

“THE UNENDING APPETITE FOR STORIES”: GENRE THEORY, INDIGENOUS THEATER AND TOMSON HIGHWAY’S “REZ CYCLE”

Rubelise da Cunha

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande/CAPES
Instituto de Letras e Artes/Center for Canadian Studies
rubelise@vetorial.net

Abstract / Résumé

Drama confirms the roots of Indigenous literatures in traditional storytelling performances; therefore it contributes to a theoretical approach to literary genres that is Indigenous-centered and focuses on how stories shape the literary text. Tomson Highway’s “Rez Cycle” exemplifies how theater gives continuity to Cree/Ojibway storytelling through a representation of past and present, history and myth, and through the performance of the rituals of sacrifice that produce feelings of transformation and healing each time Nanabush is resurrected. His plays establish a dialogue with new approaches to genre theory and validate Indigenous theater as a form of symbolic action that performs kinesthetic healing in actors and audience.

Le drame confirme que les racines des littératures autochtones se trouvent dans la représentation des contes traditionnels. Le drame contribue donc à une approche théorique des genres littéraires qui est axée sur les Autochtones et qui se concentre sur la façon dont les contes façonnent les textes littéraires. Le « Rez Cycle » de Tomson Highway donne un exemple de la façon dont le théâtre offre une continuité aux contes des Cris et des Ojibway par une représentation du passé et du présent, de l’histoire et du mythe, et par le spectacle des rituels du sacrifice qui produisent des sentiments de transformation et de ressourcement chaque fois que Nanabush renaît. Les pièces de Highway établissent un dialogue avec les nouvelles approches de la théorie du genre et valident le théâtre autochtone comme une forme d’action symbolique qui offre un ressourcement kinesthésique aux comédiens et à l’auditoire.

It is in our bodies—and as bodies—that we tell our stories and understand what it means to be Native people enacting decolonization and continuance.

-- Qwo-Li Driskill, "Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization and Healing."

Genre and Storytelling

When I came to Canada in 2004 to develop part of my Ph.D. research on "Storytelling Figures of Resistance in Lee Maracle, Thomas King and Tomson Highway," I had the opportunity to travel to Bellingham, US, to interview Salish writer and critic Lee Maracle at Western Washington University. Since I was writing a chapter about her novels *Sundogs*, *Ravensong* and *Daughters Are Forever*, during the interview I mentioned Helen Hoy's 2001 book *How should I read these?*, in which she explains her students' negative reactions towards Maracle's novels by pointing to their feeling of being outsiders when in contact with Indigenous literatures. In Maracle's writing, Raven stories do not present orthodox conclusions, and the understanding of these stories requires knowledge of the Salish cultural context. In the chapter "Because you aren't Indian," Hoy uses a postcolonial approach to show Maracle's strategic non-Western discourse. She states that her students' reactions are provoked by the blending of oratory with story, which makes the construction of knowledge one of the aims of the novel. Although Hoy focuses on Maracle's specific writing aesthetics, the novelist's reaction to Hoy's text was not positive. Maracle suggested that Hoy's definition of *Ravensong* as a blend of oratory and story could be a refusal to consider her narrative a novel. In her words, *Ravensong* is a novel, and Hoy's text repeats the imposition of a Western discourse that cannot accept the inclusion of Indigenous writers within the scope of the Canadian novel, nor their innovative contribution to Canadian genres.

Maracle's statement makes us question which concept of novel we use when we decide to approach her narrative, and shows the necessity of an ethical and Indigenous-centered approach when analyzing Indigenous literatures. In other words, what is our concept of literary genre? Is it a pre-established category or a form in motion, which is transformed by each literary text? To achieve a level of responsible criticism, it is fundamental to reevaluate literary categories that have been used to impose a model of literature and not to acknowledge how Indigenous narratives can transform Western categories. This awareness of the necessity of Indigenous-centered criticism coincides with a moment that John Frow has called the crisis in genre theory, which means recogni-

tion of the necessity of changes in the Western approaches to literary genres. For this reason, this essay aims at a dialogue between new approaches to genre theory and Indigenous knowledges exploring the possibility of an Indigenous-centered theory of literary genres.

