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GEORGE RYGA'S "HAIL MARY" AND TOMSON HIGHWAY'S NANABUSH: TWO PARADIGMS OF RELIGION AND THEATRE IN CANADA

In 1967 George Ryga wrote *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, ironically celebrating Canada's centennial with the **first** Canadian play to portray the tragedy of our aboriginal peoples; it subsequently became a canonical staple of Canadian theatre. Depicting the martyrdom of a Native girl on the streets of Vancouver, it was a powerful consciousness-raising experience for its white, middle-class audiences. Nevertheless, the play simplistically sentimentalised the aboriginal plight as the victimisation of passive children by irresponsible white parents: a Eurocentric, patriarchal paradigm that reflected the Department of Indian Affairs' assimilationist policies.

Almost twenty years later, Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* dramatised the paradigm of Native writers telling their own stories. A comedic revisioning of Native tragedy, it portrays seven Manitoulin Island "rez sisters" who raise money to attend THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD; it foregrounds matriarchal empowerment and valorises Native spirituality through the omnipresence of Nanabush, the Ojibway Trickster. Although both plays end with a death, the hopeless inadequacy of the priest's requiem for Rita Joe, "Hail Mary, Mother of God ... pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death," has been replaced by Nanabush's final dance, "merrily and triumphantly" celebrating a vibrant Native culture.

En 1967, George Ryga a écrit The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, la première pièce de théâtre canadienne traitant des difficultés des peuples autochtones au Canada. De façon ironique, elle a été composée l'année même du centième anniversaire du pays. Par la suite, la pièce est devenue un incontournable du théâtre canadien. Illustrant le martyre d'une jeune fille autochtone dans les rues de Vancouver, la pièce avait ému l'auditoire et engendré une prise de conscience de la part des spectateurs blancs provenant de la classe moyenne. Toutefois, de façon simpliste, elle a empreint de sentimentalisme la misère des autochtones en la représentant sous la forme de représailles exercées contres des enfants passifs par leurs parents blancs et irresponsables. Il s'agissait donc d'un paradigme patriarcal et euro-

centriste qui reflétait les politiques d'assimilation du ministère des Affaires indiennes.

Environ vingt ans plus tard, le paradigme des écrivains autochtones racontant leurs propres histoires a été mis en scène dans *The Rez Sisters* par Tomson Highway. Cette interprétation humoristique de la tragédie autochtone présente sept « femmes de la réserve » de l'Île Manitoulin qui veulent amasser les fonds nécessaires pour participer au PLUS GRAND BINGO DU MONDE. La pièce met ainsi l'accent sur les pouvoirs matriarcaux et valorise la spiritualité autochtone via l'omniprésence du joueur de tour ojibway, Nanabush. Les deux pièces se terminent avec une mort, mais le requiem inadéquat et sans-espoir que prononce le prêtre pour Rita Joe, « Sainte Marie, mère de dieu ... priez pour nous pauvres pécheurs, maintenant et à l'heure de notre mort, » a été remplacé par Nanabush qui danse « joyeusement et triomphalement, » célébrant ainsi la culture vibrante des autochtones.



In 1967 the Vancouver Playhouse commissioned George Ryga, a little-known socialist playwright of Ukrainian background, to write *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, ironically celebrating Canada's centennial with the first major Canadian play to dramatise the tragedy of its aboriginal Indian peoples. Also the first English production to open the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in 1969, the revised text went on to become a canonical staple of Canadian schools and theatres in subsequent decades (Innes 48). The play depicts the martyrdom of a young Native girl on the streets of Vancouver. Impoverished and exploited, she is arraigned for prostitution and subjected to the multiple trials which structure the play, interspersed with her past memories of carefree childhood times on the reserve in the Cariboo. Unable either to survive in the city with her lover Jaimie Paul, a Red Power advocate, or to return to an outmoded life on the reserve with her father, David Joe, she is destroyed by the negligence of the white institutions of church, school, social work, and justice—and finally raped and murdered. Although, ironically, Rita Joe was played by a white actress, Frances Hyland, the drama was a powerful consciousness-raising experience for its white, middle-class audiences. In a preface to the published text, Chief Dan George, who played David Joe, proclaimed it as a “message all Canada should hear” (35). Nevertheless, I would argue in retrospect that Ryga's play simplisti-

cally sentimentalised the aboriginal plight as the victimisation of passive children by irresponsible white parental authorities, and that this well-meaning but Eurocentric, patriarchal paradigm ultimately reflected the assimilationist policies of the Department of Indian Affairs at that time (Grant 40).

