"TOMSON HIGHWAY'S DRY LIPS: CHARTING THE CRISIS OF NATIVE MASCULINITY."

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Abstract
What makes Tomson Highway's plays so fascinating is the way he attempts to deconstruct white images of the Native by means of a challenging rendering of the life of today's First Nations in Canada. Gender is one category he is very much at pains to problematise, both femininity and masculinity. In his play Dry Lips Oughta Go to Kapuskasing (1989), Highway achieves the destabilisation of gender stereotyping by means of two devices: one, the relentless biopsy of Native masculinity as represented by seven different individuals, thus preventing essentialising moves; and two, the deployment on the stage of the Native trickster Nanabush, a genderless entity which takes on the features of femininity under three different guises or manifestations.

"This is not the kind of earth we want to inherit," says Simon Starblanket, the prophet, hero, and spokesperson for young Native men in the play Dry Lips Oughta Go to Kapuskasing (1989: 94). With Simon's statement, the Native Canadian writer Tomson Highway conjures up the long history of dispossession, marginality and deprivation of the First Nations of North America at the same time as he calls for a better future. Highway's is one of the chorus of voices raised to demand changes in contemporary Canada. He belongs to a generation of Native writers who have managed to succeed in an industry which remains to this day dominated by the Anglo/French presence. Above all, these writers attempt to truthfully represent Native experiences and thus counteract the pernicious influence of Euro-centred discourses on their people.

The First Nations of North America suffered the full impact of the development of 19th-century ethnography in Europe, which had a strongly evolutionary approach to human societies, as James Duncan explains:
Cultures around the world were classified into a temporal (and moral) hierarchy ranging from primitive to modern. Definitional power, of course, rested with European taxonomists who by the twentieth century had redefined certain cultures as 'dying', their religious objects becoming consequently 'cultural artifacts' to be 'salvaged' by appropriating them for collections in Western ethnological museums, or 'primitive art' to disappear into museums of art or into the hands of wealthy, private collectors. (1993: 42)

The construction of the imaginary Indian in Canada had its key period in the second half of the 19th and the early years of our century, as the western lands suffered a painful transition from free fur-trade areas to settlement at the same time as eastern Canadians came into possession of the theoretical tools to conceptualise and record their version of History. The colonists who struggled to make a living in the west and who were in close contact with the Native peoples were able to perceive them only through the darkened glass of prejudice, and they contributed with their accounts to transmit over-simplified stereotypes:

For the prejudiced individual among the colonists every aspect of the Indians and their society seemed to confirm their inferiority. The Indian physique was described in disparaging terms... The Indian mind was thought to be "full of weird strange fancies and imaginations," and the Indian to be "strangely superstitious." Apart from a "few miserable superstitions, and a childish belief in omens," the Indians were believed to have no religious concepts and were regarded as "incapable of retaining any fixed idea." According to settler reports they acted more from instinct than from reason and were nearly destitute of any sense of right and wrong.
They were warlike, but treacherous and cunning rather than courageous. . . .

The Indians were also said to be dishonest and deceitful as well as lazy and unsuited to manual labour. (Fisher 1988: 179-80)

Such stereotypes also permeated the early writing of the United States and Canada, especially the frontier romances, whose extreme popularity facilitated the dissemination of "a racist-nationalistic philosophy of white-Indian relations" (Barnett 1975: 18). Most interesting to our purposes here is that recent studies of the representation of the Native in these literatures (Barnett 1975; Monkman 1981; Goldie 1989) agree that the stereotypes are heavily sexualised. Goldie's *Fear and Temptation* in particular has analysed the gender difference evident in the portrayals of Indians in the literatures of the settler colonies, and he concludes that the female Indian "represents the attractions of the land but in a form which seems to request domination, unlike her violent male counterpart who resists it" (1989: 65). These scholarly accounts of the representation of the Indian in the white imagination suggest the sheer weight and strength of the stereotypes that today's Native writers have to deal with, despite the emergence in Canada of revisionist works by non-Native writers in the 1960s and 70s, like George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) and Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973).

Penny Petrone has identified in Native drama "the most exciting literary development in the 1980s" in Canada and in Tomson Highway "Canada's most celebrated native playwright" (1990: 170 & 172). But what makes Highway's plays most fascinating is the way he attempts to deconstruct white images of the Native by means of a challenging rendering of the life of today's First Nations in Canada. Gender is one category he is very much at pains to problematise, both femininity and masculinity. His first play, *The Rez Sisters* (1987), followed the adventures of seven
women living on the imagined Wasaychigan Hill Reservation on Manitoulin Island (Ontario), while the second, *Dry Lips Oughta Go to Kapuskasing* (1989) focused instead on the lives on the same imaginary reserve of seven men who were only mentioned in the former play. The name of the reserve is not accidental; it is the Ojibway word for "window", and therefore the play is intended to offer the audience a glimpse into this Native microcosm.

