

PLAY GUIDE



MEN ON BOATS



TEN THOUSAND THINGS PRESENTS

MEN ON BOATS

by **Jaclyn Backhaus**

February 4 - March 15, 2026

Directed by **Joy Dolo**

Music by **Walken Schweigert**

Featuring **Jay Owen Eisenberg, Charli Fool Bear, Ashawnti Sakina Ford, Emjoy Gavino, George Keller, Elise Langer, Anya Naylor, Adelin Phelps, Maureen Sherman-Mendez, Karen Wiese-Thompson,** and understudies **Michelle de Joya** and **Em Adam Rosenberg**

Stage Manager **Jason Clusman**

Costume Designer **Sarah Bahr**

Scenic /Props Designer **Sarah Brandner**

Movement Coach **Isabel Nelson**

Play Guide **Liv Kemp**

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Imagine a nurse. What do they look like? Imagine a doctor. What do they look like? Now imagine people exploring the west in the 19th century. What do they look like?

We are all shaped by the society we live in. When I was growing up, I imagined white women as nurses, men as doctors, and explorers of the United States as white men.

Before directing this play, I've been cast as: a cook, a street walker, a father, a cat, and many more. Because that is how I was seen. By casting folks that are underrepresented in

history, we are invited to look past the bodies of the actors and see the story. A story that encompasses themes of friendship, courage, colonialism, adjacent with lots of humor. As we journey on, we find that we all need a little help, a little grace, forgiveness, and lots of courage. And we find that we need each other. In our world today that still rings true. In this world, it is 1869, four years after the Civil War. Asserting Manifest Destiny, men believed it was the will of God and their right to map and claim the United States- naming lands that were already claimed by Native Americans.

This story was inspired by the real John Wesley Powell and his crew. Their journals have been expertly reimagined by playwright Jacyln Backhaus. And, again, reimagined by TTT's fantastic cast and crew. Through all these iterations, we have a play that is fearless and bold and full of heart.

Oars up! Oars out!

-Joy Dolo



ABOUT TEN THOUSAND THINGS

Ten Thousand Things awakens the creative spirit of audiences and artists by bringing essential and exceptional theater to people from all backgrounds and life experiences. Performing in the round with all the lights on, minimal sets, live music, and no stage, actors engage audiences up close, sparking the audience's imagination. Through free, community-hosted performances for audiences in places like shelters, correctional facilities, elder care, and English language learning centers, alongside ticketed, TTT-hosted shows, we ensure that "everyone can be in the audience."



REWRITING THE STORY OF AMERICA'S "GREAT" ADVENTURE

Men on Boats takes inspiration from a real 1869 expedition down the Colorado River, when a group of explorers in four boats set out to chart the Grand Canyon and claim it for the United States. What unfolds onstage is not a tidy history lesson, but a fast-moving, often chaotic journey—full of daring plans, clashing personalities, and dangerous assumptions about land, power, and legacy.

MAJOR JOHN WESLEY POWELL'S BOAT THE "EMMA DEAN",
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, ARIZONA. 1871.



THE PLAYWRIGHT

Jaclyn Backhaus is a playwright, educator, and co-founder of Fresh Ground Pepper theatre festival. Her work includes *Men On Boats*, *India Pale Ale*, *You Across From Me*, *Folk Wandering*, and *You On the Moors Now*. She was the 2016 Tow Foundation Playwright-in-Residence at Clubbed Thumb, and she is the recipient of the Jody Falco and Jeffrey Steinman Commission for Emerging Playwrights from Playwrights Horizons. She has also received the Ars Nova commission for Bull's Hollow. Backhaus holds a BFA in Drama from NYU Tisch. She grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, but currently lives in Queens, New York. She is of Punjabi, German, and botanical descent.

CHARACTERS

Played by a cast of people the first journey left out, *Men on Boats* invites audiences to reconsider whose stories are remembered, whose voices are centered, and how history changes when it is retold from a new perspective.

the EMMA DEAN



JOHN W. POWELL
One-armed leader
of the expedition



WILLIAM DUNN
Hunter, trapper



JOHN C. SUMNER
Former soldier,
current explorer

the KITTY CLYDE'S SISTER



OLD SHADY
Powell's older
brother, Civil War vet



BRADLEY
Lieutenant

the MAID OF THE CANYON



HALL
Mapmaker



HAWKINS
The cook



O.G. HOWLAND
Printer and hunter



SENECA HOWLAND
O.G.'s little brother



FRANK GOODMAN
So British

ON LAND



TSAUWIAT
A Ute chef



THE BISHOP
Tsauwiat's wife



MR. ASA
A desert settler

POWELL'S MISSION

In 1862, the U.S. government passed a law called the **Homestead Act**. This law promised 160 acres of land to people who moved west and claimed it. Long before this, **Indigenous peoples had lived on and cared for this land for thousands of years**. The land was not empty, even though the government treated it that way.

