

Tomson Highway's "The Rez" Plays: Theater as the (E)Merging of Native Ritual through Postmodernist Displacement.

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Introduction

Canadian Native playwright Tomson Highway emerged on the national and international theatre scene with the production of two plays in the late 1980s: *The Rez Sisters*, first staged by Native Earth Performing Arts Toronto in 1986; and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, originally produced at Theatre Pass Muraille in Toronto in 1989. Both plays were extremely well-received at the time and made Highway the talk of the Canadian theatre establishment. Both plays won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for an Outstanding New Play (1988-89), as well as the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award, given to Canadian plays produced professionally in the Toronto area.

Set on the fictional Wasaychigan ("Window") Hill reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* can be seen as obverse sides of a coin—or as mirror images of the shared theme of "the big game", viewed from a gendered perspective. *The Rez Sisters* tells the story of seven Native women on a largely comic quest to attend The World's Biggest Bingo Game in the city of Toronto, several hundred miles from the reserve. There are no men in the play except, perhaps, for the figure of Nanabush, who resembles the "Trickster" Coyote from traditional Native mythology. *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* concentrates on seven men (some of whom are mentioned in *The Rez Sisters*), who must deal with the creation of a women's hockey team on the reserve. There are no women in the play, except for Nanabush, now manifested in various female forms.

This paper evaluates Highway's success in taking what is essentially an oral tradition of storytelling and translating it into a tradition in which designated actors perform a script for an audience in a specific space designed especially for the performances. This transition is examined in terms of the theatrical form used by Highway, as well as the use of some of the elements from traditional storytelling and Native mythology (with special reference to Nanabush and how his/her role in Highway's plays differs significantly from that role in traditional storytelling). As well, the paper takes a look at how Highway manages to walk the fine line between Native ritual performance and theatrical entertainment. Finally, the paper

examines Highway's ability to perform this transformation, arguing that his success depends on having avoided mimetic forms and making a leap instead from oral storytelling directly to a postmodern theatre that contains elements of the theatre of the absurd, magic realism, and hybridity.

Turning the Oral into the Written Word

In the context of power relationships between Natives and the colonizers, the written English language has always been too easily twisted, too easily made to reflect whatever the colonizing forces wanted it to. In one creation story from the Salish people of the British Columbia interior, the white man acts as the betrayer of his older brother, the Native. As told by elder Harry Robinson, the younger brother, being literate, stole "the paper" from God and thus usurped the Native's rightful inheritance:

And that younger one,
now today, that's the white man.
And the older one, that's me.
That's the Indian.
And that's why the white man,
they can tell a lie more than the Indian.
But the white man, they got the law. (Robinson, 1989, pp. 45-46)

Thus, while Natives eventually became literate themselves, the original betrayal is still considered part of the colonizing process even today. Native writing tends to reflect the act of "remembering" (pre- and post-betrayal) so important in the oral storytelling tradition.

According to Métis writer Emma LaRoque: "Some themes unique to a person dispossessed stand out: a haunting and hounding sense of loss that drives one to reminisce. 'I remember,' many of us write, 'I remember'." (xxviii).

At present, there seems to be some degree of symbiosis of the oral and written, a type of Native literature that LaRoque has called "transitional" and moving "from the oral to the written" (xxviii). At the same time, there is still uneasiness and the feeling of a clash between the two forms that goes beyond the mere instrumentality of the oral versus the written. According to Ong, for instance, "orally based thought" and "the technology of writing" are so different "that many of the contrasts often made between 'western' and other views seem reducible to contrasts between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness" (29).

According to LaRoque, this type of struggle has become internalized for the modern Native writer, who must operate in both worlds: "(w)hat is at work is the power struggle

between the oral and the written, between the native in us and the English” (xx). At the same time, even writers who are able to take the traditional oral stories and convert them into written material express a type of dissatisfaction with the ability of the written stories to capture all of the texts and subtexts of the original oral stories. Native writer Basil Johnston, for example, writes in a note within his collection of short stories, *Moose Meat and Wild Rice*, that: “The stories as written cannot adequately convey the real nature or impart the scope of that sense of wit and humour that forms an integral part of the Ojibway people and their character” (188).

