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*Representations of Rape and Gendered Violence in the Drama of Tomson
Highway*

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Abstract

In *The Rez Sisters* (1986), *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), and *Rose* (1999) renowned Cree dramatist Tomson Highway mounts a dramaturgical critique of colonialism, focusing most prominently upon the disenfranchisement of Native women and the introduction of Western gender roles into First Nations cultures. Within each of the three “Rez Plays,” he employs the metaphor of rape to depict cultural, territorial and spiritual dispossession brought about by colonization. However, in hegemonic narratives of colonization, Indigenous women are similarly represented in connection with the land and the metaphor of rape is used to portray colonial takeover; as colonial domination heightened, literary portrayals of Indigenous peoples, particularly women, became increasingly demeaning.

This thesis investigates the extent to which Highway’s works can serve as truly subversive, liberating texts given that the recurring portrayals of sexual violence in the “Rez Plays” reinvigorate dangerous, misogynistic stereotypes. Situating Highway’s plays within a framework of contemporary feminist postcolonial theory, this thesis problematizes the repeated use of gender specific representations of victimization in the “Rez Plays.”

Introduction

The Drama of Tomson Highway

Cree dramatist Tomson Highway is one of the first Native Canadian playwrights to have received both critical and mainstream acknowledgment for his theatrical works. *The Rez Sisters*, first staged by Native Earth Performing Arts Toronto in 1986, and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, originally produced at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto in 1989, were broadly acclaimed. Both plays won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play, as well as the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award, given to plays produced professionally in the Toronto area (Berrie). The third addition to the “Rez Series,” *Rose*, was produced in 1999 by the Theatre College affiliated with the University of Toronto. All scheduled shows sold out before the first performance (Hauck 47). The three plays are set on the fictional Wasaychigan Hill reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. They provide an unabashed examination of conditions upon Native reserves in contemporary Canada (Highway, qtd. in Carlyle). In a compelling, comedic and somewhat brutal fashion, Highway reveals what he believes to be the existing ramifications of the colonial legacy in First Nations communities. In the “Rez Plays,” Highway’s dramaturgical critique of colonialism focuses most prominently upon the disenfranchisement of Native women and the introduction of Western gender roles into First Nations cultures.

Highway endorses cultural revitalization and a return to tradition for First Nations communities, blaming much of what has been lost upon the colonial introduction of monotheistic religion. He frequently articulates support for First Nations women in their struggle to reclaim the matricentric roles of the pre-contact era. In *Comparing Mythologies*, the published transcript of his 2002 lecture at the University of Ottawa, he argues that misogynistic acts of violence against First Nations women are apparent manifestations of colonial intervention. He describes

the meeting between the “angry male God” of the Christians and the “benevolent female God” of the Amerindians, arguing that “the circle of the womb was punctured, most brutally, by the straight line of the phallus” (Highway, *Comparing* 46-47). From statements of this nature, it is evident that the dramatist has adopted a gendered conception of colonial violence. Thus, it is no surprise that, within each of the three “Rez Plays,” he employs the metaphor of rape to depict cultural, territorial and spiritual dispossession brought about by colonization. Highway also feels that it is essential to portray such images in order to draw attention to the brutalization of First Nations women in contemporary Canada. He believes that such victimization, being a direct result of colonization, must be confronted in order for successful “decolonization” to commence (Highway, qtd. in Coté 15). He says that he wishes “to prevent this kind of thing from happening to another Native woman” and that “we need to educate our sons and our sons’ sons,” ultimately declaring that he “will write this stuff until the world stops treating women so poorly” (Highway, qtd. in Male and Tompkins 22).

However, the repeated portrayals of gendered violence in the “Rez Plays” are disturbing because they are reminiscent of colonialist portrayals of Native women. In hegemonic narratives of colonization, Indigenous women are represented in connection with the land and thus regarded as violable. As colonial domination heightened, literary portrayals of Indigenous peoples, particularly women, became increasingly demeaning. Such misrepresentation in mainstream literature has contributed to the social construction of Native women as sexually accessible objects of conquest. Native women have too often been deemed “Promiscuous Indians” and treated accordingly (Damm 13). The real-life implications of such racist, misogynistic representations have been catastrophic. Although rape may provide an ideal metaphor for the violence involved in colonial takeover, Highway’s portrayals recuperate violent images which

have contributed to the subjugation of Native women. This thesis investigates the extent to which Highway's work is unwittingly complicit in colonialist discourses of androcentrism. An important question to ask is whether his plays can serve as truly subversive, liberating texts given that the recurring portrayals of sexual violence in the "Rez Plays" reinvigorate dangerous, misogynistic stereotypes. Situating Highway's plays within a framework of contemporary feminist postcolonial theory, my thesis problematizes his repeated use of gender specific representations of victimization.

My thesis consists of three chapters, focussed on each of the "Rez Plays": *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and *Rose*. Highway's most recent play, *Earnestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, which I discuss in my conclusion, stands apart from the "Rez Plays." Perhaps because the play was commissioned, and its subject matter was predetermined, the rape metaphor does not appear in *Earnestine Shuswap*, where the only performance of violence is a self-inflicted stabbing. Neither does the absence of gendered violence diminish the play's capacity to emphasize the harmful effects of colonialism. Rather, the placement of the drama within a colonial context serves to highlight the historical wrongs committed by colonial entities. My conclusion, which juxtaposes the "Rez Trilogy" with *Earnestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, argues that colonial violence can be depicted successfully without portraying women as tropological victims of rape and abuse.

The Colonial Legacy

Many Canadians pride themselves on the belief that their ancestors made "peaceful" arrangements with Indigenous peoples rather than simply "conquering" them as occurred in the United States (Freeman 444). This comforting outlook frequently results from ignorance

regarding the events which actually took place in North America during the early years of European colonization. Such lack of knowledge has resulted, in part, from attempts on behalf of the Canadian government and religious institutions to erase the history and culture of Indigenous peoples from the land; in order to maintain a sense of national innocence, records of the acquisition of Canadian territory, which reveal the brutal disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples, were buried and disregarded (Lawrence, "Rewriting" 22-23). Combined with this systemic erasure is the fact that early historical narratives often portray Native peoples as savage and incompetent, while glorifying the plight and courage of explorers, traders, and settlers. In truth, when the fifteenth-century European explorers came to North America, searching for routes to the "riches of the Orient, fishing grounds, and mineral wealth," Native Canadians "fed, housed, cured, and guided them" (Trigger 120, 28). The Europeans were impressed with the generally harmonious existence of the Amerindians, and wondered "how peaceful relations could prevail without the threat of force in the background" (Dickason 12). Initial interactions between Indigenous and European groups were primarily amicable. This cooperation was largely related to the fact that the European newcomers required the assistance of Native people. As observed by Eva Mackey, "the main goal of the early Imperial presence was resource extraction through the fur-trade, an economic activity that absolutely depended on Native people's labour and knowledge" (38). Only when "disputes over land rights envenomed relations between English settlers and native peoples" did it become "fashionable for Whites to describe Indians as bloodthirsty monsters who were human only in shape" (Trigger 15). Many of the early accounts of northern Amerindian cultures were written by French Jesuits. These depictions, skewed by the religious beliefs of the Jesuits, "provided the basic discursive elements that Canada's first historians (essentially French and Catholic) used to produce Canada's history" (Sioui, *Histories*

19). Historical accounts of Indigenous cultures produced in the nineteenth century were coloured by the “intellectual racism” which characterized the era, inspired ethnocentric sentiments, and inevitably led to the portrayal of Native peoples as “idolatrous, credulous” and “immoral” (Trigger 34). These broadly accepted accounts also tended to suggest that Amerindians were few in number and politically unorganized. Until the second half of the twentieth century, it was widely believed that the Amerindian impact upon the environment was so inconsequential that North America remained a “virgin land” at the time of European contact. It is true that Native peoples did not perpetuate the spoliation of their environment as industrialized societies do. However, their numbers were great and, by the early contact era, they had developed an intricately organized social order. In the first half of the seventeenth century, “the French were in contact with native groups totalling more than 125,000 people”; both their numerousness and skilfulness “allowed native Canadians to play a far different role during the Heroic Period than history books have ascribed to them” (Trigger 7).

It was the insalubrious interactions with European colonists that drastically decreased the flourishing Native population. Between 1492 and the early twentieth century, “the aboriginal population of the American continent shrank from 112 million to approximately 5.6 million” (Sioui, *Amerindian* 3). Most Amerindian deaths were caused by diseases that were carried overseas and transmitted by European colonists. Many of those who survived the ravaging epidemics were killed while fighting in the colonial wars, instigated by territorial conflicts between the British and French. Despite the epidemics and social unrest brought upon them by the colonists, the Amerindians “defended themselves only when it was necessary” (Sioui, *Amerindian* 13). There is a historical consensus that Native peoples were kind to the Europeans, until, on the brink of destruction, certain factions of “Indians sought in vain to expel the

newcomers” (Trigger 28). Due to this peacefulness, there is a tendency to idealize pre-contact societies, at the cost of viewing Native peoples as mere victims. This is a “form of paternalism” which denies agency and results in representations which portray Indigenous peoples as infantile (Freeman 460).

Tolerant treatment of the hostile colonists, on the part of the Amerindians, was not due to ineptitude; rather, such tolerance was connected to their spiritual philosophies. According to Georges Sioui, unlike the European newcomers, Amerindians did not define individual worth based upon hierarchical rank; they assumed that all “individuals are equal” and connected in a “circular chain of all orders of life” (*Heritage* 22; *Amerindian* 19). Sioui also observes that the majority of Amerindian societies were “matricentric in their ideological and spiritual conception of the world,” and that this “deference towards the woman reflects the recognition, in matricentric societies, of a human brotherhood vested in the Earth-Mother” (*Amerindian* 14, 42). Such beliefs are in sharp contrast to the religious convictions held by the first colonists. Bruce Trigger points out that “European religions were exclusive and intolerant, as well as hierarchically organized and controlled”; the Christians viewed all non-Christian societies as “morally and technologically inferior,” while “tribal societies were also viewed as politically inferior” (121). With this in mind, it is not surprising that Native peoples were often treated in an unfair and disrespectful manner by the colonists. The first explorers, traders and settlers to arrive upon the shores of North America, “products of societies in which oppression was the norm if not the rule,” were met with this gynocentric civilization, founded upon respect for all forms of life (Sioui, *Amerindian* 19). For the Amerindians, woman “represented reason, the being who educates man, orients his future, and anticipates society’s needs”; yet, over a relatively short

period of time, colonial policies and practices completely removed women from this esteemed position, which was “in a sense superior to that of man” (Sioui, *Amerindian* 14).

Although efforts at religious conversion began with the earliest European explorers, the coming of the French Catholic missionaries, known as the Recollets, in 1615 signified the beginning of an institutional and systematic attempt, on the part of the European colonizers, to supplant the Amerindian spiritual order. However, the Recollets were not a “militant, élitist order like the Jesuits”; since they were not “confessors and mentors to Kings, the Recollets had little influence” (Sioui, *Heritage* 136). The Jesuits, on the other hand, were a wealthy and powerful religious order. According to Bolton and Marshall, the Jesuits, also Catholic, were the “most important social factor” in the early settlements, “controlling the life of the people” (88). The Jesuits focused their energies on establishing “missions” in the settlements because, from the outset, “conversion of the Indians” was a crucial tenet of colonial success (Bolton and Marshall 82). With the founding of the Jesuit missions, the European patriarchy began to systematically destroy the matriarchal social order of the Amerindians. Highway refers to this cultural-religious clash, stating that:

God as a man met God as a woman . . . and thereby hangs a tale of what are probably the worst cases of rape, wife battery, and attempted wife murder in the history of the world as we know it. At that point in time, in other words, the circle of matriarchy was punctured by the straight line of patriarchy. (*Comparing* 47)

From early in the colonization process, First Nations peoples had been forced to mirror the culture of the colonizer. For close to three hundred years “White North Americans had assumed that native peoples were doomed to be culturally assimilated or to perish as a superior European civilization spread inexorably across the continent” (Trigger 7). Through a number of

means, patriarchal, imperialist hierarchies of labour and power were “imposed on a gatherer/hunter society” (Emberley, *Defamiliarizing* 4). Most prominently, coercive assimilative practices were carried out through colonial processes within the legal and educational systems (Monture-Angus 80). Legislation leading up to, and including, the Indian Act of 1876 provided governing bodies with the legal power to dictate most aspects of Aboriginal life (Assembly of First Nations; Stonefish 13). Relegation of Indigenous people to designated land allotments, combined with pedagogical control, have led to “loss of lands, resources, and self-direction and to the severe disturbance of cultural ways and values” (LaRocque). Beginning in 1892, Native children of Canada were sent to residential schools “to systematically destroy their language and memories of home” (L. Smith 69). The schools were created for the specific purpose of assimilating these children to Western European culture, that is, “Settler society” (Alfred 103). As young as five, they were taken forcibly from their homes by “priests, Indian Agents, or police officers” (Assembly of First Nations). Many settlers believed that this resocialization to a European lifestyle was a “priceless gift” for which the Aboriginal students would later be grateful (Freeman 446). Since the 1980s, there has circulated an ever increasing number of stories regarding the maltreatment of children in these schools (Stonefish 17). The mortality rate of students in the residential school system was so high, even during the first half of the twentieth century, that Indian Affairs Minister, Duncan Campbell Scott, claimed that “fifty percent of students that passed through the schools did not live to benefit from the education they received therein” (qtd. in Freeman 447). Abuses were “accepted by white communities as necessary conditions which had to be met if Indigenous people wanted to become citizens (of their own land)” (L. Smith 69). Historical injustices involved in colonization have resulted in oppression

and pain which are “passed from parents to children almost wordlessly” (Freeman 456). It is this legacy with which contemporary Native communities must contend.

Although colonization negatively impacted “*all* Aboriginal people,” it has “taken its greatest toll on women” (LaRocque). Removed from their matriarchal roles, Native women were placed in the care of male relatives. Patriarchal control was institutionalized in the Enfranchisement Act of 1869. The act ensured that women were both bound to their husbands, and disallowed political participation in band administration. Under the Enfranchisement Act, it also became illegal for women to inherit land (Emberley, *Thresholds* 87). Women were thus denied any possibility of independence. Because Native men had also suffered social dislocation, they were frustrated, confused, and undoubtedly angry. In some cases, disempowered Native men “exerted their anger over the only arena of power they were given by the colonizer: the power to dominate women” (Kim Anderson 97). This point is key to Tomson Highway’s plays, since in his work the violence against Native women is often conducted by Aboriginal men within Native communities. Today, Native women are “overrepresented” as victims of domestic violence; evidence indicates that Aboriginal women’s “risk for violence is about three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal women” (Brownridge 164). Although the findings of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* maintain that precise data regarding the rates of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities is difficult to attain, the study does declare that it remains an “intense concern among Aboriginal people, especially women” (Government Vol.3, Ch.2, par.3). Some accounts connect the supposedly elevated threat of violence directly to colonization (Brownridge 199; Hylton 18). As expressed in the findings of one study commissioned by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, “the colonization process and, in particular, the trauma that resulted from residential schools, led to a loss of culture. This fact of

history cannot be divorced from many of the problems faced by Aboriginal communities today” (Hylton 18). As Sherene Razack reminds us, “the continued denial of Aboriginal sovereignty and the Canadian government’s consistent refusal to honour treaties and resolve land claims maintain these profound [colonial] injustices” (*Looking* 59). Although it is important to remember that “[Aboriginal] men are victims too,” this colonial victimization can never justify the fact that Aboriginal women suffer violence “frequently at the hands of the men in their families” (Government Vol.3, Ch.2, par. 3.1). Native women may also be less apt to report domestic violence than White women. Razack emphasizes the difficulties associated with coming forward as a victim of violence within a minority community. She states, “[minority women] risk being viewed by our own communities as traitors and by white society as women who have abandoned our communities because they are so patriarchal” (*Looking* 59). For all of these reasons, Highway must be credited for his effort to hold men, White or Native, accountable for their violent transgressions. The colonial history of violence is no excuse for the enactment of further violence; it is this cycle of victimization which Highway, justly, attempts to draw attention to in his plays.

The Rape Trope

In her book *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock explores the gendered nature of colonial representations presented in hegemonic narratives of colonization. In these narratives, the land is gendered female, whereby it becomes metaphorically vulnerable to the phallic thrust of the masculine colonizer’s technology (26). The virginal quality of the land connotes an empty void, relegating the land’s primary inhabitants to a realm of “anachronistic space” and attributing initial discovery to the colonizer (30). In this sense, the bodies of women, along with Indigenous

people, are constructed as objects of conquest. With the relegation of Indigeneity and femininity to a tropological space of inconsequentiality, masculine conquest and barbarity became ever increasingly justifiable. Due to this enhancement in the rationale behind the progress of masculinised, imperial conquest, the metaphorical connection between the female body and the terra incognita is of great significance in colonial discourse. In his book *Fear and Temptation*, Terry Goldie investigates the multiple metaphoric meanings behind representations of Indigenous figures in colonial literature. According to Goldie, the indigenous woman “represents the attractions of the land but in a form which seems to request domination. . . . The image of the female as receiver of the male power provides an explicit opportunity for the white patriarchy to enter the land” (*Fear* 65). Of course, “the normative sexual relationship of the white male with the indigene female is rape, violent penetration of the indigenous” (Goldie, *Fear* 76). Kim Anderson corroborates the findings of McClintock and Goldie, arguing that “Native women have historically been equated with the land . . . this relationship has typically developed within the context of control, conquest, possession and exploitation” (100). In her book *Conquest*, Andrea Smith further elaborates upon the connection between rape and colonial takeover, stating that “the project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable – and by extension, that Native lands are also violable” (12).

According to Ann Laura Stoler, the frequent use of sexual domination as a metaphor for colonial control in early twentieth-century narratives was also correlative to enhanced imperialist concern regarding overt comingling of colonizer and colonized. As she argues, “sexual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker” (Stoler, *Carnal* 45). Since traditional European “domesticity” was considered an important part of colonial success, “agents of church and state attempted to enact colonization by

controlling and regulating women's bodies" (Pickles 7). As observed by Julia Emberley, the European "divide between the public and domestic spheres instituted and maintained colonial-patriarchal power" (*Defamiliarizing* 4). Therefore, both metaphorically and tangibly, the specific, gendered control of women was an important part of the masculine colonizer's patriarchal supremacy. However, gender prescription does not function as a sole means of subjugation, but is enmeshed with class and race. As stated by McClintock, "race, gender, and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other" (*Imperial* 5). Indeed, imperialist policies targeting Aboriginal women were "particularly harsh" (Pickles 7) partially because it was important to "break the power of Indigenous women" within their communities in order to create a colonial replica of the European patriarchy (Lawrence, *Real* 47). Andrea Smith argues that Aboriginal women were also targeted because, in the eyes of the colonizers, they were "polluted with sexual sin"; thus, "Native people's individual experiences of sexual violation echo 500 years of colonization" (13). According to Smith, even today, "when a Native woman is raped, it is an attack on her identity as a woman and her identity as a Native. The issues of colonial race and gender oppression cannot be separated" (8).

Many literary works that are described by critics and scholars as "postcolonial," particularly pieces by male authors, return to the trope of the virgin land, so deeply embedded in colonialist discourse (Gilbert 213). In these postcolonial pieces, the intentions are implicitly subversive, yet often the female body is reappropriated, only to be metaphorically violated again. Rape, specifically interracial rape, acts as a symbol for the colonial violation of land and culture in a number of plays by both Native and non-Native dramatists. This is especially true of plays produced in areas of the world such as Canada, where the territory was considered to be empty and open to colonial discovery (Gilbert 213). Three seminal Canadian examples include George

Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths's *Jessica*, and George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*.

The concept of postcolonial literature as a body of work catalyzed by European contact has been criticized for both its nationalistic implications and its periodized classifications. Thomas King, for one, believes that the term is particularly problematic in its application to Native literature (“Godzilla” 185). Postcolonial theory has regularly been charged with “enacting or perpetuating the appropriative gestures it is, ‘in theory,’ meant to disable” (Turcotte 207). However, some Indigenous writers have appropriated the term “postcolonial” for their own purposes, not necessarily aligned with mainstream theory. According to Marie Battiste, “Indigenous thinkers use the term ‘post-colonial’ as a symbolic strategy for shaping a desirable future, not an existing reality” (212). Within his plays, Highway “questions the existing systems” in an attempt to resist the attempts by colonial states to erase Indigenous culture from the political landscape (Highway, qtd. in Lutz 91). This approach conforms to the definition of postcolonialism described by Battiste. Arguably, rape images are used in postcolonial pieces to demonstrate the brutal violence involved in the process of colonization; they are intended to be staged so as to portray the problematic mentality which accompanies the act of sexual/colonial violation. As suggested by Gilbert and Tompkins, this technique can serve, in some instances, to mitigate the “voyeuristic” aspect of White spectatorship and encourage recognition of complicity in the implementation of colonial order (214). On the other hand, the virtual absence of the colonizer in Highway’s “Rez Plays” alarmingly blurs the meaning of the trope.

Drawing upon a Foucauldian notion of meaning derivation, Linda Alcoff argues that “meaning must be understood as plural and shifting, since a single text can engender diverse meanings given diverse contexts” (12). Under this assumption, that meaning is fluid and the

readership is constantly defining new meanings, Highway's depictions of female brutalization are doubly troubling. First, such portraits are representations of misogynistic brutality; even if they are implicitly critical of acts of violence against women, they present vocalizations and extreme enactments of misogyny. Second, the widespread imbrication of scenes of gendered violence in colonialist and misogynistic discourse makes it possible that readers or spectators might misunderstand the purpose of these representations. Although the cultural positioning of Aboriginal authors such as Highway may alter the impact of the rape metaphor, images of sexual violence against women are still being used as a means of communicating the broader political message of cultural destruction. Such usage is uncomfortably reminiscent of imperialist ideas concerning the metaphoric, and by extension, actual domination of women. In her essay "The Politics of Representation," Barbara Godard interprets Althusser's theory of interpellation to argue that literary and dramatic representations present subject positions which readers or spectators are "invited to occupy" (186). This suggestion requires that the realm of literary production be considered a social institution, responsible for the discursive production of ideology. Such refocusing is necessary in order to highlight the relationship between Highway's dramatic portrayals of rape and their effects on the society in which they are produced, and which they in turn produce. In these texts, the Native woman is made to occupy the position of victim, while the Native man is often cast as perpetrator. Thus, the White reader is allowed to share the position of victim by empathising with the woman, and experiencing exoneration, however fantastical and short lived. When considered in terms of the production of subjectivities, the interpellative potential is dangerous, particularly for Native women. It is not my aim to prove that identity is entirely constructed by narrative, but I will argue that ideological institutions and

their discursive productions are complicit, to an indefinable degree, in structuring both social hierarchies and subject positions.

Most scholarly treatments of the dramatic works of Tomson Highway focus upon the presence of Native magic in the plays, particularly the dramatic role of the Trickster deity, known as Nanabush amongst the Ojibwa. This is not to say that the topic of rape has been completely disregarded, rather that it is most often addressed as a secondary element, within a discussion of the plays' Native authenticity. For example, Gilbert and Tompkins argue that the presence of Nanabush, and the dramatic use of his/her embodiment in the "Rez Plays," "actually refuses the power of rape by subsuming it within the mythological frameworks invoked" (215). However, as observed by Jennifer Henderson (285) and Wendy Pearson (175), amongst others, Highway's depictions closely recall the real-life attacks upon several Native women in the sixties and seventies. This fact dispels the surrealism and draws the harsh reality of rape to the foreground. Even if the fantastical quality of Native magic could serve to reconstitute the rape as a fictive metaphor, Ric Knowles points out the way in which such tropism might obscure the horrific reality of sexual violation. Drawing upon Jacques Lacan's theory of semiotics, Knowles argues that since "the sign marks the absence of the material referent," using rape as a metaphor to depict colonial violence "risks effacing both its lived, material reality for the women who are its victims and the actuality of its gendered and raced practice, both historical and contemporary" ("Hearts" 249). Alan Filewod further suggests that the mere presence of Native magic within the drama of a play does not automatically legitimise the use of images which would otherwise be considered disdainful or misogynistic ("Averting" 23). It became evident, upon the revival of *Dry Lips* in the early nineties, that Highway does not present a portrait of Canadian Indigenusness that is unanimously accepted. The play was criticised extensively by

Native and non-Native feminists alike (Fraser; Tuharasky; Baker). Considering these critical responses, to which I shall return in Chapter Two, it is clear that the images used by Highway in his plays do not embody an essential and transcendent message that subverts hegemonic and imperialist representations. Audiences have responded to his work in extremely different ways.

