Conclusion

Drew Hayden Taylor’s plays reveal how for the Natives theatre has become an effective political tool to (re)present their identity and culture which have been systematically repressed and eroded by the devastating colonial policies of assimilation. While questioning the underlying Euro-Canadian dominant methodologies and assumptions, Taylor re-visions the image of the Natives in Canada. Native issues of culture, identity and self-determination are explored, documented and discussed on a platform where non-Natives and Natives alike can come together and communicate with, or learn from, each other. Through his powerful plays Taylor on the one hand affirms the culture and identity of the Natives and on the other makes the non-Natives recognize their false assumptions about the Natives. Therefore, Native theatre, in Taylor’s hands in particular, has become a ‘theatre of transformation’ or a ‘forum for Native voice,’ as it offers the Natives a means through which to explore colonization and fight for self-determination. Taylor’s overtly political plays are expressions of political resistance against the colonial policies of the Canadian government towards the Natives. Even his other plays which are not overtly political deal with political issues like assimilation, authenticity, aboriginal stereotypes, loss of culture and identity, appropriation, hybridity and political correctness.

When in 1980s Taylor entered the arena of Native theatre, the plays being produced then, such as, Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, though comic at one level, did not present very positive images of Native culture. However, Taylor took upon himself the task of exploring urgent Native issues through delightful comedies full of wit, satire and humour though not
completely dismissing or discounting the anger and despair one finds in other Native performances. Deliberately using a non-accusatory and lighter tone, Taylor has certainly helped Native theatre to get rid of the growing charge of the overly strident fixation of the Native playwrights with the tragic and dysfunctional. His humorous approach to Native issues has lessened the danger of non-Native audience or readers disconnecting themselves from Native stories.

The Native issues Taylor raises may not be entirely new, but the method of approaching and voicing the issues are entirely unique. Taylor’s close relationship with his Native family and community and his constant awareness of his mixed Native identity along with the inevitable influence of and relationship with dominant culture, due to his white colour, have influenced both his aesthetics and sense of Native identity and culture. Despite the obvious influences of the Western theatre devices, Taylor’s plays vividly and emphatically demonstrate a distinction from Western theatrical constructs, with minimum use of the elements of conflict, resolution, and catharsis and the role of a protagonist and antagonist. He uses the Native storytelling approach for the construction of his plays that both de-emphasizes conflict and focuses upon a community centered story with no central single character taking central position in the play. Due to lack of central conflict or character, Taylor, like other earlier Native playwrights, had to experience resistance from non-Native theatre companies in Canada (as Taylor reports in his commentaries and essays). Conflict does exist in Native communities but it is discouraged for the survival of the community. Thus, despite the conflicting situations and characters in Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock, alterNatives, In a World Created by a Drunken God, Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth and 400 Kilometres, Taylor through the use of humour, satire and irony keeps it at minimum.
Similarly, his plays largely do away with the concept of heroes or villains and focus upon a group or community. Instead of using one or two characters to drive the action of the play, Taylor often employs a small group of individuals, having equal weight in the story, to explore the Native issues in greater complexity by presenting multiple point of views. Most of his plays such as *alterNatives*, *In a World Created by a Drunken God*, *Someday*, *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* and *Girl Who Loved her Horses* are open-ended without any final resolution or reconciliation, thus, they leave the audience, both Native and non-Native, alike to think about the issues raised in the plays and draw their own conclusions. His plays initiate not only an open debate but also an inner debate, probably the best example is his *In a World Created by a Drunken God*. He starts his plays from a Native situation and in the end he looks at larger humanistic and existential aspects mostly by transcending all limiting borders and binaries.

There are some similarities with Western constructs such as the use of inner monologues (Anne’s monologues in *400 kilometres*), use of surreal elements (in *Education is Our Right*, *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*, *The Boy in the Treehouse*, *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* and *400 kilometres*), elements of farce and sitcom comedies (*The Bootlegger Blues* and *The Baby Blues*) and time and space effects. However, the difference lies in the use to which these Western devices are put. The Western playwrights most often make use of these techniques to reflect the negativism, nihilism and some sort of void in the Western society. However, Taylor adopts these techniques to reflect an essential humanism and to create life affirming and positive vision of Native people and society.

When Taylor writes plays for young audiences their realistic surface is disturbed for another order of reality, which makes its presence felt through expressionistic and
surrealistic distortions. *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* is set at a place of some mysterious spiritual 'power', site of vision quests for generations. Its power brings together Native teenagers from the past, the present and the future. In *Education is Our Right* Taylor makes use of surrealistic images through Spirit of Education Past, Present and Future. In *The Boy in the Treehouse* a mixed-blood boy being raised by his widowed Father, who is a white, attempts a 'vision quest' in his backyard treehouse. He is guided by a girl, who has mysterious ability to walk on tree branches. She seems to be the spirit of his dead mother. And *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* departs even more radically from everyday reality, as it shifts from realistic dialogue to 'horse dance' – painting of horse coming to life with supernatural energy.