In contrast, almost twenty years later, Tomson Highway, a Cree from northern Manitoba who holds degrees in both Music and English from the University of Western Ontario, wrote *The Rez Sisters*, thereby dramatising a new paradigm of Native writers telling their own stories. *The Rez Sisters* portrays seven women on the Wasaychigan (Ojibway for “window” [xiii]) Hill Reserve who decide to raise money in order to attend “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD” in Toronto (27). Each of them has her dream, none of which is entirely realised, but their sisterhood, their human dignity, and their spirituality are strengthened even in the presence of rape and death. Highway does not minimise Native tragedies, but his comedic revisioning foregrounds Native empowerment through its matriarchal culture and valorises Native religion through the omnipresence of Nanabush, the Ojibway Trickster (xii). Although both plays end with a death, the hopeless inadequacy of the priest’s requiem for Rita Joe, “Hail Mary, Mother of God ... pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death” (130), has been replaced by Nanabush’s final dance, “merrily and triumphantly” (118) celebrating a vibrant Native spirituality.

Native playwright and critic Drew Hayden Taylor, tracing the development of “Native Theatre in Canada,” situates Ryga’s and Highway’s plays at key developmental points. After more than a century of repression of “traditional Native beliefs” by “Christianity, [...] the government, and the residential school system,” in the 1960s Native peoples “began to assert” themselves politically (225-26). George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, although “written by a non-Native person” and performed “in the original production in Vancouver [by a] non-Native [cast],” was “a milestone in Canadian theatre in offering more accurate representations of the urban Indian experience” and alerting “people [to] the power of theatre and [...] the plight of Native peoples” (226). Subsequently, as another “step towards getting our voice back,” the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts was founded in Toronto in 1974; it created the Native Theatre School. Ten years later, Shirley Cheechoo started the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group on the West Bay Reserve on Manitoulin Island where Tomson Highway first workshopped *The Rez Sisters* in February 1986 (226-27). When none of the white, mainstream

Toronto theatre companies would produce his play, Highway took it to the Native Earth Performing Arts Company when he became Artistic Director there (227). The production at the Native Canadian Centre in November 1986 was a tremendous success and later toured cities from British Columbia to Ontario. According to Taylor, “[w]ithin the Native community, [...] *The Rez Sisters* marked the beginning of contemporary Native theatre because that’s when people stood up and said, ‘[...] People are telling their own story and they’re telling it well’” (229). Highway followed his landmark play in 1989 with an award-winning sequel, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, a co-production between Theatre Passe Muraille and Native Earth. Its success guaranteed that “[f]rom there, Native playwrights had their own voice” (230). Daniel David Moses, Drew Hayden Taylor and others followed Highway’s example, and, by the late 1990s, Taylor could say that “Native theatre, instead of being the exception, is now an accepted component of contemporary Canadian theatre” (231).

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe is a didactic indictment of a white society that has deprived the Native peoples of their traditional social and economic security on the reserves and then failed to provide personal and cultural identity for them in the modern city. Their inevitable fate is dramatised in the form of a classical tragedy, with ominous foreshadowings and choric figures. The death of the heroine is choreographed as a martyrdom: the ironic “ecstasy” of a victim-saint.

These Western literary paradigms provide a backdrop for Ryga’s use of modern European theatricality. He employs Brechtian alienation devices (house lights up, untheatrical cast entrances, direct addresses to the audience) in order to implicate and politicise his audience: “the animals there ... (*gestures to the audience*) Who sleep with sore stomachs because ... they eat too much” (113). He also uses Expressionistic techniques (episodic plot, symbolic staging and backdrop, lighting and sound effects) to project the troubled, hallucinating mind of his protagonist (Grace 51-52).