Stuart Hall suggests that the cultural hegemony uses stereotypical representations to maintain a position of dominance; he refers to this practice as “representational violence” (258). Stereotyping serves to maintain the social symbolic order. Janice Acoose observes that the Native woman appears in Canadian literature as either an “Indian Princess” or an “easy squaw,” representations which “create very powerful images that perpetuate stereotypes” (Acoose 65). She argues that “it is gross and deadly violations like [Helen Betty] Osborne’s¹ that make the issue of Indigenous women being misrepresented in non-Indigenous writers’ texts of such vital importance” (Acoose 70). Acoose’s comments emphasize the tragic effects of racial stereotyping, highlighting the capacity of literature to propagate such stereotypes. Canadian discourses have “long constructed Aboriginal women as *particularly* likely to be promiscuous and immoral” (Brownlie 161).² This stereotype of licentiousness causes Native women to be constructed as “there for the sexual taking” (Kim Anderson 109). Sadly, misrepresentations are further perpetuated by sexual violation. According to Catherine Martin, “the fact that we [Native women] have been raped tends to make them [mainstream society] think that we are easy. It is a way to excuse the rapist, or to ignore the race issue” (qtd. in Kim Anderson 110). It follows that

¹ Helen Betty Osborne (1952-1971) was born on the Norway House Reserve in Manitoba. She was abducted and brutally murdered near The Pas, Manitoba, on the morning of November 13, 1971. Shortly after, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police concluded that four young White men, Dwayne Archie Johnston, James Robert Paul Houghton, Lee Scott Colgan and Norman Bernard Manger, were involved in her death. It was not until December 1987, that one of them, Dwayne Johnston, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder. James Houghton was acquitted. Lee Colgan, having received immunity from the prosecution in return for testifying against Houghton and Johnston, went free. Norman Manger was never charged (Amnesty International).

² In her 1892 essay, “A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction,” E. Pauline Johnson suggests that Native women are portrayed homogeneously as the “wild [uneducated] Indian girl” (179). Johnson’s observations make evident the fact that literary stereotypes of Native women have been present in Canadian texts from early in Canada’s history.

depictions of sexual victimization may contribute to this dangerous cycle of stereotyping, misogyny, and violence. In producing his literary and theatrical portrayals, Tomson Highway risks contributing to hegemonic stereotypes which naturalize and “fix” identities (Hall 258).

As observed by Native dramatist Drew Hayden Taylor, rape may provide “the perfect metaphor for what happened to Native culture,” but it is necessary to be wary of “becoming fixated on dysfunction” (“Alive” 34). Taylor recounts his conversations with Native actresses who lamented the fact that they continually had to play rape victims in Aboriginal theatrical productions:

[Rape] became an overwhelming metaphor for Native culture in theatre. After a while it gets kind of tiring. There are so many other metaphors we can deal with.

An actress friend of mine, I saw her once after she’d done her show. She was very tired and down. I asked, “What’s wrong?” She said, “Oh sometimes it’s tiring being raped eight times a week, twice on Wednesdays.” (“Afternoon” par. 14)

Taylor claims that “what’s available for Native actresses out there is basically three roles. You’re the mother in jeans and plaid shirt, that’s unemployed with six kids. You’re an alcoholic or you like to play Bingo. Or you’re the victim of some sort of physical or sexual abuse” (“Afternoon”). These statements suggest that Taylor does not believe negative depictions of women, derived from stereotypes, to be particularly empowering. Neither does Highway’s position as a cultural insider ensure that his representations of female victimization do not simply reaffirm the dominance of the colonizer. Those marginalized often become accustomed to resisting negative portrayals produced by the dominant society, but it is entirely likely that insider reification of hegemonic representations makes resisting the “spectacle of regression through identification” all the more difficult (hooks, “Oppositional” 121). Whatever Highway’s authorial intentions,

these portrayals of rape are profoundly marked by social interpellation of men as aggressors and women as their victims. When these images of female dehumanization and humiliation recur within a text or genre, the female characters come to be marked, if not entirely defined, by their capacity to be violated sexually. Thus, through representation, the oppressive gender binary, which Highway is attempting to undo, is, in fact, performed as a spectacle. It is for this reason that Highway's plays may be interpreted as reproductions of the discursive colonial stereotypes that are continuously propagated by the dominant society's ideological institutions. Most disturbing is the fact that such depictions are readily accepted as "unmediated testaments of authenticity" and allowed to stand unquestioned (Filewod, "Receiving" 367).

Filewod argues that the absence of the colonizer in the "Rez Plays" diminishes White "culpability," thereby assisting in the promotion of the very regime which was initially responsible for the "erasure of native peoples" ("Averting" 21). He is concerned that the popularity of the plays is related to the fact that non-Native audiences "can write into them the image of the Native that makes us most comfortable" (Filewod, "Averting" 23). Particularly valid is Filewod's fear that Highway's representations may serve to reinforce stereotypes and reinscribe colonial violence, since reception of Highway's subversive message relies upon the audience's ability and willingness to receive it. Another concern is the degree to which there may be an element of gratuitous sexual violence in these portrayals, or whether some readers/viewers may be responding to the plays on this level. Many audiences are accustomed to stereotypical portrayals of both Aboriginal women and men. The fact that Highway's important message is delivered through a fictionalized yet misogynistic portrayal of violence which is both gendered and racially coded makes misperception a strong possibility. In light of this ambiguity, it is also necessary to examine the potentially interpellative capacity of such portrayals. Do these

depictions truly enable the development of subversive subjectivities? Do they encourage White spectators to acknowledge complicity in oppression? Is Highway successful in assisting Native women in their struggles of reclamation? I will argue that, instead of accomplishing these aims, Highway's depictions risk maintaining present social hierarchies. The majority of theatre critics who have acknowledged only the positive aspects of Highway's plays fail to engage with such criticism in any extended way. I hope that my interrogation of these topics will provide a relevant contribution to the current body of work relating to the drama of Tomson Highway and, more broadly, to the portrayal of gendered violence in Canadian theatre.

Epistemological Entanglements

My thesis is informed by a broad historical and cultural understanding of the milieu within which Highway's writings are inscribed. This study is thus situated within debates about Canadian and Aboriginal contexts in the late twentieth century. My approach is also firmly grounded in feminist understandings of the representational violence to which women, particularly Aboriginal women, have been subjected historically, both in colonial history and contemporary times. My main methodological concerns emerge from two distinct, however intertwined, critical debates. The first is cultural debates regarding authenticity and interpretation (Eigenbrod; King, "Godzilla"; Hoy). As a cultural outsider, I am concerned that my commentary, albeit well intended, may contribute to a body of critical work which misinterprets Native literature by analysing it, inappropriately, in an academic context. It is extremely difficult to critique while consistently attempting to find balance between "fixating on and ignoring difference" (Hoy 48). As observed by Thomas King, Native literature stands apart from Canadian literature, and it is dangerous to analyze Native literature within a mould designed for

Canadian literature (“Godzilla” 185-87). Highway himself has pointed out the distinctive quality of Native literature, stressing particularly the linguistic sensuality, physicality, and androgyny of the Cree language (“Why” 40). Keeping these things in mind, I have doubted the acceptability of critiquing Highway’s work in a feminist academic context. Might the analysis of Highway’s plays in a feminist framework devalue the Aboriginal concerns of his writings? Regarding this issue of intercultural interpretation, I have chosen to follow Alan Filewod’s line of thought: it cannot be demanded that one man produce the Native voice (“Receiving” 172); to ask such a thing of Highway’s work would be, in itself, an essentialist indulgence. Furthermore, consistent failure to engage responsibly with Aboriginal literature could lead to its marginalization. After all, “silence too – even respectful silence – can be a form of erasure” (Hoy 51). Scorning the constructed divide between White and Native literature in his interview with Hartmut Lutz, Basil Johnston stated, “you have a ‘reserve,’ a special place for ‘Indian’ books in the library . . . you know you have to put them aside, ‘Indians’” (qtd. in Lutz 231). Demarcations of authenticity can also result in subtle dismissal and eventual ghettoization. In her interview with Lutz, Lee Maracle specifically articulated her feelings regarding outsider criticism, stating, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to be silent at any time” (qtd. in Lutz 177). Thus, I do not believe that the literature upon which my thesis focuses ought to be cordoned off from academic analysis.

This leads to my second methodological concern: recent feminist debates concerning voice and positionality (Nagar 79; Alcoff 8; Lal 105). This thesis addresses historical and contemporary social problems in Aboriginal communities, focusing particularly on sexual violence against women. My interpretations are directly tied to the production of knowledge and power and are, therefore, ethical and political in nature. Given this, the politics of representation poses a troublesome dilemma. As Aboriginal peoples, especially Aboriginal women, have

frequently been misrepresented by White academics, it has been a struggle to determine the legitimacy of the academic analysis of Aboriginal literature. According to Lal, it is not uncommon for feminist researchers to experience “paralysis from analysis that ensues from the reflexive mode of analysis and authorial strategies of powers and representations” (125).

Throughout my childhood, the vast majority of my associates came from households not unlike my own. Although my mother is a “Status-Métis,” this official definition has had minimal impact upon her life; aside from acknowledgment of her descent, she has not had the time or opportunity for cultural exploration. My father, although born in Scotland, identifies himself as “Canadian” and has little interest in his genealogical ties. The daughter of a second-generation Métis mother and a Scottish father, I was raised surrounded by self-identified “White” people. Only when I moved away from home in 2000, to attend Carleton University in Ottawa, did I begin to have friendships with people from cultural backgrounds which fundamentally differed from my own. At this same time, I became fascinated with theatre. My knowledge concerning Aboriginal theatre has been gained from either literature or scholarly lectures. Similarly, my understanding of Aboriginal women’s issues is derived from secondary sources. Clearly, I cannot claim to have any intimate, firsthand knowledge of the “Rez” life which Tomson Highway satirizes in his works. I am thus a part of the dominant culture which has been historically, and is presently, responsible for the disenfranchisement and oppression of Aboriginal peoples in North America.

Nevertheless, my background has made me aware of the inadequacies of essentialist and binary constructions of subjectivity. This categorical determination of identity results in the reproduction of colonialist binaries: colonizer/colonized, man/woman, first-world/third-world, Native/non-Native. Dualisms inherently simplify the multiple positions which we all necessarily

occupy, suggesting that vastly complex groups, composed of individual human beings, are effectually homogenous. Sara Suleri professes that she is “embarrassed by the prospect of having to contemplate such simplistic binarism” (335). Taking a controversial position within feminist theory, Suleri argues that she wants to deconstruct the racially encoded positions which have become embedded in the very framework of postcolonial feminist theory. In this sense, Suleri's critique of feminism as “skin deep” emphasizes the way in which feminist representational practices can rely upon convenient categories of identity, determining location through racial categories (335). Bat-Ami Bar On similarly critiques the notion of “epistemic privilege” (83). Bar On argues that assuming some positions to be essentially more insightful than others requires giving “authority” to a certain perspective; this enables the researcher to “silence and command obedience from the authorized voice” (Bar On 96). As articulated by Sherene Razack, “the cultural differences approach reinforces an important cornerstone of imperialism: the colonized possess a series of knowable characteristics and can be studied, known, and managed accordingly by the colonizers whose own complicity remains masked” (*Looking* 10). In this way, the construction of oppositional identities actually works against the feminist project of transforming power relations by reinforcing “the very distinctions they are supposed to erase” (Lal 114). It is true that location plays a crucial role in determining experience, understanding, and political aims. I do not mean to argue that feminist theorists and researchers should not engage in any authorization of knowledge. Rather, I am arguing against the acceptance of certain kinds of authorizations without critical interrogation. Assuming that representations created by those who are demarcated as “Native” are inherently innocent and authentic “downplays the very real possibility that such representations can be colonialist while simultaneously obscuring the possibility of non-colonizing representations emerging from non-subjugated standpoints” (Lal

113). Even if we are to rely upon historically defined social locations to determine who can (and cannot) speak, most people occupy numerous positions. For example, Highway may have spent his early childhood almost exclusively with immediate family, but he was later educated in a Catholic residential school, attended the University of Western Ontario, and was trained as a concert pianist in England. Even locationally, we all occupy a multitude of spaces and are, to a greater or lesser extent, hybrid.

I am not attempting to use hybridity as a vehicle to bypass the epistemological entanglements surrounding location. I will not suggest that I can possibly transcend the very real cultural divide that exists between myself and Aboriginal people. Neither do I claim that Native women are oppressed and unable to address Highway's troublesome portrayals in their own terms; as mentioned, certain Aboriginal women have already done this. What I will argue is that there exists no location or identity that can possibly result in the production of perfect or unmediated representations. As argued by Sara Ahmed, "a full ethical engagement with the 'other' is impossible" ("Other" 572). It may seem tempting, therefore, to follow Alcoff's proposal that it is acceptable, even beneficial, to speak for others when the motivation behind the speech is emancipatory (29). However, this argument is predicated on the assumption that one has the capability to determine who is in need of assistance, as well as the ability to anticipate the capacity in which one's work will be received. I do not pretend to have the political omniscience to define precisely which representations will be emancipatory for whom. I can only attempt to critically analyze Highway's work, focusing on the usage of rape as a metaphor while remaining aware of the specific context within which it is inscribed. I understand that there are a number of ways in which Highway's work might be interpreted. I also acknowledge that there is room for error which could result in some form of unintended misrepresentation. Nevertheless, it seems as

though ideas of cultural incommensurability are accompanied by dangers which outweigh those associated with potentially flawed representation.

Chapter 1: The Fantasticality of Rape in *The Rez Sisters*

Production, Reception and Influence

The Rez Sisters was first produced by Act IV Theatre Company and Native Earth Performing Arts on 26 November 1986. Because Native Earth did not have its own theatre space at the time, the performance took place at the Native Canadian Center in Toronto. *The Rez Sisters* debuted to enthusiastic critical reception in Toronto. Highway won the Dora Mavor Moore award for best new play, as well as a Floyd S. Chalmers award for outstanding Canadian play. Following local acclaim, *The Rez Sisters* embarked on a sell-out national tour of Canada from October 1987 to February 1988. Native Earth, and then-director of the company Tomson Highway, were subsequently invited to perform *The Rez Sisters* for the 1988 season at the Edinburgh International Festival; *The Rez Sisters* was one of only two Canadian plays to be performed at the Festival (Preston 135). Upon publication in the Fall of 1988, *The Rez Sisters* was shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for Drama. The play was also staged by the New York Theatre Workshop's New Directors/New Directions series in 1993 (Gilbert, *Plays* 390). Despite a positive review from *The New York Times* critic, David Richards, the play was forced to close due to lack of audience before the review was ever published. Marpessa Dawn Outlaw observes that failure to draw a crowd south of the border is "emblematic of the troubled state of Native-American drama in the United States" because "despite a similar history, Canada has long taken a different approach to its indigenous arts in general, and theatre in particular" (82). Within Canada, *The Rez Sisters* was an immediate success.

Helen Gilbert argues that with the extraordinary national success of *The Rez Sisters* Highway "claimed a space in Canadian theatre for Native peoples and Native performance styles"; she goes on to suggest that the debut of Highway's first instalment to the "Rez Plays"

marked a crucial turning point in Native Theatre, inspiring the production of a “substantial corpus of Indigenous work including contributions by Daniel David Moses, Monique Mojica, Drew Hayden Taylor, Marie Clements and Margot Kane amongst others” (*Plays* 390). Drew Hayden Taylor concurs that *The Rez Sisters* “swung the doors open for an entire generation of Native playwrights” (“Rez”). Prior to the success of *The Rez Sisters*, the efforts of Native theatre groups in Canada were mainly “fringe,” or community-based endeavours, lacking “mainstream” acknowledgement (Gilbert, *Plays* 390). For Native Earth Performing Arts, the production of *The Rez Sisters* began an era marked by unprecedented artistic productivity and financial gain. The considerable legacy of *The Rez Sisters*, as well as its unusually positive critical reception, contributed to the canonization of Tomson Highway as Canada’s premier Native dramatist.

While studying at the University of Western Ontario, Highway was exposed to the dramatic works of renowned Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay (*Rez* vii). The plot of *The Rez Sisters* is similar to that of Tremblay’s *Les Belles Soeurs*, published in 1968 in French and 1973 in English. Like *The Rez Sisters*, *Les Belles Soeurs* portrays social “dislocation” experienced by seven Québécois women from the east end of Montréal, within the larger realm of Canadian society (Gilbert, *Drama* 47). In both plays, the women use games played by working-class women to vitalize their seemingly hopeless lives. In *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay depicts the Québec of the 1960s as a destitute place, devoid of spirituality. For Tremblay, the degeneration is mainly caused by the Catholic Church’s stupefying control over all aspects of community life. He suggests that social change must be a result of the people’s effort. Highway transposes a similar tale, with a similar theme, to a fictional reserve in northern Ontario. However, Highway’s work is original enough in scope that it cannot be classified as a derivative

of Tremblay's piece. The element of Native mythology with which Highway infuses the *The Rez Sisters*, in combination with the play's boisterously funny characters, results in ample novelty.

In *The Rez Sisters*, seven women, all sisters, step-sisters or sister-in-laws, travel from their home on the Wasaychigan Hill Reserve to Toronto to participate in "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD"³ (Highway, *Rez* 27). While none of the women profit significantly at the bingo, the experience is shown to have altered each woman's life in a meaningful way. Although the plot of *The Rez Sisters* is straightforward, the play addresses weighted issues including cultural integration and misogynistic violence, both resulting from European colonization. The presence of the trickster figure, Nanabush, serves to remind audiences of the regenerative capacity of Native spirituality. Highway delivers his other social messages through scenes involving intimate encounters between the seven female characters as they recount instances of gendered violence enacted upon them. The women's recollections are troublesome for two reasons. Firstly, because the portrayals cut through a primarily comedic play, they serve to trivialize the actuality of gendered violence; secondly, because such tropes recall misogynistic and racist stereotypes, Highway risks contributing to the damaging discourses of colonialism. Part of the reason for the tremendous popularity of *The Rez Sisters* is that the play provides spectators and readers with what they believe to be a glimpse into contemporary Native culture. In truth, the characters in *The Rez Sisters* are far more satirical than realistic. Primarily, Highway's characters are used to represent particular aspects of the colonial legacy with which the playwright wishes to contend. Native women are associated with the land and both are envisioned as susceptible to male colonial violation. This metonymic alignment often results in representational violence. According to Taylor, "[o]ne of the ironies of this play is that it helped

³ THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD is consistently written in capital letters throughout the play to emphasize the excitement with which the women discuss the event

to change and correct many of the stereotypes people from the dominant culture had developed over the centuries about Native people. It did this by replacing [these stereotypes] with others” (“Rez”). While Taylor is referring to the “new” stereotype that aligns Native women with bingo, his comment might equally apply to some of the less humorous stereotypes that are present in this play and others of the “Rez Trilogy.”

Empowerment of Women

Certainly, the portrayal of the women in *The Rez Sisters* is intended as an affirmative one. Loosely basing his female characters on his mother and her extended family, Highway seeks to show the humour and energy of his characters, which they express through a constant mixture of bickering and affection. The women in Highway’s play attain a certain degree of empowerment as they prepare to achieve their dream: THE BIGGEST MODERN BINGO IN THE WORLD. Yet Highway does not shy away from portraying the social realities of his characters’ lives.

As Highway indicates in his notes to *The Rez Sisters*, “*Wasaychigan*” means “window” in Ojibway; the reserve is a metonym for Native communities across the country (xiii). It looks out upon the economic and socially “powerful White society” and looks in at “its own signs of self-destruction and self-preservation” (Nothof). *The Rez Sisters* opens at the home of Pelajia Patchnose where she is mending her roof with the assistance of her well-meaning, though inept, sister, Philomena Moosetail.⁴ From her vantage point atop the roof, Pelajia, who acts as an unofficial leader to the women, can see “half of Manitoulin Island on a clear day” (Highway, *Rez* 2). It is evident from early in *The Rez Sisters* that Pelajia is both the most politically conscious sister and the one with the broadest perspective. She has the most insight into the social problems

⁴ Interestingly, both the name Pelajia and the name Philomena derive from that of Highway’s own mother. In the preface to *The Rez Sisters*, Highway dedicates the play to his “mother, Pelagie Philomene Highway, a Rez Sister from way back” (v). It should also be noted that Pelajia’s son in *The Rez Sisters* is named Tom.

that plague her community; as she tells Philomena, “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). Pelajia says that “the old stories, the old language” are “almost all gone,” implying that she longs for a return to traditional ways of life; however, in the same speech, she paradoxically recalls “Bingo Betty,” a legendary bingo-player from past times who functions as an iconic figure for the women (5). The Rez sisters are tired of their lives at “boring old Wasaychigan Hill” and their only excitement comes from the bingo games at the local church and nearby towns (2). Bingo Betty is both a reminder of cultural transformation, brought about by colonization, and an inspirational figure for the sisters. Colonial attempts to replace Native Spirituality with Christianity have inspired the women to reinvent their deities. The fact that Betty is invoked nostalgically implies that Pelajia is acutely aware of her community’s desperate state and is seeking to conjure an image of hopefulness out of the devastation that surrounds her. Philomena’s subsequent description makes evident the iconic status to which Bingo Betty has been elevated in the minds of the sisters.

In the old days, when Bingo Betty was still alive and walking these dirt roads, she’d come to every single bingo and she’d sit there like the Queen of Tonga, big and huge like a roast beef, smack-dab in the middle of the bingo hall. One night, I remember, she brought two young cousins from the city – two young women, dressed real fancy, like they were going to Sunday church – and Bingo Betty had them sit one on her left, with her three little bingo cards, and one on her right, with her three little ones. And Bingo Betty herself sat in the middle with 27 cards. Twenty seven cards! Amazing. (16-17)

Betty and her two cousins represent a modern version of the Holy Trinity. Highway depicts a colourful rearticulation of this Christian image as a trio of bingo players. Betty's presence suggests that the women have created a new spirituality, instead of simply adopting the one imposed upon them. The women may be victims, but they respond proactively to oppression. The women's resourcefulness and ingenuity help them to remain hopeful, despite the troubled state of their community. Although *The Rez Sisters* includes stereotypical representations of Native women, these are, to some degree, counterbalanced by such portrayals of female resilience and empowerment. In this respect, *The Rez Sisters* is distinct from the other two plays in the "Rez Trilogy," where most images of female strength are undermined by an overabundance of violent, degrading depictions.

In the second scene, the women learn that THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD is coming to Toronto. All of the women hope to realize their particular dreams by winning the jackpot. The women's goals arise out of the oppression to which their community has been subjected as a result of colonization. Pelajia, whose wish is the most altruistic, intends to "put that old chief to shame" and build paved roads for the Rez, "jet black" and "shiny" (8). Philomena wants an indoor bathroom with a brand new toilet, "wide and very white" (5). Annie Cook, who is in love with a Jewish country singer, "Fritz the Katz," wants the biggest record-player "in the whole world" on which to play Patsy Cline albums (35). Marie-Adele plans to spend her winnings on "a whole island" in the "North Channel" where she, her husband Eugene, and their fourteen children, can live comfortably (36). Veronique, who longs for a larger family and is obsessed with orthodox Christianity, wants to own the largest stove on the Rez so that she can "adopt Marie-Adele Starblanket's children and cook for them" (36). As observed by Ann Nothof, these "goals are primarily unconscious tactics for psychological survival, providing a

way of addressing physical needs and of ameliorating current living conditions.” The women’s goals only accommodate immediate discomfort and cannot address the long-term problems caused by colonialism and forced assimilation. All of the women speak as though they will win the bingo: it is never a question. Without a belief that their aspirations will be realized, the pain of cultural and spiritual dispossession will become unbearable. Likewise, without the glamorized, almost certainly embellished, recollection of Bingo Betty as the “priestess of Bingo,” there is very little romance in the mundane activity of small-stakes Wasy bingo (Highway, *Rez* 16-17). Betty is a beacon of hope that encourages the women to persevere against unfavourable odds. It is significant that this crucial, empowering figure is female.

When the play reaches its climax at THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, the women appear as apostles at “*the last supper*” (102). The fifteenth-century mural painting by Leonardo da Vinci depicts the last supper from the final days of Jesus’s life, as narrated in the Gospel of John.⁵ During their final meal together, Jesus tells his followers that one of them will betray him; the painting portrays the varied reactions of the disciples. Significantly, the women lose Marie-Adele in this scene, as she literally dances into the afterlife with Nanabush who is disguised as the resplendent Bingo Master. While Marie-Adele may be considered a Christ figure, Highway’s invocation of Christian mythology does not suggest that the other women are disciples. The play’s climax reveals a blending of traditions: Christian and Native. The *mélange* results in the empowerment of the women, particularly Philomena, who briefly embodies the spirit of Bingo Betty. Highway portrays Philomena seated with twenty-seven cards, urging the Bingo Master to call her lucky number. Philomena, for this short scene, has the power of Bingo Betty. When B14 is not called, the sisters vengefully storm the podium and make off with the

⁵ For a complete analysis of *The Last Supper* see *Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper: A Cosmic Drama and an Act of Redemption* by Michael Ladwein (Pforte Verlag Temple Lodge Publishing, 2006)

number machine. The theft of the machine implies that the women will no longer leave the fulfilment of their wishes to chance.