In his essay "Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today," John Frow mentions the decline of the presence of genre in contemporary literary theory, which, in his opinion, might be due to the continuing prevalence of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy (1627). In his opinion, this is where the state of the art in genre theory still rests: "with the beginnings of an account of the social life of forms, but not with a fully fledged research paradigm, and indeed with a problematic that has little purchase on most recurrent work in literary and cultural studies" (1629).

In fact, the crisis mentioned by Frow concerns the use of old paradigms, or taxonomies that have been used to establish borders, to classify texts, to impose the "yes" or "no" in the scope of literature, and in this process a Western theoretical paradigm might become a barrier for the understanding of Indigenous literatures. The discipline of genre theory has been connected to a sense that divides "Us" and "Them," "what is" and "what is not," a perspective that J. Edward Chamberlin names the "theatre of Them and Us, with its chronicles of differences and historical distress" (49). As Jacques Derrida notes, "as soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: 'Do,' 'Do not' says 'genre,' the word 'genre, the figure, the voice, or the law of genre" (56). In other words, genres have been treated for a long time as pre-established categories. Such categories would not only define which texts can be considered literary according to generic models, but would also set a certain hierarchy in which the texts that most conformed to the norms would be the most valued, and consequently would be part of the "canon" of literature in a certain country, or the canon of Western literature. In "Oratory on Oratory," Maracle highlights the hierarchical aspect involved in genre theory by pointing to its compromise with colonialism and associates definitions of genre with the constitution of a colonizing canon in literature. However, she also stresses that today "the colonized are free to challenge this House of Lords" (56), and it is by the contribution of Indigenous writers and critics, and the teachings they provide from their specific nations and cultures that a dialogue with genre theory emerges, in which the exercise of classifying and constructing hierarchies is substituted by the experience of learning with the stories told.

John Frow elaborates a concept that connects genre to performance. He explains that his concept of genre as a performative structure that shapes the world in the very process of putting it into speech (*Genre 18*) is very close to what Michel Foucault calls discourse – “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49), and it is a medium or system of representation that fosters the comprehension of cultural phenomena. Frow explores how genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world, so that they become “a form of symbolic action: the generic organization of language, image, gestures, and sound makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world” (*Genre 2*). If, according to Frow, genre is a performative structure, a category in motion which constructs knowledge, the ground is open for the development of a genre theory that emerges from Indigenous understandings of literature and storytelling. And it is exactly when Maracle questions the traditional classification process involved in the designation of genres that she develops a study of story and oratory in contrast to Western models, showing how it is much more effective and profitable for Indigenous people to see themselves through the story (55), and not through Western paradigms. Although it is fundamental to acknowledge that she refers specifically to Salish storytelling and oratory, she also contributes to a questioning of preconceived Western literary approaches to Indigenous literatures generally, pointing to the meaning and function of stories. Maracle’s theorizing about storytelling takes into account the written texts, which become the rememberers of the story in the modern world (67), and she develops her argument through a perspective that acknowledges the story, the listener/reader and the process of transformation that results from this experience. Her focus on story as a genre also establishes a dialogue with the concept of genre as performance, or as language that acts and is transformative: “The point of hearing (and now reading) story is to study it in and of itself, to examine the context in which it is told, to understand the obstacles to being that it presents, and then to see ourselves through the story, that is, transform ourselves in accordance with our agreement with and understanding of the story” (55).

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, in her collaborative work with three female Elders between 1974 and the 1980s, provides insights into the function of stories for the Yukon people. Her work is published in the co-authored book entitled *Life Lived like a Story* (1990) and in a subsequent book called *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (1998). In this second book, she comments that one of the many things these women taught her is that “their narratives do far more than entertain. If one has optimistic stories about the past, they

showed, one can draw on internal resources to survive and make sense of arbitrary forces that might otherwise seem overwhelming" (xii). Cruikshank shows how the story constitutes much more than the words pronounced or the narrative told, since it has a practical and fundamental role in the lives of the peoples. When acknowledging the storytelling practice of Mrs. Sidney, one of the three Elders, she states that "when potential for conflict emerges among people with different perspectives, successful resolution often involves demonstrating how a story can reframe a divisive issue by providing a broader context for evaluating such issues" (xv). Her ideas also converge with the meaning that Maracle attributes to stories as being fundamental for the healing and survival of the people. Cruikshank also mentions the relationship established between the communities and the transcribed texts, and how the Yukon Elder storytellers point to writing as just one more way to tell their stories and to make them part of social practice: "Written texts become points of reference narrators can allude to when they want to make socially significant statements to family members, to other members of their community, or to the larger world about the *potential* of stories to make us reevaluate situations we think we understand" (xiv).