However, there has been an attempt to roll the oral style into the written page, and to use elements such as repetition, questions to the reader, and interjectory remarks as if the person in the book were speaking to the reader. As well, the stories of someone like Robinson work by using a different approach to time:

For Harry Robinson there is no distinction between past and present, mythological reality and reality documented in writing, history and story. The mythological past of humanity explains the present reality (like the existence of Europeans) and the present verifies the past, much like the story about the literate younger twin, the ancestor of the Europeans, who used his literacy to lie to his older brother, the ancestor of the Indian. (Eigenbrod 93)

This combination of “told” stories that are at the same time preserved on paper involves Natives walking a fine line between the two worlds. There is a demand that the principles that are part of the oral tradition—cyclical concept of time, mythology-history interacting, lack of separation between the symbolic and the realistic—be upheld in the written world.

Another connection between Native writing and the oral tradition from which it arises is the concept of collaboration, the connectedness between one individual and another, and between people and the natural world. According to Allen (1989): “Tribal art of all kinds embodies the principle of kinship, rendering the beautiful in terms of the connectedness of elements” (5).

Native writers are also quick to stress that the use of “I” under these circumstances should not be taken in the same way as the “I” in Western cultures. It is not an individual “I” but rather a communal one, once again reflecting a bringing together, a sense of union:

The emphasis on oneness as opposed to separations and divisions is an essential characteristic of tribal - and that means also oral - cultures. It is in this sense that stories can be written in an “oral form,” blending together the individual and the communal, the commonplace and the spiritual, the human and the supernatural, thus reflecting a circular rather than a linear way of thinking. (Eigenbrod 98)

In the next section, the paper looks at how Tomson Highway has taken this oral storytelling tradition and all that it implies, and attempted to produce a postmodern theatrical experience. This postmodern performance experience tries to capture both the orality and the ritual qualities of Native culture, and tries to bring together the mythology-history of that culture in a world very much run by the colonizers, who do not believe in mythology and seem to have forgotten their own history.

From Storytelling to Postmodern Performance

According to Tim Bond, the former artistic director of The Group, Seattle's MultiCultural Theatre "(w)hen you do realism, it doesn't speak to the greater aesthetic of Native-American culture. Yet traditional storytelling doesn't reach cross-culturally. We need a new, modern form" (Quoted in Outlaw. 83). In describing the play *The Indolent Boys* by N. Scott Momaday, which tells the story of how three Native boys freeze to death while trying to escape abuse at an Oklahoma school in 1891, Outlaw points out that "[t]he emphasis on resolving dramatic tension, so crucial to Western classical dramatic structure, is missing here ... Instead, the focus is on retelling the story over and over, in the Native tradition of the monologue, from various points of view" (Outlaw 84).

There is little argument that what we would call "theatrical elements" have played significant roles in the Native festivals, rituals and healing rites. Among those elements are role-playing, mimicry, dance, masking and song. In fact, Buller (1981) talks of a "traditional Native theatre in Canada" (3). For her part, Preston (1992) does not distinguish between Native ceremonial rites and theatrical performance: "Native drama flourished in this country long before the Europeans arrived and many of Canada's indigenous cultures had very complex and elaborate cultural performances. These were primarily religious dramas that used masks, props, lighting, and smoke effects" (136).

Highway himself has theorized on this subject, attempting to explain why the stage (in particular, the postmodern stage) serves as the best way to "translate" the oral traditions and storytelling performances of Native cultures. This is his vision of a type of syncretic theatre based on those oral traditions:

Why the stage? For me, the reason is that this oral tradition translates most easily and most effectively into a three dimensional medium. In a sense, it's like taking the 'stage' that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing it--using words, actors, lights, sound--onto the stage in theatre. For me, it is really a matter of taking a mythology as extraordinary and as powerful as the human imagination itself and reworking it to fit, snugly and comfortably, the medium of the stage. (1987, 29)

While there is sufficient evidence to indicate that Native playwrights have made the leap into a postmodern theatrical approach in some ways similar to that employed by Western (Euro-American) playwrights, it is important to point out the key differences between the two. Among the obvious similarities are the use of a type of magical realism, inner monologues using spotlights, and time and space effects that can be described as surreal. There are also many of the theatrical tricks employed by French theatre of the absurd playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco. However, as pointed out by Usmiani (1995), the differences lie in the use to which these devices are put. While Euro-American plays most often reflect “the negativism, nihilism and spiritual void of Western postmodern society . . .,” a play such as “*The Rez Sisters*, in spite of the similarity of its dramatic matrix, reflects the essential humanism, life-affirming and hopeful world view of Native peoples” (127-128). Ironically, while the vast majority of Euro-American postmodern plays have given up on the idea of a humanistic society, Native playwrights such as Highway have embraced it, and have actually gone on to re-enforce it.