Thus the stage is dominated by a circular ramp that imprisons Rita Joe in a timeless, repetitive courtroom scene centred on the Magistrate’s chair. The backdrop is a “mountain cyclorama” veiled by a dark maze curtain suggesting “gloom and confusion, and a cityscape” (37). Rita can only escape from this grotesque present into nostalgic memories created by lighting spots which transport her into the past, but also coldly isolate her in the present, and finally evolve into the “prison bar shadows” of her captivity (92) and the lights of the train (heralded throughout the play by the

ominous horn) that signals Jaimie's death and hers.

The characters in this play are also Expressionistic stereotypes in a theological-political allegory of patriarchal white authority and dependent Native children, which the white folklorist Singer repeatedly articulates in an appropriation of Rita Joe's voice:

Sleepless hours, heavy nights
Dream your dreams so pretty,
God was gonna have a laugh
An' gave me a job in the city! (72)

White authorities discount Native spirituality when Rita says, "I told the guy I'd seen God, and he says—'Yeh? What would you like us to do about it? [...] You better call [...] the airforce'" (73). Rather, the official Church is represented by the worker priest who preaches humility, passivity, and adherence to the "old life" of the reserve (113), which Rita condemns as a Christian conspiracy: "long ago the white man comes with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years ... then we had all the Bibles, an' the white man had our land" (96). The most well-meaning and sympathetic of the white colonisers, Father Andrew nevertheless personifies Eurocentric religious inadequacy in Rita's judgement: "Go tell your God ... when you see Him ... Tell him about Rita Joe an' what they done to her! Tell him about yourself, too! ... That you were not good enough for me but that didn't stop you tryin'!" (97).

This condemnation of insensitive, irresponsible, and inadequate parental authorities extends to the state also. The education system is characterised by the teacher who submerges Native culture in a "melting pot" (79) of second-rate English literature. The social worker, Mr. Homer, rejects the noble savage clichés of the "do-gooders," but his version of the realistic Native is a childlike dependent, grateful for his charity. The magistrate, who pities Rita because of "the child" he once saw in the Cariboo (47), is himself imprisoned by the white laws and institutions which have already failed her, as she says, "You got rules here that was made before I was born" (91). Finally, he blames this "child" of "civilization," as he terms her (67), for rejecting the patriarchal system of white schools, clinics, and courts, and condemns his victim to her fate:

You have a mind ... you have a heart. The cities are open to you to come and go as you wish, yet you gravitate to the slums and skid-rows and the shanty-town fringes. You become a whore, drunkard, user of narcotics ... At best

dying of illness or malnutrition ... At worst, kicked or beaten to death by some angry white scum who finds in you something lower than himself to pound his frustrations out on! What's to be done? You Indians seem to be incapable of taking action to help yourselves. Someone must care for you. (125)

This articulation of the white master narrative supported by Church and State is symbolically on trial in Ryga's play and stands condemned for racism and genocide. However, Ryga fails to provide a counter-narrative to this well-intentioned but inadequate paternalistic paradigm, beyond the implication that the white audience, theatrically complicit in these crimes, will be politically motivated to create a more generous and tolerant society. Ultimately, this is not a subversion but a reinscription of the meta-narrative.

The problem is that Ryga's Native characters, although endowed with more humanity and individuality than the white villains, are still Expressionistic puppets, didactically manipulated to arouse our pity, if not our fear (Grace 52). If our crime is to blame the victim, Ryga's implied solution still involves the treatment of them as victims. Rita Joe desperately craves freedom and fulfilment, a "home" (68) where she can find love that isn't bought and sold, and "a place where you can keep babies" (99). But she is a child in the city, confused and exploited economically and sexually, and her fatal decision not to return to the reserve seems motivated more by a romantic desperation to stay with her lover than by a mature awareness of the options for Native empowerment.

Her father, David Joe, epitomises the parental love and responsibility that the white surrogates have so badly perverted. He refused to sell Rita to the white foreman when she was a child, and he travels hours to retrieve her from the city. He represents traditional Native culture and past security on the reserve. Nevertheless, he is a "noble savage stereotype" (Goldie 189), a character whom Ryga modelled closely on the personality of Chief Dan George because "he seemed in every way the tribal father, in the *white man's impressions of Indian life*. He retains a remarkable folk-memory [...]. I appreciate his traditionalism; it's a great thing if it could be incorporated into the mainstream of Canadian life" (qtd. in Innes 50; italics added). Yet, even David Joe knows that this traditionalism is doomed: "If we only fish an' hunt an' cut pulpwood... pick strawberries in the bush ... for a hundred years more, we are dead" (Ryga 114). However, his tentative solution—to elect as chief "someone who's been to school ... maybe univer-

sity" (113)—ironically echoes the assimilationist policies of the Church-run residential schools.