All of the sisters are influenced positively by Marie-Adele's death. The fantasticality that pervades the play's action culminates in seemingly "magical transformations" (Highway, "An Interview" 354). The changes also confirm Marie-Adele's status as a Christ figure. Up to this point, Veronique St. Pierre has shown herself to be a gossipy woman, embittered by her own childlessness and unhappy marriage. After Marie-Adele dies, Veronique is able to live her dream by taking care of Marie-Adele's children. Eugene Starblanket provides all the things that Veronique's alcoholic husband cannot: a huge roast to cook, a good stove to cook it in, and a family that needs her love and care. Veronique's character is thus reformed and she becomes a joyful foster-mother. Annie Cook is satisfied by the opportunity to sing in the band with Fritz the Katz, although she is forced to settle with a borrowed record player. Philomena, who wins six-hundred dollars, is the sole profiteer at *THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD*. As a result of this good luck, she is finally able to install her lavish, modern washroom, the highlight of which is an "elevated" toilet (117). The journey to Toronto and its ending with Marie-Adele's death have also resulted in Pelajia becoming a more determined leader. She no longer wants to leave the Wasy Rez, but would rather stay and supplant the old Chief. To this extent, Highway forecasts a hopeful future for the "rez sisters." It is fitting that a play imbued with such fantastical surrealism closes in this magically optimistic manner.

The most consequential transformation is that of the exteriorly tough Emily Dictionary. Emily relinquishes her hardened demeanour and becomes sisterly to Zhaboonigan, the mentally disabled adopted daughter of Veronique St. Pierre. Zhaboonigan's fragility inspires Emily to show a nurturing side. At the end of the play, Emily reveals that she is pregnant. A new life

compensates for the loss of Marie-Adele, as Emily is transformed into a loving sister to Zhaboonigan and a loving mother to her unborn child. It should be kept in mind that Marie-Adele dies of ovarian cancer, an obvious side-effect of which is infertility. Marie-Adele's death is preceded by her desexualisation and consequent infertility. Concerning her husband, Eugene Starblanket, Marie-Adele says "I can't even have him [Eugene] inside me anymore. It's still growing in there. The cancer" (96). In life, Marie-Adele is the mother to fourteen children; she is portrayed as a hyper-fertile matriarch. Kim Anderson explains that "[m]otherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies" (*Recognition* 83). According to Anderson, "[c]reation is understood to be within the realm of the female because of the profound understanding that women bring forth life" (*Recognition* 71). Since Marie-Adele is also a Christ-like martyr, Highway may be attempting to dispute Christian notions of a male god.⁶ Along these lines, her death could be seen to represent colonial upheaval of matricentric Native traditions. As observed by Julia Emberley, "Indigenous mothers suffered the real effects of colonial policies. Their sexuality and bodies were subject to regulations for the purposes of establishing . . . patriarchal governance" (*Defamiliarizing* 186). Emily's pregnancy provides a complementary symbol to Marie-Adele's death.⁷ The former signifies spiritual rebirth, while the latter represents colonial erasure of Native traditions. In *The Rez Sisters*, fertility has positive connotations. Marie-Adele is a magical matriarch whose death serves to better the lives of her sisters. Emily's pregnancy is a joyous event, suggesting a new beginning for the Wasy Rez. These reverent representations of fertility and pregnancy are at odds with the grotesque and demeaning depictions of pregnancy and motherhood in *Dry Lips* and *Rose*

⁶According to Highway, patriarchal conceptions of a male god are the root of misogyny. In his interview with Judy Steed, he expressed his opinion on this matter, asking, "what is the real source of misogyny? How do we explain the origin? To me, I see [misogyny] as directly related to the origin of God as a man. That's where misogyny comes from" (Highway, qtd. in Steed)

⁷ In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *Rose*, Highway also uses pregnancy and birth metaphorically. In the following two plays, pregnancy is more often a site of grotesqueness.

The Rape of Zhaboonigan: Violence Against Women in *The Rez Sisters*

Highway uses the rape trope in an attempt to bring colonial violence to the dramaturgical foreground. While the other women are engaged in anarchic conflict in the Wasy general store, the action of the play freezes, and the spotlight fixes on Zhaboonigan. Zhaboonigan, whose name translates as “needle” or “going through thing,” reveals to Nanabush, in seagull form, that she was raped as a child (48). She tells Nanabush that two “white boys” picked her up in their car and used a “screwdriver” to rape her: “they put the screwdriver inside me,” she says, “*pointing to her crotch underneath her dress*” (48). As Zhaboonigan relives the rape in the distracted manner of a child, not fully comprehending the resounding implications of her words, Nanabush re-enacts the “*agonizing contortions*” of her ravaged body (48). Characteristically, Zhaboonigan begins to count, this time using male names: “Nicky Ricky Ben Mark” (48). With the utterance of each name, she pulls a feather from Nanabush’s wing. Thus, the trickster spirit, the symbol of Native spirituality, comes to embody the trauma initially experienced by the child. This destabilizing of the gender binary is enhanced by the fact that Nanabush, the mythologically genderless trickster, is played by a male dancer; the androgyny of the spirit’s body potentially mitigates the gender dichotomy involved in the initial rape. Since the trickster is both male and female, the violation is no longer merely an act of misogynistic violence. The mythological magic of the trickster dramatically subsumes some of the reality behind Zhaboonigan’s traumatic suffering. In this instance, the transposition of Zhaboonigan’s original torment onto the body of the trickster relegates the rape to a realm of sexless fantasy.

However, Zhaboonigan’s treatment at the hands of the White boys recalls the real-life murder of Helen Betty Osborne, a young Native girl from The Pas, Manitoba. In 1971, Osborne,

a high-school classmate of Tomson Highway, was gang raped by four young White men, stabbed fifty-six times with a screwdriver, and left to die; only one of the four offenders was tried, receiving a notably light sentence considering the atrocious nature of the crime (Henderson 285; Pearson 175). Highway expressed the extent to which he was affected by this event in an interview with Lisa Male and Joanne Tompkins. In his words, “she died on the side of the road after they tossed her out of the car. And for sixteen years no one said anything, even though everyone in the town – the town council and the police – knew who did it. It changed me” (Highway, qtd. in Male and Tompkins 22). Although it might be argued that this realistic context, however nuanced, better serves to emphasize the very real struggles of Native women, I suggest that the tropological depiction reifies colonial stereotypes concerning the victimization of Native women. The rape and murder of Helen Betty Osborne, and the unjust processes that followed, have become emblematic of the violence perpetrated by White men against Native women in Canada. Such systemic misogyny and racism are rooted in discourses that designate Native women as sexually accessible and expendable. The re-enactment of this event may serve to recuperate these discourses, particularly because the trope is embedded within a superficially comedic text where the actual impact of rape is filtered by the play’s light-hearted overtones. The distracted manner in which Zhaboonigan recounts her experience of rape also contributes to this mitigation of reality. Consequently, Highway’s fictionalized representation of the attack upon Helen Betty Osborne both revives the violent misogyny with which the act was perpetrated, and trivializes the event by portraying it in such a fantastical, surreal manner.

Neither is Zhaboonigan the only female character in the play to be represented as a victim of gendered violence. Emily Dictionary was beaten daily by her husband of ten years before she left him. In the midst of the conflict in the Wasy store, Emily says that “every second night for

ten long ass-fuckin' years that asshole Henry Dadzinanare come home to me so drunk his eyes was spittin' blood like Red Lucifer himself and he'd beat me purple" (50). Emily has also recently absorbed a punch from her new lover, Big Joey, aimed at another one of his women, the notorious Gazelle Nataways. Emily is strong spoken and able-bodied; however, her inclination toward abusive men distracts audiences from these commendable traits. The behaviour of Emily Dictionary suggests that seemingly strong women are susceptible to the allure of a "hunk" like Big Joey, despite the grave likelihood that he will become physically or emotionally abusive: Big Joey has a reputation for malign treatment of women (52). The apparent strength of Emily Dictionary is therefore undermined by the idea that she is so easily violated. North America's history of racism and violence against Aboriginal women makes Highway's repeated portrayals of victimization particularly dangerous. Such depictions of Native women are in keeping with stereotypical portrayals which "foster cultural attitudes that encourage sexual, physical, verbal, or psychological violence against Indigenous women" (Acoose 71).

Zhaboonigan's memory of rape certainly implicates White men in violence perpetrated against Native women. However, Emily Dictionary's recollections imply that Native men are perhaps a more tangible concern. While the attack upon Zhaboonigan is made surreal by the involvement of the trickster and the hazy reminiscence with which she articulates the memory, Emily's experiences of violence are realistic and, in the case of Big Joey, recent. Zhaboonigan's tale is fictionalized whereas Emily's visceral description of her former husband's red-eyed drunkenness adds a gritty realism to the memory. Big Joey had been "settlin' back on a coupla beers" before he punched Emily, indicating that both of Emily's experiences of abuse were catalyzed by alcohol consumption (52). Emily's testimonies imply that violence perpetrated by Native men who, according to Philomena, "are all the same" occurs as a result of excessive

consumption (51). Highway's representation of Native men as alcoholic and abusive is made blatant when Annie Cook, whose daughter Ellen lives with a "white guy in Sudbury," says that White men "are nicer to their women [than Native men]"; she goes on to proclaim that Native men will "screw you, drink all your money, and leave you flat on your ass" (87). Veronique St. Pierre corroborates this view when she says that she will never have a large stove because her husband, Pierre St. Pierre, "never has any money. He drinks it all up" (27). Even Marie-Adele's hard-working husband, Eugene Starblanket, is reportedly prone to alcoholism. Marie-Adele expresses her concerns regarding the fate of her children if Eugene should "start drinkin' again" after she dies (78). Since the Native men referred to in the play are always intoxicated when they commit acts of violence, this may be considered an attempt, on the part of Highway, to draw attention to the colonial legacy and its detrimental effect upon Native communities. On the other hand, because Native men in *The Rez Sisters* are almost always discussed in light of their inadequacy, alcoholism, and abusiveness, the implication is that these traits are inherent to Native men. Sherene Razack observes that "when a white judge takes the cultural contexts of Aboriginal men into account during a rape trial . . . [i]t can mean, and it has, that the rapes are viewed as a kind of cultural practice: these people do these kind of things" (*Looking* 19). With Native men represented as alcoholic aggressors and Native women as their repeated victims, whatever superficial strength the female characters may have is tainted by discourses of racism and gender binarism.

As the women drive to Toronto, Emily tells them that, after leaving her abusive husband, she moved to San Francisco and joined a Native women's motorcycle gang known as "the Rez Sisters"; Rose, the leader of the gang, became Emily's lover (97). To Emily's heartbreak, Rose was 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, she drove her motorcycle down the middle of the highway, head-on into a massive 18-wheeler. Here, the transport truck can be considered a symbol for the destructive force of dominant culture. Emily, unlike Rose, has no urge to self-destruct by full confrontation with dominant society. Without washing her lover’s dried blood from her neck, she drives “straight into daylight,” all the way back to her home on the Wasaychigan Hill Reserve (97). Rose’s decision to remain in the path of the 18-wheeler cannot be considered a direct act of gendered violence. However, because Highway has adopted a gendered conception of colonizing entities as masculine and colonized entities as feminine, Rose’s death is implicitly an act of colonial/masculine destruction. Hence, the female body is again used violently, as a trope intended to emphasize colonial wrongs and contemporary cultural dispossession. Furthermore, Emily’s graphically bloody recollection of Rose’s suicide points to an incremental increase in the vividness with which Highway describes the violence perpetrated against his characters.

Also on the way to Toronto, Philomena divulges that she was abandoned by a White lover. She says that, initially, he treated her “like a Queen” until his wife walked in on them making love and “he left with [his wife]” (81). Philomena’s story serves to counterbalance Annie Cook’s adamant declarations that White men treat women better than Native men do.⁸ Alone in the city, Philomena was forced to give up the baby she was carrying. As a result of this separation she does not know whether her child is a “boy or a girl” (81). After her mother became ill, Philomena returned to the Wasy Rez and stayed there. Thus, Emily and Philomena have both been driven back home by the physical and emotional violence inflicted upon them by White society. Philomena’s estrangement from her child also symbolizes a loss of culture. Her

⁸ There is no suggestion that the White man is alcoholic or physically abusive. Therefore, this representation is at odds with the portrayal of Native men in the text. Philomena’s White lover is a wealthy urbanite.

child will never be introduced to her/his heritage, language, or contemporary culture. Philomena, like Zhaboonigan Peterson and Emily Dictionary, is revealed to be part of a larger trope suggesting the dangers (for Native women) of miscegenation between Native women and White men. Highway implies here that Native women are expendable in the eyes of White men.

Relative to the next two instalments in the “Rez Trilogy,” the representations of gendered violence in *The Rez Sisters* do work positively toward a just critique of colonial damage and domination. Because the play also incorporates portrayals of female empowerment, the representations are more balanced than in the following two plays. Since the gendered violence is described rather than enacted in *The Rez Sisters*, these recollections are far less disturbing than the depictions of gendered violence in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *Rose*. In each woman’s recollection of gendered violence, the colonial legacy is painfully manifest, most blatantly in the rape of Zhaboonigan and the death of Rose, but also in Philomena’s memory of abandonment. To this extent, Highway draws attention to the continued impact of colonial oppression on Native peoples. However, this effect is achieved by employing problematic representations of female characters who are metaphorical beings, depicted repeatedly as victims of gendered violence perpetrated by White and Native men. Although the use of gendered violence as a trope to signify colonial transgressions may be subdued in *The Rez Sisters*, Highway nevertheless risks dismissing the real social struggles of Native peoples by dematerializing them into pure trope.

The Nanabush Factor: The Role of the Trickster in *The Rez Sisters*

One of Highway’s intentions in his work is to revive mythic structures that have been degraded or erased by assimilative colonial practices and policies. In this revival mission, he

focuses much of his attention upon Nanabush, the trickster figure, whom he compares to “*Christ in the realm of Christian mythology*” because “*he straddles the consciousness of man and God, the Great Spirit*” (Highway, *Rez* xii). According to Highway, Nanabush is integral to the survival of Native culture. As he writes,

[s]ome say that “Nanabush” left this continent when the whiteman came. We believe he is still here among us – albeit a little worse for wear and tear – having assumed other guises. Without him – and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever. (Rez xii)

Alan Filewod argues that many White critics assume the trickster offers “proof of shamanistic authenticity,” thus overlooking the fact that, “through making the inexplicable [Native mythology] coherent, the playwright is offering a mediated representation” (“Averting” 367). Lena Perkins similarly suggests that the trickster poses something of a distraction for the critics of Tomson Highway’s drama. Perkins observes that many critics read Highway’s use of the trickster figure as “an assertion of values of an intact and monolithic culture,” thereby disregarding other fundamental aspects of his work (259). The magic with which Highway’s plays are infused should not be cause for neglecting other components of his vastly complex works, including his often troublesome characterizations of women. Due to the pivotal role of the trickster in *The Rez Sisters*, a thorough analysis of the play’s gender dynamics must include an explication of Nanabush’s function therein. In *The Rez Sisters*, the trickster acts firstly as a transformational figure, covertly assisting the women in their separate journeys towards spiritual fulfillment; secondly, Nanabush is an embodied reminder to both the “rez sisters” and to real audiences of the continued presence of Native spirituality, despite colonial attempts at erasure.

However, when the play's invocation of Nanabush is placed alongside the play's engagement with gendered violence, the two work at opposing purposes.

Nanabush appears in three different disguises: the seagull, the nighthawk and the Bingo Master. Although he⁹ is present on the stage, only Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan recognize Nanabush well enough to speak to him, and they can only see him at certain times. The other women in the play are too far removed from their spiritual traditions to see Nanabush; he remains invisible to them and they see only his disguises. When Nanabush first appears to Marie-Adele she does not recognize him immediately. As the persistent seagull refuses to fly away, she asks, “[w]ho the hell do you think you are? The holy spirit?,” suggesting that even as she shoos him from her fence, Marie-Adele senses the divinity of the trickster (19). Marie-Adele uses Christian terminology when she speaks to Nanabush, referring to him as a member of the Holy Trinity. This statement is evidence of Highway's fantastical blending of traditions in the play. It also reaffirms Marie-Adele's status as a Christ figure. On the way to Toronto, the women stop to fix a blown tire and Marie-Adele is assailed by an aggressive and menacing Nanabush figure. In the notes to the play, Highway writes that Nanabush is a “*comic, clownish sort of character*”; yet he is neither comic nor clownish in this scene (*Rez* xxii). Disguised as the nighthawk, Nanabush attacks Marie-Adele while she slips into a “*total hysterical breakdown*” (92). As the nighthawk, Nanabush is Marie-Adele's otherworldly guide into the afterlife. However, because she is not yet able to accept her impending death, she also rejects Nanabush.

It is during the play's climax that Nanabush succeeds in leading Marie-Adele into the afterlife. As the women raid the podium and steal the number machine, Nanabush, disguised as the Bingo Master “*dressed to kill [in] tails, rhinestones and all,*” dances Marie-Adele off of the

⁹ Nanabush is genderless. I refer to him in the masculine here because the character, in *The Rez Sisters*, is played by a male dancer (originally, Rene Highway, Tomson Highway's brother)

stage and into the afterlife. With worldly chaos raging around them, Marie-Adele and Nanabush are “*calm*” and “*silent*,” as they waltz “*romantically*” away from the noise and confusion of the bingo game (103). While they leave the other women behind, Nanabush transforms to become the nighthawk, thus reminding Marie-Adele of his existence and helping to ease her transition into death. Marie-Adele whispers to him in Cree, “Oh. It’s you, so that’s who you are” (102). Highway’s portrayal of Nanabush as a Bingo Master signifies the adaptive strength of Native spirituality. In this embodiment, the trickster is most similar to Bingo Betty who also represents spiritual survival. Both figures are products of traditional blending and both are sources of strength for the women in the play. By reverting back to his nighthawk form, Nanabush reveals his transformational power, again affirming the resilience and survival (against all odds) of Native spirituality. The interventions of the Nanabush figure add a magical element to the play which diminishes the realism of the drama. The pain of Marie-Adele’s death is undermined by this fantasticality, as is the tragedy of her suffering.

Nanabush appears to Zhaboonigan in the diminutive guise of the benign, however irritating, seagull. Instead of being proactive, as he is with Marie-Adele, he listens to Zhaboonigan without attempting to interfere. Lena Perkins argues that Nanabush functions as a memory figure in *The Rez Sisters*, co-existing in past and contemporary times; according to Perkins, because of his double temporal allegiance, the trickster figure is essential for the “creative act of remembering” (261). For Highway, cultural healing results from the exorcism of painful memories and the revival of spiritual tradition. In the scene with Zhaboonigan, the primary significance of Nanabush’s presence is that he inspires her tragic recollections. Initially, it would seem that Nanabush’s “agonized contortions” are intended to express the suffering Zhaboonigan endured during the rape; however, the emblematic function of Nanabush is

ambiguous here (48). Although he definitely initiates Zhaboonigan's recollection of the rape, it is unclear whether Nanabush solely represents Native spirituality, or if he is also linked somehow to the White rapists. At the beginning of their exchange, Zhaboonigan says to him, "Are you gentle?" Immediately, then, Zhaboonigan's interlocutor is identified as a possible threat. Yet whom is she addressing: Nanabush or the White boys who attacked her? Zhaboonigan's further comments suggest that she is seeing the scene of the rape being played out before her. Looking directly at Nanabush she says, "I know who you are. There, there. Boys. White boys. Ever nice white wings, you" (47). So what does she see?: Nanabush or the White rapists? The presence of Nanabush not only allows her to recall the rape, but his "white wings" actually remind her of the rapists (47). The conflation of Nanabush with the White rapists calls into question Highway's purpose in portraying the rape scene in this way. If Nanabush is both a symbol of Native spirituality and the White rapists, then the confused emblematicism in this scene obscures Highway's message. As in the case of Marie-Adele's death, the involvement of the magical trickster draws critical attention away from the disturbing nature of the portrayal of rape.

Problematic Representations in *The Rez Sisters*: Conclusions

In her postcolonial analysis of Highway's plays, Sheila Rabillard draws upon Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity to suggest that Highway's works demonstrate a subversive rearticulation of the European-colonizer's culture. In her conclusion, Rabillard argues that, in the *The Rez Sisters*, Highway employs "the cultural products of the colonizer," while reshaping them "into something new and partially familiar to the dominant culture yet also new and estranging" (25). Ann Nothof has read the play in a similar way, arguing that Highway "succeeds in bridging the gap between [Native and White] cultures by dramatizing their

collision.” Maria Casas acknowledges that some of Highway’s portrayals are problematic, but argues that colonial stereotypes could only be perpetuated by a play like *The Rez Sisters* if mainstream society “minimizes the strangeness – to a colonial gaze – of the text” (13). These critics applaud the distinctiveness of the world that Highway presents. They insist that he portrays a distinctly “Native” vision.¹⁰ This perspective assumes that *The Rez Sisters* performs Aboriginality for the entertainment of mainstream viewers. Yet, it is possible that non-Native readers/viewers find in his play the version of Native identity they already believe to be true. One must seriously question the power dynamics involved when audiences are so quick to consume a play like *The Rez Sisters* in which Native women are portrayed as promiscuous, drunk, and apparently violable. Highway himself has said that, in structuring his plays he applies “sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk” (qtd. in Wigston 8). This application in *The Rez Sisters* has resulted in representations of Native people, especially women, which may contribute to colonialist stereotypes.

Alan Filewod’s assessment of *The Rez Sisters* is significant in this context. “[W]hen I watch Tomson Highway’s plays,” he states, “I am discomfited by the unresolved relationships of colonialism; my gaze is returned but my power as colonizer is unchallenged; ultimately I am afraid that my response disqualifies itself” (“Averting” 28). Filewod compares Highway’s plays to those of Native theatre group, Tunooniq. According to Filewod, unlike Native Earth, Tunooniq “would never have a chance in hell of attracting a commercial producer” (“Averting” 19). In *The Rez Sisters*, Highway offers a testimony concerning the condition of Native people that resonates with the dominant culture. *The Rez Sisters* was interpreted by an anonymous British critic in attendance at The Edinburgh International Festival as being “really just a

¹⁰ See also Denis Johnston’s article “Lines and Circles,” as well as Helen Gilbert’s analysis of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in *Postcolonial Drama* (212-17)

community play” (qtd. in Filewod, “Averting” 21). It is probable that many spectators/readers, like this British critic, have interpreted *The Rez Sisters* as a “jolly celebration of eccentric culture peopled with larger-than-life characters who are blessed with funny names”; such an interpretation requires that the female characters are “‘more authentic’ – meaning more sexual, defined by their appetites and spirituality – than we are” (Filewod, “Averting” 22). Rather than estranging his non-Native audiences, Highway’s play may actually affirm negative preconceptions regarding Native people.

The “Rez Plays” are routinely read by audiences who are accustomed to witnessing stereotypical portrayals of Native men as alcoholic, criminal, and abusive and Native women as easily accessible victims. Mainstream media regularly portrays semi-pornographic representations of violence perpetrated against Native women. The aestheticization of racialized violence in both media and popular culture perpetually reinforces colonially rooted stereotypes concerning Native men and Native women. Even if Highway’s portrayals do reflect negative colonial influences, when performed as a spectacle for mixed audiences, these representations may also reify racially charged stereotypes. Highway has repeatedly stated that his intentions are to support Native women. The question, then, is whether a critique of colonial transgressions can succeed if it recuperates colonialist discourses about Native peoples. In his attempt to revive the mythic structures of Native tradition and support the women in his community, Highway has problematically portrayed both Native men and Native women. The rape of Zhaboonigan is the most disconcerting instance of gendered violence in *The Rez Sisters* because of its specific connection to the Helen Betty Osborne case and the ambiguous alignment of Nanabush with the perpetrators of the crime. By employing gendered violence, especially the enactment of a rape based upon a real event, as a trope in a comically surreal play, Highway risks effacing the lived

reality of such victimization as well as the actual raced and gendered practice of sexual violence. Moreover, the problematic gender binarism by which the relationships between Native men and Native women are characterized in this play reifies hegemonic stereotypes that fix Native men as barbaric aggressors and Native women as their easily violable victims.