Based on Cruikshank's insight that narratives or stories "are inevitably locally grounded, highly particular, and culturally specific" (*The Social Life of Stories* xiii), my essay examines how Ojibway/Cree plays and theater, here exemplified by the work developed by Tomson Highway in his "Rez Cycle," not only revitalize the storytelling tradition, but also establish a dialogue with new approaches to genre theory in the twenty-first-century. The focus is on how stories shape the literary text in order to perform a speech act. From this perspective, genre theory has as its center an Indigenous view of literature grounded in a storytelling tradition that encompasses the sacred aspects of the culture aiming at the construction of transformative knowledge. Highway's writing represents the points of reference which not only narrators but members of the community and outside the community can use to reevaluate situations, maintain tradition and perform healing. Although there is considerable literary criticism published on Highway's plays, my aim in this essay is to approach his "Rez Cycle" from a genre perspective and to demonstrate how his plays validate Indigenous theater as a form of symbolic action that performs kinesthetic healing, in a sense that actors and audience are transformed when they experience how healing feels.

Indigenous Theater and Storytelling Performance

Departing from a concept of storytelling performance as literary genre, I understand that any act that gives form to knowledge involves

translation. It is always a story, an emotion, a conflict that the writer has in mind which will be translated into the written page and take a certain form. In the introduction to *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English* (2003), Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles carefully explain each term that composes the title of the book. The explanation of "drama" becomes their own poetics of Indigenous drama since it explains the process of giving form to knowledge. They differentiate between the sacred ceremony of storytelling and the theatrical performance and emphasize the importance of protecting the culture and individuals, but also point to the process through which traditional storytelling as dramatic text may perform healing:

In creating theatre the First Nations artists represented in this collection are drawing on a known and lived sense of what is essentially ritualistic. They know that in all theatre there's a healing that takes place on the stage, in the audience, and between the stage and the audience, a healing that is part of the mutability of Coyote, part of the humor, and part of the ritual.

But when you call upon Coyote through ritual, when you call upon ancestors, someone's going to show up. It becomes necessary to create a space, a container that tells the spirits that it's play, in order to respect and protect the culture and the people who are embodying the spiritual elements of that culture. That container is theatre (v).

Theater is the container, the genre, and the act of translating the Indigenous concept of story, or the ceremony of storytelling into this container, lies on the border between two different worldviews and cultures, between the unseen and the material worlds, interior and exterior realities, translation between languages and discourses, including the values and ideologies. What is more important, this act of translation maintains the performative characteristic of storytelling, which in itself is a speech act for the people and the culture to perform healing. This healing is realized on stage by accessing tradition, and Mojica and Knowles's reference to Coyote, the Trickster, reminds us of the tradition of Trickster tales, which in Cree/Ojibway culture are present in Weesageechak/Nanabush storytelling. In contemporary performances, tradition is recalled on stage to tell stories of the past and the present, so that the audience can relate them to their own personal histories and their own participation in the social group. As Ojibway playwright and critic Drew Hayden Taylor explains, "At its origins, storytelling was a way of relating the history of the community. It was a way of explaining human nature" ("Alive" 29).

Although scholars such as J. Edward Chamberlin have acknowl-

edged the complexity of storytelling performances, it is Ojibway playwright and essayist Drew Hayden Taylor who contributed to a history of Indigenous theater in Canada specifically. He reminds us of the roots of contemporary Indigenous theater in the storytelling tradition rather than as a consequence of the presence of Western culture. In "Canoeing the Rivers of Canadian Aboriginal Theatre: The Portages and the Pitfalls," he mentions the origins of Indigenous theater in storytelling and highlights the theatrical complexity of cultures such as the Nuu-chah-nulth of the West Coast, which have for centuries used such elaborate theatrical devices as trap doors, masks, smoke effects, and props to help illustrate their ceremonial dramas (25-26). In "Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada," Taylor argues that Indigenous theater may be directly attributed to a society rooted in an oral culture and the tradition of storytelling:

Theatre is a logical extension of the storytelling technique. Looking back at the roots and origins of traditional storytelling, not just Native storytelling but storytelling in general, it is the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step. (29)