In the next section, the paper takes an in-depth look at Highway’s two best-known plays—*The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*—to determine how effective this “translation” from oral storytelling and ritual performance to a postmodern theatrical matrix has been.

Mixing Mythological and Historical Time: Nanabush’s Legacy

There are several types of “translation” involved in the presentation of Highway’s two plays. The first has to do with the use of Cree and English in the plays and the movement from Cree, which is Highway’s mother tongue, and the finished English text for the stage production (with a smattering of Cree):

My characters speak in Cree, because I write about my home community where the people speak Cree. The older generation, my parents for example, and my older brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, don't speak any English at all. So, when I write about them, and I write mostly about them, I have a picture of my cousins, my aunts and uncles, in my head. So my characters talk in Cree. And sometimes whole sections of the first draft will come out in Cree. So what I do, because I am a musician as well, I treat the language as music. I experiment with a form of English writing that attempts to capture the rhythm and the humour of the Cree language. Humour is very much at the centre of the Cree language. (Quoted in Balme, 1993. 395)

This translation can also be seen in the rhythm of the dialogue, which Highway manages to convey through the use of an English that lacks all punctuation and pulls together conjunctions in a string. As well, it should be noticed that, while not all the characters in *The*

Rez Sisters recognize the trickster figure of Nanabush, those that do are the ones who can speak Cree, which suggests a connection between the mythological world and the historical one. The first time one of the seven female characters in the play, Marie-Adele, who is dying of cancer, sees Nanabush (appearing as a seagull) coming to get her to take her to the mythological world, the language becomes all mixed up:

NANABUSH. As-tum. [Come.]

MARIE-ADELE. Nee. Moo-tha ni-gus-kee-tan tu-pi-mi-tha-an. Moo-tha oo-ta-ta-gwu-na n'tay-yan. Chees-kwa. [Pause]. Ma-ti poo-ni-mee-see i-goo-ta wee-chi-gi-seagull bird come shit on my fence one more time and you and anybody else look like you cook like stew on my stove. Awus! [Nee. I can't fly away. I have no wings. Yet. [Pause]. Will you stop shitting all over the place you stinking seagull bird]. (*The Rez Sisters*, 19)

Similarly, in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway makes use of dialogues and monologues that are almost entirely devoid of punctuation. An example is the scene where Big Joey calls out the play by play sequences of a woman's ice hockey game that is not visible to the audience, mixing Cree, sport jargon and a rapid-fire delivery that combines Cree speech rhythms with the kind of sports commentary that most white people are familiar with:

BIG JOEY. [. . .] Number Thirty-seven Big Bum Pegahmagabow, defensewoman for the Wasy Wailerettes, stops the puck and passes it to Number Eleven Black Lady Halked, also defense-woman for the Wasy Wallerettes, but Gazelle Nataways, Captain of the Wasy Wailerettes, soogi body check meethew her own team-mate Black Lady Halked woops! She falls, ladies igwa gentlemen, Black Lady Halked hits the boards and Black Lady Halked is singin' the blues, ladies igwa gentlemen, Black Lady Halked sings the blues. (*Dry Lips*, 74)

In trying to explain the rhythm and tempo of Cree and why it comes across as humorous, Highway explains that Euro-American postmodernism is pessimistic and negative, while Native postmodernism still has a glimmer of hope and belief in it: "You laugh all the time when you speak it [Cree]. In spite of the violence on the reserve, the rhythm of the language is funny. It must have something to do with the Trickster being at the centre of it" (Quoted in Conologue, C5).

The second "translation" performed by Highway is the transformation of the Native rituals and rites of a tribal society into significant symbols and markers for a world that has for the most part abandoned any belief in those rituals. In other words, religious or spiritual belief has been transformed into art, and the creative spirit behind the myths and stories in the oral tradition have been changed into a new form of creativity, one that is highly visual and visceral at the same time: "Indian mythology is filled with the most extraordinary events,

beings and creatures. These lend themselves so well to visual interpretation, to exciting stage and visual creation ... Not only are the visuals powerful, the symbolism underlying these extraordinary stories is as basic and as direct as air” (Highway, 1987. 30).