Chapter 2: Colonial Oppression and Emblematic Rape in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*

Production and Critical Reception

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing premiered on 21 April 1989, produced by Theatre Passe Muraille and Native Earth Performing Arts. Like *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* is set in contemporary times, on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve. The play, which Highway describes as the “flip side” to *The Rez Sisters*, is performed on two stage levels, and in three different languages (Cree, Ojibwa, and English) (*Dry* 12). In *Dry Lips*, the lives of seven men on the Wasy Rez are shown in terms of their varied responses to the women of the reserve, who have decided to form a hockey team. The men are casualties of a cultural clash with White settler society, which results in their redirecting their sense of disempowerment onto the women in their community. They have become pathetic, disempowered, irresponsible and self-destructive. Big Joey is the least responsible of the Wasy men; he denies his paternity and blames his impotence on the women. Most of the other Wasy men are equally dysfunctional. Creature Nataways, a garrulous simpleton, is Big Joey’s adoring sidekick. Pierre St. Pierre is the Rez clown; he is an inarticulate alcoholic. Spooky Lacroix has substituted an addiction to alcohol with an addiction to Christianity. His distorted rearticulation of Western religion is placed in direct opposition to the Native spirituality of young Simon Starblanket; the conflicting relationship symbolizes the struggle between the two systems of spiritual belief. Zachary is the closest thing the play has to a lead character. His obsession with opening a bakery on the Rez is comparable to Pelajia’s dream of building new roads: both want to improve their community. Zachery’s plan to present his proposal to the Band Council is foiled when, in the first scene, he is caught in sexually compromising circumstances by Big Joey, who has a rival plan to start a new radio station to

broadcast hockey games from the local arena. Big Joey threatens to use Zachary's undershorts as evidence of infidelity unless Zachary withdraws his proposal. While minor conflicts between the men add a humorous element to *Dry Lips*, these campy interchanges are in stark contrast to the play's serious scenes.

The plot of *Dry Lips* hinges on two disturbing iconic moments: the re-enactment of the birth of Dickie Bird Halked seventeen years earlier, in 1973 – the same year as the stand-off at Wounded Knee¹¹ – to a drunken mother on a tavern floor; and the rape of Patsy Pegahmagahbow¹²/Nanabush by Dickie Bird. In *Dry Lips*, Highway contends with a number of issues associated with colonization: the harmful intervention of Christianity, the oppressive functioning of the gender binary, addiction and, not least of all, violence against women, which is implicitly tied to European colonization. In this play, Highway suggests that the idealization of White femininity has contributed to Native men's devaluation of Native women, and that Christianity has helped to promote patriarchal attitudes, thereby upholding the destructive gender binary that also results in mistreatment of Native women. However, Highway's subversive messages are conveyed through a series of problematic representations of women. Not only are female bodies objectified as sites of grotesque violence, but violence against women is used to emblemise colonial oppression. The violence in *Dry Lips* is more vivid than the violence in *The*

¹¹ The first incident at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, took place in December of 1890. Wounded Knee was the site of the last battle of the Indian Wars, it was a massacre, with an estimated Sioux death toll between 150-300. The second incident began in the third week of February 1973. The conflict consisted of a seventy-one-day stand-off between Native activists, on one side, and Bureau of Indian Affairs agents, F B I, and Police on the other. The firepower of the Federal agents eventually overpowered the activists who had occupied a church. The occupation resulted from a longstanding dispute between the government and the Independent Oglala Nation over treaty rights. No substantial gains were made. Wounded Knee functions, for some contemporary Native writers, as a metonym for the clash between White and Native cultures. For further information concerning Wounded Knee, see Francis Paul Prucha's *The Great Father, the United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

² Francis Pegahmagahbow was the most highly decorated Native soldier in Canadian military history and the most effective Canadian sniper in World War I. For further information, see *Pegahmagahbow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero* by Adrian Hayes (Toronto: Natural Heritage, 2005). Francis Pegahmagahbow also figures in Joseph Boyden's acclaimed novel, *Three Day Road*. It should be noted that country and western singer, Patsy Cline, is repeatedly mentioned in *The Rez Sisters*. Nanabush is a traditional figure, but her/his embodiments are sometimes very modern. It is possible that Patsy's name signifies the adaptive fortitude of Nanabush.

Rez Sisters. This escalation peaks in the third instalment in the “Rez Trilogy,” *Rose*, which contains numerous scenes with excessive and gratuitous violence.

Jennifer Preston observes that those involved in the original production of *Dry Lips* “were a little worried about the reception of the play as it dealt with some very difficult issues . . . they wondered if people would be able to accept the way Christianity and its effects upon Native people were portrayed” (149). These concerns were in vain; like its highly acclaimed predecessor, *Dry Lips* debuted to positive critical reception. Highway received the Dora Mavor Moore Award and the Floyd S. Chalmers Award.¹³ Accolades for the initial production of *Dry Lips* were so extensive that, in 1991, the Mirvishes, the wealthy producers of *Miss Saigon*, provided funding for a *Dry Lips* revival, to be staged at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto. The restaging of Highway’s play at a large, commercial venue incited criticism from individuals who had overlooked the play’s faults upon first viewing. The opening at the Royal Alexandra sparked a controversy amongst feminist reviewers, both Native and non-Native, who were displeased with the representations of women and gendered violence in the play.¹⁴ Anita Tuharsky, a Métis critic, was the first to express her disappointment at Highway’s failure to counterbalance the negative depictions of Native people with positive alternatives; in her letter to a national Aboriginal newspaper, *Windspeaker*, Tuharsky outwardly accuses Highway of abusing his “abilities” and writing for the public who “enjoys these images” (5). In her scathing review of *Dry Lips*, Tuharsky writes,

Aboriginal women were portrayed as loose, unfaithful, sleazy drunks with no respect for human life and childbirth. The women in the play were nude and

¹³ For full details concerning the initial success of *Dry Lips*, see Preston, “Weesageechak Begins to Dance” (149-50)

¹⁴ Some critics and scholars have disregarded the negative responses of Aboriginal women, and suggested that criticism of Highway’s work arose entirely from misinterpretation on the part of White critics. For example, in the introduction to *An Anthology of Native Canadian Literature in English*, Moses and Goldie argue that “when people said Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* was misogynistic it seemed to be because they weren’t trained by the culture to understand it” (xxi). By erasing the criticisms voiced by Aboriginal women, Moses and Goldie reconfigure the controversy, depicting it as a debate between marginalized Aboriginal artists and White feminists. This was not the case

showed no modesty for their body but allowed it to be portrayed in a degrading manner. I for one would like to tell Mr. Highway that Aboriginal women are not like this. . . . This is pornography. This is a disrespectful portrayal that only reinforces damaging stereotypes against our women. (5)

Tuharsky also proclaims that “Aboriginal men fared no better. They were portrayed as unfaithful drunks, uneducated, slovenly in dress, uncaring, selfish self-absorbed failures” (5). It is Tuharsky’s opinion that Highway does not help audiences to overcome the obstacles created by colonialism, but that “it is images such as the ones in this play that breed oppression, racism and disrespect for Aboriginal peoples and their culture, traditions, and spirituality” (5). Tuharsky’s negative response to the play was followed immediately by White feminist Marion Botsford Fraser’s column in *The Globe and Mail*. Fraser, who draws upon the criticisms raised by Tuharsky, also insists that the play includes unnecessarily misogynistic representations of women. According to Fraser,

the two central events in the play are horrible abuses of women, unmitigated by compassion . . . our attention is drawn not to the women who are suffering, but the men who are watching. . . . *Dry Lips* is not a play about misogyny, but is a drama studded with misogyny. (10)

Several months after Fraser’s article appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, Native playwright and poet Marie Annharte Baker’s response was published in *Canadian Theatre Review*. Baker claims that some women had “nightmares for a week” after viewing *Dry Lips* and that the play does nothing more than portray “the victim merry-go-round” (88-89). She argues that it is “internalized racism and sexism that seems to get financial awards, literary or artistic awards,” implying that *Dry Lips* is an exemplary display of such “internalized racism” (Baker 89). Baker

believes that it has “become fashionable” for audiences to watch Native theatre and that “we [Native people] find excuses to praise our further degradation on stage or screen” (Baker 88). For his part, Highway has repeatedly stated that his intentions are to emphasize the harmfulness of colonial interventions and assist Native women in their attempts at cultural reclamation. In conversation with interviewer Judy Steed, Highway expresses his feelings concerning feminist criticism and the representations of women in *Dry Lips*.

In order to do that [heal] you have to expose the poison, that’s what Lyle Longclaws said, the quotation at the beginning of the play. When you want healing you have to talk about men talking about women. Most heterosexual men, most straight men do talk about tits and ass, and that’s what I was portraying. What is the real source of misogyny? How do we explain the origin? To me, I see [misogyny] as directly related to the origin of God as a man. That’s where misogyny comes from. (qtd. in Steed)

Naming the colonial introduction of monotheism and patriarchy into First Nations cultures as the source of violence against women, Highway suggests that cultural healing will only be attained if the colonial legacy is blatantly exposed. Feminist critics like Baker find no solace in the Longclaws quotation, which was, as Baker points out, “also printed on the playbill” (88).¹⁵ In response to Highway’s public declarations of support and empathy toward women, Baker writes that “it is convenient to make enough commentary to be unaccountable for any inadvertent racist or sexist imagery” (88). She observes that subtle, professedly unintentional racist and sexist imagery is still troublesome. Baker claims that Highway’s work “arouses suspicion about the audience because it is not popular to attend politically incorrect performances that might

¹⁵ Of course, this Longclaws quotation is not part of the play performance, but only printed on the playbill for certain performances. The quotation is also printed in the published text.

intentionally endorse racism”; she worries “about the unintended” (88). For Baker, the popularity of *Dry Lips* is connected directly to racism and the fact that many representations in the play reaffirm negative stereotypes held by mainstream society regarding Native people.

Just as Anita Tuharsky expresses concern that Highway’s play does not draw adequate attention to the complicity of White colonizers in the destruction of Native communities, so too does Baker worry that responsibility is not assigned adequately. She writes that “a Yuppie would go home feeling relieved that Indians live on the rez and in another part of the city. For whites and white-nosers the play is a wonderful revelation about the contradictions in Indian lives. But to a young Native person the play might be another affront to one’s identity” (Baker 89). Keeping Highway’s alleged intentions in mind, Baker goes on to question the positive reception of his work. Concerning the success of *Dry Lips*, she asks firstly if “the average Native woman or man would walk out of the theatre with a greater understanding of racism or sexism?”; secondly, she queries whether a “Yuppie boss or co-worker would find anything in the play to better understand the inequality of the workplace where racism and sexism is a structural hierarchal reality?” (89). For both Tuharsky and Baker, the answer to these questions is no. Rather than subverting colonial domination, both women argue that Highway’s drama actually perpetuates colonial stereotypes. Instead of repeated portrayals of Native victimhood and degeneration, Baker wants “to see that the average white Canadian gets a bit of responsibility” (88). Susan Bennett cites Baker in her response to Jennifer Preston’s previously cited article, “Weesageechak Begins to Dance,” where she criticizes Preston’s totalizing and entirely positive “tourist gaze” (“Response” 10). Bennett, like Baker, believes that the representations of Native people, particularly women, in *Dry Lips* are very disturbing and that Highway risks affirming negative stereotypes by staging such portrayals.

Alan Filewod, writing from the position of a White male critic, asserts that *Dry Lips*, like *The Rez Sisters*, offers an image of Native people with which White audiences are “comfortable” (“Averting” 22). He shares the reservations expressed by Tuharsky, Baker and Bennett concerning the reception of a play like *Dry Lips*. Filewod fears that, because the presence of oppressive colonial institutions remains primarily invisible throughout *Dry Lips*, White spectators are able to deny their culpability. For Filewod, it is this opportunity for exoneration that has caused both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* to receive such vast critical acclaim. As he writes,

The [positive critical] response is problematic because the celebratory response erases the politics of the play and re-establishes the narrative as a generalized statement of anticolonialism, permitting the colonizer to assume the posture of the colonized. It is inevitable that we should come to Highway’s plays through identification with the oppressed characters rather than an awareness of our place as colonizer. (“Averting” 21)

The critic declares that only a play that “upholds the cultural myths by which Anglo-Canada excuses its marginalization of native Indians” would be “picked by a commercial producer” (Filewod, “Averting” 22). According to Filewod, once *Dry Lips* was performed in the large commercial venue of the Royal Alexandra, feminist critics were better able to see the problem with Highway’s representations; such a venue made the gratuitous violence and sexualization of women readily evident. This forces one to question what the critical response might have been if *The Rez Sisters* had been produced by the Mirvishes at the Royal Alexandra. The new production of *Dry Lips* reordered and necessarily altered the generation of meaning. Filewod writes that “this production brought the contradictions [of *Dry Lips*] to the foreground”; “not only did the

play assume the possibility of reinforcing overt racism . . . it enabled the (mainly) white establishment audience to identify with the oppressed” (“Receiving” 371). This sentiment emphasizes Filewod’s ultimate concern that Highway lets White audiences “off the hook” (“Averting” 22). Filewod’s interpretation of *Dry Lips* therefore supports the angry testaments of Baker and Tuharsky. These critical articulations suggest that Highway’s works do not entirely succeed in allowing “the poison to come out” (*Dry* 15). In fact, it seems equally possible that the “Rez Plays” reinscribe White colonial domination and thereby contribute to the oppression of Native people, particularly Native women. The critical observations of Tuharsky, Baker, Fraser, Bennett and Filewod serve to reinforce my argument that Highway’s depictions of violence against women do little to remedy the multitude of problems associated with the colonial legacy in Canada; rather, such portrayals may reinforce stereotypes regarding Native people which are prevalent in mainstream society.

The Gender Binary and White Femininity

Highway discussed the colonial imposition of the gender binary during a speech given in February 2000 at York University, asserting that in Cree “a male/female hierarchy doesn’t exist . . . there are really three genders in the aboriginal belief” (qtd. in Carlyle). In *Dry Lips*, Highway attempts to disrupt the harmful gender binary. This effort is most apparent in his portrayal of a Native women’s hockey team. Hockey is considered to be a man’s sport, particularly a White man’s sport. In *Dry Lips*, “hockey functions simultaneously as an icon of White Canadian culture and masculinity” (Billingham 370). By forming a hockey team, the women seem to be disturbing normative gender roles. The reactions of the Wasy men to the idea of women playing hockey are indicative of the disrespect and fear they feel toward women, as well as their discomfort with any disruption of gender normative behaviour. Big Joey and Creature “*laugh themselves into*

prolonged hysterical fits,” while Pierre refers to the phenomenon as a “revolution”; Spooky is thankful that the apocalypse is encroaching, lest the women should attempt to usurp male power entirely (Highway, *Dry* 35). Although the stick-wielding women are not present on stage, the male characters are haunted by “*the eery, distant sound of women wailing and pucks hitting boards*” (Highway, *Dry* 65). The women’s distant cries suggest a spiritual ceremony; it is as though they are usurping spiritual power. The men may be too far removed from their cultural traditions to fully understand the significance of the women’s gathering, as though traditional spirituality has become foreign to them. Indeed, the men’s interpretation of the cries as “eery” recalls White men’s responses to Native ceremonies (65).

Curiously, the women have imposed biological restrictions on membership in their hockey team. In order to join the Wasy Wailerettes, a woman must either “be pregnant or have piles and piles of babies” (29). Because participation in the Wasy women’s hockey league necessitates fertility, women are still qualified only by their sex and consequent reproductive capabilities. While fertility and sexuality remain of primary importance, the female body, with its reproductive potential, remains the focal point. This does not lead to a re-negotiation of the codes by which gender is defined. Rather, the evaluation of women, based upon their reproductive function, recalls colonial and misogynistic policies concerning the regulation of women’s bodies.¹⁶ Although it may initially appear that these female hockey players present a subversive representation of womanhood, Highway undermines this potential subversion by maintaining that participation on the women’s team and motherhood are inextricably linked.

The figure of Nanabush, the genderless trickster, is also employed by Highway as a means of upsetting the gender binary. Nanabush is corporeally personified, appearing as

¹⁶ As observed by Robin Jarvis Brownlie, Indian Affairs Agents assumed that they had the right to “regulate Aboriginal women’s sexuality and enforce obedience to Euro-Canadian models of correct gender expression” (163); colonial policies were in place to ensure that Aboriginal women satisfied their “domestic role,” including appropriate monogamy, childbearing, and motherhood (165).

grotesque versions of the women in the men's lives: Gazelle Nataways, the temptress who compromises Zachary's happy marriage; Black Lady Halked, Big Joey's alcoholic mistress and Dickie Bird's mother; and Patsy, the hope of new life and new spiritual awareness for Simon, whose rape unsettles the men's fragile interrelationships. When Nanabush appears as the women, she wears 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. Nanabush's donning of prosthetic body enhancements may be read, as it is by Billingham (369), as an exhibition of the performative nature of gender: the women literally put on their sex. Although it seems that Highway does intend to portray gender performativity, because Nanabush is played by a woman this is problematic. The female body is made hyper-sexual through the embellishment of traditionally sexualized, reproduction oriented, body parts. Attention is inevitably drawn to the exaggerated femaleness of the body. If Nanabush were played by a male dancer, as in *The Rez Sisters*, Highway's images might be used more successfully to dispute the gender binary. As she is female in *Dry Lips*, the Nanabush figure portrays a sexualized representation of divine, hyper-feminine womanhood.

Dry Lips opens with a dumb-show which takes place at the home of Big Joey. Gazelle Nataways, who, like all but one of the play's four female characters,¹⁷ appears as an embodiment of Nanabush, has seduced Zachary Keechigeesik. As Zachary slumbers naked on the sofa, "Hockey Night in Canada" plays on the television. After kissing his bum, Gazelle leaves her sleeping lover on the couch and puts on a gigantic pair of rubberized breasts over her own breasts. In the stage directions that precede Act One, Highway indicates that "*prominently displayed on one wall is a life-sized pin-up poster of Marilyn Monroe*" (15). Richard Dyer

¹⁷ It is unclear whether Hera is a manifestation of Nanabush in the play. She does not wear prosthetic body parts. However, as the play closes, Hera "*peals out with this magical silvery Nanabush laugh*," reminding audiences of the continued presence of the trickster (130)

observes that Hollywood's mechanisms for glamour lighting "were developed in relation to White women, to endow them with a radiance that has correspondences with the transcendent rhetoric of Christianity. Of no other star was this more true than Marilyn Monroe, known by the press at that time as 'the Body'" (160-61). In her lifetime, Monroe was constructed as a sexualized Madonna, the "apotheosis of desirability, all that a man could want yet nothing that can be had, nor anything that a woman can be" (Dyer 161). In *Dry Lips*, Monroe is epitomized as "the object of male desire"; specifically, she represents an idealized "male construction of White female sexuality" (Lundy 106). All of the men's behaviours and attitudes towards women throughout the play must be considered in light of the fact that Monroe is presiding over the action. As Susan Billingham observes, "when white womanhood is taken as the norm or standard of female beauty, women of colour are placed at an automatic disadvantage" (369).

Gazelle/Nanabush's prosthetic breasts suggest, at least in part, the unattainable nature of idealized White femininity. If the male construction of beauty is unreachable for White women, it is certainly not achievable for Native women. In the initial silence of the opening scene, Highway hints at the way in which notions of White femininity have shaped and displaced the role of Native women. However, Highway's attempted subversion of the idealization of White femininity is confused by the hyper-sexualized representation of Gazelle. Monroe, the icon of White femininity, remains inanimate upon the wall, while Gazelle, the Native woman in the scene, performs her sexuality for mixed audiences. The Native female is rendered grotesque and farcical whereas the White woman is beautiful and untouchable. In this respect, Monroe remains iconic, serving to emphasize Gazelle's corporeality. This portrayal only reifies colonialist discourses which demean Native women and signify White femininity as pristine and superior.

The play's dialogue opens with an exclamation of "Hey Bitch!" by Big Joey (16). This opening line, directed toward Gazelle, is manifest of the Wasy men's general attitude toward women. The male characters in *Dry Lips* have adopted patriarchal, misogynistic behaviours. Big Joey expresses his disdain for women most vocally. Upon entering his home to find Zachary asleep on the couch, he says, "[y]ou know, Zach, there's a whole lotta guys on this rez been slippin' my old lady the goods but there ain't but a handful been stupid enough to get caught by me" (20). Big Joey views Gazelle as a commodity over which he has rightful control. The idea that Gazelle is property, subject to male will, is reaffirmed by Creature Nataways, Gazelle's former husband. Eager to avoid upsetting the hostile Big Joey, Creature says nervously, "I tole you once I tole you twice she's yours now. It's like I loaned her [Gazelle] to you, I don't mind. I can take it. We made a deal, remember?" (25). Such verbalizations lead to the objectification of Gazelle, thereby enhancing the potential for her hyper-sexualized body to become a focal point for audiences. Considering the way in which colonial discourses have depicted Native women as promiscuous and sexually accessible, such demeaning articulations are incongruous with Highway's subversive intentions. Big Joey speaks disrespectfully of women at numerous points throughout the play. Highway has apparently constructed the hyper-masculine, overtly misogynistic, character of Big Joey in order to draw attention to the negative impact of colonial interventions, particularly the construction of the gender binary, upon Native men. Deprived of his feminine element, Big Joey is emotionally stultified. He is also the owner of the Marilyn Monroe pin-up, implying that he places undue value upon White femininity.

The standoff between Native protesters and FBI agents at Wounded Knee left Big Joey a broken man, psychologically castrated. Roberta Imboden observes that Big Joey has brought the "hatred and violence of the South Dakota site back with him" (116). Big Joey's son Dickie Bird

Halked (whom he denies) was born the same year as the protest at Wounded Knee. Big Joey was working as a bouncer at the Dickie Bird Tavern the night of the fateful birth. He did nothing to stop Black Lady Halked from excessive drinking, and fled in a panic when she went into labour on the bar-room floor. Late in the play, he recalls the catastrophic conflict at Wounded Knee, connecting the protest with Dickie's birth.

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. So when I saw this baby comin' out of Caroline, Black Lady . . . all this blood . . . I knew it was gonna come . . . I freaked out. (119-20)

Emasculation through symbolic castration suggests the disempowerment of Native men through colonial policy and practice. However, Big Joey's incoherent recollections indicate that he has psychologically conflated the protest at Wounded Knee with Dickie's birth. For him, both are coloured with blood, and both have contributed to his present emasculation. The fact that he associates disempowerment with the loss of his genitals indicates that Big Joey considers his sex, and his colonially constructed gender role, to be the ultimate source of his power as a Native man. For this reason, he considers the empowerment of women to be extremely threatening to his position. Big Joey's association between female agency and White domination is made evident when he refers to the formation of a women's hockey team as "Wounded Knee three! Women's version!" (63). He assumes that female empowerment will necessarily lead to his own disempowerment, and further emasculation. By incorporating a character like Big Joey into the play, Highway may be trying to hold Native men accountable for the violence they perpetrate

against Native women. However, the portrayal of Big Joey's misogyny is always facilitated by a degrading, and sometimes violent, representation of one of the women in the play.

Big Joey witnesses the rape of Patsy. He is smoking a joint in the bushes while the disturbing event takes place. Although he is accompanied by Creature Nataways, who urges him to intervene, Big Joey, once again, does nothing. He restrains Creature, while attacking his masculinity by referring to him as a "fuckin' fruit"¹⁸; Big Joey's statement suggests that it is innately male and inherently heterosexual to abet violence against women (100). During the rape scene, Big Joey is transformed from a cowardly bully to a representative of "weakness and evil in modern Native society" (D. Johnston 260). Confronted by Zachary, Big Joey confesses his motivation for allowing Dickie to rape Patsy: "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). As observed by Sheila Rabillard, Big Joey's words "make an explicit association between political domination and male/female antagonism. . . . Big Joey appears to assert that women – who, offstage, have intruded into an exclusively male sport – and the agents of White domination both emasculate" (15). Thus, Big Joey's psychological connection between female agency and emasculation becomes abundantly clear with this misogynistic outburst. The enmeshment of images of female empowerment with images of colonial domination reminds viewers/readers of the hierarchy of domination that exists due to colonialism. Big Joey's violent rage is born out of the oppression to which he has been subjected. Highway wishes for his audiences to understand that Big Joey is both a victim and a perpetrator. Viewing "Aboriginal men as dysfunctional (and not, for example, oppressed) and Aboriginal women as inherently rapeable confirms the superiority of white men" (Razack, *Looking* 69). Therefore, it is necessary

¹⁸ For a full analysis of the homo-social interrelationships between the men in *Dry Lips*, and between Big Joey and Creature in particular, see Peter Dickinson, *Here is Queer: Nationalities, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*

to acknowledge that Native men who commit acts of violence have also been subjected to the violence of colonialism. However, the invocation of White oppression at this particular point in the play dismisses accountability. With attention drawn away from his violent crimes against women, and toward the violence of colonization, Big Joey is not portrayed as fully culpable in either his general perpetration of misogyny or his facilitation of rape. Furthermore, because the suggestion of colonial oppression is recollective and invisible, White audiences are not made to feel uncomfortable or complicit.

