CULTURAL COLLISION AND MAGICAL TRANSFORMATION: THE PLAYS OF TOMSON HIGHWAY

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In *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Tomson Highway places in violent juxtaposition the cultural and spiritual values of Native and non-Native Canadians. Although there is in some respects a cultural accommodation and a positive integration of some of the materialistic products of a White capitalistic society, the negative consequences of cultural collision are played out in the lives of the women and men who constitute the Native community of Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. As Highway indicates in his notes to *The Rez Sisters,* "Wasaychigan" means "window" in Ojibway: the reserve functions in both plays as a metonym for Native communities across the country—looking out on the conspicuous indicators of an economically powerful White society, and looking in at its own signs of self-destruction and of self-preservation. From her vantage point "away up here" on the roof of her house, as she hammers on new shingles with her silver hammer, Pelajia Patchnose, the Rez Sister with the clearest vision and the widest perspective, can see "half of Manitoulin Island on a clear day." She can see signs of fecund family life behind Marie-Adele's white picket fence, and signs of negligence and irresponsibility in the garbage heap behind Big Joey's "dumpy little house"(2). Beyond the reservation, she can just barely make out the pulp mill at Espanola where her husband works, and if she had binoculars she could see the superstack in Sudbury; if she were Superwoman, she could see the CN Tower in Toronto, where two of her sons work. The life of her family, then, extends beyond that of the reservation and finds a degree of accommodation beyond its parameters. Pelajia is also well aware of the spiritual and social problems on the Rez, and

considers the possibility of a revolution in which the white male authority of church and state is overthrown:

> Everyone here's crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush (6).

Moreover, "the old stories, the old language" are "almost all gone" (5). Paradoxically, however, Pelajia also recalls with nostalgia a great bingo-player of the past who functions for her as social icon. She focuses on any positive indicator of survival and empowerment, regardless of its origins, and she both bullies and inspires the other six Rez sisters, all of whom struggle with ways to survive in a fragmented society.

In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Tomson Highway focuses on the lives of seven Native men in the Wasaychigan Reserve. The consequences of cultural collision are more radical and destructive in his second play of a projected seven play cycle, as the men of the Rez act out their anger and frustration, the consequences of their disempowerment, in violent, self-negating acts, or through denial and escape into alcoholism. In both plays, however, Highway shows the potential for healing in terms of a transformation which comes as a consequence of living through the cultural nightmare, and waking to discover the possibility of a new beginning. In the process of exploring the problems which are destroying Native society, self-destruction is obviated, and a transformation envisioned:

> I think that every society is constantly in a state of change, of transformation, of metamorphoses. I think it is very important that it continue to be so to prevent the stagnation of our imaginations, our spirits, our soul. . . . What I really find fascinating about the future of my life, the life of my people, the life of my fellow Canadians is the searching for this new voice, this new identity, this new tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds . . . combining them and coming up with something new. (Highway "Interview" 354)

Highway rejects nothing in his experience of both Native and non-Native society—the negative as well as the positive consequences of cultural collision and cultural bridging fuel the transformation.

In both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* there are graphic and brutal realizations of the collision of cultures,

when they assume oppositional values. The conflict is the result of a refusal to accommodate differences, and a desire to assert power and control through an annihilation of these differences. But the recognition of differences is not necessarily a conception of cultures in essentializing terms, as Sheila Rabillard argues in her post-colonial analysis of the two plays as "hybridizations."[1] In Highway's plays there is no concept of "pure" cultures. The Rez comprises both Native and non-Native worlds, a variety of cultural patterns and experiences; these worlds collide when differences are not accommodated.