Since the Native identity has been constantly disrupted, destroyed, eliminated and stereotyped by the dominant Euro-Canadian society, the overcharged question of 'Native identity and culture' or 'the quest for Native identity' remains central to almost every play. His plays probe questions such as what does it means to be a Native in the contemporary times? Is there any authentic or essential Native culture and identity? Is it necessary for a Native to know Native languages, ceremonies and traditions? As in Chapter One, “Political Activism and Issues of Native Identity,” Taylor critically examines the simplistic White notions of Native identity and proposes a Native identity that is not based on White 'essentialist' or 'authentic' assumptions but is fluid and evolving. Taylor deconstructs essentialist approaches towards "Nativeness" through the portrayal of the characters like Michael, Angel, Bobby and Yvonne and presents identity as a dynamic and ever changing process and he considers the essentialist approaches to identity as a form of cultural oppression. In alterNatives, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* and *The 'Blues' Quartet*, by employing mimicry and hybridity, Taylor questions the logic of essentialist identities,
deconstructs the notions of authenticity, subverts the colonial representation of the Natives and provides alternatives to conventional politics of identity.

_The ‘Blues’ Quartet_ acts as a critique of cultural appropriation where Taylor humorously explores and mocks at the notions of authenticity, cultural appropriation and its academic representation as a form of censorship and control. He makes great fun of the White’s search of authentic “Nativeness”, confronting the White search for the true, that is, vanishing Native with thoroughly hybrid real Native characters such as Martha, Marianne, Amos, Noble, and Skunk. Taylor himself being a hybrid, both biologically and professionally, rejects an ‘authentic’ or ‘essential’ notion of Native identity and culture and portrays his characters in real contemporary hybrid conditions, characters who find a resolution of conflicting or contrary realities in their own person. For example, Rusty who, like many contemporary Native youths, finds himself oscillating between two cultures in the end develops a positive future vision for himself. Similarly the funny character Warrior Who Never Sleeps also finds a resolution in the end. And all other Native characters accept hybridity as a social reality without any ambivalence, irresolution and conflict.

In his comedies, _The Baby Blues_, _The Buz’Gem Blues_ and _The Berlin Blues_, (as he does in _alterNatives_) he presents ridiculously exaggerated examples of White people desperately trying to ‘go Native’ and the Natives becoming White. Probably, the funniest example is the character of Summer who embraces “Nativeness” and exposes a laughably flawed attitude towards “Nativeness” or “Indianness.” Equally funny and ridiculous characters are Birgit and Reinhart in _The Berlin Blues_, who plan to exploit the Native culture for commercial gains by constructing Ojibway Theme Park. Similarly, Colleen in _alterNatives_ appropriates Native culture perhaps to fill her own cultural vacuum or probably to enhance her position in the academic world.
These plays satirically and ironically suggest that the non-Natives need to look at Native culture and identity in a natural way not forced by sympathy or stereotypes created by world academia. Through the portrayal of characters like Colleen, Summer and Professor Savage, Taylor ironically projects academia as ‘subjective myth making institutions’ and debunks the generalized ‘politically correct’ stereotypes in favour of a more rounded depiction of Native identity, far more close to reality.

While countering stereotypical non-Native essentialist representations of Native identity, Taylor employs a strategy of first acknowledging the misrepresentations and then debunking them. His characters first engage directly with the non-Native assumptions and then they attempt to subvert the stereotypes.

Taylor defies the confinement of Native existence to the past. Hence, in his plays he purposefully avoids feathers, beads, buckskin dresses and the use of Trickster as a character, the images firmly entrenched in the non-Native psyche. Instead of dancing shamans, fierce warriors, savages, buffalo hunters, wise Elders, Pocahontas princess and miracle-inducing medicine men, Taylor presents his audience with faulted, funny and accessible portrayals of Native characters. Though Taylor sometimes portrays or names his characters like Warrior Who Never Sleeps, Tonto, Amos (wise Elder) and Professor Savage, but he does it ironically to mock and subvert non-Native romanticized assumptions about the Natives. Similarly, instead of presenting dark and angry stories of colonization, tragedies of assimilation and elimination of Native culture and identity, Taylor offers plays with families and communities struggling with the dire consequences of colonization, making the non-Native audience conscious of the damages done to the Natives. Taylor’s Someday trilogy very sensitively records the traumatic and cathartic journey of an adoptee to reclaim her Native identity and culture. It is a poignant story of love, “scoop up” and
discovery and of the Native family’s struggles and experiences, which may help in the healing of others who are going through a similar experience. With the poison exposed, Taylor’s *Someday* trilogy also suggests how to move forward in a genuine manner which will both prompt healing and prevent further damage to Native identity and culture.