Dickie's horrendous actions inspire Big Joey to acknowledge his paternity. Following the rape scene, Highway portrays a reconciliation between father and son; Big Joey protects Dickie from the fury of Simon Starblanket, who is set upon avenging Patsy. Only through an act of misogynistic violence can Dickie finally gain his father's approval. The fact that Dickie and Big Joey should bond over the rape of a woman is disturbingly reflective of the Wasy men's misogyny. Back at Big Joey's house, Dickie Bird "*stands directly in front of and facing the life-size pin-up poster of Marilyn Monroe. . . . his head drops down in remorse*" (107). Dickie seems to sense the influence of Western patriarchy upon his actions. He knows that a connection exists between his brutalization of Patsy and this representation of Monroe. The suggestion is that the idealization of White femininity has resulted in violence against Native women. Dickie is a pitiable figure throughout the play, yet he is portrayed as most pathetic after he commits the rape. Dickie's remorse causes him to become suicidal; he "*slowly walks over to Big Joey, kneels down directly in front of the barrel of the gun, puts it in his mouth. . . . in the complete silence the two men are looking directly into each other's eyes*" (107). The intensity of the deranged pair staring at one another, with only a gun between them, and the giant poster of Monroe above is broken when "*Marilyn Monroe farts, courtesy of Ms. Nanabush: a little flag reading 'poot' pops up out*

of *Ms. Monroe's derriere, as on a play gun*" (107). Monroe's flatulent intervention is most likely designed to emphasize the ridiculousness and dangerousness of the idealization of White femininity. In making Monroe corporeal and comical, Highway attempts to upset notions of superior White femininity. However, by drawing attention to Monroe, and the idealization of White femininity, Highway removes attention from the misogynistic violence perpetrated by Dickie and Big Joey. The tragedy folds back into the innocence of bodily humour. For this reason, the significance of the violence enacted upon the women in the play might come to be trivialized by audiences. It must also be kept in mind that Marilyn Monroe was driven to suicide by her unhappiness. She spent much of her life as an object of male sexualization. Because Monroe was herself a victim of patriarchal objectification and oppression, further exploitation of her image can never truly be subversive.¹⁹

Christianity and Symbolic Rape

Simon Starblanket and Spooky Lacroix embody the opposing traditions of Native spirituality and European Christianity, respectively. Simon plans to visit South Dakota, with his pregnant fiancée, Patsy, in order to celebrate the renaissance of Native culture by dancing with the Sioux. Simon first appears "*dancing and chanting*" in the forest under a full moon, dressed in a traditional costume (38). Simon's potential to enrich Wasy society seems hopeful; he says that "we've got to learn to dance again . . . I'm the one who has to bring the drum back. And it's Patsy's medicine power, that stuff she's learning from her step-mother . . . [that] helps me" (45). In this way, Simon's spirituality is aligned with the feminine element of Nanabush in the play. As Simon tries to learn the traditional dance, "*the magical flickering of his luminescent powwow*

¹⁹ See Barbara Learning's *Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998).

dancing bustle” is doubled by a dancing bustle worn by Nanabush (38). In *Dry Lips*, Nanabush’s bustle “provides an oppositional symbol to the death-dealing cross held like a weapon by Spooky Lacroix” (Nothof). The cross represents the Christian Church’s involvement in the destruction of Native culture. Son of a medicine man, Spooky Lacroix has abandoned his family’s spiritual traditions and become fanatically Christianized.

Spooky incessantly proselytizes to Big Joey’s unacknowledged son, Dickie Bird Halked, in whom the colonial legacy is most manifest. The young man suffers from the chronically debilitating effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, the most obvious effect of which is his inability to speak. Dickie’s muteness represents the colonial diminishment of Native languages. The fact that Dickie can speak neither Cree nor English reflects his confusion concerning the conflicting traditions of Native spirituality and European Christianity. When Dickie finally manages to speak to his mother, the words he utters are in Cree, yet Black Lady Halked responds only in English. Like her brother Spooky, Black Lady has given up alcohol for Christianity. Dickie’s inability to engage in either Native or European traditions has left him primarily silent. His struggle is displayed dramatically by Highway on the three occasions when Dickie appears between Simon Starblanket and Spooky Lacroix (68, 73, 78). At the Wasy Wailerette’s first hockey game, “*caught between Simon’s chanting and Spooky’s praying, [Dickie] blocks his ears with his hands and looks with consternation at the ‘game’*” (73). Visibly torn between the claims of Spooky’s Christianity and Simon’s Native spirituality, Dickie is eventually overwhelmed by the power embodied in the symbol of the crucifix.

Spooky’s cross becomes a literal weapon in the hands of Dickie Bird; he uses it to rape Simon’s pregnant girlfriend, Patsy Pegahmagahbow. Patsy/Nanabush finds Dickie wandering in the woods, upset after an unproductive conversation with his mother. When she attempts to

comfort him, he proceeds to violently rape her: “*Dickie Bird grabs Patsy and throws her violently to the ground, he lifts her skirt and shoves the crucifix up against her*” (97). In this scene, the rape is connected to the land in a series of movements, which involve Dickie Bird stabbing the cross downward, toward the ground, while Patsy simultaneously lifts her skirt to reveal profuse bleeding.

[Patsy] *stands there, facing the audience, and slowly gathers her skirt, in agony, until she is holding it above her waist. A blood stain slowly spreads across her panties and flows down her leg. At the same time, Dickie Bird stands down-stage, beside the rock, holding the crucifix and making violent stabbing motions with it, downward. All of this happens in slow motion. The crucifix starts to bleed.* (100)

Native lands and culture have been brutalized by colonial forces, most directly by the Christian church. As observed by Emma LaRocque, “European patriarchy was originally imposed on Aboriginal societies in Canada through missionary Christianity and government policies,” the continued effects of which include spiritual and cultural dispossession, as well as misogynistic violence. According to LaRocque, colonization has resulted in “loss of lands, resources, self-direction, and a severe disturbance in cultural ways and values” for Aboriginal people. Highway has stated repeatedly that he views Christian colonial interventions as the primary source of misogyny and violence against women in Native societies.²⁰ In *Dry Lips*, as in *The Rez Sisters*, rape is employed by Highway as a metaphor in order to make a political statement. The symbolism is complemented by the fact that Nanabush and Patsy are played by the same actor. Also, Patsy’s stepmother is a medicine woman and midwife, as well as one of the few elders on the reserve concerned with preserving traditional Native practices. Because the trickster deity is

²⁰ In *Comparing Mythologies*, the published transcript of his 1999 lecture at the University of Ottawa, Highway elaborates upon the harmfulness of the imposition of Christian monotheism onto Native cultures

gendered female this time, she is also a symbol of lost matricentrism. In its metonymic role, the rape is representative of the eradication of Native culture and history as a whole. It is significant that Dickie rapes the Native traditionalist figure in the play, as opposed to one of the other women. This emblematic devastation is enacted “with the symbolically loaded crucifix, the phallic weapon with which this patriarchal religion has ravaged Native culture” (Wasserman, “God” 185).

Because in *Dry Lips* the rape is enacted, rather than described, it takes on a physicality which is profoundly disturbing. Neither is the gender binary mitigated, as it is in *The Rez Sisters*, by the involvement of the fantastical trickster figure disguised as an androgenous seagull. Patsy, like the other embodiments of Nanabush in the play, wears prosthetic body parts; in this case, the “vivacious” eighteen year old wears a “very large, oversized” prosthetic bum (Highway, *Dry* 97). Patsy does not appear as an asexual being. All of the Nanabush figures in *Dry Lips* are portrayed as hyper-feminine and hyper-fertile; the presence of the trickster does nothing to mitigate the gender binary here. The trickster’s presence adds a surreal dimension to the action, yet ultimately does not diminish the terrible gendered violence involved in Dickie’s attack upon Patsy. In her analysis of Highway’s acclaimed novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jennifer Henderson critiques his use of the rape trope in both *Kiss* and *Dry Lips*, stating that the metaphor “implies the contamination of an original state not just of integrity, but also purity” (274). The prosthetic rape²¹ in *Dry Lips* is representationally dangerous not only because it aligns Indigenous women with the land, but also because the trope suggests that there is a state of purity from which both the land – and implicitly the women – have degenerated. Colonial narratives of colonization often eroticize the land as pure and virginal, “void of sexual agency, passively awaiting the thrusting male insemination of history, language, and reason” (McClintock, *Imperial* 30), while

²¹ I am referring to rape conducted with an inanimate object that separates the body of the rapist from the body of the victim

simultaneously representing Indigenous women as “inherently impure,” thereby making both the land and women’s bodies seem “inherently violable” (A. Smith 13).

Simon Starblanket, who up until this point appeared to represent the hope of the next generation, is driven to the brink of madness by news of the rape. Although Simon has attempted to resist European-colonial systems and values, his response to the rape of Patsy by Dickie reveals that, like the other men on the Wasy Rez, he has been greatly influenced by patriarchal thought. His first instinct is to avenge the violation of his partner. He gets a bottle and a gun and searches in vain for Dickie, who is safely concealed in the home of Big Joey. Patsy/Nanabush appears on the upper level; she “*lifts her skirt and displays the blood stains on her panties*” (113). Appalled, Simon yells angrily into the winter night, dancing and chanting frantically, with gun in hand. Only when Zachary arrives with a hot apple-pie does Simon relent and agree to disarm. Ready to hand his weapon over, Simon is momentarily distracted by Patsy/Nanabush’s flickering powwow bustle; he drops the hunting rifle he has been carrying, causing the gun to go off and shoot him in the stomach. Wasserman suggests that Simon’s cruel death is “classic trickster cosmology, part tragic irony, part dirty rotten trick” (“God” 39), but for audiences the meaning of Simon’s tragic and untimely death is vague. It is noteworthy that, because she distracts him, Patsy is ultimately to blame for Simon’s death. Just as Black Lady is culpable in Dickie’s tragic birth, Patsy is responsible for the downfall of Simon, the play’s symbol of hope for the future. Rather than portraying female strength, such representations stigmatize women as corrupt and dangerous. Furious, Zachary rages at the callousness of a god that could allow such a senseless tragedy to occur:

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? (Highway, *Dry* 117)

Nanabush is not up in the clouds, of course, but corporeally embodied. Nanabush walks amongst humankind, unlike the omnipotent, omniscient god of Christian monotheism, who remains far removed from humanity. Immediately following the accidental death of Simon Starblanket, Highway provides a response to Zachary's cosmological questions, imbuing the otherwise tragic scene with some scatological Nanabush burlesque.

[S]itting 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)

As observed by Billingham, Nanabush is depicted as “the Christian God in drag” (365), which highlights the way Highway blends masculine and feminine traits in a manner consistent with his effort to disrupt gender binarism throughout the play. This representation of Nanabush also provides a reminder of “the futility in looking for metaphysical answers” (Wasserman, “God” 40). By staging such an iconoclastic portrayal of the divine – be he/she Nanabush or Yahweh – Highway seems to be suggesting that the men on the Wasy Rez need to take matters into their own hands if they wish to improve their living conditions. Even if Nanabush is present, she will never help a group of men who do not help themselves. Reliance upon divine intervention alone, particularly from an erratic deity like Nanabush, will not prove fruitful. However, this portrayal of Nanabush is incongruent with the play's previous representation of rape. It is not possible to divorce this comical image of Nanabush from the rape of Patsy or the death of Simon by which it

is immediately preceded. By including the comical scene, at this crucial juncture, Highway allows for both tragedies to be minimized in the minds of spectators/readers. The play's denouement is also troublesome in light of the fact that neither Big Joey nor Dickie are ever held accountable for their misogyny and violence. In terms of violence against women and overt misogyny, there are seemingly no repercussions. The man who is punished is the one who has been most proactively trying to improve the Wasy community. If the burlesque portrayal of Nanabush is intended as a call to action, then Highway's message is vague at best.

The Objectification of Women and Metonymic Pregnancy

Dickie's birth is recalled repeatedly by the men in *Dry Lips*. The tragedy is one of the iconic moments around which the action of the play revolves. During one of these recollective sessions, Gazelle Nataways/Nanabush appears on the upper level of the stage and begins to strip; Gazelle was the stripper at the Dickie Bird Tavern the night Dickie was born. As "*Gazelle strips down to silk tassels and G-string, [the men] begin tearing their clothes off*" (87). Highway has indicated that this portrayal is reflective of the way men objectify strippers in reality. In his interview with Judy Steed, he recalls "seeing fifteen to twenty men staring at the stage, like they were seeing God . . . God as a woman, God as a stripper" (qtd. in Steed). Gazelle, who is characteristically wearing her prosthetic breasts, is intended to appear as a pornographic fertility goddess. In this representation, Highway attempts to feminize and, to some extent, mock the Christian God. In another context, the portrayal of a female deity might be subversive and liberating for women. However, this satirical deification also results in sexualization and objectification. The divine aspect of the Nanabush figure is subsumed by this over-sexualized representation. As argued by Susan Billingham, this scene could easily "reinforce objectification

and degradation of Native women” (369). At the end of this memory scene, the men are interrupted by Simon Starblanket and “caught with their pants down” (Highway, *Dry* 87). Although the scene concludes with the men embarrassedly pulling up their trousers, the humorousness of their fluster does not detract from the objectification of Gazelle that has just taken place. The fact that Gazelle and Nanabush are played by the same actor does little to alter the impact of such a portrayal. If Highway’s intentions are to subvert the colonially imposed gender binary and the idealization of White femininity, then this portrayal of a Native woman as a sexualized stripper is a poor choice, as it works in opposition to these aims. Objectification and degradation of Indigenous women have been integral to colonial, patriarchal domination because it was necessary “to break the power of Indigenous women within their nations” (Lawrence, *Real* 47). Representations that serve to further objectify Native women potentially contribute to colonial discourses that degrade Aboriginal people.

Aside from reminiscence amongst the men, the grotesqueness of Dickie’s birth is also recalled dramatically by repeated portrayals that occur on the upper level of the stage. Black Lady first appears to her disturbed son while Spooky Locroix fervently preaches to him. Since Black Lady is visible only in Dickie’s mind, Spooky remains oblivious to her presence. Black Lady appears, ironically, as a beer-swilling “*Madonna*” (52). In the stage directions to this bizarre and upsetting scene, Highway writes:

[l]ights up on the upper level, where we see this bizarre vision of Nanabush, now in the guise of Black Lady Halked, nine months pregnant (ie., wearing a huge out-sized prosthetic belly). Over this, she wears a maternity gown, and, pacing the floor slowly, holds a huge string of rosary beads. She recites the rosary quietly to

herself. She is also drinking a beer and, obviously, is a little unsteady on her feet because of this. (52)

On the lower level of the stage, Dickie prays to this satirical version of the Madonna. In comparing Black Lady to the Christian Madonna, Highway implicitly suggests that Christian interventions are partially responsible for Black Lady's predicament. The semi-pornographic deification of Black Lady also contrasts the iconic pin-up of Monroe, echoing the "deification" of the stripper (Gazelle Nataways) in the bar. The spectacle of Black Lady drunken, pregnant, and divine, is intended to juxtapose harsh realities with constructed ideals. If Monroe symbolizes idealized White femininity, then Black Lady/Nanabush portrays the painful result of the imposition of such standards. Highway draws attention to the interlocking nature of gender binarism, White supremacy,²² and Christianity, emphasizing the way in which these systems combine in order to uphold patriarchal colonial domination. Black Lady is very far from being either the Virgin Mary or Marilyn Monroe: this portrayal satirizes both icons. Unfortunately, the satirical depiction is achieved at the representational expense of Native women. This degrading image of Black Lady may reify the very racist and misogynistic stereotypes which Highway intends to subvert. Similar to Gazelle, Black Lady's body is hyper-sexualized. Her pregnancy is made grotesque by her prosthetically enhanced abdomen and her overconsumption of alcohol. When this image is contrasted with the iconic poster of Monroe, or Christian iconography depicting the Virgin Mary, the superiority of White femininity is not contested, but affirmed. Once again, Highway's intended message is superseded by his choice to portray a degrading image of Native womanhood.

²² I am not referring to the specific political ideology that advocates the social dominance of White people, but to the racial dominance of White people, which has resulted from colonialism, regardless of intention

Black Lady appears in this form periodically throughout the play, while becoming progressively more intoxicated. Kateri Damm points out that “[s]tereotypes such as the Drunk/Lazy/Promiscuous Indian . . . continue to pervade the consciousness of those, both Native and non-Native, who have been ‘educated’ through Western institutions” (13). In repeatedly staging such a demeaning representation, Highway risks affirming the many negative stereotypes concerning Native peoples that continue to prevail in mainstream society, including those which depict Native women as alcoholic unfit mothers. At the end of Act One, Black Lady appears as overseer of the Wasy Wailerette’s first hockey game. On the upper-level of the stage she sits perched upon a giant hockey puck.

Nanabush, as the spirit of Black Lady Halked, naked, nine-months pregnant, drunk almost senseless and barely able to hold a bottle of beer up to her mouth . . . [she] struggles to stand and begins staggering . . . up on top of the jukebox and stands there in profile, one arm lifted to raise her beer as she pours it over her belly. (77)

In this appearance, Black Lady is a gratuitous spectacle. The dousing of her prosthetic abdomen with alcohol mocks Christian baptismal rituals. Although Highway intends to satirize Western religion, he also inadvertently suggests that Native motherhood is farcical and inherently degraded (ie. the stereotype that Native women are bad mothers). Considering this depiction, it becomes easy to understand Barker and Tuharsky’s discomfort with Highway’s representations of Native women. This image particularly recalls Tuharsky’s criticism that the women in the play are portrayed as “sleazy drunks with no respect for human life and childbirth” (5). While Black Lady drinks herself unconscious, a morose Kitty Wells song plays from the luminescent jukebox.

It’s a shame that the blame is on us women,

It's not true that only you men feel the same;
 From the start most every heart that's ever broken,
 Was because there was a man to blame. (78)

If the incorporation of the lyrics from Wells' ballad is Highway's effort to hold men accountable for violence against women, then this attempt is weak. The grotesque figure of Black Lady demands all audience attention. It is unlikely that this scene leaves many spectators/readers with a better understanding of violence against women. On the contrary, in this scene it is explicitly a woman who is responsible for the debilitation of the next generation, represented in her son, Dickie Bird, who is born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Highway's representations of grotesque pregnancy and negligent motherhood are in opposition to the reverence for womanhood and motherhood that was an integral part of many Native cultures in the pre-contact era. In her book *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, Kim Anderson describes the importance of mothering in matricentric Native societies. Comparing the pre-colonial matricentric family structure with the patriarchal structure imposed by colonial forces, she writes "[t]here was no way for men in these societies to assume the position of 'head' of the family; rather, they became part of the interdependent family unit that ensured the central role of the mothers" (K. Anderson, *Recognition* 80). Andrea Smith concurs that "prior to European contact, Indian societies for the most part, were not male dominated. . . . many societies were matrilineal" (18). Anderson elaborates upon the esteemed position held by Native mothers in pre-colonial societies.

Motherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies. This stemmed from the reverence for women's innate power to bring forth life. Yet this power belonged to all women, regardless

of whether or not they biologically produced children.²³ Indigenous societies highly valued their children and both biological and non-biological mothers were honoured for their work. (83)

Paula Gunn Allen confirms that, prior to colonization, matricentric Indigenous societies considered motherhood to be sacred, noting that Indigenous women were not subject to the unfair division of labour that was commonplace in European households. According to Gunn Allen, women “were mothers, and that word did not imply slaves, drudges, drones” (7). Examining the social ethics and spiritual beliefs of pre-contact Amerindian peoples, Georges Sioui claims that “deference towards the woman reflects the recognition, in matricentric societies, of a human brotherhood vested in the Earth-Mother” (*Amerindian* 17). Mary Gopher similarly describes the analogy of woman/earth inherent in philosophies of many Aboriginal peoples: “[i]n our religion, we look at this planet as a woman. She is the most important female to us because she keeps us alive” (qtd. in R. Farley 77). Commenting on Anishinaabe motherhood, Renée Elizabeth Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bédard attests that, to the present day, “[t]he act of being a mother is recognized as sacred work in our communities” (66).

Indeed, many Native women continue to valorize their ability to procreate and nurture their children, communities, and the earth. This celebration of female reproduction is rooted in matricentric tradition and mythology. Traditional Native creation stories depict the fall of Sky Woman from her home in Sky World. Sky Woman, the matriarch associated with the beginning of the world, is known by different names amongst different peoples. Significantly, she is pregnant when she lands on the back of the great turtle. Joy Harjo separates Sky Woman from Judeo-Christian conceptions of the “pure” Madonna figure, explaining that “the woman who fell

²³ Notably, the Wasy Wailerettes allow only biological mothers to join their hockey team. Veronique St Pierre, foster mother to Zhaboonigan Peterson, must fight for her membership. Highway’s representation is at odds with Anderson’s description of what it means to be a mother.

from the sky was neither a murderer nor a saint. She was rather ordinary” (46). In Beth Brant’s story, “This is History,” the Sky Mother gives birth to First Woman, also known as Earth Mother. The representation of Sky Woman’s pregnancy is consistent with Native women’s veneration of pregnancy and motherhood in historic and contemporary times. Sandra Laronde explains that “earth and creation, as we know it, was born when Sky Woman fell from the stars. . . millions and millions of Indigenous women have inherited [Sky Woman’s] legacy” (vii).

Brant describes the birth of First Woman:

[Sky Woman] pushed, and First Woman slipped out of her and onto the soft nest. First Woman gave a cry. Sky Woman touched her companion, then gave another great push as her placenta fell from her. She cut the long cord with her teeth as she had learned from the animals. She ate the placenta as she had learned from the animals. She brought First Woman to her breast as she had learned, and First Woman began to suckle, drawing nourishment and medicine from Sky Woman.

(Brant 79)

Brant’s depiction, though vivid, does not incorporate any of the grotesqueness evident in Highway’s representations of childbirth. Rather, Brant portrays birth as natural, beautiful and divine. In his *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)*, Bruce Johansen explains that Christian influences altered the Iroquoian creation story. Johansen claims that “the culturally destructive activities of the Christian missionaries suppressed or distorted much of [the myth’s] original content” (83). According to Johansen, the missionaries started altering the tale “in the sixteenth-century, believing that their call to proselytize justified bringing the Iroquoian Creation story into line with Christian theological themes that were alien to it” (83). For other Native Peoples, the story of Sky Woman was similarly altered by Christian forces. For Brant, Harjo,

Laronde and other Native feminists, it is important to “re-claim” the story of Sky Woman (Elder xxii), revising it from the “post-missionary versions that omitted the story of the Daughter altogether” (Johansen 83).

Contemporary valuation of pregnancy and motherhood are directly related to Native women’s attempts to reclaim pre-contact esteem; to this extent, maternity and gender equality are politically connected. However, Lisa J. Udel observes that Native women’s respect for maternity derives not only from matricentric historical traditions, and the desire to revitalize them, but also from “an overpowering awareness of the government’s abduction of Indian children, the non-consensual sterilization of Native women, along with the nation’s highest infant mortality rates” (44). Colonial discourses stigmatize Native women as degenerate and unfit mothers. It has been the task of Native women to subvert these stereotypes, which have contributed to the justification of racist eugenics practices and assimilative policies targeting Aboriginal children. Native women’s reproductive capability is thus a powerful tool to combat Western genocide. Mohawk legal scholar and activist Patricia Monture-Angus explains, “women are sacred because we bring life into this world. . . . First Nations women are respected as the centre of the nation for [this] reason” (49). Clara Sue Kidwell similarly claims that the female reproductive function is “a crucial factor in determining a woman’s social role in tribal societies. Women bear children who carry on the culture of the group” (149). The reclaiming of motherhood, along with the “tribal responsibility to nurture children in a traditional manner and without non-Indigenous interference, assumes a powerful political meaning” (Udel 47). In representing pregnancy and childbirth in such a violent manner, Highway inadvertently undermines the multilayered significance that motherhood has for contemporary Native women.

In *The Rez Sisters*, Emily Dictionary's pregnancy represents cultural rejuvenation. A similar trope is employed in *Dry Lips*. Near the end of the play, the birth of Spooky Lacroix's baby girl is briefly mentioned (123). This birth, which symbolizes a new beginning for the Wasy Rez, is a source of joy for the community. However, Highway also uses pregnancy in *Dry Lips*, like rape, as part of a trope intended to portray cultural damage inflicted by colonial interventions. The birth of Dickie Bird serves the metaphorical purpose of portraying the harmful result of colonial oppression upon Native peoples. If Big Joey had not become so dysfunctional and misogynistic, he might have interrupted Black Lady's drinking and saved her unborn child from fetal alcohol syndrome. It is also significant that Dickie rapes Patsy immediately following a confrontation with his mother. The violence involved in Dickie's attack upon Patsy in a sense represents an attack on his own mother, as Patsy is pregnant at the time of the rape and her unborn child is aborted. The rape of Patsy with the crucifix, and the consequent abortion of her fetus, is intended to emblemise the particular damages inflicted upon Native communities by the Christian Church. These tropes are disturbing because of their potential contribution to misogynistic and colonialist discourses which envision Native women as inherently fallen, degraded, and maternally unfit. Despite the positive implications of the birth of Spooky's baby, the female body, with its reproductive function, remains the means by which broad political messages are conveyed. When this positive metaphor is used alongside grotesque portrayals of pregnancy and birth, it becomes even more troublesome.