The obvious alternative to the victimisation of Native peoples should be Rita's lover, Jaimie Paul, who embodies Red Power in conflict with the Church-State hegemony: "I don't believe nobody ... no priest or government ... They don't know what it's like to ... to want an' not have ... to stand in line and nobody sees you!" (115). Nevertheless, he is depicted as frustrated and impotent. His agenda is admirable: "No more handouts [...] We're gonna work an' live like people [...] stop listening to the priest an' Indian department guys who're working for a pension!" (82-83). However, with no socio-economic power, he dissipates his energy in futile gestures, angry brawls, and drunken escapism. His death, immediately preceding Rita's, universalises the hopelessness of the Native tragedy.

Ryga reinforces this sense of despair in the cyclical, fragmented structure of the play. There are no scene divisions in the two acts. All Rita's trials are condensed into one timeless ordeal, and the disconnected flashbacks, premonitions, and present crises reflect the loss of control and chronology in Rita's mind. This destruction of linear coherence and progress may reflect, as Parker suggests, the "associate[ive]" and "intuitive" patterns of the "Indian mind" (xvi), but the circular repetition also leaves the naturalistic impression of an inescapable fate.

When this play was first performed, white reviewers praised Ryga's rendition of Native speech and imagery. However, Chief Dan George admitted that the cadences are not authentic, although a white audience would not recognise this (qtd. in Grant 41, 44). Ryga himself explained that Rita's dialogue is not so much indigenous but "universal because it expresses the kind of general fear and reservation that people in any culture would have when coping with a new experience and trying to define it" (qtd. in Innes 49). This "universal" Western literary paradigm is also reflected in the very effective, but not particularly Native metaphors of the geese and the dragonfly (92-93, 121). David Joe invokes these images as emotional correlatives to express, respectively, his feelings of aspiration and loss. Ultimately, however, they are projections of Ryga's Eurocentric literary mind on his characterisation of the romantic primitive.

Ryga's stage directions deal harshly with the Singer who sits outside the main stage area, but to some extent she appears as an ironic portrait of the dramatist. Changed in the Ottawa production from "the Folklorist/Entertainer duo of the première" to a

single, schizophrenic figure (Innes 48), she is both an “alter ego to Rita” and “a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma.” Well-intentioned but culturally alien, she sits “turned away from the focus of the play” (Ryga 37), her songs “almost accidental,” irrelevant, and ultimately insensitive as she trivialises Rita’s death with sentimental spirituality: “Oh the singing bird / Has found its wings / And it’s soaring” (130). Ann Mortifee composed the music for Ryga’s lyrics in the popular white folk music style of the sixties—as far from the Native idiom as are the stylised ballet and mime interludes that Ryga uses to choreograph Rita’s memories and her death.

In 1967 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was an impressive and essential lesson for white audiences. But, in retrospect, we can see that Ryga, in his appropriation of the Native voice, ultimately, if unintentionally, subverted Native religion and reinscribed white culture in his tragic ending around the dead bodies of his martyred heroine and hero. As the Priest silences David Joe’s “ancient Indian funeral chant” with his inadequate “Hail Mary,” and the Singer sentimentalises the “necrophilic rape” with her Romantic lyricism, the “Young Indians [...] defiantly” represented by Rita’s sister are only allowed a hopeless eulogy: “When Rita Joe first come to the city—she told me . . . The cement made her feet hurt” (129-30).

Tomson Highway, nineteen years younger than Ryga, produced a play nineteen years after *Rita Joe* that reversed the process of religious and cultural appropriation in his “hybrid text” (Rabillard 6). *The Rez Sisters* is a counter-narrative that borrows freely from the dominant white culture but reinscribes the marginalised Native people at the centre of their own story. Himself a product of both cultures, Highway gave up a career as a concert pianist to “put together [his] knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language. It amounted to applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of [an Indian] drunk, say, at the corner of Queen and Bathurst” (qtd. in Wigston 8).