The tremendous power of “translation” and transformation is represented nowhere as well as in the figure of Nanabush itself, a central character in both of Highway’s plays. The trickster figure, known as Nanabush in Ojibwa mythology and Weesagechak in Cree, has some abilities that make it a perfect catalyst in a ritual or theatrical performance: Nanabush can change shape and become any human or animal figure, appear as either female or male or both, and, unlike Christian symbols, cannot be categorized as either mainly good or evil. As playwright Daniel David Moses points out: “The trickster figure shows the difference between native and Western cultures ... Mainstream culture creates heroes to emulate; native cultures have the trickster figure, who more often than not you don’t want to emulate” (Quoted in Kaplan. 19). Because Nanabush is all things to all people, as it were, Highway is able to use the creature in different ways for different plays.

In *The Rez Sisters*, which is a comic, almost slapstick play about seven women on the reserve who decide, each for reasons of their own, to try to get down to Toronto and partake in what is being billed as the Biggest Bingo Game in the World, Nanabush plays an almost realist role. Nanabush appears three times in the play—as a seagull, a nighthawk, and then as a MC at the bingo game before reverting to the nighthawk image in a transformation that takes place on stage during the process of the action itself:

The figure of Nanabush in his various guises provides Highway with a means to bring into play a level of experience beyond the empirical and quotidian, which otherwise dominates the seven women's lives on the reservation. The intervention by Nanabush in their lives can be seen as analogous to structural features found in Native oral traditions, where the borders between mythological and empirical worlds are not clearly demarcated. In such stories Nanabush can operate in both worlds.
(Balme, 178)

In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which features the men on the reservation who are in some way related to or connected with the women in *The Rez Sisters*, the themes are much darker and more disturbing. Here, Nanabush takes on several grotesquely exaggerated female roles, almost carnivalesque in appearance and intent. As Highway himself states in a foreword to the play:

So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology--theology, if you will--is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously. [. . .] Some say that Nanabush left this continent when the white man came. We believe she/he is still here among us--albeit a little the worse for

wear and tear having assumed other guises. Without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever. (12)

In effect, what Highway does here is merge the iconic figure and representation of the mythical and folkloric Nanabush with the most obvious of Western cultural icons, images that have permeated and infiltrated all levels and all societies. This hybridity represents the new “spirituality” that results from the bringing together of these disparate images. In *The Rez Sisters*, we see the beginnings of this when the Bingo Caller MC morphs into the nighthawk, the bird of death come to carry Marie-Adele away. It is full-blown in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, with Nanabush on various occasions being: (a) A swollen-bellied drunken female perched on a jukebox and about to give birth to her Fetal Alcohol Syndrome damaged child; (b) A parody of the Christian deity sitting on a throne and dressed “in an old man’s white beard and wig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women’s high-heeled pumps” (Highway, 1989. 117); (c) An overweight teenage girl with an exaggerated artificial rear-end, almost clownish in effect.

Highway’s intent in the presentation of what some might consider a sacrilegious vision of a figure that is after all a god in Native mythology seems two-fold: first, to indicate that a patriarchal society has created these bizarre body images after its own male image (as flashbacks on the part of the male members of the reserve); second, as a way to deal a blow to the over-idealized and over-romanticized images of Native spirituality (a modern-day version of the figure of the “noble savage”):

If the mythological creature Nanabush is to survive as a contemporary and culturally appropriate stage figure, then he/she (this seems to be one of Highway's messages in the play) will have to adapt to and assume images deriving from popular mass culture, which are an integral part of present-day Native experience. (Balme. 179-180)

Highway indicates as much when he describes Nanabush taking in the sights of Toronto’s downtown: “[H]e also takes strolls down Yonge Street, drinks beer, sometimes passes out at the Silver Dollar and goes shopping at the Eaton Centre. You should have seen him when he first encountered a telephone, an electric typewriter, a toaster, an automobile. I was there” (Highway, 1987. 29). In other words, Highway wants to make sure that his Nanabush is not confused with the trickster figure in Cree and Ojibway mythologies, no matter how much it might resemble that creature. According to Filewod (1994): “In both plays, Nanabush is a transformative agent whose presence enables the development of plot. Highway’s declared purpose in both plays is to show the still active role of the Trickster, as a metonym for suppressed spirituality, in the material lives of Native people” (366).