The Dream Ending

At the end of the play, Zachary awakens in the same position as at the beginning, minus Gazelle and "Hockey Night in Canada." This time he opens his eyes to his wife and their baby;

Smurfs is playing on the television in his own home. Zachary is muttering when his wife Hera wakes him, just as he does when he is awakened by Big Joey at the beginning of the play. This time, Hera, not Gazelle, plants a kiss on his bottom. Zachary and Hera's house is the same as Big Joey's, but much cleaner; "over the pin-up poster of Marilyn Monroe now hangs what was, earlier on, Nanabush's large powwow dancing bustle" (127). Zachary has awakened from his nightmare to a seemingly ideal reality. This dream ending leaves viewers and readers guessing as to the reality of the preceding action. If the tragic conditions portrayed throughout the play are real, then the optimistic ending, with Zachary joyfully lifting his infant daughter, undermines the issues raised by Highway in the play. Particularly, the instances of violence against women are made to seem insignificant in light of this joyous conclusion.

In his book *The Shaman's Doorway*, Stephen Larsen describes the dream practices of the Iroquoian peoples of upstate New York, prior to European colonization. By interpreting the ethnocentric accounts composed by early European anthropologists and historians, Larsen provides an analysis of the dream-life of the Iroquois. Larsen writes,

this inner life is believed to be as real or more real than the waking world. . . .

Dreams are recognized as possessing a meaning within the ordinarily chaotic and incomprehensible surface of the dream. The dream and the inner life of which it is the symbol are the key to what 'goes wrong.' (89)

Larsen observes that the Iroquois used their "sophisticated insights into the functioning of the mind" as a means of explaining and remedying problems (89). Similarly, "the Huron were great believers in the idea that dreams and visions could provide important information, communicated by spirits with whom they had close relationships. This extended into their conceptualization of medicine" (Steckley 13). Among some Native peoples, particularly the Northern Algonquian and

the Iroquoians, “it was the dream that provided a guide for action, a prophecy as to what might be expected to occur and hence what should be done” (Tooker 89). For the Huron, Iroquois, Algonquin, as well as other Native peoples, dreams were used as instructive tools that could provide significant information concerning physical and social problems.

In the program notes for the premiere of *Dry Lips* at Theatre Passe Muraille, Highway indicates that “dreams – and the dream-life – have traditionally been considered by Native society to be the greatest tool of instruction” (qtd. in Preston 148). However, because the men who are responsible for the violent enactments of misogyny in the play are never actually held accountable, the lesson is unclear. If audiences are supposed to understand the terrible events in the play as warnings against the harmfulness of Euro-Christian institutions, then this already confused critique of colonialism is weakened by the “palliative dream ending which seems gratuitous” (D. Johnston 260). If dreams indeed have an important instructive role in Aboriginal cultures, what is this dream advising? The degeneration, alcoholism, violence and misogyny brought about by colonialism are successfully displayed in the play, but Highway provides no suggestions concerning what Native people ought to do now. In this respect, *Dry Lips* portrays a “victim merry-go-round,” with no end in sight (Barker 88- 89).

It is difficult to read Zachary’s dream as instructive, given Highway’s failure to indicate some form of revival for the Wasy community. As argued by Baker and Tuharsky, Highway does not include any positive images of Native women or men to counterbalance the portrayals of misogyny, rape, feticide, and sexualization that occur throughout the play. Although the play incorporates representations which initially seem to transgress colonially constructed gender norms, such as women playing hockey, or Zachary baking, these portrayals are undermined by the play’s repeated portrayals of gendered violence. The conclusion of *Dry Lips* is also

disturbing because Zachary's child is female. Considering the premonitions contained within Zachary's dream, the future does not seem bright for an Aboriginal woman born on the Wasy Rez.

Chapter 3: Woman as Women: Sexual Violence and Rape in *Rose*

Production and Critical Reception

Like *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, *Rose* is set on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve of Manitoulin Island, Ontario. In the third instalment of his extant “Rez Plays,”²⁴ Highway unites five of the surviving women from *The Rez Sisters* with four of the seven men from *Dry Lips*. The plot of *Rose* concerns the events which take place when residents on the Rez clash over the desire to maintain Native traditions and secure Indigenous rights, on the one hand, and the desire for financial gain through the establishment of a Las Vegas-style casino on the other. Beyond the straightforward polarity, the conflict extends to a battle between the sexes over power in politics and relationships. The “LaCreams,” a group of three female singers, operate as a dramaturgical bridge between the two genders. The musical trio sets out to raise money for a motorcade to escort a progressively more illustrious group of public figures – from Bob Rae to Jesus – to the signing of the first Indian Treaty in almost two hundred years. One of the LaCreams, the provocatively named Pussy Commanda, acts as a double agent, both sleeping with and spying on the women’s chief rival, the notorious Big Joey.

As the title suggests, the play features Roses – three Roses. The first Rose, Pelajia Rosella Patchnose from *The Rez Sisters*, is the first female chief on the reserve; she acts as a “living Trickster” (Shackleton 284), engaged in a power struggle with Big Joey, who still supports the former chief, Munchoos X Comeagain. Both the machinations of Munchoos X and the ambitions of Big Joey are supported by financial backing from the Sudbury Mafia, making it hard for Chief Big Rose to maintain her position. The second Rose in the play is Rosabella Jean

²⁴ During the course of the dramaturgical workshops for *Rose*, held at the University of Toronto’s Theatre College in May 2002, Highway explained that “*Rose* is the third in a series of seven plays invoking issues of gender and relationships, with each gender alternating the upper hand” (qtd. in Hauck 51)

Baez; she appears as a ghostly Nanabush figure, who orchestrates events from the spirit world, which she entered ten years earlier, after purposely crashing her Harley into an 18-wheeler. The third Rose, Rosetta Dictionary, is also a posthumous entity; she died in Emily Dictionary's womb upon being kicked to death by a jealous Gazelle Nataways. All three Roses are connected to Emily Dictionary, the play's pivotal character, to whom they are sister, lover, and daughter, respectively. Throughout the action, the Roses encourage Emily to confront male violence against Native women. The interventions of the two spirit Roses add the element of Native magic which, by this point, has come to be an expected, if not essential, component in Highway's plays. At the climax of the play, which follows the brutal mutilation of Pussy Commanda by Big Joey and the subsequent castration of Big Joey by the Rez sisters, the women succeed in forming a motorcade to block the casino. However, this is accomplished at the cost of Chief Big Rose's life, as she is assassinated by Creature Nataways to avenge the attack on Big Joey. At the close of the play, the three trickster Roses sprout wings as they rise skyward into the mist, leading the other women in the motorcade into the spirit world, all of them harmoniously singing the joyous "Thank You" song (Highway, *Rose* 150-51).

The first publicized reference to *Rose* dates from March of 1989; in an interview with Nancy Wigston, Highway suggested that he had begun to craft the third play in his "Rez Series." The play, as yet unnamed, was to be a musical focusing upon the "Indian biker chick, Emily Dictionary" (qtd. in Wigston 9). Native Earth Performing Art's 1989 season was kicked off with a fundraiser called "Weesageechak's Gala," held at the Sutton Hotel in Toronto. At the gala, Highway staged a sneak preview of *Rose*, expressing his hopes that the play would premiere during Native Earth's 1992-93 season (Preston 151). In 1992, the year in which the events of the play take place, *Rose* was still a work in progress. The following year, 1993, Highway spoke

about the play publically for the first time at any length in an interview conducted on a visit to Australia and New Zealand. While he expressed his desire to have the play ready to be “produced in Canada in 1994,” he also suggested that he was having difficulties structuring a “big” play like *Rose* (qtd. in Male and Tompkins 22). In the words of John Alcorn, one of the musical directors for two of the early workshop productions of the play: “*Rose* is one big baby” (qtd. in Hauck 48). *Rose* certainly is a large-cast musical, requiring more than twenty actors with singing capabilities, as well as multiple changes in costume and lighting which require a great deal of technical wizardry. For its considerable production demands to be met, the play would have to be staged at a substantial venue. It is most likely these factors which, twenty-one years after Highway first envisioned the musical, have kept *Rose* from being professionally produced, despite the phenomenal success of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*.

By 1994 Highway had reorganized *Rose* so that it was ready to be produced in whatever theatre was able to handle its epic reach. There was strong interest in *Rose* from several production companies, including Mirvish Productions. However, before anyone would commit they wanted to see the play staged, so a workshop presentation was arranged to determine the play’s production potential (Hauck 48). It took three regional theatre companies to put the workshop together: the National Arts Center, Manitoba Theatre Center, and Canadian Stage Company. The play was performed at Berkeley Street Theatre in Toronto for a by-invitation-only audience, including David Mirvish. Although *Rose* was warmly received, the meetings that followed did not produce an agreement and the three theatre companies disbanded (Hauck 48). In 1996, Drew Hayden Taylor – then artistic director of Native Earth – slated the production of *Rose* for Native Earth’s 1998 season; however, following “internal strife and restructuring” at

Native Earth, Taylor resigned and the planned production of *Rose* never came to fruition (D. Taylor, qtd. in Hauck 49).

That same year, Highway was invited by Pia Kleber, director of the University of Toronto's Theatre College drama program, to become the Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor at the Theatre College for the 1999-2000 academic year (Hauck 49). Before Highway's arrival at the college, Kleber had secured the rights to stage the first full production of *Rose*. The play was to be performed by the program's fourth-year graduate students. For Highway, this was not an issue; "I've been working on *Rose* for ten years," he said, "if I want to see it staged before I die then this is the opportunity to do so" (qtd. in Coté 15). Leah Cherniak was hired as the show's director. Overwhelmed by the enormity of the production, she said jokingly that *Rose* should be staged at "the sky dome, or as a large environmental piece"; according to Cherniak, the best she could do with such a monstrous play was "experiment with it on a small stage – making the most elegant choices to facilitate the script, and also giving the sense of bursting out of the performance space" (qtd. in Kaplan, "Young Take" 55). *Rose* opened on 21 January 2000, with many theatre critics and members of the national press in attendance. The play was a tremendous success in terms of ticket sales, as all performances sold out before the opening night (Hauck 49).

However, critical reception was mixed. Jon Kaplan of *Now Magazine* responded favourably, finding the play to be "full of energy, [with] unexpected turns and eccentric dramatic characters" ("Rollicking" 55). On the other hand, critics for several major newspapers responded very negatively to both the enormity of *Rose*, as well as the polarized portrayals of comedy and violence in the play. In his negative review, Vit Wagner of *The Toronto Sun* describes the play as "sprawling" and suggests that the college's staging gives an inkling as to why *Rose* has yet to be

professionally produced (D4). Kate Taylor, reviewer for *The Globe and Mail*, refers to the script as “deeply flawed,” not only because it “features 13 songs and far too much plot,” but also because “It moves awkwardly from its comic core to moments of sadness and true bloodshed”; ultimately, she found the play to be a “sprawling mess” (R3). Taylor concludes her review by saying that “somewhere in *Rose* there slumbers a powerful tragicomedy about male-female relations on the reserve when gambling arrives, but after ten years of work the playwright still hasn’t awakened it. . . . *Rose* is destined to be a footnote to *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*” (R3). Highway’s unwavering commitment to the songs of *Rose*, some of which he still performs for live audiences, might suggest that he has not yet consigned *Rose* to footnote status.

Considering that depictions of extreme violence in *Rose* are often preceded or followed by blatantly ridiculous portrayals, it is not surprising that Highway has been criticized for his abrupt transitions. In his defence, Highway says: “silliness is needed to balance the horror” (qtd. in Hauck 50). Concerning the numerous scenes containing violence in *Rose*, he says: “I hate violence, but my plays are full of violence because that’s what is going on in my community . . . still, women are victims everyday” (qtd. in Coté 15). Probably because it has not yet been professionally produced, *Rose* has not received the vehement criticism visited upon *Dry Lips* by feminist critics. This lack of extensive criticism is certainly not due to an absence of gendered violence in the play, as *Rose* includes numerous portrayals of Native women and Native men that are representationally violent. In fact, the graphic and sadistic representations of gendered violence in *Rose* are unprecedented in the previous two “Rez Plays,” marking an obvious escalation in the gratuitousness of Highway’s depictions. In *Rose*, Highway once again addresses issues associated with the colonial legacy in Canada. By staging a conflict between the sexes, he attempts to suggest that colonial oppression has led to corruption and violence against women on

contemporary reserves. However timely and pertinent Highway's intended message may be, the conveyance is problematic. In usual fashion, he employs rape and gendered violence to emblemise the cultural damage inflicted by colonialism. Disturbingly, Highway's intended message of anti-colonialism is almost completely obscured by the ambiguity with which it is delivered. In *Rose*, the playwright clearly indicates that violence is an epidemic problem on the Rez, but fails to make any overt connection between the brutal violence enacted by the Native men in the play and colonialism. The representations of rape and gendered violence in *Rose* often seem incongruent with the play's action and completely disconnected from Highway's intended subversion of patriarchal colonial institutions.

Setting the Stage

During a dramaturgical workshop for *Rose*, held at the University of Toronto's Theatre College on 11 May 2002, Highway stated that "*Rose* takes place in Emily's heart" (qtd. in Hauck 51). In this respect, the play may be considered an internal monologue, with Emily's memories, wishes and fears projected onto the stage. This might explain some of *Rose*'s incongruence, as well as the play's overall dream-like quality. *Rose* opens in Emily Dictionary's living-room, where she mourns for her lost loved ones. On the upper level of the stage, Rosabella, Rosetta, and Chief Big Rose rise out of the darkness in response to Emily's woeful cries. Lurking nearby, stalking the young Rosetta, are four men: "*the men stop and watch, as if waiting for the right moment to grab [Rosetta]*" (Highway, *Rose* 15). With the two adult Roses nearby it seems as though Rosetta is safe, when suddenly a "*gunshot resounds, echoing three times. The three Roses freeze. Silence. The four shadowy men, handguns pointed, slowly begin to recede into the shadows and disappear*" (15). Emily is awakened by the sound of the gunshots and the three

Roses vanish back into blackness. This scene, which evidently occurs in Emily's dream, is a premonition of the dangers that lie ahead for the women of the Wasy Rez. As the three Roses are Nanabush figures, the opening scene metonymically implies that Native spirituality is also in danger. The men in Emily's dream are faceless, suggesting that any man is a potential antagonist, capable of malevolent violence. From the opening scene onward, Rosabella/Nanabush occupies the upper level of the stage, transformed into a burlesque dancer's dressing room, with company from Rosetta/Nanabush. The magical figures stand witness to the remainder of the play's violence from their fantastical perch above the action, Rosabella frequently breaking into song and dance, and Rosetta regularly intervening in the affairs of Emily Dictionary.²⁵

In the second scene, Chief Big Rose is depicted in preparation for an imminent visit from Premier Bob Rae, whom she has scheduled to arrive for a treaty signing. She and her sister Philomena arrange for a traditional headdress to be made for the occasion. Chief Big Rose functions as a leader to the women, the play's embodiment of female strength and resilience. Her refusal to support Big Joey's proposal to turn the Community Hall into a casino incites a violent backlash from the men. Her plan to wear a traditional chief's headdress to the treaty signing, and her chieftom in general, come under scrutiny from her political opponents, namely, former chief Munchoos X and Big Joey. Chief Big Rose's general subversion of gender normative behaviour and her consequent refusal to accept male domination fuel the men's violence throughout the play. In the opening scene, the two sisters, along with their female supporters, make their way to the Community Hall, performing a "*traditional women's shawl dance*" while "*the men stalk them, making provocative sexual gestures*" (17). In this manner, the women in the play are metonymically aligned with Native traditionalism, while the men are connected to sexual

²⁵ Because *Rose* is such a large-cast play, the intervention of the two otherworldly tricksters, who remain on the upper level for most of the action, are connected less to some characters than others. They are clearly most involved in Emily Dictionary's life. Although the two ghostly Roses often break into song with the play's chorus, they are most extensively portrayed in those scenes that focus on Emily

antagonism. Not even inside the hall can the women escape harassment. As Chief Big Rose begins to address the assembly of women, “[g]lass shatters. . . . Men’s taunting voices can be heard outside, receding into the distance. Chief Big Rose looks out the [broken] window” (17). Despite comic interventions, such as Chief Big Rose’s recollection of stepping on a flaming bag of dog poop (18), the regularity and severity of gendered violence on the Wasy Rez become evident very early in the play. Like Emily’s dream-space, the political world of the Wasy Rez is shown to be a place where women are constantly endangered by misogynistic violence.

Rape and Misogynistic Violence

Big Joey’s central role in *Dry Lips* as a hyper-masculine misogynist is a mild precursor to his presence in *Rose*, where his lust for money and power instigate much of the violence in the play. Not only has he decided to seek help from the Sudbury mafia in funding his would-be casino, thereby jeopardizing the safety of the women and men in his community, but he also agrees to help former chief Munchoos X reclaim the chieftom, by whatever means necessary. It is Big Joey’s greed that inspires his obsession with the casino and it is his misogyny that allows him to enact his plan, against the will of all the Wasy women. In portraying the implementation of a casino as the primary locus of contention between the sexes, Highway may be mounting a critique against the prominent role of gambling establishments in some Aboriginal communities. Despite the fact that certain forms of gaming were practiced traditionally by Aboriginal peoples, there are many arguments suggesting that on-reserve casinos perpetuate social problems.²⁶ When

²⁶ Although Aboriginal high-stakes gambling enterprises generate much-needed revenue, employ Aboriginal people, and share revenues with First Nations communities, the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling looks more like the adoption of the high-stakes, profit-seeking gambling model that has been led by the provincial governments in Canada and less like an “evolution” of the culturally accepted, “authentic,” Aboriginal gaming that was previously practised within Aboriginal communities by Aboriginal people. For more information on gambling in Aboriginal communities, see Yale D. Belanger’s *Gambling With the Future: The Evolution of Aboriginal Gaming in Canada* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2006).

he first appears in the play, Big Joey is tallying the evening's profits from his "*after-hours-club*," a "*calculator upon his mighty chest*" (23). With him lies his long-time lover, Gazelle Nataways, "*draped around [Big Joey's] huge muscular thighs . . . barely wearing a pink negligee*" (23). Big Joey would far rather concern himself with his budget than pay attention to the seductive Gazelle, who is reduced to a pathetic, subservient, hyper-sexual creature, "*utterly obsessed with him*" (23).

Well aware of his malign intentions, the crafty Chief Big Rose enlists Pussy Commanda and Liz Jones, members of the Native women's motorcycle gang, the Rez Sisters, to spy on the corrupt Big Joey. The beautiful motorcycle women arrive in Wasy looking to reunite with their old friend, Emily Dictionary, unaware that they are entering a place of constant gender conflict. Emily, Pussy, and Liz become Chief Big Rose's secret weapons. Their vocal talents allow them to infiltrate Big Joey's after-hours-club without raising suspicion. When he first sees Pussy, Big Joey swoons over her, "*awed by her beauty, her charisma*" (49). It is significant that Pussy's actions are not entirely altruistic in her espionage mission. Although she is aware of his history of violence against women, Pussy "*goes weak at the knees at the sight of the impossibly handsome, and very studly, Big Joey*" (47). Similar to Gazelle, she is overcome by Big Joey's attractiveness and must "*struggle to remain faithful to her original mission*" (79). Her inability to refrain from sexual intercourse with Big Joey, despite her longing to avoid attachment, suggests that, although she may be a tough "biker mama," Pussy cannot control her sexual impulses (49). Pussy's suggestive name also contributes to her hyper-sexualization in the play. Kim Anderson observes that "the narrative espousing how 'easy' Native women [are]" has been "entrenched in western consciousness" as a means of justifying violent crimes committed against Native women (*Recognition* 104). Considering that, in *The Rez Sisters*, Emily Dictionary cannot resist Big

Joey's machismo allure either, it would seem that Highway's female characters are too often portrayed as sexually accessible, even to those men who may threaten violence. Such representations are in keeping with colonial stereotypes that depict Native women as sexually promiscuous and exploitable.

Because he views women as expendable property, Big Joey hastily agrees to dismiss Gazelle in favour of Pussy, promising that he will "send [Gazelle] shopping in Sudbury" to get her out of the way, further exhibiting his chauvinism (Highway, *Rose* 48). When Gazelle disputes her replacement, Big Joey callously proceeds to break her arm. The beating is not carried out on stage, but Veronique St. Pierre informs the other women in Chief Big Rose's entourage that "Big Joey finally had the sense to beat the livin' daylights out of that slut Gazelle Nataways" (52). Veronique's apparent approval of Big Joey's misogyny is problematic because it suggests that women encourage violence against one another. The fact that Gazelle has been dropped on the "front steps of the health center" implies that Gazelle has been beaten so badly that she cannot mobilize her own body (52). From this point on, she appears with a "*broken arm*" (62). To add insult to injury, Big Joey sends the pink negligee formerly worn by Gazelle to Pussy, along with a dildo for Liz Jones, a self-proclaimed "dyke" (56). Big Joey despises Liz for her femaleness and her failure to conform to a heteronormative lifestyle. In *Rose*, Big Joey emblematises the problems associated with polarized gender roles; his hyper-masculinity is shown to be dangerous and destructive. However, as in *Dry Lips*, portrayals of Big Joey's misogyny are often facilitated by degrading and violent representations involving the women in the play.

Big Joey's misogyny is problematically demonstrated by his incitation of a vicious assault upon Philomena Moosetail. The portrayal is one of the most arbitrary instances of

gendered violence in the play, breaking the flow of the action and contributing to *Rose*'s overall disjointedness. Following a comic exchange between Veronique St. Pierre and her bumbling alcoholic husband Pierre, Philomena appears on the stage; formerly the St. Pierre's bedroom, the set is now a dirt road at night. Returning to the Community Hall with Chief Big Rose's finished headdress, Philomena is stalked by five men, including Big Joey's henchman, Creature Nataways. Philomena tries to run, but it is too late and the men ambush her. "Help me, help me, help me, help me, help meeeeeeeee!!!," she cries, as her attackers encircle her (85).

The men close in. Philomena shrieks a bloodcurdling scream. . . . One man strips Philomena of her fun fur jacket. A second kicks the sewing paraphernalia out of her hand. The third fights with her over the headdress, finally taking it. Creature rips her blouse open, exposing her bra. Her hands fly up to cover herself. . . . five men beating Philomena with sticks, stones and fists, kicking her as one destroys the headdress completely. (85)

Feminist perspectives consider violence against women to be "intentional behaviour chosen by men as a tactic or resource associated with attempts to dominate, control and punish women" (Dobash 293). Just as he punishes Gazelle for her resistant behaviour, Big Joey is punishing Philomena for allying herself with Chief Big Rose. When next she appears, Philomena has "*both arms in casts*," yet the event is barely mentioned in the remainder of the play, thus making the functionality of this portrayal exceedingly unclear (Highway, *Rose* 91). Philomena is depicted as a pitiable victim during her attack; as she "*starts to cry*," her frantic pleas for help are somewhat childlike, serving to infantilize her (85). Throughout the remainder of the play, Philomena wears casts on both arms. Because North American society is deeply anchored in a history of violence against women, especially Aboriginal women, the image of Philomena being brutally beaten by

several men replicates a pattern of dominance inscribed within the colonial legacy and reflected in colonial literature. As Janice Acoose points out, in much of “eurocanadian literature Indigenous women are imprisoned in stereotypical images, which perpetuate racism and sexism and foster cultural attitudes that encourage violence against Indigenous women” (15).

Embittered by the abuse she has suffered, Gazelle flees to the women’s camp, joining forces with Chief Big Rose. However, it is not long before she is overcome by the jealousy she feels toward Pussy Commanda, who is not only Big Joey’s new lover, but also a member of the LaCreams. As the popularity of the musical trio grows, so too does Gazelle’s animosity toward Pussy. Finally acting on her jealous inclinations, Gazelle provides Big Joey with evidence of Pussy’s double allegiance by slipping him the incriminating tape recording – made by Pussy for Chief Big Rose – of Big Joey scheming with the Sudbury mafia. Gazelle’s actions, much like Veronique’s approval of Big Joey’s abuse, are disturbing because they suggest that women are complicit in misogynistic violence. Gazelle’s betrayal of Pussy might also reinforce demeaning stereotypes that depict women as jealously competitive. Upon realizing that he has been duped by the women, Big Joey responds with characteristic rage and violence. Before beating Pussy, he rhetorically asks: “[do] you know what I do to women who lie to me?,” indicating that violence against women is habitual for him (Highway, *Rose* 15). Big Joey’s statement also implies that Pussy’s crime is especially reprehensible because she is female. Liz Kelly explains that “masculinity draws on notions of virility, conquest, power, and domination and these themes are reflected in gender relations” (30). In Big Joey’s mind, women are necessarily domitable; thus, in acting against him Pussy has subverted her gender role. It is through violence that he reasserts his control and his masculinity.