This play, intended as the first of a cycle of seven “rez” plays, celebrates the “resurgence” of Native spirituality and culture “seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation” (qtd. in Wigston 9). Although not as overt as his later novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which Highway says is “about the killing of one religion by another, about the killing of God as woman by God as man” (qtd. in Hodgson 3), *The Rez Sisters* also foregrounds competing white and Native spiritualities in the struggle for aboriginal survival. It is part of his planned “series of novels and plays and other works of

art, addressing the basic issue of religion, spirituality, because I think that it is at the origin of all these problems” (qtd. in Hodgson 5). The rez sisters, like Rita Joe, search for freedom, dignity, and love in the midst of pain, loss, and death. However, their play is not a Euro-Christian sacrificial tragedy, but a hilarious comedy, transforming Native adversity into, in Highway’s words, “humour and love and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology” (qtd. in Johnston 259) through a “three-dimensional” dramatisation (qtd. in Petrone 173) of an oral Trickster tale: “at once admonition, instruction, and entertainment” (Moses 87).

In contrast to Ryga’s play, *The Rez Sisters* is centred in a place of Native emancipation. Except for a brief interlude (3 pages in a text of 118), the drama takes place on the Wasaychigan Hill “rez” or in the van, a mobile “sisterhood” going to Toronto. Highway realistically acknowledges the economic, social, and spiritual problems of a marginalised people: “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). Nevertheless, the reserve is portrayed, not as a hopeless anachronism, but as a vibrant extended family with resentments and violent conflicts ultimately overcome by love and mutual support. The “grand and ridiculous march to the band office” at the end of Act One (60) and the “fundraising activities” which turn into “an insane eight-ring circus” at the beginning of Act Two (70) symbolically take control of all of the stage area and demonstrate the women’s communal energy and pragmatic self-empowerment. The multiple settings on the reserve, where they reveal their dreams, and the mobility of the van, where they confess their fears, convey their freedom in time and space. Despite their pain, these are not passive victims imprisoned in either the city or the reserve but adventurers on a pilgrimage.

Symbolically, “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD” in Toronto represents their material aspirations as a correlative of their spiritual desires. Involving “the entire theatre [as] the bingo palace” (100), the BINGO is a satire on the consumerism of white society and the debasement of Christian religion (for Highway, specifically Roman Catholicism). Here, BINGO is presented as the modern symbol of Catholicism (“The scene is lit so that it looks like ‘The Last Supper’” [102]) and is just a bigger version of the game organised by the local priest which frustrates the rez sisters’ aspirations: “All of us Wasy women. We’ll march up the hill, burn the church hall down, scare the priest to death, and then we’ll march all the way to Espanola, where the bingos are bigger and better” (15). Therefore, it is a comic triumph when this White reli-

gious-cultural icon, despite its seductiveness, is appropriated, accessed, utilised (with limited success), and finally subverted by the Native women: “attacking the bingo machine and throwing the Bingo Master out of the way. [...] they go running down centre aisle with [the machine] and out of the theatre” (103). Although the transformation of the Bingo Master into Nanabush signals one woman’s death, this is no martyred tragedy but a triumph of Native spirituality over white consumer religion. The lighting of “The Last Supper” and the “good luck” crucifix in Zhaboonigan’s hand transform into the rez graveside of “the spirit world” and the matriarchal empowerment of Pelajia’s hammer as she gives the eulogy for Marie-Adele:

Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we’ve ever been to in our lives, huh? You know, life’s like that, I figure. When all is said and done. Kinda’ silly, innit, this business of living? But. What choice do we have? When some fool of a being goes and puts us Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, dishes out this lot we got right now. But. I figure we gotta make the most of it while we’re here. You certainly did. And I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you. For me. For all of us. Promise. Really. See you when that big bird finally comes for me. (*Whips out her hammer one more time, holds it up in the air and smiles.*) And my hammer. (105)

Six women in this play are sisters by birth or marriage; the seventh is a mentally disabled adopted daughter. This dramatisation of a community as protagonist contrasts with Ryga’s portrayal of the anguished individual and is, according to Thomas King, a major defining trait of Native literature as opposed to non-Native writing that tends to “imagine [...] Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction” (King xiv). Characterised with a lively and earthy realism, the rez sisters represent the traditional empowerment of matriarchal figures in Native society before the Indian Act institutionalised a European male hierarchy: “The Christian Church and the patriarchal government gave Native men power that they never had in their own cultures, a frightening and alienating experience” (Grant 47). However, this play deals more comically with male misogyny than does Highway’s next play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In *The Rez Sisters* the women deliberately use their voluble, authoritative discourse to disrupt their patriarchal silencing when the male chief refuses their request for travel funds. Together they form a community charac-

terised by an extreme intimacy that produces jealous conflicts but also inclusiveness and interdependency.