Even though the plays have many points in common, they have been differently received by critics, *Dry Lips* being considered in general less of an achievement than *The Rez Sisters* (cf. Johnson 1990). From my point of view, the cause for the different reception results from the very choice and treatment of materials in each play. *The Rez Sisters* showed Native womanhood in a way that western societies find easier to handle: though the staging of these seven women's lives exposes the effects of poverty and marginality, yet they are allowed to embark on a process of empowerment and sisterhood that is congenial to the messages of second-wave feminism, ever-present in western societies in the last few decades. Consequently, audiences and readers would tend to be receptive. On the contrary, the topic and treatment of *Dry Lips* is at best, unsettling, and at worst, it arises a complex welt of feelings (puzzlement, embarrassment, even guilt). The crisis of masculinity is a spectacle that we still find difficult to come to terms with in western societies, and the Native dimension of these experiences makes it even more so.

The destabilisation of gender stereotyping is achieved in Highway's plays by means of two devices: one, the relentless biopsy of only one sex at a time although it is represented by seven different individuals and not just one, thus preventing essentialising moves; two, the deployment on the stage of the Native trickster
Nanabush, a genderless entity which takes on the features of the opposite sex to the one under scrutiny, but again by assuming not one, but three different manifestations.

In *Dry Lips*, the seven male characters are representative of two generations. Most of them are in their forties, with ages ranging from 39 to 53. The leader of this older generation is Big Joey, the proverbial "big man" and patriarchal role model, a womaniser who is in fact very much out of touch with his real self and who despite his apparent success with women, is unable to feel a thing. Creature Nataways is his sidekick and shadow, a man who admires Big Joey so much that he tries to imitate him in all respects. Actually, he is in love with Big Joey but does not know how to broach the subject with someone who is the heterosexual macho-man *par excellence*. Big Joey's former sidekick and crony was Spooky Lacroix, but they are no longer in speaking terms. Spooky is a reformed alcoholic who has made sense of his life by adopting the Christian creed. Pierre St. Pierre remains an alcoholic, a pitiful gossip who does not have a life of his own and lives by proxy. Finally, Zachary Keechigeesik is the only one with a realistic goal in life: he dreams of starting his own bakery. He is a firm believer in all things material, anything one can touch and shape with one's hands.

What is most striking is the disparity of these five characters, who are at odds in lifestyles, means and ends. This can be easily perceived in performance, since whenever two or more of them happen to meet, they end up quarrelling about some unimportant thing, or else they are shown engaged in their separate pursuits: Spooky is forever knitting clothes for the baby his wife is expecting, Pierre rummages in everybody else's kitchen until he finds a beer, Zachary pesters everyone with his bakery daydreaming or makes pies, Big Joey hangs around and Creature agrees with everything he says.
The younger generation, and therefore the Native hope for a better future is represented by two very different men, Dickie Bird Halked (17) and Simon Starblanket (20). Dickie Bird embodies how the sins of the fathers will fall on their sons. His mother's alcoholism maimed him, and he was born mute and psychologically unstable. Though officially the son of Wellington Halked, his real father is Big Joey, who refuses to acknowledge him. Dickie Bird lives with his uncle, Spooky Lacroix, and has been raised on a steady diet of Bible-reading. On the other hand, Simon Starblanket stands for a promising future. As his name indicates (Simon/Peter), he is a kind of Messianic figure, a prophet who rejects the example of the older generation and calls for a return to the ancient practices and beliefs. He is engaged to Patsy Pegahmagabow, the medicine woman's step-daughter, and he spends most of his time in the forest, chanting and dancing, because he believes that he is "the one who has to bring the drum back" (1989: 45).