Many Americans believed in **Manifest Destiny**, the idea that the United States was meant to expand across the land. Earlier, in 1803, the **Louisiana Purchase** nearly doubled the size of the country. After this, many **settlers** began moving west in the 1830s to look for land and new opportunities. They often traveled in covered wagons.

By the mid-1800s, parts of Colorado, Utah, and Arizona were still not fully mapped by the U.S. government. This does not mean no one lived there—it means the government had not recorded or claimed it. The land in the Southwest was rocky and dangerous, which made travel very difficult.

After the Civil War, during a time called **Reconstruction**, a man named John Wesley Powell was sent on a small government mission. He traveled by boat through the Grand Canyon to map the land and rivers the government wanted to control.

KEY TERMS:

Homestead Act (1862): A U.S. law that gave land to settlers who moved west and claimed it.

Stewardship: Taking care of land, water, and animals so they stay healthy for the future.

Louisiana Purchase (1803): When the United States bought a large amount of land, almost doubling the country's size.

Settlers: People who moved to new land to live there, often taking land that already belonged to Indigenous peoples.

Reconstruction: The time after the Civil War when the country was trying to rebuild and reorganize.



A MAP OF POWELL'S MISSION, OARS.COM

THE LAND

The Ute Indian Tribe (pronounced “Yoot”) has lived on and cared for the land in northeastern Utah for thousands of years.

This land is called the Uintah Basin. It is about 150 miles east of Salt Lake City. Today, the Ute tribe lives on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation. The reservation is very large—over 4.5 million acres—and is one of the largest reservations in the United States. The tribe has about 2,070 members, and many live on the reservation.

The Northern Ute tribe has three bands, or groups: the Uintah, Whiteriver, and Uncompahgre. The Uintah band were the first caretakers of the Uintah Basin. Later, the Whiteriver and Uncompahgre bands were forced to move there from Colorado.

According to Ute tradition, their people were brought to this land by a god named Sinauf. For many generations, the Utes lived by hunting animals, gathering plants, and moving with the

seasons. They were also skilled artists who made beadwork and leatherwork for ceremonies.

The 1800s were a very difficult time for the Ute people. They suffered from diseases like smallpox, which came from Europe. At the same time, their land was taken over by traders, miners, settlers, and sometimes other tribes. The Utes tried to protect their land. Sometimes they resisted. Sometimes they tried to make peace through treaties. Many of these treaties caused them to lose large amounts of land.

In 1861, the Uintah and Ouray Reservation was created by order of President Abraham Lincoln. Even after this, the Utes continued to hunt and travel in parts of Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming for some time.

Today, the Ute tribe continues to care for their land. They run businesses, raise cattle, and produce oil and natural gas. Their culture and connection to the land continue today.

RIGHT: CHIEF OURAY PICTURED WITH HIS WIFE CHIPETA, - ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL LEADERS OF THE NORTHERN UTE PEOPLE

BELOW: A PRESENT-DAY UTE MAN WEARING TRADITIONAL REGALIA



ACTOR Q&A

With Charli, Anya, and Maureen



Describe *Men on Boats* in three words:

Charli: Adventure, legacy, shenanigans

Anya: Energetic, fun, touching

Maureen: Funny, heartfelt, explorative

Tell us a bit about your real-life character:

Charli: Seneca Howland was in the publishing business. He was a presser, but he was also a pretty accomplished hunter, and, from all accounts, he was the softer, more friendly counterpart of his brother, OG. The two of them worked together and were close throughout their entire lives until they died. That's my favorite thing about him - his loyalty to his brother.

Anya: Bradley kept a journal during the expedition, but he didn't tell anyone about it. It was donated to the Library of Congress after he died because one of his family members just found it. He had very detailed notes about the

trip, but he wasn't doing it for fame or to publish a book like Powell was. Bradley had a very positive outlook – there's a lot of rapids in the play, and in real life, and he talks about how he thought they were fun to run!

Maureen: Sumner was 29 when they did the expedition and he was an adventurer – the kind of person you'd call up for this sort of thing. Him and Powell stayed friends after, but it went awry when Powell started publishing and gave himself a little bit too much credit. Sumner was so devastated by this and the loss of the other members who passed away that he kinda descended into madness.

What aspect of the show are you most excited to share with audiences?

Charli: We've been working a lot on physical comedy. I feel like being a part of this group of people, of actors, has been very inspiring. I think all of us push each other out of our comfort zones, and I'm really excited for people to see that.

Anya: Every time we're in the boats going down rapids, we do these beautifully choreographed movement pieces. We don't have any actual boats, we're not using real ores, we're not using real rope, so the audience will have to use their imagination.