Each of the sisters articulates a Bingo dream in Act One that is revealed in Act Two to be a material symbol of a more spiritual aspiration. Pelajia Patchnose wants to have money to pave all the roads on the reserve to demonstrate her spiritual leadership: “Nanabush will come back to us because he’ll have paved roads to dance on” (59). “Apple Indian” Annie (“Red on the outside. White on the inside” [86]) wants to buy every single Patsy Cline record and sing backup to a country and western band. The childless Veronique wants a brand-new stove to “cook for all the children on the reserve” (36). Philomena Moosetail covets a big modern toilet, but her real goal is to employ a lawyer to find the illegitimate child which her white lover forced her to abandon. Emily Dictionary wants to escape the memories of her abusive husband and her lesbian lover who committed suicide because of “how fuckin’ hard it is to be an Indian in this country” (97). In this tragicomic medley the greatest suffering is portrayed by retarded Zhaboonigan, who was raped by two white boys with a screwdriver, and by Marie-Adele Starblanket, who, dying of cancer, dreams of buying an island surrounded by a white picket fence to protect her husband and fourteen children.

Highway’s comic revisioning of Native tragedy neither trivialises it with romantic sentimentality nor transcends it with Euro-Christian paradigms. His Natives survive through a combination of earthy humour and aboriginal spirituality embodied in the eighth character, Nanabush, who is immanent and omnipresent throughout the play but, significantly, only visible to Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan. Highway says that Nanabush in Native culture is analogous to Christ in European culture, “straddl[ing] the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit” (“Dry Lips” 322); however, he is “a clown, a Trickster, who stands at the centre of our dream life, as opposed to the European context where the central figure is an agonized individual. European mythology says we are here to suffer; our mythology says we’re here to have a good time.” Moreover, unlike “Jesus Christ [...] the Cree figure was never made flesh” and is therefore non-gendered and free from the “European male-female-neuter hierarchy” (qtd. in Wigston 8-9). Therefore, Nanabush is the complementary sexual element: male in *The Rez Sisters*, female in “Dry Lips.”

In Act One Nanabush is initially absent from the roof top of Pelajia’s house as she surveys the rez and the world around it; he is “gone” like the “old stories, the old language” (5). First appearing as

a white seagull whom Marie-Adele scornfully addresses in Cree as “the Holy Spirit” (19), he later becomes the spiritual guardian and confidante for her and Zhaboonigan. Only to Nanabush can Zhaboonigan narrate the horrific story of her rape by “white boys”—a parallel to Rita’s and in fact paradigmatic of white culture’s rape of native life generally—and, as he sympathises in “agonizing contortions,” she seems to find some peace: “Nice white birdie you” (47-48). He accompanies the women in their empowerment “march” to the store for community (35) and then to the band office for autonomy (60). He participates in the “insane eight-ring circus” of their fund-raising (70) and shadows their pilgrimage to Toronto, at first terrifying Marie-Adele with intimations of death, but finally giving her wings for a calm, peaceful passage. When he turns from the Bingo Master into the nighthawk to take her “into the spirit world,” her final words, again in Cree and English, are serene: “Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma so that’s who you are [...] the master of the game [...] come ... to ... me ... ever soft wings [...] take me” (104).

According to Highway, Nanabush teaches “us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; [...] Without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever” (“Dry Lips” 322). Symbolically, Nanabush (in the original production played by Highway’s brother René, a renowned native dancer) accompanies the women in all their activities, grows stronger as they do, and rejoices at their finale. At the end, in contrast to the beginning, he is present on Pelajia’s rooftop “danc[ing] to the beat of [her] hammer, merrily and triumphantly” (118). As Highway has explained, native dance symbolises “the interrelationship between the spirit world and the world of the living. [...] That balance was tipped when the Canadian government and the Catholic Church told Native people that they could no longer dance.” Nanabush’s dance at the end of *The Rez Sisters* represents the triumph of native spirituality over Eurocentric tragedy: “Dance is a metaphor for being, so if we cannot dance, we cannot pray” (qtd. in Hodgson 2).