Even in a simplified account of the plot of *The Rez Sisters*, a cultural mélange is evident. The seven women—sisters, half-sisters, step-sisters—all hope to realize their particular dreams by winning the jackpot at "Biggest Bingo in the World" in Toronto. The means, then, is heavily compromised by non-White popular culture, and even the ends—the women's goals—are pervasively in terms of materialistic White society: Pelajia wants paved roads for the Rez, her sister Philomena wants an indoor bathroom with a large white toilet on which she can enthrone herself; Annie, who is infatuated with a Jewish country singer, wants the biggest record-player in the world on which to play country music; Veronique, who is infatuated with doctrinal Christianity, wants the biggest stove on the Rez. These short-term goals are primarily unconscious tactics for psychological survival, providing a way of addressing physical needs and of ameliorating current living conditions. They represent an accommodation with White society, but cannot address the consequences of cultural collision. The negative consequences of the opposition of cultural codes are manifested in the "so many things" that each woman has to forget: Emily Dictionary was beaten daily by her husband of ten years before she left him—the implication being that violent male behaviour is the result of alcohol abuse, which itself is a consequence of cultural collision. Philomena was abandoned by a White lover, and had to give up her baby; as a result she does not know who her child is—a clear indicator of loss of cultural identity. Zhaboonigan, Veronique's mentally disabled adopted daughter, has been raped by a gang of White boys. She relives this rape in the play at a point when the other women are in a state of anarchic conflict before they finally resolve to work together to raise the necessary money for the trip to Toronto. Highway cuts through the comic mayhem with a graphic account of rape which is an undeniable indicator of the violence inflicted on one Native woman. Rape may function as a metaphor for the intrusive,

destructive impact of one society on another in this play, as it does in *Dry Lips*, but it is also a cruel fact: Zhaboonigan (whose name means "needle" or "going-through-things") was assaulted by two White boys with a screwdriver, and left bleeding by the side of the road. Highway has explained in a talk at the University of Victoria in 1992 that this rape is based on an event which took place in a small town in Manitoba: Helen Betty Osborne, a young Native girl, was gang-raped and murdered by young White men—and penetrated fifty-six times with a screwdriver. (24; Note #13) Although many people in the town knew about the incident, only one youth of the four was brought to trial, and received a very light sentence.

Cultural collision is also strongly indicated in another recollection of violence suffered by a Native woman in *The Rez Sisters*. After leaving her abusive husband, Emily Dictionary joins a gang of Native lesbian "biker chicks" in San Francisco, one of whom, Rose, has been driven to self-destruction by her experience of "how fuckin hard it is to be an Indian in this country" (97). Refusing to give way, to give in, she drives her bike down the middle of the highway, and goes head-on into a big 18-wheeler—a graphic symbol for the destructive force of a dominant culture. Emily, however, with the spray of her lover's blood on her neck, drives on "straight into daylight," back to her home on the Wasaychigan Reserve. She has no urge to self-destruct through direct confrontation. And it is Emily Dictionary who conceives a baby in a one-night stand with the Rez stud, Big Joey. A form of transformation is effected through this promise of a new life, in which Zhabooningan in particular takes great pleasure. Highway is uncompromisingly idealistic in his hope for an improved life in the next generation of children, whom he sees as "magical" in their possibilities. Similarly, in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, hope for the future is embodied in a baby girl. The last sound heard in the theatre, in the darkness, "is the baby's laughing voice, magnified on tape to fill the entire theatre" (130).[2]

In *The Rez Sisters*, the many children of Marie-Adele—fourteen in total (the number seven and its multiples recur in Highway's plays, having mystical significance in Native mythology)—also suggest the possibility of a flourishing Native culture. And the tragic, ironic death of Marie-Adele of ovarian cancer is also constructed as a magical transformation. Through the agency of the shape-shifter, Nanabush, she is brought to an acceptance of her death, and its horror and cruelty metamorphose into a welcoming of the "ever soft

wings" which provide a final relief from her pain. Nanabush, the trickster figure in both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing,* teaches the meaning of existence on earth by embodying its many contradictions. Death is cruel and final, but it is also a transformation—part of the continuing cycle of life, as Raven, another trickster figure, suggests in Lee Maracle's novel, *Ravensong*:

> "Death is transformative," Raven said to earth from the depths of the ocean. The sound rolled out, amplifying slowly. Earth heard Raven speak. She paid no attention to the words; she let the compelling power of them play with her sensual self. Her insides turned, a hot burning sensation flitted about the stone of her. Earth turned, folded in on herself, a shock of heat shot through her. It changed her surface, the very atmosphere surrounding her changed. (85)

The shape-shifting, transformative powers of Nanabush are evident in his or her many manifestations (Grant 110). In *The Rez Sisters,* Nanabush, played by a male dancer, manifests himself as a seagull, a nighthawk, and the Bingo Master, moving between the extremes of white and black, hope and despair, comedy and tragedy, order and chaos, as well as between Native and White cultures. Because Nanabush participates in both cultures, elements of each may be accommodated, without a necessary mutual destruction. *The Rez Sisters* concludes with Philomena sitting like a queen on her "spirit white" toilet throne, celebrating the black and white "large, shining porcelain tiles" (117) of her bathroom, and Pelajia back on her roof, still looking for the seagulls over Marie-Adele's house, unaware that Nanabush is right behind her, dancing "to the beat of her hammer, merrily and triumphantly" (118) in celebration of the strange inconsistencies and contradictions in individual lives.