Taylor’s comedies discussed in Chapter Three dispel the image of the ‘stoic Indian’ and shows how humour is central to Native culture, and for Taylor humour is an indispensable tool for engaging with existing myths, stereotypes and false notions. The unassuming, engagingly humorous tone of Taylor’s plays has the capacity to disarm viewers, who later realize that they been confronted with thorny Native issues. His use of humour is of a poking and prodding nature. It is a mild form of teasing, on the surface seeking to entertain and amuse, but subtextually seeking a reconsideration and change in thinking and attitude. Yet, to a large extent, his humour is inclusive, rarely confrontational, aggressive and biting, and it thus makes the uncomfortable Native issues comfortable.

Taylor’s range of humour varies from lighter slapstick in *The Bootlegger Blues*, to farce and mimicry in *The Baby Blues*, subversive humour in *The Buz’Gem Blues*, forcefully satiric and ironic humour in *The Berlin Blues* to a little bitingly aggressive, in *alternatives*. His humour is very specific and located in the past as well as the present living conditions and can be viewed uniformly subversive, positive and healing. Taylor through hilarious dialogues and situations probes the ambiguities and contradictions of identity politics and ceaselessly disrupts the Western imaginative constructions of Native identity. His humour often builds around tense and complicated issues to dissipate the conflict while simultaneously bringing the complex Native issues to the fore. Apart from serving as a tool for ‘survival’ humour
in Taylor’s plays also acts as a communication strategy with substantial potential for serving as intercultural mediator as it is generated from intercultural encounters.

While dealing with problems in modern Native communities such as drunkenness, alienation, aimless life, poverty and clashes within families and Native communities Taylor with incredibly ‘self deprecatory’ humour, shows that there is more than one way of dealing with Native issues. Instead of endlessly debating and despairing over the Native social and individual problems, he can make fun of them to ease the pain they create. Politically incorrect jokes and fun with bootlegging in *The Bootlegger Blues* are the best examples of self-deprecatory humour of Taylor. Thus, he allows Native as well as non-Native readers to move beyond accusation, guilt and stereotypes to mutual understanding.

Taylor’s plays are not only an expression of protest against the colonizers. He likes to celebrate Native life in its diversity and in several of his plays he attempts at reclaiming Native culture by use of Native sensibilities of humour, character, storytelling and setting. Language is regarded as an important embodiment of cultural heritage, knowledge, tradition and identity. As an attempt to recover the lost languages Taylor makes frequent use of Native words, phrases and sentences and skillfully includes the interpretations and meanings in the body of the play. Native mythology and spirituality, once relegated as inferior by European missionaries, play an integral part in all Native literary productions, either directly or indirectly. Trickster, a comic or clownish sort of character in the Native mythology, is central to many Native playwrights such as Tomson Highway and Daniel David Moses. Though Taylor does not portray Trickster as a character in his plays yet the Trickster spirit, Trickster like characters and references to Trickster stories are quite frequent. Native spirituality also figures occasionally through characters’ attempt at ‘vision quest’ etc.,
a religious Native ceremony which requires fasting, prayer and ceremonial purity, which Taylor uses not only to celebrate Native spirituality but also to explore the confusions and dilemmas of the contemporary Native youths about their spirituality, as in the case of Rusty.

Taylor also presents Native culture by frequent references to Native cultural heritage in his plays such as sweetlodge, dreamcatcher, animal totems, buckskin dresses, traditional jewellery, traditional foods and by emphasizing Native community sense and by the portrayal of elders, who are regarded as wise counselors and custodians of cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. Settings and references to pow wows, pow wow dancers, pow wow outfits and music are frequent in Taylor’s plays as music, dance and ceremony are integral part of Native culture. Yet in his celebration and reclamation of Native culture Taylor attempts to underline the fact that culture like identity is evolving. Nevertheless, his plays though starting from specific Native situations invariably transcend the specific concerns to larger humanistic concerns.

Taylor’s plays offer several other areas for future research. In order to broaden the critical analysis of Taylor’s plays postcolonial literary theories (which this thesis briefly refers to) could be applied for dialogical exchange with reference to the Natives’ own approaches to their literature as advocated by Thomas King in his essay “Godzilla v.s. Post-colonial” and Kimberly Blaeser’s, Ojibway scholar, “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center” to explore Native point of views and to find how far it is relevant to study Native works within the postcolonial frameworks. These Native critics believe that studying Native literature by way of Western literary theories violates its integrity and consider it as a new act of colonization. Since humour is a dominant element of Native culture, a comparative study of Taylor’s
comedies with other Native writers could be useful to explore other facets of Native humour.

An extremely vibrant playwright Taylor is indeed a major Native playwright because he is a Native and deals with some issues and situations which are specifically Native, but he is a great dramatist who stands with the best on the world stage both in the range of depicting complex human situations and his remarkable innovations in handling the technical possibilities in the theatre.