[Big Joey] grabs Pussy roughly by the collar and lifts her off her seat. Struggling, Pussy tries to peel his hands off her blouse. . . . Big Joey bangs Pussy viciously back into her seat and slaps the cassette tape down on the table. . . . [he] pulls back to punch Pussy's face with incredible force. . . . In the darkness, the punch sounds like a rock hitting a brick wall. Pussy wails out with agony. (Highway, Rose 113-14)

Following this audible offstage beating, which persists into the next scene, Pussy vanishes from the play for several scenes, supplanted by femme fatale Gazelle Nataways as the third member of the LaCreams. Despite her disappearance, whenever the action returns to Big Joey's basement, Pussy "*can just be heard moaning in an adjoining room*" (121). In this manner, the ominous sense of impending violence, initiated in the opening scene by the presence of the four mysterious men, continues to pervade the play's drama. It is not until late in the play that Emily and Liz are able to coerce Jealousy Y. Comeagain, the high-fashion trophy wife of Munchos X, into divulging the unknown whereabouts of Pussy.

When the Wasy women arrive at Big Joey's house, they find Pussy "*hanging from two 'chains' attached to the ceiling . . . naked and unconscious*" (130). Liz Jones removes the shackles from Pussy's wrists, while Emily Dictionary supports her weight, "*alleviating the pressure from Pussy's arms*" (130). In this image, Pussy is depicted as a torture victim; with her battered body relinquished to the will of others, she is entirely deprived of agency. The pornographic nature of this depiction enhances Pussy's hyper-sexualization in the play. The representation also recalls the incapacitated state to which Gazelle is diminished by Big Joey earlier in the play. Just as it is necessary for the "Moose triplets" to "[drop] Gazelle at the health center" (52), Pussy requires the other women to remove her nearly lifeless body from its position

of bondage. In a patriarchal society, part of male “power is physical strength used over and against others less strong or without the sanction to use strength as power” (Dworkin 13). In order to maintain his position of masculine dominance, Big Joey diminishes women to a state of physical immobility and consequent incapability because, for Big Joey, it is inherently male to physically dominate women. The attack upon Pussy is particularly gruesome because it is also sexualized. Big Joey slices off her nipples and watches as she is gang raped by “a bunch of his goons” (Highway, *Rose* 138). Commenting on the sexual torture of lynching victims in post-abolition North America, Sherene Razack explains that the White mob was determined to “evict Black men from the community of [White] men” because Black men posed a “threat to masculine sameness” (*Casting* 71). Similarly, Big Joey demands that Pussy be returned to her position of female inferiority, a position he fails to recognize as fully human. As Razack argues, “[s]exualized violence accomplishes the eviction from humanity, and it does so as an eviction from *masculinity*” (*Casting* 71). By enacting violence, especially sexual violence against women, Big Joey attempts to relegate them to subservient status, thereby affirming his distinctly masculine superiority; “the association of masculinity with domination, of sexual dominance with personal ‘success,’ is all pervasive” (MacLeod and Saraga 41). It follows that if masculinity requires dominance, its binary opposite, femininity, requires submission. Big Joey needs to see women in a position of subordination in order to feel successful.

It is significant that Big Joey watches while Pussy is gang raped. In patriarchal cultures, gang rape functions as an act of solidarity amongst misogynistic men. In her seminal book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller analyzes the function of gang rape in female subjugation and male bonding:

No simple conquest of man over woman, group rape is the conquest of men over Woman. It is within the phenomenon of group rape, stripped of the possibility of equal combat, that the male ideology of rape is most strikingly evident. Numerical odds are proof of brutal intention. They are proof too of male bonding . . . and proof of a desire to humiliate the victim beyond the act of rape through the process of anonymous mass assault. (Brownmiller 187)

By collectively demeaning a woman, misogynistic men bond with one another and in doing so each affirms his masculinity. As the attack on Philomena is also carried out by a group, the men in *Rose* express their collective dominance, through misogynistic violence, on more than one occasion. Peggy Sanday elaborates upon the motivations of gang rape in a fraternal context, where the subjugation of women is one of the crucial tenets of brotherly cohesion.

Sexual domination is an ever-present theme and concern. Dominance takes a variety of forms – social, sexual, and fraternal. The brothers are concerned to dominate women socially and sexually. Part of the reason they bond as a group is to achieve the domination that they believe is owed to all males. (Sanday 124-25)

In providing his fellow rapists with sexual access to Pussy, Big Joey is confirming his power over her and his brotherhood with the other Wasy men. In *Dry Lips*, Big Joey and Dickie Bird bond after the prosthetic rape of Patsy Pegahmagahbow. Jane Caputi defines rape as “a social expression of sexual politics, an institutionalized and ritual enactment of domination” (205). The Wasy men have joined forces against the women in misogynistic solidarity and they are acting in concert to assure that male power is not subverted. In *Rose*, the portrayal of gang rape is used to emphasize the poor interrelations between the sexes on the Wasy Rez. Highway also intends to

demonstrate the horrendousness of rape. However, this representation of Pussy is profoundly demeaning, as she is subject to indescribable humiliation before an audience.

After she is rescued from Big Joey's house, Pussy is taken to the hospital, where the other women congregate, praying for her survival.

At a "hospital room" in Sudbury, Pussy Commanda lies dying in a "bed" of flowing white sheets. At least, she appears to be dying. Will she survive? Or will she not? Hera is giving her a "cedar bath," wiping her gently with a white cloth. . . . Philomena, meanwhile, sits off to the side with both arms still in casts.

(Highway, *Rose* 136)

Pussy is beatific in this image, swaddled in "*flowing white sheets*," with the other women gathered around her apostolically (136). As she hung upon Big Joey's wall, arms splayed and chained, Pussy appeared as though crucified. It is possible that Highway intends audiences to understand Pussy as a martyr.²⁷ She sacrifices her well-being, and potentially her life, so that the women might prevail over the men in their gendered conflict. In this sense, Pussy becomes a semi-divine emblem of Native womanhood; particularly, she represents those Native women who are victims of misogynistic violence. However, just as the deifications of Black Lady and Gazelle in *Dry Lips* are made grotesque by the simultaneous sexualization of their bodies, so too is Pussy represented as hyper-sexual throughout the play; unable to resist the sadistic Big Joey she renders herself vulnerable to his inevitable violence. In this respect, Highway does not paint a flattering picture of Native womanhood. The pornographic violence inflicted upon Pussy, and the subsequent representations of her mutilated body, are tragic spectacles. Demanding full

²⁷ In *The Rez Sisters*, Highway also employs Christian imagery, depicting the women at THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD as though seated at "The Last Supper", as she dies during the bingo game, Marie-Adele is portrayed as a Christ-like martyr. Christianity is invoked in *Dry Lips* when Dickie rapes Patsy with the crucifix

audience attention, these brutal depictions subsume all positive messages concerning female solidarity or the revival of female esteem.

Most of the Wasy women are survivors of misogynistic violence. In her monologue, which follows the rescue of Pussy Commanda from Big Joey's house, Emily Dictionary suggests that, just as the Wasy men have bonded in their misogyny, the women – with the notable exception of Gazelle Nataways – have also formed a unified collective. While Emily describes the unsettled state of affairs on the Wasy Rez, the other scenes from the play “*remain sort of visible, like slides, or visions of ghosts*” (Highway, *Rose* 137). Because the play takes place in Emily's “heart,” the previous scenes may be understood as Emily's memories pouring onto the stage (Highway, qtd. in Hauck 51). Pussy, the emblem of abused womanhood, is visible during the monologue; off to one side, she lies in her hospital bed. Emily speaks to the audience as though she is addressing “*all the women in the world,*” implying that her speech is not only intended for the Wasy women, but for every woman who is a victim of misogynistic violence (137).

Seven rapes on the island in the past year alone, since [Liz and Pussy] got here: Jill Keechigeesik, short Mary Ann Patchnose who died from internal bleeding because they went and shoved a beer bottle up her koozie and then broke it, Clara Jane Saunders, Twyla Hunter who ended up in an insane asylum, Vereena Kananakesik, Little Dishes Frontier, Georgette Winnumin who lost her baby and then killed herself. How many were told they wanted it, how many were told they asked for it, that they were to blame? Was Zhaboonigan Peterson to blame when them four white guys ganged up on her, rammed a screwdriver fifty-six times into her womb, left her in the snow to freeze and bleed to her death and then got away

scott free to do it again and again, to god knows how many other women? Helen Betty Osborne, man, history-making goddamn swindle. (137)

As the attack upon Osborne is mentioned immediately following Emily's description of the rape of Zhaboonigan, the two events – one real, the other fictional – are overtly conflated. While the connection between the attack on Zhaboonigan and the murder of Helen Betty Osborne is only implicit in *The Rez Sisters*, here the link is clearly articulated. The details of the rape of Zhaboonigan, provided by Emily, are very similar to the horrific facts of the Osborne case, making the connection obvious. However, it is notable that Osborne was not prosthetically raped with a screwdriver; this is an embellishment designed by Highway to suit the "Rez Plays." Further emphasizing the epidemic violence on the Wasy Rez, Emily conjures images of nameless "men beating their wives with hammers, setting them on fire, pouring acid on them" (137). She also recalls the rape of Patsy Pegahmagahbow "with a crucifix by Dickie Bird Halked as his own father, Big Joey, watched and did nothing to stop him" (137). Though most of the men on the Wasy Rez seem to be guilty of some form of misogynistic violence, Emily names Joseph Jeremiah McLeod – Big Joey – "the king of them all" (137).

Emily's monologue characterizes the Rez as a place where women are terrorized by the threat of misogynistic violence, especially sexual violence. This portrayal may be Highway's attempt to hold Native men accountable for the violence they inflict upon Native women. According to Anderson, "violence against women is so prevalent in our communities that it has become an 'ordinary' part of everyday life for many Native families, and Native women who have not experienced some form of family violence are seen to be 'the exception, not the rule'" (*Recognition* 55). Highway may intend for his graphic representations to alert audiences to this reality. The phenomenon of "sexual terrorism" is one means by which women are subject to

male tyranny in patriarchal societies. Catherine MacKinnon explores the effectiveness of sexual terrorism as a means of maintaining patriarchal dominance.

Sexual abuse works as a form of terror in creating and maintaining this arrangement [of gender inequality]. It is a terror so perfectly motivated and systematically concerted that it never need be intentionally organized. . . . I have come to think that the unique effectiveness of terrorism . . . is that it is at once absolutely systematic and absolutely random: systematic because one group is its target and lives knowing it; random because there is no way of telling who is next on the list. Just to get through another day, women must spend an incredible amount of time, life, and energy cowed, fearful, and colonized, trying to figure out how not to be next on the list. (MacKinnon 7)

As illustrated by MacKinnon, sexual terrorism is one of the most frightening means of female subjugation. Although Highway might intend to portray the gendered violence he sees “going on in [his] community” as a means of resisting such patriarchal domination and misogyny, it is questionable whether the recurring representations in *Rose* actually assist Native women (qtd. in Coté 15). The depictions of female brutalization are overtly demeaning and because there is nothing in the play to suggest the complicity of colonization and White supremacy in the violence taking place on the Wasy Rez, Highway risks reinforcing discourses which inferiorize Aboriginal culture generally, and Aboriginal women particularly.

As observed by Sherene Razack, “[i]n cases of sexual violence involving Aboriginal women and immigrant women, the contexts of both the victims of violence and their attackers are often *culturalized*, that is, understood as cultural and frozen in time” (*Looking* 19). Since the

Wasy Rez is a metonym for all reserves,²⁸ Highway's portrayals can be understood to represent Native life in general. Because the men who are responsible for the acts of misogynistic violence and their victims in the play are Native, and because there is no explicit connection made between the misogynistic violence occurring on the Wasy Rez and colonialism, audiences may interpret the violence as a "cultural characteristic" (Razack, *Looking* 19). According to Razack, when it occurs within "communities of colour, we need to understand sexual violence as the outcome of both white supremacy and patriarchy; culture talk fragments sexual violence as what men do to women and takes the emphasis away from white complicity" (*Looking* 59). There is no clear suggestion in *Rose* that the Wasy men's behaviour is inspired by the introduction of European patriarchy or colonial oppression. Therefore, the play does not leave readers/viewers with a deeper understanding of the history of colonization that has resulted in the social problems that Highway addresses in his work. Neither does *Rose*, surreal and disjointed as it is, help individuals to understand racism and sexism as they function in society on a daily basis. Canada's history of racism and violence against Aboriginal women makes Highway's repeated portrayals of victimization particularly troubling.

It is expressly because of the reality of sexual violence that aestheticizations of this violence must be used very carefully and with a great deal of accountability. Images of misogynistic violence are often disempowering for women, even when the female victim is portrayed sympathetically. Some critics argue that representations of violence against women "vividly dramatize the preferred power relations and cultivate fear, dependence on authority, and the desire for security rather than social change" (White 287). The potential that depictions of gendered violence will contribute to women's internalized sense of vulnerability is problematic. Moreover, the "portrayal of certain groups as victims represents a symbolic expression of those

²⁸ In the introduction to *The Rez Sisters*, Highway points out that "'Wasaychigan' means 'window' in Ojibwa" (xiii)

victim types' social impotence" (Gerbner and Gross 182). To this extent, representations of gendered violence are a form of social control, positioning men as aggressors and women as victims. In her analysis of the 1988 film *The Accused*, which deals with the gang rape of a young working-class woman in a bar, Susan Faludi expresses her frustration that "a film that simply opposed the mauling of a young woman could be passed off as a daring feminist statement," pointing out that many young men "hooted and cheered [during] the film's rape scene" (152). Faludi critically questions whether "people really need to be reminded that rape victims deserve sympathy?" (151).

In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey explains that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (27). According to Mulvey, in narrative cinema, woman plays a "traditional exhibitionistic role," with her body displayed as a passive erotic object for the gaze of male spectators, allowing them to project their fantasies on to her: she connotes "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (27). The men on screen, on the other hand, are agents of the look, who are able to possess and control the woman. Notably, Big Joey is positioned as spectator to the gang rape of Pussy; this is a clear example of the male/female power dichotomy described by Mulvey. Concerning theatre audiences, Laura Tanner observes that "[w]hen the male gaze is turned upon the female body, what it sees is an image while what it experiences is an act of imagining; the female form effaces itself to mirror male desire" (86). With this in mind, it is even more disconcerting that audiences bear witness to the spectacle of Pussy's mutilated body. Drawing upon Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze, Elaine Aston points out that "if the female spectator identifies with the 'Woman,' then she reproduces herself as an object of desire for male consumption" (40). Because the process of viewing live theatre is not unlike the

cinematic experience, one is forced to question how the images of misogynistic violence in *Rose* might affect female spectators. It is possible that the sensationalized representations of gendered violence in *Rose* efface the tragic experiences of the many real women who are victims of sexual violence. It is also probable that such gratuitous, and seemingly purposeless representations, are injurious for some female viewers.

Metaphoric Pregnancy and Emblematic Castration

Throughout *Rose*, Emily Dictionary is haunted by the spectre of her deceased child, Rosetta Dictionary, also a Nanabush figure, who appears as “*a girl of 5*” (Highway, *Rose* 14). Rosetta was kicked from Emily’s womb by Gazelle Nataways five years before the play’s events. When Gazelle decides that she can no longer sustain the physical abuse to which she is subjected by Big Joey and looks to the other women for support, she and Emily are forced to confront one another. During the conflict, Rosetta makes one of her appearances on the lower level of the stage. In this scene, she is accompanied by the ghosts of other aborted and miscarried babies. The ghostly babies are not visible on stage, but their laughter can be heard echoing throughout the theatre. Gazelle, unnerved by the “*giggles of ‘little spirit girls,’ that is, little girls not yet born,*” says to Emily, “[i]t was . . . Joe made me do it” (70-71).²⁹ Gazelle thus implies that, yet again, Big Joey is responsible for an act of horrendous misogynistic violence. In *Dry Lips*, he plays a role in the rape of Patsy Pegahmagahbow and the consequent abortion of her fetus, implicating him in at least two feticides. As it is Highway’s intention that his audience understand masculinist violence to be an evil and destructive force, and Big Joey emblematises patriarchal hyper-masculinity, it is not a surprise that he is involved in the deaths of unborn

²⁹ Toward the end of *The Rez Sisters* we learn that Emily is pregnant with Big Joey’s child

children. The abortion of Rosetta is employed as part of a larger trope designed to represent the damaging effects of patriarchal interventions upon Native peoples, especially Native women and children. In her monologue, Emily recalls the rape victim, “Georgette Winnumin, who lost her baby and then killed herself” (137). The image of the rape of Georgette Winnumin and her subsequent miscarriage is used in conjunction with the representation of Rosetta’s fetal death to suggest that patriarchal misogyny is to blame for untimely infant deaths. However, the collaboration of Gazelle in the death of Emily’s baby is troubling.

In Emily’s mind, incitement from Big Joey is not a justification for Gazelle’s own misdeed; “you kicked my belly,” says Emily, “you killed my Rosetta, killed her in my belly five years ago” (71). After Emily has the opportunity to demand accountability from Gazelle, who is left speechless, the scene shifts from a verbal confrontation between the two women to a disturbing vision, evidently drawn from Emily’s memories and dreams:

it is as if Emily and Gazelle are caught in a time warp. . . . Emily screaming, falling to the ground, Gazelle kicking her belly, over and over. All the while Rosetta runs around Emily and Gazelle, screaming at them – Rosabella watching her from above, as if guiding her. . . . Laughing and crying, the voices of infants-never-born fill the theatre. And, in heartbreaking slow motion, Emily gives birth, Rosetta crawling out from between her thighs, Emily screaming with agony, Gazelle with horror. (70-71)

Throughout the birth sequence, Rosetta calls “Mommy. Mommy. Let me be born. Please? Let me be born” (71). The morbid birth of Rosetta, already deceased, is made surreal and frightening by the eerie giggling of unborn children, as well as the fact that Emily has just been savagely beaten by Gazelle, who now observes the event. After Emily gives birth to Rosetta, in the

presence of Gazelle, the animosity between the two women abates. The surreal birth purges Emily of her anger and inspires empathy and regret in Gazelle. Despite the invocation of an expedient truce between the old enemies, this representation is extremely problematic, as it suggests both women treat pregnancy irreverently. Emily engages in a physical conflict with Gazelle and in doing so endangers her fetus. Gazelle's display of brutality, enacted at the whim of Big Joey, affirms that she is both a slave to Big Joey and a cruel woman. The representations of Rosetta's brutal death and grotesque birth clearly do a disservice to the reverence with which many Native women regard childbirth and motherhood.

The scene is also unsettling because it is another instance where women are portrayed in competition with one another. Just as she betrays Pussy Commanda, it is discovered that Gazelle has killed Emily's baby in order to maintain her relationship with Big Joey. Feminist critics suggest that in patriarchal societies women are socialized to compete for male attention. Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum explain that "competition among women has historically centered on winning men's attention" (98). Elaborating on sexual competition between women, Orbach and Eichenbaum go on to say that "[a] woman's social position, her visibility, the way she has been known (Mrs. -), in the past, largely depended on that of a man's - first that of her father and later that of her husband. Thus competition to get the right man is a serious business" (99). Nell Irvin Painter similarly suggests that, until recently, it was "unthinkable for [women] to compete for something other than men's approval" (ix). Sexual competition between women is a product of patriarchal restrictions placed upon women, rather than a manifestation of any innate desire for male approval. In the words of Laura Tanenbaum: "[w]e feel competitive with one another because of our confused place in society" (19). In portraying the competition between Pussy and Gazelle, and then Emily and Gazelle, Highway may be critiquing patriarchal social

organizations that deny women agency and force them to compete for male attention. Similarly, Veronique's approval of the abuse inflicted upon Gazelle Nataways, earlier in the play, might be Highway's attempt to address the way in which misogynistic violence can be normalized by both men and women.

However, these representations of female rivalry make some of the play's women appear conniving and treacherous, obscuring Highway's intended message of anti-misogyny. The play's portrayals of female friendship are undermined by the suggestion that women are complicit in misogynistic violence. Such depictions also fail to do justice to Native women's subversion of patriarchal social organization both in historic and contemporary times. As observed by Winona Stevenson,

historical evidence demonstrates that when Aboriginal women were faced with losing personal autonomy and power, they resisted. They resisted the patriarchy because it threatened to undermine their socio-economic autonomy and because it threatened the socio-cultural cohesion of their communities. (63)

Describing the influence of Aboriginal women's resistance upon American feminism, Patricia Monture-Angus states that "[t]o separate Aboriginal history from feminist history is to re-write the past" (231). The activism of contemporary Native women is equally resistant to patriarchal codes of behaviour, which refuse to make space for female solidarity. Many Native women activists subvert patriarchy through the revitalization of traditional matricentric thinking. Kim Anderson explains that "[i]dentity for our people inevitably involves the reclaiming of tradition. . . for Native women, reclaiming tradition is the means by which we can determine a feminine identity that moves us away from the western patriarchal model" (*Recognition* 157).

In the final lines of her monologue towards the end of the play, Emily Dictionary lists Big Joey's recent crimes, prominently including the murder of Rosetta and the rape and torture of Pussy Commanda.

Beating Lalala Lacroix senseless with a piece of firewood, Gazelle Nataways, me, me, me, getting Gazelle Nataways to kick me in the gut five years ago, killing my Rosetta when she was almost ready to be born. Pussy Commanda. Slicing off her nipples, watching her as she gets gang-banged by a bunch of his goons, hung up like a slab of meet at a slaughterhouse. (Highway, *Rose* 138)

Although Emily has clearly reassigned blame for Rosetta's murder from Gazelle to Big Joey, the sexual torture of Pussy is the final catalyst that incites the Wasy women to take their revenge against him. On Emily's command, an "*absolutely stunning Liz Jones*" is sent to seduce Big Joey. Convincing him that her lesbianism has been a transient phase, she lures him into a state of comfort and slips a sedative into his champagne (138). Before he drifts into unconsciousness, he tells Liz that Pussy "had it coming," revealing his lack of remorse (139). Following the sedation, Pussy Commanda appears briefly in her hospital bed, "*wrapped in a white sheet, barely alive*" (140). Pussy is displayed, once again, as the play's emblem of battered womanhood, semi-divine in her liminal state between life and death. As the image of Pussy fades into the background, all of the women join Liz in Big Joey's basement.

Hera, Veronique, Philomena, Annie. They help Liz strip Big Joey naked and hang him by the wrists on the two "chains" where Pussy had been found earlier. . . . Hera prepares a herbal poultice as the other women prepare a basin, rolls of gauze, towels, etc. and place them on the floor at his feet, all moving slowly, as in ceremony, Rosetta, Rosabella, and Chief Big Rose watching from the side, all

intensely aware of what is about to happen; it is as though all the women in the show have joined hands and put their seal on the ultimate pact. Emily takes out a meat cleaver. Rosabella hides Rosetta's eyes from the violence about to occur as slowly, Emily lifts the cleaver up at Big Joey's crotch. And strikes. "Blood" explodes at his feet. The entire stage turns blood red, red roses exploding everywhere – on the walls, on the floor, in the sky. (141)

Immediately following the castration scene, the men in the play – except Creature and Big Joey – appear on the stage dressed in “*“dental floss’ bikinis, Carmen-Miranda-fruit headdresses, penis-shaped maracas in hand . . . and dancing a samba from hell”* (141). The chorus of men sing along with the women as they remove Big Joey from his chains, dress his wound, and wrap him in a bathrobe. The men have been reduced to female objects of consumption; in their fruit headdresses and bikinis, they appear both farcical and exotic. The castration is made grotesque by the entrance of the men dressed in drag. This cabaret element is discombobulating, causing the violence to become surreal and dream-like. Because the Roses are present for the castration, some of the chaos in the scene can be attributed to the trickster element in the play. Unlike the Judaeo-Christian God, Nanabush never delineates clearly between good and evil. However, Highway’s inimical pairing of these two images – the samba line and the castration – makes it easy to understand the discomfort felt by some critics concerning the juxtaposition of horror and comedy in the play. The carnivalesque quality of the scene renders the violence eerie and unnerving.

The representation of the dancing men suggests that Highway is satirizing psychoanalytic theories of castration anxiety. Freudian psychoanalysis assumes that men are subject to an unconscious fear of penile loss, originating during early childhood and lasting a lifetime.