Taylor continues his argument by telling the history of Indigenous theater in Canada, and highlighting the crucial role of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group (Debaj), an Ojibway drama company created in 1984 (located on the Wikwemikong reserve on Manitoulin Island, and has recently opened its Creation Center in Manitowaning). In his interview with Shannon Hengen, Artistic Producer Ron Berti comments on the outreach program of the company and explains how it acknowledges both the story and the storyteller, and does not see them as separate entities, as Western theatrical conventions typically would. He also points to the connection between storytelling and theater in the roots of Ojibway culture: "Placing the emphasis on the relationship between the story and the storyteller reflects an Indigenous world view – whereby all things are connected and therefore have a relationship with all other things. Traditional storytelling is the foundation of Native theatre and is an oral art form, with stories passed down by the telling of them" (66).

Shannon Hengen's book *Where Stories Meet: An Oral History of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre* (2007), in which she interviews artistic directors and producers that have participated in the twenty years of the existence of the company, as well as her latest work as co-editor with Joe Osawabine of *Stories from the Bush: The Woodland Plays of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group* (forthcoming), acknowledge the importance of

Debaj for an understanding of Ojibway/Cree theater and its roots in storytelling performances. In the introduction to the latter (forthcoming) book, Hengen approximates the method of storytelling or personal disclosure that Cruikshank observes in her work with the Yukon Elders to the method of dramatic creation and production used at Debaj: “Just as the Yukon Elders invoked traditional stories to explain turning points in their lives, the artists at Debaj weave legendary and personal accounts to create and produce their work. We who have access to the teachings presented by De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre can similarly learn from them about our own lives.”

Hengen’s interview with Alanis King, the former Artistic Director at Debaj, states that, generally speaking, theater does translate into self-esteem, identity, relationships, since it involves the team building experience (28). The experiences she has had with young people at Debaj point to the characteristics that approximate theater and storytelling, since both involve a sense of communion and the construction of the story in a group experience. The outcome of such an enterprise is the healing process that takes place through the theatrical performance, in this case both for the actors and the audience. When Hengen points to the differences between storytelling and theater, since stories can be told without making them into theater, King explains that:

so long as there are stories to be told there’ll always be theatre and probably vice versa, but a lot of stories – people still haven’t brought them forward. [...] I’ve come to know that there’s only like four stories, but everyone keeps doing them over and over again, even Hollywood, and we just keep seeing them again and again. What’s unique about us is that we get to add in the magic, we get to add in the myth of coming alive instantly and we believe it, or a dance figure – some sort of spiritual element about it that lifts or elevates it and that’s where I always go. (33)

King recognizes that Indigenous theater recovers recurrent themes which are used universally but highlights that the uniqueness of this theater comes from its magic – “the myth of coming alive” (33). Such an understanding of theater echoes Cruikshank’s methodology and her concept of oral history, which, attuned to narrative conventions, in her opinion “provides an observatory from which to assess the shifting boundary between what we call *history* and what we call *myth*” (x).

Tomson Highway’s “Rez Plays” exemplify this narrative on the border of history and myth, fiction and spirituality. He participated as director of Debaj at its beginning, during the 1984-85 season. It was at Debaj that he first developed the idea for *The Rez Sisters*, and its first draft

was workshopped on the island. Later Highway became artistic director of the Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto, a theater company formed in 1982, where he produced the play and Larry Lewis directed it. *The Rez Sisters* marked the beginning of contemporary Indigenous theater,¹ which represents the translation of storytelling into the play that is not only performed on the stage, but has a script that is published and circulates as literature. Highway's Rez Plays are an example of what Taylor calls "the Aboriginal way of theatrical storytelling" ("Native Theatre's Curtain Call?" 30) which encompasses a sense of humor that, combined with a sense of storytelling, has helped them grasp who they are and allowed them to survive tragedies. Therefore, the theatrical genre acquires an important function for the communities, since, in Taylor's words, it produces a "cathartic release": "Our stories told of the results of 500 years of colonization, of residential schools, of being put on reserves or thrust into the city, of a sort of internal diaspora. Theatre becomes a sort of cathartic release after so many years of being silenced" ("Native Theatre's Curtain Call?" 30). Moreover, as Highway's plays demonstrate, the confrontation with the wounds of colonization opens the possibility for kinesthetic healing.