The erasure of Native culture that Simon is so earnest about is counteracted in the play by the ever-present figure of Nanabush, the trickster. The trickster is defined by Highway as:

[A figure that] goes by many names and many guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses. Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit. . . .[The trickster] is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously. Therefore, where in The Rez Sisters, Nanabush was male, in this play--"flip-side" to The Rez Sisters--Nanabush is female. 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
guisers. Without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core
of Indian culture would be gone forever. (1989: 11-12)

In Dry Lips, the role of Nanabush is to embody Native femininity, which is absent
from the stage: women are mentioned in the play, but they are only twice glimpsed (in
the hockey game and in the rape scene). Since masculinity cannot be understood
without making reference to femininity, the playwright conveys this interconnection for
the audience by having two levels on the set: on the lower level the seven men act out
their troubles, while on the upper level Nanabush adopts three female forms: the
Temptress, represented by Gazelle Nataways, the object of desire of Wasaychigan men;
the Madonna, represented by the 9-months pregnant Black Lady Halked (Dickie Bird's
mother); and Native Tradition, in the body of Patsy Pegahmagabow, the medicine
woman and Simon's fiancée. Each of these characters is easily identifiable for the
audience in that the change from one to the other takes place onstage, and it entails not
just a change of costume, but also the addition or removal of prosthetic bodily pieces.
Patsy can be recognised by the oversized prosthetic bum, Gazelle by the gigantic
breasts, and Black Lady by a huge belly. Femininity, like masculinity, is therefore de-
essentialised, as the audience becomes involved in the puzzle of an identity game.

Nevertheless, the female and the male spheres remain separate throughout the
play, thus hinting at the lack of harmony and the atmosphere of muted conflict (between
the two sexes but also among the men and among the women) that reign in the Native
community. Further evidence involves the end of Act I, when a hockey game between
the reservation women's team, the Wasy Wailerettes, and another reserve's team
becomes a violent incident. Influenced by the negativity and lack of support of the
reserve men, who consider the very idea of women playing hockey absurd, the women
end up using the hockey sticks against their own team. Act 2 will have to restore harmony and order on the reserve by forcing the men to face the event that played havoc on their lives: the birth of Dickie Bird Halked seventeen years earlier to an alcoholic mother in a tavern while the men were drinking and enjoying a strip-tease. Their feelings of guilt at their own negligence and passivity have turned them against themselves and each other.

Once more, the key to this restoration of order lies with Dickie Bird, who embodies the traumatic loss of identity of the Native man. Torn between the Biblical ranting of his fanatic Catholic uncle, Spooky Lacroix, and the Cree chanting of his friend Simon Starblanket, Dickie Bird flees into the forest profoundly disturbed, and there he rapes Patsy (Simon's fiancée and a representative of Native tradition) with his uncle's crucifix. This, as Maufort has explained, is "a symbol that Christian civilisation has metaphorically destroyed Indian culture with the help of Indians themselves" (1993: 237).

Furthermore, this tragic event discloses how deep is the gap between Native men and Native women in this community, as Big Joey is a passive witness to the rape, and he even prevents Creature from stopping Dickie Bird. Big Joey must finally confront his woman-hatred: "...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" (1989: 120). He acknowledges his hatred and fear of women's emancipation, his deep confusion regarding the change of gender roles that has taken place in his lifetime. Nevertheless, the crisis of Native masculinity is not only the result of women's emancipation, but also and even more importantly, of the emasculation of the Native male by white western culture, especially as represented in the play by Christianity and the erasure of the Native tradition. Gender conflict thus stems from imperialistic racism as well.
Nevertheless, Tomson Highway offers a hopeful resolution for the troubles of Native men, once purged of their guilt, resentment and self-hatred. First of all, a second hockey game proves to be a victory for the reserve women's team, thus indicating that the breach in the community is now repaired and they are able to again act successfully as a collective. Secondly, the last scene replaces the image of the Christian Nativity group (Joseph, Mary, and little Jesus) with a Native Nativity (Zachary, his wife Hera and their baby daughter) that has learnt to make the best of both worlds, Native and non-Native. The setting for the Nativity scene is Zachary's living-room, where the couch is "now covered with a 'starblanket' and over the pin-up poster of Marilyn Monroe now hangs...Nanabush's large pow-wow dancing bustle. The theme from "The Smurfs" television show bleeds in" (127) while the young family laugh and talk in Ojibway. With this image of reconciliation and harmony Highway suggests the healing powers of family and community, as this Native man fully acquires a sense of identity that is built on his commitment to others. This, as Thomas King has remarked, is one of the most pervasive themes in Native writing nowadays:

Community, in a Native sense, is not simply a place or a group of people, rather it is, as novelist Louise Erdrich describes it, a place that has been "inhabited for generations," where "the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history." . . . This idea of community and family is not an idea that is often pursued by non-Native writers who prefer to imagine their Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction. For Native writers community--a continuous community--is one of the primary ideas from which our literature proceeds. (1990: xiii-xv)
Works Cited


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The most influential of these versions of North American and Canadian History would be the one given by the historian Francis Parkman in a handful of books written in the 1850s. According to Daniel Francis, "By the end of the 19th and on into the 20th, Parkman's views of the Indians prevailed in most Canadian history books, and in school books in particular" (1995: 166).