I thought it had the makings of a good story □ the premise promises drama, conflict, and humor. Second, if I wrote the story maybe no one would actually have to do it, hah! (something I would consider intrinsically wrong even if arguably fair). Third, it flips so many scripts I feel like it gives audience members a genuine opportunity to examine their own opinions and perspectives, and gives them an opportunity to change (which is, to my mind, one of the true powers of theatre □ not only do the characters evolve, but if it is well done then so does the audience). Lastly, I felt like the discussion surrounding Black Lives Matter was far too academic, far too political, and not nearly personal enough. Skull for a Skull makes police brutality personal. Visceral. Emotional. It does the same for the disposition/disturbance/repatriation of human remains (still a very large problem for many Native communities). And gives that experience to the audience, many of whom are likely to be middle/upper class white people with little to no personal or family experience with police brutality; and thus their/our perspective can benefit from using our imagination.

Ultimately, I wanted to entertain, I wanted to inspire, and I wanted to transform the audience members. I don't know whether I accomplished this or not, but I did the best I could do.

- How has being involved at Haskell University changed your perspective?

Oh gosh, five bajillion ways. It has been formative in every fashion. My entire career has been at Haskell; answering this would be like answering how university, or high school, or knowing my mother has changed my perspective. Some concrete changes, however, include: much greater awareness of social inequality facing contemporary Native cultures, greater awareness and appreciation of the diversity of Native cultures, greater awareness of the resilience, strength, and endurance of Native cultures; greater awareness of the extremes of racism directed at Native cultures in pop culture and American culture at large. I have met some of the most amazing people on the planet at Haskell. I have excellent mentors there, and have made some excellent opponents as well; it's the whole package. The Haskell Boxing Club, the members and the coaches, have been very important to me as well. They have treated me like family, and I have learned and benefited a great deal from that.

- Have any of your students influenced the creation of the characters in your play?

Absolutely. Kaleb is modeled in large part by my good friend, Erik Riley; he is Apache and was the Head Coach of the Haskell Boxing Club for a very long time. Brie is in part an amalgamation of many of my students with a strong vein of my (non-Native) cousin Bridget. She is a lifelong activist, hyper-intelligent, very outspoken, and an inspiration. Sol and John are drawn from combinations and different characteristics of many of my students and co-workers. Some of the lines of dialogue from the play come from actual student roadtrips I have taken with various of my High Power Rocketry teams. Addy is a combination of some of my coworkers and my ex-girlfriend, Ashly. I have apologized profusely to all of them.

- What social or political factors influenced the themes that you explored in the show?

Black Lives Matter, the South Lawrence Trafficway, and the election of Trump. I rewrote several scenes in the aftermath of the 2016 election, because I am tired of making space for bullshit and accommodating perspectives that are harmful to communities of color, the poor, and the most vulnerable in our society.

- What were you trying to accomplish by sharing this story?

I have addressed this, to some extent, in some of the previous questions. In addition to those reasons, I wanted to share some of the beauty of the Haskell experience with the world. I wanted people to be able to see the beauty of contemporary Native people □ they are so resilient, so funny, and so brilliant! I wanted to show people that it is not an issue of feeling guilty or apologizing for what has happened in the past, but rather an issue of taking responsibility for what is happening right NOW. I wanted to inspire people to do something about it; inspire them to examine their own perspective and evolve it; inspire them to change for the better. And inspire myself to do the same.

- What is the significance of shadow boxing?

Nothing! Boxers are obsessed with boxing. They are always shadowboxing. If there is anything more to it it would be to remind the audience where these characters come from; remind them how tough they are, how strong they are, and the bonds between them.

- What exact year did you imagine this show being set?

2010-2013 or so. In the last few years after cell phones came out, but before the South Lawrence Trafficway was built.

- Are there any themes, elements, aspects of your ideas that run through your other works in addition to Skull for a Skull?

Yes, apparently there is. I am currently writing a novel that is, in some sense, a metaphor that illustrates the importance of Indigenous culture and traditional knowledge to our larger culture, their strength and resilience, and the challenges and importance of Minority Serving Institutions. It is kind of like Harry Potter goes to Space. Apparently, I can't seem to escape the environment in which I have been marinating.

- Are there any biographical elements of your life that relate to the play in any manner? Why did you write this play at this particular time in your life? What were the

social/political/national circumstances at the time of you writing this play that may have influenced this script?

Yes, many; a breakup, student roadtrips, boxing, long dog walks through graveyards at night, lots of reading and thinking about white privilege, police brutality, and my own political perspectives, my interactions with thousands of students and Native faculty, and long conversations with my buddy Eric.

I chose to write it when I did, because that was when I was ready to write it. I spent five years writing a sci-fi novel that turned out to be total garbage (even the second draft was garbage). I learned a lot from that experience, however. Writing is a difficult craft and takes a lot of practice. I simply was not ready to write this play any time before I actually started it. When I did start it, however, it was fascinating to me how the issues of the day seemed to be percolating up through the story and the characters seemingly without any effort from myself. These issues persist; and will, unfortunately, continue to persist for some time. My hope is that, at some point, Skull for a Skull will get some stage time. It is imperfect, but what it says is worth saying and, in my opinion, needs to be said.