The Storytelling Genre: Tomson Highway's "Rez Cycle"

Highway's theater is very much connected with a sense of mythology that is grounded in the storytelling tradition. In his Charles R. Bronfman Lecture in Canadian Studies published by the University of Ottawa Press, *Comparing Mythologies* (2003), he offers a definition of mythology that is related to Lévi-Strauss's ideas about the relationship between language, story and myth. Going back to the Greek etymology of the word, Highway reminds us that "myth" is narrative, story, whereas "logos" is "word" or "discourse," so that mythology becomes the "art of storytelling." In Cree, "mythologize" is a word that belongs between the words that mean "to tell a story," "to tell the truth" and "to tell a lie" (22). In short, mythologies are halfway between truth and lie, non-fiction and fiction. They tell the stories of the spiritual movements of peoples across the landscape.

One of the great contributions of Highway's lecture is to compare, on the same level, the three mythologies that influence the Canadian culture and imaginary: Christian, Greek and Indigenous mythology. While Lévi-Strauss uses a Western definition of myth to analyze the structure of myth in "other" cultures, searching for common patterns, Highway highlights that colonialism and the mythologies that came with the Europeans are part of a story that arrived in Canada only in 1492. At that time, Mother Earth was a powerful entity long before the patriarchal God

came to subjugate her. According to Highway, mythology is the language that explains what science and religion cannot, that is, the origin of life. This is the dream world where beings like the Indigenous trickster walk: half-woman half-fish, half-man half-coyote. This “most elaborate of all fictions” (49), halfway between truth and fiction, is the language or discourse in which figures such as Raven, Coyote, Rabbit, Hare, Nanabush, Weesageechak and other storytelling figures of Indigenous cultures are found.

Highway’s theater is shaped by his mythology as becomes obvious when he explains that his plays tell about the feminine divinity – the divinity of Indigenous cultures. His conception of drama encompasses the literary genre from a perspective that centers on Indigenous knowledge, and reinforces the origins of theater in the performance of telling stories – or in the narrative of mythology that constructs a sense of who they are as a people, as well as reasserts their connection to divinity (Mother Earth) – which in the Rez Plays appears through the figure of Nanabush.

In his interview with Hengen, Highway considers the coexistence of comedy and tragedy as one of the differences between Indigenous theater and European/Western formulas (*Where Stories Meet* 15). In order to translate trickster stories into plays, Highway chooses a genre that he considers tragicomic, since it brings the possibility of translating the double-edged discourse that is performed by Nanabush. And it seems that we can only fully understand the genre of his text if we move from the knowledge he wants to construct with his play, or the story he wants to tell, to the generic characteristics. The choice of the dramatic text has to do with its potentials to perform Nanabush’s tale. The tragicomic aspect is able to recover the ritualistic and ceremonial characteristics encompassed in Ojibway storytelling, and Highway’s dramatic text constructs and translates the beliefs and the worldview of the contemporary Ojibway community, with their challenges and predicaments, but also with their liveliness, humor and sense of community. He also explains how the characters in *The Rez Sisters* are based on his own family, his aunts, his mother, and his younger sister (*Where Stories Meet* 15). Such a process shows how Highway dives into mythology and his memories of the past to talk about the present, performing the process that Cruikshank identifies in the storytelling of the Yukon Elders: “each narrator combines traditional narrative with individual experience to construct a coherent account of her life” (*Life Lived like a Story* xi). In Highway’s “Rez Cycle,” such process is multiplied by the many characters that act on stage and by the many stories he recovers not only from his family, but from Cree and Ojibway life histories.

Nanabush is a female figure in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) and *Rose* (2003), but a male figure in *The Rez Sisters* (1988), though the whole play centers on a group of seven women from the reserve. These three plays take place on the fictional reserve of Wasaychigan Hill, on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Highway is Cree, but has also had contact with the Ojibway in Ontario. In the Production Notes to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, he explains how these two cultures intermingle in his plays. Cree and Ojibway are used freely "for the reasons that these two languages, belonging to the same linguistic family, are very similar and that the fictional reserve of Wasaychigan Hill has a mixture of both Cree and Ojibway residents" (11). The use of Cree and Ojibway languages is significant in the plays. In the published plays, the characters speak Cree and Ojibway in many situations, and the translations into English appear as footnotes, which make non-Indigenous readers negotiate their position as outsiders.