While Nanabush is central to Highway's plays (they could not work without Nanabush), it must be remembered that he/she is part of an ensemble cast. As pointed out by Perkins (2002): "Nanabush is neither a contemporary nor a readily available figure; he is a figure brought back from the past of a culture that no longer exists in any coherent form ... The play's emotional centre is not Nanabush himself but the ways in which other characters relate to him" (260).

That interaction between Nanabush and the characters in the plays is complex and multi-layered. In *The Rez Sisters*, while he is physically present on the stage, most of the characters do not see or comprehend his "real" nature. He is seen by them as simply another natural part of the world in which they exist at the present time, having lost the ability to view the "true" world where spirituality resides. The only two characters who see him as more than just a bird or bingo master are Marie-Adele who is dying of cancer, and Zhaboonigan, who is considered mentally handicapped and who was brutally raped as a child. There is a sense here that the play is running on two different time sequences – the mythological and the historical:

Nanabush's time is a "time of the Other" not because it is "separate" from westernized time or from the time-scheme followed by the rest of the play, but because it is of a different nature. In Nanabush's time, past and present are both intertwined and distinct. His function is to communicate his sense of time to the rest of the characters in the play. (Perkins. 260)

The two time sequences are different in another way: while Nanabush exists in circular time, the majority of the action of *The Rez Sisters* moves from start to finish in accordance with the western, lineal way of viewing time. But there are moments in the play (usually highlighted by spotlight monologues) in which circular time takes over. These are like a series of pauses in the frantic action going forward much like a slapstick comedy:

[I]n these pauses and in the memories to which they give occasion, the play begins to gain a sense of its own past, the past of its characters, and the past of their culture. The scenes in which characters remember the past are scenes in which their identities and their histories are set against the inexorable movement of time. The most significant of these scenes are inspired by or presided over by Nanabush, whose complex temporal allegiance provides an opportunity for the laboriously creative act of remembering. (Perkins. 261)

Perhaps the best explanation of Nanabush time versus linear time can be found in the scene where Marie-Adele dances with the Bingo Caller and the Bingo Caller slowly morphs into the nighthawk:

[...] the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele [emerges] waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. [...]

MARIE-ADELE U-wi-nuk u-wa? U-wi-nuk u-wa? Eugene? Nee. U-wi-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma so that's who you are ... at rest upon the rock ... the master of the game ... the game ... it's me [...] come ...come ... ["Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are."] (103-04; translation in original)

It is this scene more than any other that distinguishes Highway's plays from those of Western postmodern playwrights, even those of the theatre of the absurd, with which they have many things in common. The reaching out from the "time of the Other" leads to a different idea of death than the one most white audiences have become accustomed to:

In Nanabush's world, preparation for death does not involve sorrow or repentance, as it does in the Christian tradition, but a certain amount of pain, a good deal of talking, a night or two on the town, and a willingness to accept ironic coincidences. Death, the final "game" of which Nanabush is master, arises out of the chaos and the banality of the bingo hall and out of the theatrical act of remembering that takes place there. (Perkins. 266)

This sort of transcendence is not found in the plays of Beckett or Stoppard. In fact, without this understanding of the role of Nanabush in the plays, it is difficult to understand the central action of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. This is a play that is rife with violence and a series of disturbing events that make the audience squirm, including degradation and rape. At the same time, the play ends with a life-affirming scene in which a character that has been dreaming (again a representation of another time) lifts up a newborn baby.

The central action of the play circles around the attempt to create a woman's ice hockey team on the reserve. However, we never see the female hockey players—nor any women at all other than in the transformations carried out by Nanabush. On stage are seven men from the reserve, the main ones being Big Joey, a self-professed sexual athlete; Simon Starblanket, who dreams of bringing back the old ways with the help of his fiancée Patsy; Dickie Bird Halked, who suffers from foetal alcohol syndrome; and Zachary, the dreamer. Through the series of Nanabush inspired flashbacks, we are shown how Dickie Bird's mother, staggering drunk, gave birth to him as she leaned against a jukebox in a tavern and how Big Joey, the father, fled from the scene, all his puffed-up masculine attitude vanishing in an act of supreme cowardice. Confusing visions of his mother's horrible labor with another character's harangues on the pain of Christ on the cross, Dickie Bird brutally rapes Patsy with a crucifix. When in a drunken stupor, Simon learns of this, he goes after Dickie Bird but ends up accidentally shooting himself.