Maureen: We don't always get to see people in the bodies that we're in go on adventures, climb cliffs, or do things typically in 'male'

What aspect of the show are you most excited to share with audiences? (cont.)

territory. Vice versa, we're in these bodies expressing affection with one another, and I think that can shake up what it means to be a male adventurer, whatever that could mean. What is innately human, and what is innately performative?

understand a point of view that feels dimensionally opposed to your own, this play has opened my heart to people I disagree with. We definitely make fun of a lot of tropes of masculinity, but we also give these characters the depth they deserve. That's what helps us invest in these people.

Why do you think the playwright chose to revisit *this* story? Why are we telling it in 2026?

Charli: This story is full of duality. You admire these men for their bravery and their thirst for knowledge, but at the same time it puts a really clear and unrelenting lens on these men and their hubris in claiming land that wasn't theirs. I think in this moment in time, we're seeing the power of a narrative, and the power of how you tell a story, and how easy it is to twist a detail and create a whole different narrative. At the end of the day who does your story belong to, and who gets to tell it?

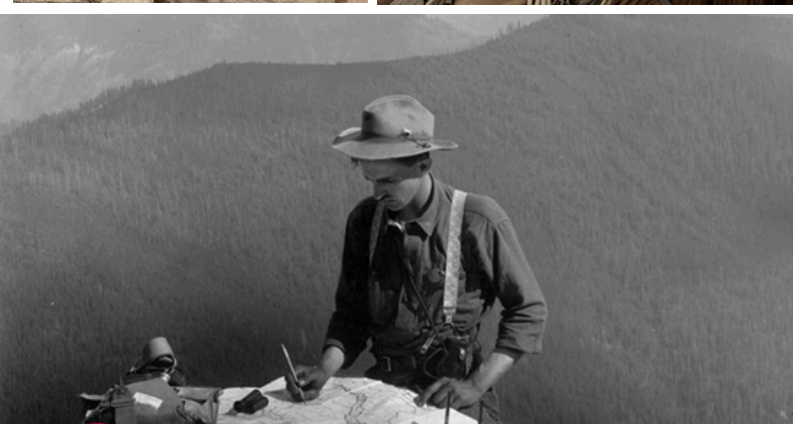
Anya: I think it's a very interesting commentary on racism and the Manifest Destiny. And honestly? It's really just so silly to be like, 'Oh, now this land is ours, and it's never been anyone's before.' This play makes fun of that, because people have never stopped doing that. And it's very serious...but it's also just so dumb.

Maureen: Men on Boats calls into question who owns spaces, who owns narratives, and, similar to Hamilton: 'Who lives, who dies, who tells your story'. Even though can tricky to



DESIGNING THE WORLD

Take a look into the costume renderings by designer Sarah Bahr and the inspiration that helped bring them to life!



COSTUME
RENDERINGS BY
SARAH BAHR

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the playwright chose to revisit *this* story? Why are we retelling it in 2026?
2. How does humor shape the way serious themes are presented in the play? Why might comedy be an effective tool here?
3. How does this play compare to what you've learned in history class about westward expansion or Manifest Destiny? What perspectives or details does the play include that are often minimized or omitted in textbooks?
4. The playwright chose to tell this story with a cast of people the original expedition left out. What effect did that have on how you experienced the play?
5. What qualities make a good leader? What does the play suggest about the importance of collaboration within a team?
6. Who actually owns land, if anyone? Is land something that can truly be owned? How does the play encourage the audience to question ideas of entitlement, exploration, and "discovery"?



U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY TEAM UNDER THE DIRECTION OF JOHN WESLEY POWELL, SWEETWATER COUNTY, WYOMING. (GETTY IMAGES)

REFLECTION ACTIVITY: Land Acknowledgement

OVERVIEW

This lesson serves to teach participants about the land they are learning on by viewing and creating original land acknowledgements and being introduced to complex topics such as who Indigenous people are, what the term settler refers to, and notions such as broken promises and renewed commitments to share the land.

MATERIALS

Computer or iPad with internet access, “Land Acknowledgement Rubric” (on page 14)

DURATION

3-4 hours

This is a lesson created by WhoseLand.com in collaboration with Anishinaabe educator [Christine M'lot](#). Visit their website for full lesson plans. These resources are available for educators to use, share, and build upon through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 license ([CC BY-NC-SA2.0](#)).

PART 1 (ACTIVATING ACTIVITY): Grounding Meditation and Discussion

Big Idea: Participants will participate in a grounding meditation and then discuss the importance of land and place.

Begin the lesson by taking participants outside or a set of windows, if possible. Have participants sit in a circle. Guide participants through a grounding meditation by instructing them to close their eyes and focus on their senses – hearing, feeling, and smelling. Once everyone’s eyes are closed, ask them to concentrate on the following:

1. What do you hear right now? Do you hear walking in the halls, wind blowing outside, or people laughing in the distance? Concentrate on hearing everything around you for a minute.
2. What are you feeling right now? Do you feel the seat beneath you, cool air from the window, or your feet inside your shoes? Concentrate on your sense of feeling for a minute.
3. What do you smell right now? Can you smell food nearby, the sharp cold smell from outside, or someone’s perfume?