Highway's "Rez Cycle" is exactly what Michael Wood calls "an unfinishable work" (1396), which signals "an unending appetite for stories" (1396). Wood states that although all complete stories by definition have an ending, there are many ways of stopping before reaching completion, and there are many reasons for not wanting a story to end, whether we are writers or readers, tellers or listeners (1395). Highway always calls attention to the fact that these three plays belong to a cycle composed of seven plays, which is still in progress in these twenty years after the publication of *The Rez Sisters*. Such a fact emphasizes the necessity of maintaining the process of storytelling, since it is vital for the continuity of Cree/Ojibway cultures represented in the plays by the characters, their life histories and mythology. The continuity expressed by the three plays already published is expressed not only by the permanence of the same characters and the same community, but also by the chronological sequence in the events. Moreover, these three Rez Plays perform an act of resistance to violence against women and of resurrection of Cree/Ojibway spirituality. The plays show the threat of violence against women as a metaphor for the damages caused by colonialism and the imposition of Western values. The character that becomes the embodiment of this violence is Big Joey. Women as creators, human beings that have the power to give birth, represent the power of the feminine divinity which is central to Cree/Ojibway culture, and violence against them symbolizes the destruction of Indigenous values.

Highway's recovery of spirituality in the "Rez Cycle" brings a Cree/Ojibway perspective of theater as genre which challenges Western theory, since it acknowledges how the literary genre moves beyond the limits of the literary to include the sacred and ceremonial as performance, or a

speech act of resistance for Indigenous communities. Language, music, characters, scenery and performance in his plays become vehicles to reconnect the audience to spirituality. Most importantly, all these elements work for the creation of feelings in actors and audience, so that ceremony takes place. The performance of scenes of violence, such as the rape scenes, even when they are just memories such as is the case in *The Rez Sisters*, are extremely necessary to interrupt the humor that engages actors and audience and make them feel the wounds of colonization, either as participants or witnesses, since such scenes recall violent episodes that have been part of the life history of Indigenous peoples. In this healing ceremony, the scenes of violence become sacrificial rituals in which actors and audience take responsibility when they feel the pain, and renegotiate their roles in society by the resurrection of Cree/Ojibway values and spirituality, represented by the survivor figure of Nanabush in the three plays. Furthermore, the rape scenes that are recurrent in the “Rez Cycle” have also the important role of retelling historical facts that have happened to Indigenous women in Canada, but that have not received the proper attention from the media, official history and authorities. Highway’s political role emerges here, in which his Indigenous conception of drama is able to encompass “history” and “myth” to perform an act of resistance to the violence against women he has witnessed throughout the years.

The speech act of resistance created by the plays is performed by the complex resurrection of Nanabush, since the Trickster is on stage as a survivor of violence and colonization. The transformative nature of Nanabush is recovered in the plays always in three different forms; they subvert the idea of the Holy Trinity by resurrecting the Trickster three times. Throughout the three plays there is this constant fluctuation between the two realms, the material and the spiritual, which is performed by the communication between Nanabush and the characters, as well as by the scenic devices that Highway designed and included in the stage directions so that there would be different levels on stage on which actors would interact. Actors and audience experience the pain each time the trickster figure faces violence and destruction in the skin of Indigenous women; however, it is by engaging with the mythical transformative power of Nanabush that healing is felt.

Nanabush establishes contact with Zhaboonigan and Marie Adele in *The Rez Sisters*, with Simon Starblanket in *Dry Lips*, and with Emily Dictionary in *Rose*. It is through Simon Starblanket’s dream in *Dry Lips* that the idea of Nanabush’s Trinity emerges. The violence that is going to happen, as well as the necessity to recover spirituality and ceremony, are not only foreseen by him, but felt in his body: “My arms, my whole

body, stuck to this rock. Then this...eagle...lands beside me, right over there. But this bird has three faces, three women. And the eagle says to me: 'the baby is crying, my grand-child is crying to hear the drum again'" (44-45). After the eagle is gone, there is a woman's voice somewhere "singing something about angels and god and angels and god..." (45). This dream alludes to the power struggle between Christianity and Cree/Ojibway spirituality. Simon and Patsy have the important role of "bringing the drum back" (45), since he dances and chants and she has the medicine power. The drum and the traditional medicine are elements that have effects on the bodies, since they evoke the opening of the senses to a spiritual reconnection. Hence, Simon and Patsy's role is to engage community kinesthetically so that ceremony continues to be performed. Patsy Pegahmagahbow's baby is symbolic of a rebirth of spirituality and storytelling, and her rape is the attempt to prevent it from happening.