Thus, Nanabush's transformations go beyond those of gender, and beyond any naturalistic transition from one play to the next. While Nanabush was an ethereal bird/dancer in *The Rez Sisters*, the opposite is true in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*:

Nanabush is corporeality personified, appearing as grotesque versions of the women in these men's daily lives: Gazelle Nataways, the temptress who compromises Zachary's happy marriage; Black Lady Halked, Big Joey's alcoholic mistress and Dickie Bird's slattern mother; and Patsy, the hope of new life and new spiritual awareness ... to emphasize the larger-than-life sexual importance these women have for the Wasy men, Nanabush dons oversized prosthetic devices for their sexual characteristics: huge rubberized breasts for Gazelle, big buttocks for Patsy, and a full-term belly for Black Lady Halked. (Johnston, 1990. 262)

That a tragic play such as this could turn out to have the kind of silver lining that it displays at the end would not be possible without an acceptance of the role of Nanabush in all of this. He is, after all, "the shaman, who is taking all seven men into a dream world, knowing that before the healing can take place, the poison must be exposed ..." (Honegger. 90, citing a phrase Highway uses in the preface to the published play). In this sense, the nightmare has to be seen through, has to be enacted: "The nightmare contains the healing process: The comedic imagination, ancient gift of the trickster, outsmarts the terror: Storytelling as performance in process is a triumphant proof of continuity: a culture creates itself anew through each act of telling, of performing" (91).

Thus, it is possible for the nightmare to end with Zachary finding himself back in his own house (while in the dream he is in Gazelle Nataway's house with no pants on). It is also possible to travel back in time with Nanabush to a time before language, "toward the big bang of the all-burning, the originary moment of creation ... This world is one of shimmerings, of flickering fires, of space beyond language ... the space beyond the origin of our world, the space that moves one toward ... that moment of the birth of the cosmos ... the world before poison is poured into the ear of the king and into the minds of the Highway characters in the fallen world of the tragic circle" (Imboden. 121-122).

In this world, redemption is possible for everyone, even Big Joey, whose effort to outdo the white man results in the hyper-masculinity that is responsible for so much of the horror and pain in the play's narrative. In the dream, it is when the men on the reserve assume extreme gender positions that the tragedies take place, when they adopt the Western attitude that masculinity embodies: "success and status, toughness and independence, aggressiveness and dominance," (Herek. 568). At one point, when he feels the need to explain why he allowed his son Dickie Bird to rape Patsy when he could have stopped it, Big Joey says: "Because I hate them! I hate them fuckin' bitches. Because they—our own women—took the

fuckin' power away from us faster than the FBI ever did" (120). The attitude is one held by many white males who feel emasculated in the postmodern world characterized by non-canoncity and a lack of hierarchy. According to Fortier (2002):

Highway's theatre is profoundly concerned with the differences between native women and native men; at the same time, especially in the figure of Nanabush, Highway presents a place beyond simple gendered identity and oppression. Nanabush presents a native alternative to restrictive binary identities which for Highway are in large measure the imposition of western patriarchy on native culture. In a similar tension, *Dry Lips* combines a culturally acceptable, often restrictive, male homosocial structure with hints of a repressed homoeroticism which upsets the binary order from another direction. (205)

Yet at the same time there is a transgression of fixed gender roles in Highway's plays—and not just with Nanabush's ability to assume either role (or both in the case of the Christian deity on the toilet bowl throne). For example, he has the men baking bread and knitting baby garments while the women play hockey. As well, there is more than a hint of homoerotic sexual tension in the adoration and worship displayed by Creature Nataways towards Big Joey. In the end, even Big Joey feels the power of redemption. Announcing of the hockey game, he says "(t)here they are, the most beautiful, daring, death defying Indian women in the world, the Wasy Wailerettes!" (124).