In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing,* it is Simon Starblanket, Marie-Adele's son, who dies, apparently needlessly and tragically. In *Dry Lips,* which Highway has described as the "flip side" to *The Rez Sisters,* the lives of seven men on the reserve are shown in terms of their response to the lives of the women, who have decided to form a hockey team—the Wasy Wailerettes—as a form of assertion of solidarity and empowerment. Most of the men are casualties of the collision with White society—disempowered, irresponsible, self-destructive. Big Joey, who is regarded by the women, and who regards himself as the Rez stud, is the least responsible, denying his paternity, and blaming the women for his powerlessness. His participation at Wounded Knee in South Da-

kota, which has become a metonym for the collision of White and Native cultures, has left him spiritually castrated:

> "This is the end of the suffering of a great nation!" That was me. Wounded Knee, South Dakota, Spring of '73. The FBI. They beat us to the ground. Again and again and again. Ever since that spring, I've had these dreams where blood is spillin' out from my groin, nothin' there but blood and emptiness. It's like . . . I lost myself. (119-20)

His unacknowledged son, Dickie Bird Halked, was born in a bar, and suffers the mentally debilitating effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, the most telling one being that he cannot speak: he has no language with which to articulate his pain and frustration, or to communicate with others. Moreover, he is unsure of his paternity—his origins. Pierre St. Pierre, the clown of the Rez, especially as interpreted by Graham Greene in productions at Theatre Passe Muraille and the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, is an ineffectual alcoholic, whose good intentions become confused and misdirected. Spooky Lacroix has substituted an addiction to Christianity for an addiction to alcohol, and uses his religion to intimidate the more emotionally and psychologically vulnerable. His distorted views of White inculcated values are radically juxtaposed with the Native spirituality of Simon Starblanket, whose last name reifies the positive nature of his quest for the spiritual beliefs of his ancestors. With his pregnant girlfriend, the granddaughter of a medicine woman, he intends to visit South Dakota, the site of Native suppression, to celebrate the renaissance of Native culture by dancing with the Sioux. Although he lacks mentors, Simon tries to learn to dance and chant, and "the magical flickering of [his] luminescent powwow dancing bustle," which is doubled and amplified by a dancing bustle worn by Nanabush (38), provides an oppositional symbol to the death-dealing cross held like a weapon by Spooky Lacroix, also aptly named. In fact, as the play shows, Christian priests have tried to eradicate Native spirituality, and have demonized Native spiritual leaders. Spooky's cross becomes a literal weapon in the hands of Dickie Bird. Caught between the conflicting claims of Christianity and Native spirituality, obsessed by the potency of the cross, he rapes Simon's pregnant girlfriend with it. As in *The Rez Sisters*, rape has metaphorical implications—the rape of Native culture by White culture—but because in *Dry Lips* it is enacted, rather than described, it takes on a physical reality which is profoundly disturbing. Highway confounds the pervasive comedic

direction of the play to expose the poison. The tragedy is compounded when Simon Starblanket, in a drunken rage, attempts to avenge the rape of Patsy by shooting Dickie Bird, and accidentally shoots himself, distracted by a vision of Nanabush. As in *The Rez Sisters,* Nanabush is associated with the death of a positive life force in the play. Zachary, in a moment of anguish and despair, cries out against any presiding deity—Christian or Native—who would allow such suffering and loss:

> Aieeeeeee-Lord! God! God of the Indian! God of the Whiteman! God-Al-fucking-mighty! Whatever the fuck your name is. Why are you doing this to us? Why are you doing this to us? Are you up there at all? Or are you some stupid, drunken shit, out-of-your-mind-passed out under some great beer table up there in your stupid fucking clouds! Come down! Astum oota! ("Come down here!") Why don't you come down? I dare you to come down from your high-falutin' fuckin' shit-throne up there, come down and show us you got the guts to stop this stupid, stupid, stupid way of living. It's got to stop. It's got to stop. (116)

Nanabush's response is a mockery of any attempt to blame any "higher" deity, presumably because men and women are responsible for their own shit. Nanabush is a manifestation of the contradictions and complexities of life—a way of visualizing them in order to understand them, not a first cause:

> *Towards the end of this speech, a light comes up on Nanabush. Her perch (i.e., the jukebox) has swivelled around and she is sitting on a toilet having a good shit. He/she is dressed in an old man's white beard and wig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women's high-heeled pumps. Surrounded by white, puffy clouds, she/he sits with her legs crossed, nonchalantly filing his/her fingernails.* (117)

The figure of Nanabush embodies the extremities of the cultural conflict—and the paradoxes inherent in life and death. In *Dry Lips,* Nanabush is played by a woman, and acts out the roles of all the women in the play—the casualties of cultural collision, and the transformative possibilities. As Patsy, Simon's girlfriend, Nanabush is brutally raped; as Lady Black Halked, she gives birth to Dickie Bird astride a jukebox; as Hera Keechigeesik, whose names allude to the Greek goddess of heaven, she is the wife of Zachary Jeremiah, the Rez brother who is working towards an improved quality of life by opening a bakery, in which he will bake cookies

called Nanabush. More significantly, as the mother of his child, she embodies hope for the future.

The magical transformative properties of Nanabush are suggested in production through lighting and music, and by her presiding location on the stage. She is perched on top of "a magical mystical jukebox" which is revealed at moments of transformation in the play—the birth of Dickie Bird, and the apotheosis of Simon Starblanket,[3] whose vision of the moon is realized through a transformation of the jukebox—the popular culture of one society eliding with the mystical beliefs of another. In the Production Note included with the published play, Highway underscores the magical properties of the jukebox:

> The effect sought after here is of this magical, mystical jukebox hanging in the night air, like a haunting and persistent memory, high up over the village of Wasaychigan Hill. (9-10)

Finally, as in *The Rez Sisters,* this magical transformation is celebrated by a dance in dream-life:

> *Out of this darkness emerges the sound of Simon Starblanket's chanting voice. Away up over Nanabush's perch, the moon begins to glow, fully and magnificently. Against it, in silhouette, we see Simon, wearing his powwow bustle. Simon Starblanket is dancing in the moon.* (120)

As Highway has indicated, Nanabush is fundamental to the dream-life of Native culture, which in effect constitutes the play: Zachary awakens at the end to discover its truth. He has dreamed the whole sequence of comic and tragic events while lying on the couch in his own home. The transformation is effected through a framing of the play as dream, and a waking into the possibility for a brighter future, which as "the magical, silvery Nanabush laugh" (130) of Hera suggests, holds out more promise. The frame, however, does not mitigate the horrific and brutal events of the "dream." Their dramatization is more powerful than the comforting conclusion, and the transformation as a result remains hypothe tical.[4] Highway's plays have been performed before diverse audiences of Natives and non-Natives, been produced in mainstream theatres and on the main stage at an international festival in Edinburgh. Ironically, they have succeeded in bridging the gap between the cultures by dramatizing their collision, and effecting a "transformation" of response to Native culture.[5]

NOTES

[1] Drawing on the definitions of Homi K. Bhabha, Sheila Rabillard, in an insightful and comprehensive analysis, sees Tomson Highway's plays in terms of the "hybrid": "a space of colonial discourse in which the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery, a space which has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of 'origins'. It is precisely as a separation from 'origins' and 'essences' that this colonial space is constructed." ("Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid. Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway," *Essays in Theatre* 12.1 [Nov 1993]: 4.)

[2] According to Highway, "Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near-destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation." (quoted in Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City," *Books in Canada* 18.2: 9)

[3] This apotheosis bears some resemblance to the final vision of the murdered young protagonist in Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets* (1992). Perhaps "magical transformations" are now seen as the only way in which substantive change can be effected in increasingly complex societies.

[4] Sheila Rabillard reaches a similar conclusion in her essay:

> The play's dream world is coloured by the nightmare of alcoholism and despair, and Zachary's awakening at the close to a placid domestic realm of wife and child contrasts so strongly with the tone of the play's dreamscape as to seem itself a merely visionary hope (19).

[5] Tomson Highway was astonished at the success of his Rez plays, but believed that the greatest accomplishment of *The Rez Sisters* was that "it raised public consciousness of a specific segment of the women's community—Indian women and older women at that." (quoted from Jennifer Preston, "Weesagechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.", *The Drama Review* 9:1/2 (1987): 143-44.

Robert Nunn speculates on the position of Highway's place in respect to mainstream Canadian theatre in "Marginality and English-Canadian Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 17 (1992): 217-25.

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