Highway's recovery of Cree/Ojibway trickster storytelling on stage transforms the genre of the play into a healing ceremony. Although violence is part of the facts and stories in the material world, the presence of death in the three plays does not signal a negative consequence of violence. On the contrary, the double logic of trickster discourse reasserts the existence of the spiritual realm, and death becomes part of the healing ritual. Just like Gabriel's death in Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* signals victory over the material world as well as impositions of Christian religion, since the trickster Fur Queen takes him to another realm, the deaths in the Rez Plays are part of this speech act of resistance and perform the healing that happens by the reassessment of the past, the cathartic release and the recovery of spirituality. In *The Rez Sisters*, Marie Adele is embraced by Nanabush on the way to the spiritual world, and her dance with him symbolically represents the passage to another realm. Patsy Pegahmagahbow's rape and Simon Starblanket's death in *Dry Lips* also cause Big Joey's catharsis and open the ground for healing and understanding. The last scene in which Zachary is the naked Ojibway man lifting the naked baby girl, and his wife Hera sits beside them, ironically subverts the image of Joseph, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, as well as signals a promise of renewal and survival of spirituality. Moreover, since there are no speeches, but only Nanabush's laugh off-stage, it is the naked bodies on stage that keep on telling the story and connect the audience to the healing ceremony. The notes that end the play show that this survival is an act of the Trickster, who is alive in contemporary Cree/Ojibway society: "Split seconds before complete black-out, Hera peals out with this magical, silvery Nanabush laugh, which is echoed and echoed by one last magical arpeggio on the harmonica,

from off-stage. Finally, in the darkness, the last sound we hear is the baby's laughing voice, magnified on tape to fill the entire theater. And this, too, fades into complete silence" (130).

The continuation of violence and imbalance between men and women in the three plays is part of the idea of the cycle, which is circular and encompasses repetition. Stories need to be told and retold again so that history and tradition are not forgotten and the audience finally learns the lesson which will bring transformation through the recovery of self-esteem and identity. In *Rose*, the trickster characters engage Emily into the continuity of this battle for balance and the end of violence against Ojibway women and spirituality. Rosabella's words to Chief Big Rose at the end of the play transform the stage into a space for ceremony, survival and resurrection:

...it's true what they say, the Elders, the medicine people, there is no death. No death. Only a going away, to another world, another dimension of this same old...Earth. We are still here, we will be here forever. Sixty thousand years, thirty thousand generations of us. They can kill us and they can rape us and shoot us and set our bodies on fire but we are still here, we will always be here, will never go away. Look all around you, we are here, all of us.... (135)

Cherokee Two-Spirit writer, activist and performer Qwo-Li Driskill recognizes the role of theater as suture for Indigenous peoples, and the importance of speaking of their wounds as part of social transformation. He believes that through the naming of the wounds healing can take place. In his words, the movements he sees in Indigenous communities, which also encompass theater, "are movements to heal historical trauma as revolutionary movements in-and-of themselves. Reclaiming our languages, practicing our ceremonies and engaging with our traditions are revolutionary acts against colonial powers" (157). Driskill also recognizes the roots of theater in storytelling, and believes that through theater oral traditions can be continued and new stories for a decolonized future can be imagined, since it provides the space for Indigenous people "to engage in the delicate work of suturing the wounds of history" (155).

Driskill's acknowledgment of colonization as kinesthetic wounding, and of Indigenous theater as kinesthetic healing shows how the resurrection of storytelling redefines the concept of genre as ceremonial performance, a ritual in which "the body is also a central site of healing and resistance. Theatre aids in decolonization because through it we can learn what decolonization and healing *feel* like. Native theatre helps us understand our histories, tell our stories and imagine our futures" (Driskill 155). Highway's "Rez Cycle" engages in his concept of "theatre as su-

ture" (155). His plays emphasize stories as the roots of literature and literary genres and the recovery of traditional storytelling through writing as a possibility of constructing knowledge that performs healing for the Cree/Ojibway community, resists the continuation of internal colonialism, and turns the literary text into a space for the performance of a sacred ceremony. He revolutionizes the idea of genre as performance and as speech act by moving beyond the concept of language as act to transform it into an element of the sacred unending ceremony of healing and survival. In his concept of Indigenous theater, the creation of feeling is a necessary component so that kinesthetic healing occurs.