The play ends with the Nanabush-inspired dream/nightmare coming to a conclusion once the poison has been exposed, followed by this description of the celebration of new life, despite all the horrors and tragedies that have already taken place and that are bound to take place in the future:

The baby finally gets "dislodged" from the blanket and emerges, naked. And the last thing we see is this beautiful naked Indian man lifting this naked baby Indian girl up in the air, his wife sitting beside them watching and laughing. Slow fade-out. Split seconds before complete back-out, Hera peals out with this magical, silvery Nanabush laugh, which is echoed and echoed by one last magical arpeggio on the harmonica, from off-stage. Finally, in the darkness, the last sound we hear is the baby's laughing voice, magnified on tape to fill the entire theatre. And this, too, fades into complete silence. (*Dry Lips*. 129-130)

This scene requires no words. There is no way the audience can confuse what is going on—or can attribute it to either a Native or Western way of thinking. The celebration here is meant to be universal, primitive and pre-linguistic. This is the culmination of what Imboden (1995) describes as the "strange dialectical movement" that "pervades the play: one is the exodus of those fleeing bondage, and one is the free falling through time of those seeking the origin of the giving which created the universe" (123).

Bringing Ritual and Performance Together: Concluding Remarks

At the core of Highway's writing is the question of Native authenticity and identity. What does it mean to be of Native heritage in the 20th and 21st century? Is there an essential Native culture that can be "picked out" as it were and held up for display? His attempt at answering these questions is also at the core of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. According to Filewod (1994):

The problem of white reception of aboriginal theatre is a problem in the dialectics of decolonization and reinscribed colonization, in which voices of cultural affirmation and resistance are received by white critics as a testament of authentic and unmediated reality, which, in critical response, disallows the agency of resistance itself. (364)

At the same time, it is argued that hybridity can lead to the destruction of the original Native culture: "The contradiction develops when critics who accept western realist dramaturgy as the least mediated, most natural theatrical form find these two essentialisms, aboriginal and dramaturgical, in conflict" (364).

Highway has managed to navigate these two "essentials" in a way that gets across the way the two values are not really essential but are actually themselves constructs. He re-creates a creature from classical Native mythology and incorporates it into the structure of his plays so that what was previously an essential element of Native spirituality is now an essential element of a postmodern play. In one stroke, Highway undoes both essentialisms while at the same time making a bid for a third one, one that he feels is truly essential for the human spirit. Through Nanabush and the rituals that he/she brings into the postmodern theatre, Highway is able to fold together the strands of the various elements that combine to create Native identity today: a combination of nostalgia for the ancient rites and rituals (which in some sense are still there because they are eternal), resistance against the effects of being colonized and having their religion and spirituality stripped from them, and cultural re-birth in the form of the one true essentialism, that which Highway sees as the creativity of the human spirit in all its manifestations. As Conlogue puts it: "The 'poison' is the rage and humiliation locked up inside the native people ... the 'healing' is the power of laughter and the power of dreams. Both these medicines are part of native thought, but it is Highway's particular talent to ransack the conventions of Western theatre and find forms appropriate for them that make sense for non-natives as well" (A17).

In a broader sense, Highway's appropriation of "the conventions of Western theatre" expands his vision of the Native experience to fit the framework of the pessimistic post-modern spirit. As Oliver Bennett remarks in his critique of the phenomenon of widespread

“cultural pessimism” at the turn of the 21st century, postmodern pessimism finds its origins in environmental destruction, the loss of cultural authenticity in the midst of “identity politics,” and the growing “conviction that the culture of a nation, a civilisation or of humanity itself is in an irreversible process of decline” (Bennett. 1-12). And Highway’s use of psychoanalytic tropes and images draws upon another famously pessimistic worldview, the late Freudian conclusion that the aggressive death instinct *thanatos* must ultimately prevail over the life instinct *eros*, a conclusion seemingly borne out by the 20th century experience of world war, holocaust and disasters. For Highway, however, the spirit of pessimism is not necessarily universal, and has more to do the debasement of the Native American identity in the modern context of commercialism, pop culture and widespread spiritual anomie.

Against this spirit of pessimism regarding the loss of Native American identity, however, Highway also projects an opposing vision grounded in humor, irony and protective adaptation to the contemporary scene. In doing so, Highway apparently rejects the classical/modernist dichotomy with its obsessive focus on universal values and perfect form and balance. Thus, Highway turns what could be a crisis in cultural authenticity (the misrepresentation of basic Native rituals and cultural icons such as Nanabush) into the creation of a new form of authenticity. This authenticity relies on the creativity found in the performance of our basic humanity, elements that need to be found in all societies if those societies wish to survive.

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