Once this three-minute meditation is over, have participants open their eyes. Next, stay where you are and engage the participants in a discussion about the land. Some discussion prompts can include:

- How does it feel to be sitting on this land?
- What do you love about the land?
- How does the land provide us with everything we need to live?
- What place has a special meaning to you? How would you feel if that place was taken from you?
- What is a place that has special meaning to the community? What would happen if that place was taken from us? How would the community be affected as a whole? How would individuals be affected?



The last two questions serve to bridge participants to the topic of land displacement, resource extraction on Indigenous lands, and broken treaty promises. Inform your participants that the land they are sitting on right now is an Indigenous nation's traditional territory.

PART 2 (ACQUIRE ACTIVITY): Whose Land?

Big Idea: Participants will engage in guided research about Indigenous Peoples and land acknowledgements using the Whose Land website as a resource.

Next, either have participants explore the Whose Land website individually, or display the website for the whole group to see at: <https://whose.land/en/>.

Begin by having participants view the map of traditional Indigenous territories on the main page. See if anyone can pinpoint where you are on the map. Have participants click on the territory and see which Indigenous nation's traditional territory you are on. Have participants click on the nation that pops up to learn more about the Indigenous People who have lived on and acted as stewards of the land since time immemorial (*note: the term time immemorial refers to a time so far back that there is no date to identify it with.*)

Have participants watch multiple land acknowledgement videos on the main page. Based on the videos they watch, ask participants: What is a land acknowledgement and why is it important? What does it mean to you? What do you notice is typically included in a land acknowledgement?

PART 3 (APPLY ACTIVITY): Create a Personal Land Acknowledgement

Big Idea: Participants will co-create the Indigenous land acknowledgement rubric based on the information they learned from the Whose Land website.

Inform participants that they will be writing their own personal land acknowledgements. Ask participants what they think should be included based on the videos they watched. Co-create the criteria as a group. Review the rubric on page 14 and customize it together as a group to fit the criteria everyone decided on.

Allow participants time to create this meaningful and personal Indigenous land acknowledgement.

PART 4 (ASSESSMENT): Self or Peer Edit

Big Idea: Participants will engage in the editing process in order to strengthen their writing.

Have participants use the "Land Acknowledgement Rubric" to first self-edit their own writing. Then, have them pair up and engage in a peer-edit process. Finally, facilitators can use the rubric as a final assessment tool.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT RUBRIC

Using the instructions from Part 3 (page 12), review this rubric and customize it together as a group to fit the criteria everyone decided on.

Criteria	EXEMPLARY (5)	PROFICIENT (3)	NEARING PROFICIENT (2)	NOVICE (0)
Honoring Indigenous History	A perfect land acknowledgement would:	A good land acknowledgement would:	A developing land acknowledgement would:	An incomplete land acknowledgement would:
Personal and Original	A perfect land acknowledgement would:	A good land acknowledgement would:	A developing land acknowledgement would:	An incomplete land acknowledgement would:
Organization	The ideas are arranged logically. They flow smoothly from one to another and are clearly linked to each other. The writer's intentions are very clear.	The ideas are arranged logically. They are usually linked to each other. For the most part, the reader can follow the line of reasoning. The writer's intentions are clear.	In general, the writing is arranged logically, although occasionally ideals fail to make sense together. The writer's intentions are somewhat clear.	The writing is not logically organized. Frequently, ideals fail to make sense together. The writer's intentions are confusing.
Sentence Structure	Sentences are well-phrased and varied in length and structure. They flow smoothly from one to another. Word choice is accurate.	Sentences are well-phrased and there is some variety in length and structure. Word choice is mostly accurate.	Some sentences are awkwardly constructed so that the reader is occasionally distracted. Sentence flow is developing. Word choice can be strengthened.	Errors in sentence structure are frequent enough to be a major distraction to the reader. No flow and frequently distracting grammatical errors.
Proof of Revision	The writing is free of errors.	There are occasional errors, but they don't represent a major distraction or obscure meaning.	The writing has many errors, and the reader is distracted by them.	There are so many errors that the meaning is obscured. The reader is confused and stops reading.

WORKS CITED

Sources:

[Merely Players - *Men on Boats* Dramaturgical History](#)

[Utah Geological Survey](#)

[River History: A Look Back at the Legendary First Descent of the Grand Canyon](#)

[University of Minnesota: Writing Land Acknowledgements](#)

[Native Governance Center: A guide to Indigenous land acknowledgment](#)

[Utah Division of Indian Affairs: Ute History](#)



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