According to Freud, when the infantile male becomes aware of differences between male and female genitalia he assumes that the female's penis has been removed and becomes anxious that his penis will be cut off by his rival, the father figure, as punishment for desiring the mother figure.³⁰ Symbolic castration anxiety refers to the fear of being degraded, dominated or made insignificant, usually an irrational fear, causing the individual to go to extreme lengths to save his pride. Freud also considers masculinist domination of women to be rooted in castration anxiety; he writes, “[i]t is self-evident to a male child that a genital like his own is to be attributed to everyone he knows, and he cannot make its absence tally with his picture of [women]” (113). In Freud's view, misogyny derives from the male's discomfort with the female's lack of a phallus. He also infers that women naturally feel inferior because they do not have a penis. When young girls see that boys' genitals are different from their own they are overcome with “envy for the penis” and wish to be boys themselves (Freud 114). Freud's theory of gender relations, although it has been critiqued extensively by feminist theorists, continues to pervade certain branches of psychoanalytic, literary, and feminist theory.³¹ Highway's depiction of the castration of Big Joey, accompanied by the entrance of a chorus line composed of male samba dancers in drag, may be designed to mock outdated theories of sex-based gender binarism, while simultaneously emphasizing the ridiculousness of gender roles.

The castration scene is disturbing nonetheless, particularly because it is performed as though part of a spiritual ritual, the women “*all moving slowly, as in ceremony*” (Highway, *Rose* 141). If the castration “ceremony” is being compared to an Aboriginal spiritual ceremony, the depiction is a degrading reduction of traditional ceremonies. Historically, castration was performed in many societies, including ancient Greece and Rome, as either a means of sacrifice

³⁰ For a full explanation of Freud's psychoanalytic model, see Pamela Thurschwell *Sigmund Freud* London Routledge, 2000

³¹ See Teresa Brennan, ed *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* London Routledge, 1989.

or a means of punishment. In Europe, the practice of castration for disciplinary purposes continued well into the seventeenth-century.³² Castration, although it is “rare or prohibited in developed countries,” is still practiced chemically in cases involving repeat pedophiles (Nygard and Sonstebly 506). The enactment of castration by the women in *Rose* is reminiscent of “disciplinary dismemberment of all the genitalia,” performed as a means of punishing criminals in ancient and modern times (G. Taylor 57). Castration is a devastating punishment for any man to endure, but even worse for one who identifies strongly with his masculine gender role. As Gary Taylor argues, “for our civilization as a whole, castration produces a ‘not-man,’ a marked category that assumes and requires an already existing, widely accepted, seemingly unremarkable, genitally specific definition of ‘man’” (17). With this in mind, it seems possible that one of Highway’s purposes in representing the violence of castration might be to emblematised the resurgence of matricentric culture. If this is the case, then the castration of Big Joey, the play’s emblem of hyper-masculinity, is a metaphorical attack upon patriarchal misogynistic values.

However, instead of subverting patriarchal masculinist systems of violence and subjugation, the women themselves employ gendered violence. Although it is necessary to hold Big Joey accountable for his misogyny, this representation also demeans the women in the play by suggesting that they have become equally brutal to their male counterparts. Because the women commit an act of excessive violence, the meaning of the metaphor becomes ambiguous. The portrayal of feminists as castrators is a cliché repeatedly invoked by those hostile to feminist precepts. Rather than portraying a joyous triumph for the women, the castration scene in *Rose* reinforces notions of binaristic rivalry between men and women, founded upon patriarchal

³² For further details concerning the history of castration, see Travis Nygard and Alec Sonstebly “Castration” *The Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body* Ed Victoria Pitts Westport Greenwood Press, 2008 502-07

ideologies of sex-based difference. It is also difficult to accept this representation of castration as indicative of matricentric revitalization in light of the play's preceding representations of womanhood, pregnancy, and motherhood. The castration of Big Joey does not end misogynistic violence on the Rez.³³ The feud between the men and women continues, eventually climaxing with the women forming a motorcade to block the men's access to the Community Hall.

Lost without his idol, Big Joey, Creature Nataways is portrayed "*wandering the reserve, like the madman he has become, a half-empty whisky bottle in hand,*" while "*two blood-red moons come to shine an eerie light on him*" (Highway, *Rose* 142).³⁴ The scene is reminiscent of Simon Starblanket's hysterical intoxicated hunt for Dickie Bird in *Dry Lips*.³⁵ In a drunken monologue, Creature recalls Big Joey's dysfunctional childhood. He says: "[y]our own mummy and your own daddy hated you, that's what you said, they didn't want you, you were a mistake and they were mean to you and your daddy was mean, ever mean to your mommy . . . and you wanted them dead and you didn't like them" (143). Representing Big Joey's family situation in this way may be one of Highway's attempts to invoke notions of colonization and White complicity amidst the play's violence. However, because there is nothing in Creature's statement to suggest that the cruelty with which Big Joey was treated by his parents is a result of the colonial legacy, this depiction simply amounts to another portrayal that signifies Native parents as unfit. In the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, the devastating effects of colonialism and the residential school legacy on some Native families are explained.

³³ By using the violent tactics of the men, the women enact the same pattern of gendered violence. In the words of Audre Lorde "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112)

³⁴ As in *Dry Lips* Creature's attachment to Big Joey remains unclear. We can never tell whether Creature has romantic feelings for Big Joey or whether he simply adores him platonically. Either way, the bond is unbreakable, as Big Joey is incessantly cruel to his sidekick.

³⁵ It is significant that the full moon shines on Simon as he wanders the Rez, *half-crazed drunk out of his skull* (*Dry Lips* 110). Creature, too, is overseen by full moons, however, in the case of Creature, there are two moons and they are blood-red. The anomalous lunar occurrence might point to the heinous crime he is about to undertake. While Simon's rage is somewhat pitiable, audiences are harder pressed to feel much empathy toward the plight of Creature Nataways.

The residential school led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivors had had difficulty in raising their own children. In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their children. (Government Vol. 1, Ch. 2, par 10.4)

Without accompanying such negative representations of Native parenthood with some suggestion of White complicity, Highway risks contributing to colonial discourses that have resulted in a devaluation of Native people's parenting skills and the consequent removal of children from the care of Native parents. In 1951, the Indian Act was revised by the Federal government of Canada, providing Provincial governments with more power over Aboriginal families.³⁶ The creation of provincial child welfare systems, which facilitated the unjust removal of Aboriginal children from their family homes, "has contributed to the assimilation of First Nations children into non-Aboriginal families and societies" (M. Bennett 10). As observed by Randi Cull, "the mass removal of Aboriginal children during [the fifties, sixties, and seventies] came to be known as the 'sixties scoop'" (145). In many cases, students finished residential school, only to be placed immediately in provincial foster care. The relocation of young Aboriginal children to distant locations, combined with poorly kept provincial records, have "culminated in the creation of a 'lost generation,' a cohort of Aboriginal people removed from their homes without access to their roots" (Cull 145). Canada's history renders Highway's

³⁶ For a thorough explanation of the Child Welfare System in Canada and its harmful contribution to the colonization of Aboriginal peoples, see Marlyn Bennett *A Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography on Aspects of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada* 2nd Ed Ottawa First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2005

portrayal of Big Joey's family representationally dangerous, especially because he fails to counterbalance the negative image with any positive depictions of Native parenthood.

With Big Joey incapacitated, Chief Big Rose successfully stops the casino from opening on the Rez: the Community Hall will remain as such. Chief Big Rose opts to invite the Trickster to sign her treaty, as a replacement of a standard political figure. As the community joyously gathers to await Nanabush, Pussy Commanda, released from hospital, arrives to recommence her role as a LaCream. Pierre St. Pierre joins the group, "*wheeling a brand new stove on a dolly,*" providing Veronique with her utmost desire (Highway, *Rose* 147).³⁷ For her part, Veronique gives the group the latest gossip: "Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik plans to run for Vice Chief to replace the horrible Munchos" (145).³⁸ Just when it seems as though life is beginning to improve on the Wasy Rez, "*Creature Nataways enters through the audience and, from a distance, slowly points a handgun at Chief Big Rose's head*" (147). Enraptured by the excitement of the monumental event, no one notices Creature until it is too late. People continue to talk amongst themselves until "*[a] shot rings out. Chief Big Rose's headdress is suddenly splattered with 'blood,' right at the forehead. Silence. Stillness. . . . At center-stage, Chief Big Rose, gunshot through her forehead, blood streaming down her face, collapses backward into the crowd*" (148). As Chief Big Rose dies in front of the assembly, Big Joey is also depicted; in his basement, he "*kneels facing the wall, naked, as Gazelle Nataways, dressed as a dominatrix, whips his back with a cat-o-nine tails*" (148). Gazelle's domination of Big Joey reaffirms that the women have adopted subjugative techniques employed by the men. Gazelle's sexual torture of Big Joey can only suggest that the gender binary has simply been reversed and the play's

³⁷ In *The Rez Sisters*, Veronique expresses her desire for a large stove. She does not believe that the lazy, alcoholic Pierre will ever provide one, but in *Rose* he proves her wrong.

³⁸ Zachary has a small role in *Rose*. He is the only male figure who portrays positive aspects of masculinity. He is kind to his wife. As in *Dry Lips*, he is fascinated by the culinary arts. In *Rose*, however, his interests also extend to the realm of music, when he decides to form a "*Kitchen Rhythm Band*" (143).

surviving women have become the aggressors. The coupling of this sexualized image with the portrayal of Chief Big Rose's death exhibits an aestheticization of gendered violence unseen in the previous two "Rez Plays."

The death of Chief Big Rose, the play's symbol of female strength and empowerment, makes it unlikely that the castration of Big Joey can be understood as an act that enables matricentric revitalization. Because Rose is the play's icon of female leadership, her violent death cannot possibly indicate the resurgence of egalitarian matricentricism. As the play ends, Rose is escorted into the spirit world by the "*spirits*" of all the Wasy women, "*goddesses now*" (151). Flanked on all sides by her motorcycle-riding entourage, she flies away with Rosetta and Rosabella to join her fellow tricksters in the spirit world. This final exodus suggests that the women are collectively bonded, both in life and death, but the surreal representation does not compensate for the preceding enactment of violence. With Rose's death, the potential for prosperity on the Wasy Rez is drastically diminished. Because Chief Big Rose is the play's only living trickster figure, it seems that even Nanabush has forsaken the Rez. This conclusion implies that only in the "*spirit world*" will the Wasy women be free from the epidemic of misogynistic violence that plagues their community, rendering the situation hopeless for those women still living on the Rez (151). This outcome is very disturbing. If there is no hope of salvaging Native communities that have been damaged as a result of colonialism and White oppression, then what is Highway's purpose in portraying the violence he sees "going on in [his] community" (qtd. in Coté 15)? Without proposing a positive alternative for Native peoples, the repeated representations of gendered violence and general degeneration seem exploitative.

In her article "Stealing the Pain of Others," Razack asks: "[h]ow else to change the world and stop the horrors if not by first bringing them to light?" (389). Answering her own question,

she says: “[i]f the solution is neither to stop looking nor to stop feeling, then it is clear that something else must accompany looking and feeling” (Razack, “Stealing” 389). Because the representations of misogynistic violence in *Rose* are far removed from any signifiers that overtly suggest the role of colonization in these victimizations, mixed audiences are unlikely to acknowledge any complicity in the colonial legacy – the continued effects of which are still felt in Aboriginal communities. It is necessary that society be made aware of the social problems that prevail on reserves in Canada. However, it is equally important that individuals acknowledge that colonization has severely damaged Aboriginal communities, leaving a trail of alcohol abuse and a legacy of sexual abuse in the post-residential school era. Yet it is also important that audiences not be led to typecast all Native people as degenerate and self-destructive. Highway’s portrayals do not facilitate a complete understanding of gendered violence on the Rez as it relates to colonialism and White supremacy. Rather, *Rose* suggests a cultural epidemic of violence within Aboriginal communities, the cause of which is unclear.

In *Rose*, Native women are portrayed as victims of rape, gang rape, femicide, and physical and verbal abuse. They are often represented as hyper-sexual, irresponsible and impulsive. Native mothers are portrayed as unfit and uncaring, with little respect for maternity. Native men are, for the most part, depicted as violent, alcoholic, antagonistic, and misogynistic. The violence in *Rose* is significantly more gratuitous and sexualized than in the previous two “Rez Plays,” making these representations of Native people extremely disturbing regardless of Highway’s positive intentions. The overload of sexual violence in *Rose* belies the possibility of a focused critique. Because of the many musical interludes, the slapstick comedy, and the outrageous props – including nine dancing avocado plants – it is often difficult to follow the

play, let alone determine Highway's functional purpose for incorporating these portrayals of gendered violence.

The representational violence in *Rose* is best described as a spectacle. Mainstream audiences might thus look at the violence and corruption on the Rez as a gratuitous display from which they are entirely removed. The prevalence of negative stereotypes concerning Native people, particularly Native women, in mainstream society makes the violence in *Rose* exceedingly troubling. Although the castration of Big Joey is gruesome and unsettling, this image is not as worrisome as the play's portrayals of violence against women. In reality, violence is gendered and women are far more often victims than perpetrators. To say that such dangerous representations cause sexual violence is overly simplistic, yet by sensationalizing sexual violence against Native women in his play Highway risks reifying demeaning stereotypes of Native women that are used to legitimize violence against them. Highway's third "Rez Play," to an even greater extent than *The Rez Sisters* or *Dry Lips*, might reinvigorate colonial discourses that perpetuate the continued oppression of Native peoples, especially Native women. As Patricia Hill Collins observes, "stereotypes are not merely mental constructs; they reflect past and present practice" (30).

Conclusion

According to Highway, misogyny in Aboriginal communities is a direct result of colonial influence. As he explains, “[t]he difference between Indian [culture] and white [culture] is that one is patriarchal in structure”; in Aboriginal cultures, “[t]he world isn’t divided into that kind of gendered hierarchy” (qtd. in Steed). It is Highway’s opinion that the introduction of Christianity into Native cultures has resulted in the disenfranchisement of Native women. In his words, “God is a man, Jesus was a man. Until we conceive of God as female women will not have [the] power to be treated with respect” (qtd. in Steed). Highway attempts to support women by drawing attention to the prevalence of misogynistic violence in Native communities. “All my plays are about that in some way,” he says, “the terrible way misogyny has split the world”; Highway believes that it is necessary to “expose the poison” in order for healing to take place (qtd. in Steed). Despite his positive intentions, it is questionable whether the “Rez Plays” actually function as subversive texts. Highway’s messages of anti-colonialism and anti-misogyny are often subsumed by stereotypical, degrading representations of women. This element becomes more evident, and more disturbing, as one moves forward in the “Rez Trilogy.” While *The Rez Sisters* provides some hope for the future of male-female relations on the Wasy Rez, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *Rose* conclude with very bleak prospects for Aboriginal women.

In his most recent play, *Earnestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, Highway provides a much more effective critique of colonialism, in part because he historicizes the colonial context of the action more completely. In part a work of historical fiction, the play nevertheless contains the magic realist elements that Highway is famous for, enabling him to span historical periods in an effort to link the history of colonialism with present-day socio-economic ramifications. It is

instructive to consider some of the differences between this play and the “Rez Trilogy” in order to underscore how Highway’s critique of colonialism in the Rez plays risks becoming subsumed beneath negative and grossly violent portrayals of Aboriginal men and women – an approach that may mask and distort the very important anti-colonialist message that Highway seeks to relay, and, indeed, that provides very little optimism for the future of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Earnestine was commissioned by the Secwepmc Cultural Education Society of the Kamloops Indian Reserve together with the Western Canada Theatre of Kamloops, British Columbia. The play premiered on 24 January 2004, at the Sagebrush Theatre, Western Canada Theatre, Kamloops (Highway, *Earnestine* 1). *Earnestine* is a historical play about the grievances of the Indigenous People of the Thompson River Valley, laid out in a deposition given by their chiefs to Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1910; this document has come to be known as “The Laurier Memorial.”³⁹ The play’s action follows four women throughout the extraordinary day of 25 August 1910, the day upon which “The Great Big Kahoona of Canada” comes to Kamloops (27). Earnestine Shuswap, Annabelle Okanagan, Delilah Rose Johnson, and Isabelle Thompson hurriedly prepare for the much anticipated arrival of the “Big Kahoona,” while maintaining a consistently engaging banter with one another. The four women are portrayed as though they might be the great-grandmothers to the Rez Sisters. In a brief foreword to the play, Highway reminds readers that the women are not speaking English, but Shuswap, the “trickster” language; the play is extremely funny at points (12). In his usual inimical manner, Highway uses comedy in order to nuance the tragic reality of this sadly familiar tale of stolen land. However, this does not diminish or dramatically override the darker aspects of the play’s content. The memories of settler transgressions remain in the foreground, despite the comedic delivery.

³⁹ For a complete analysis of First Nations’ land claims cases in British Columbia, see Christopher McKee’s *Treaty Talks in British Columbia Negotiating a Mutually Beneficial Future* 2nd ed Vancouver University of British Columbia Press, 2000 For additional historical details, see Robin Fisher’s *Contact and Conflict Indian-European Relations in British Columbia 1174-1890* Vancouver University of British Columbia Press, 1992

Highway plays with the temporal scope of the action so as to incorporate events that span 100 years, from first European contact with First Nations people to the time of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's arrival, into the time-frame of a single day. Thus, as the women strive to complete their duties, including the baking of Saskatoon pie, laying of white table cloths, and catching the perfect trout, they also move through a world in transition. Fences and signs are erected in traditional berry picking territory to regulate use. Cattle, including the beloved Daisy, are moved from their pastures. Perhaps most devastating, fishing from the river is made illegal (54). The new restrictions imposed by White settlers create a great chasm between the two communities, substantially affecting the mental stability of Delilah Rose Johnson who is married to a White man and pregnant with his child. The rape metaphor is not employed in *Earnestine*, but this is not to say that the play is without metaphorically violent significations involving the female body.

Beginning with revelations of the community's history of racially charged violence, Delilah Rose becomes progressively more unnerved. At the climax of the play, a completely unravelled Delilah attempts to abort the biracial child she is carrying with a pair of scissors; she wants to "cut it out with scissors," she says, so that she can "be free" (85). Delilah does indeed stab the scissors into her abdomen. With the "*scissors sticking out of her belly*," she recites the chiefs' grievances, listed in the Laurier Memorial (85). Delilah's rhapsodic articulations of angst, combined with her self-inflicted injury, make for an uneasy viewing experience. This representation of feticide recalls the problematically degrading portrayals of pregnancy and childbirth in *Dry Lips* and *Rose*. As in the "Rez Plays," Highway risks perpetuating the denigration of Native motherhood by including such imagery, yet in her mentally deteriorated state Delilah Rose is not portrayed as culpable. Also, because she begins to recite the words of

the Memorial, audience attention is returned to the source of her misfortune – the colonial abuses of Native people – making it unlikely that individuals will misinterpret the play’s message. Colonial interventions are the cause of Delilah’s unfortunate predicament and she is acting in response to colonial transgressions against Native people. Although the representation of Delilah is profoundly compromised by colonial discourses that have resulted in the disparagement of Native motherhood, the reason for her mental instability is made abundantly clear. Delilah’s actions are intended to emblemise the divide created between White settlers and Native people by harmful colonial policies and practices. The implications of the trope are overt and unambiguous, leaving little space for misunderstanding. In this respect, the violence in *Earnestine* is at odds with the metaphorical interventions in the “Rez Plays.”

It is also significant that there is no antagonistic masculine party involved in Delilah’s perpetration of violence: only herself. Although the female body is still used emblematically to relate more broadly implicative messages, there is no aspect of gendered conflict or sexual opposition to this violent portrayal. The play is consequently less likely to contribute to discourses that demean Native cultures or reinforce notions of patriarchal gender binarism. Furthermore, the play concludes with a sense of feminine resilience and solidarity. The three surviving women continue to resist the surrender of their land and water. After Earnestine catches her own trout, without assistance from her husband Joe, Anabelle reminds the audience that Earnestine will be “fishing in that river ’til the cows come home”; to this, Daisy, the displaced cow, responds with “one final moo, a happy moo, filled with joy” (90). The women’s struggle recalls efforts on the part of British Columbia’s First Nations peoples to maintain and reclaim land rights. The play’s outcome is undeniably encouraging. Although *The Rez Sisters* concludes with similar optimism, this hopefulness is in stark contrast to the conclusion of *Dry*

Lips, where the play's misogynists are exonerated by a fanciful dream ending and the cycle of violence on the Rez is set to continue. *Earnestine*'s conclusion is also dissimilar to the tragic ending of *Rose*, which depicts the murder of Chief Big Rose and the subsequent departure of the play's other women.

Unlike the "Rez Plays," *Earnestine* holds colonial entities accountable for violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. Because the presence of the colonizer – in the form of the Big Kahoona – pervades the play's action from start to finish, it is impossible to disregard the legacy of colonialism to which Delilah's actions are a response. While the "Rez Plays" portray misogynistic violence on the Wasy Rez as culturally endemic, *Earnestine* makes obvious the connection between colonization and violence. To this extent, the play might function positively as a viable critique of colonialism, encouraging individuals to acknowledge Canada's colonial history. This is not to say that the representation of Delilah is beyond criticism, as the image of grotesquely surreal feticide and suicide is in keeping with Highway's problematic portrayals of women in the "Rez Plays." *Earnestine* nonetheless stands in opposition to the "Rez Plays" in terms of its usefulness as an educative tragic-comedy. While gendered violence is sensationalized in the "Rez Plays" to no clear end, *Earnestine* potentially fosters a more accurate understanding of colonial history amongst members of the dominant society. Although the representation of Delilah is disturbing, the playwright does not depict Native women in the same hyper-sexual, violable manner as in the "Rez Plays." The four women in *Earnestine* are more resourceful, intelligent and articulate than the women in *Dry Lips* or *Rose*. As the play concludes optimistically, with the women represented as indomitable leaders, it is improbable that *Earnestine* will contribute to the negative stigmatization of Native women in the same way that the "Rez Plays," particularly *Dry Lips* and *Rose*, might.

Since Highway does not make a clear connection between colonization and gendered violence in the “Rez Plays,” White spectators are able to disregard their own culpability in the oppression of Native people. Because the women in the plays are, for the most part, victims of violence perpetrated by Native men, readers/spectators may come to identify with the Native women in the plays, as this is the readily available option. In light of Canada’s history, such unguided empathy is problematic. In blindly consuming the pain of others, Razack warns, “we are recognizing not only the other’s pain, but his or her *difference*. Difference becomes the conduit of identification in much the same way as pain does” (“Stealing” 379). Because there is no onus on readers/spectators to consider the origin of the oppression and violence in the “Rez Plays,” individuals are able to feel exonerated from the action of the plays. In this way, the privilege and complicity of the spectator is obscured by identification with the Native woman who is represented as a victim of violence perpetrated by Native men, causing the reality of raced and gendered violence, as it relates to colonialism, to fade into pure trope. Thus, empathizing with the Native women in Highway’s plays serves only “to dehumanize them further, and in the process, to reinstall us as morally superior in relation to them” (Razack, “Stealing” 376). Appropriation of the suffering experienced by the women in the “Rez Plays” affirms the spectator’s capacity for empathy, causing the experience to be vicariously purgative and emotionally enticing. However, the closer the viewer comes to “the pain, the more the pain and the subject who is experiencing it disappears, leaving the witness in its place” (Razack, “Stealing” 377). To wit, “in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (Hartman 19). Highway’s depictions of violence against Native women in the “Rez Plays” are troubling not only because they obscure the historical source of the trauma that dogs his characters’ lives, but also because they recall discourses that stigmatize Native

women as promiscuous and sexually accessible. The already substantial risk of contributing to harmful colonial discourses is significantly enhanced by the playwright's failure to contextualize such demeaning representations within an apparent backdrop of colonization.

The sequential escalation of violence from one play to the next also works in opposition to Highway's intended subversion of patriarchal ideologies. Violent and degrading representations of women, especially women of colour, are delivered through popular media on a regular basis. The fact that these images have come to be normalized by mainstream society further diminishes the likelihood that Highway's portrayals will function subversively. Race is always relevant where representations of sexual violence are concerned and may at times interact with gender – even when the victim and the assailant share a race category. In the case of Highway's plays, the synergistic action of gender and race results in representations that signify Native women as doubly subjugated victims of raced and gendered violence. The disturbing scenes of misogynistic violence in the "Rez Plays" become demeaning spectacles when they are performed for individuals who may already have negative preconceptions concerning Native people. To this extent, the aestheticization of violence against women, particularly Native women, in media and popular culture renders Highway's representations extremely dangerous. Instead of working subversively, these images of Native women might serve to uphold negative stereotypes propagated by the dominant society's ideological institutions.

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