In the conclusion, finally settling for realistic goals and achievable dreams, the women comically valorise their lives and empower their voices. Annie appropriates the mainstream discourse by singing backup for her (also marginalised) Jewish country and western lover. Veronique validates her identity by cooking for Marie-Adele’s husband and her fourteen orphaned children. Emily, maternally embracing Zhaboonigan, celebrates her subversion of abusive relationships in her pregnancy. Most

importantly, Philomena, the only one who wins at the BINGO, buys a “toilet bowl [...] spirit white” that elevates her like a “Queen ... sitting on her royal throne, ruling her Queendom with a firm yet gentle hand” (117-18) above all the “poop [...] on this reserve” (3). And Pelajia, no longer yearning for Toronto, decides to challenge the male chief for economic, social, and spiritual leadership: “We’d see our women working, we’d see our men working, we’d see our young people sober on Saturday nights, and we’d see Nanabush dancing up and down the hill on shiny paved black roads” (114).

The structure of *The Rez Sisters*, like *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, is cyclical, fluid, and fragmented, but the premise and the effect are totally different. Highway counters the Western metanarrative of linear progress, “a straight line, what I call the Genesis to Revelations line: progress, progress, progress, from point A to point B until the apocalypse comes,” with the Native paradigm “of politics, of theology [...] a circle, a never-ending circle” (qtd. in Wigston 8). Therefore, the characters in this play do not so much develop as circle back to their centre with peace and good humour. Within the plot, the frustrations expressed as solo dreams (35-37) and cacophonous individual insults in Act One (44-46) are balanced by the duets of sisterly trust and support in Act Two (77-100), the communal circle around Marie-Adele’s grave, and the transcendent presence of Nanabush at the end

The diction and imagery Highway employs are also authentically Native. “Both Cree and Ojibway are used freely in this text” (*Rez* xi). However, although he has said that his stories come to him in Cree, he has been forced to appropriate the language of white culture in order to communicate with it (Usmiani 130). Nevertheless, he renders it in the “accent Native people have when speaking English” (Moses 84), and he simply translates the earthy and irreverent Native sensibility directly into English. According to Highway, the Cree language is “hilarious [...] you laugh constantly”; “it’s very visceral. [...] You talk openly about the functions of the body”; and “there is no gender given to words” (qtd. in Wigston 8). Therefore, he ironically uses the colonisers’ discourse to subvert their very serious, abstract, and patriarchal paradigms (Johnston 255):

PHILOMENA. (*Throwing the toilet door open, she sits there in her glory, panties down to her ankles.*) Emily Dictionary. You come back to the reserve after all these years and you strut around like you own the place. I know Veronique St. Pierre is a pain in the ass but I don’t care.

She's your elder and you respect her. Now shut up, all of you, and let me shit in peace. (43)

Similarly, the imagery in *The Rez Sisters* is concrete and pragmatic: Pelajia's hammer, Veronique's stove, Marie-Adele's white picket fence, and Philomena's toilet epitomising the excremental imagery throughout the play. This imagery contrasts with the romanticism of *Rita Joe* and also, ironically, with the religious parody of the crucifix and the Last Supper in the bingo palace (102). Throughout the play, the country and western music so common in Native communities (Grant 48) counterpoints the action ("country' to the hilt" [75]). This white "hurtin" music has been appropriated by yet another marginalised people, but it becomes an accompaniment to their spiritual survival.

Tomson Highway calls himself part of "the first generation of Indian people as a group to have university degrees, to take a good long look at the other side, its literature, its storytelling tradition, its mythology, its philosophy, and still [be] able to go back, and mix the best of both, the Native and the white" (qtd. in Lutz 94). In many ways, he is the answer to David Joe's prayer. But their theological paradigms are totally different: Ryga portrays victimised Native children whose only salvation is patterned on an authoritative Father and a suffering Son. Highway celebrates a vibrant Native people whose spiritual mythology affirms matriarchal community and Nanabush's earthly delights. ❁

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