An approach to Indigenous drama that acknowledges the theatrical genre as storytelling performance, as the one here applied to Highway's "Rez Cycle," not only contributes to the construction of Indigenous-centered criticism, but also highlights how Indigenous knowledges have interacted with Western literary tradition and have constructed singular forms of discursive expression. Such forms of discourse, as Indigenous drama exemplifies, go beyond the limits of the written literary texts to resurrect a storytelling tradition that is prior to Western literary definitions and involves, in our Western terms, religious, ontological, and philosophical as well as literary concerns. Therefore, a concept of genre as storytelling performance is able to respect not only the sacred aspect of storytelling, but also the holistic characteristic of Indigenous cultures, in which literature, or the telling of stories, plays a strong role in the construction of history, reassessment and continuation of mythology, as well as in the healing of the wounds of colonialism.

Wai Chee Dimock points to the challenges faced by those who work with genre theory today, and those who decide to move from the knowledge of text to the understanding of the written performance. She recognizes that "if the study of genre ends up being not even strictly language-based [...], if it takes us to popular forms as well as to adjacent disciplines such as anthropology, folklore, and performance studies, then literature itself might be part of a larger phenomenal field, feeding into it and being fed by it, a kinship network still more various and robust" (1384). I believe that Highway's "Rez Cycle" confirms literature as part of a larger phenomenon, since it acknowledges storytelling as genre. His recovery of storytelling in drama performs a humanistic healing act, which engages both Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors and audiences. He turns the stage into the space that gives continuity to the oral performances of Cree/Ojibway storytelling through a representation of past and present, history and myth, and through the performance of the rituals of sacrifice that inevitably produce feelings of transformation and healing in the body of participants and witnesses each time Nanabush

is resurrected. While Wood states that we will have neither the appetite nor the anxiety for stories when we are dead (1396), Nanabush comes to defy death and reassure continuity each time a story is told.

Rubelise da Cunha is Associate Professor of English and Vice-Coordinator of the Center for Canadian Studies at the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG), Brazil. Her recent publications include “A Path to Freedom, A Key to Real Being: The Transformative Power of Poetry and Public Reading,” an interview with Lee Maracle (Open Letter, n. 7, Fall 2008). She also co-edited with Eloína Prati dos Santos the second volume of *Perspectivas da Literatura Ameríndia no Brasil, Estados Unidos e Canadá (Perspectives of Aboriginal Literature in Brazil, the United States and Canada 2007)*. She has recently developed research on genre theory and Indigenous theater as a Visiting Scholar at Laurentian University (2008-2009). Her research is financed by CAPES, a foundation affiliated with the Ministry of Education of Brazil.

Notes

1. Drew Hayden Taylor mentions that there had been other plays by Indigenous authors prior to the *Rez Sisters*, Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths being the most notable authors, but it was Highway’s play that “tapped into the larger Canadian theatrical consciousness” (Native Theatre’s Curtain Call?” 29).

References

- Chamberlin, J. Edward
2003 *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories: Finding Common Ground*. Toronto: Alfred Knopf.
- Cruikshank, Julie
1990 *Life Lived Like a Story*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P.
-
- 1998 *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P.
- Derrida, Jacques and Avital Ronell
1980 “The Law of Genre.” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1: 55-81.

Dimock, Wai Chee

2007 "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA* 122.5: 1378-1388.

Driskill, Qwo-Li

2008 "Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization and Healing." *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics*. Eds. Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod. Winnipeg: Fernwood. 155-168.

Foucault, Michel

1989 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge.

Frow, John

2005 *Genre*. New York: Routledge.

2007 "'Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need:' Genre Theory Today." *PMLA* 122.5: 1626-1634.

Hengen, Shannon

2007 *Where Stories Meet: An Oral History of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada.

Hengen, Shannon and Joe Osawabine

2009 *Stories from the Bush: The Woodland Plays of De-ba-je-mu-jig Theatre Group*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada. (forthcoming).

Highway, Tomson

1988 *The Rez Sisters*. Calgary: Fifth House.

1989 *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Calgary: Fifth House.

1998 *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.

2003 *Comparing Mythologies*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P.

2003 *Rose*. Vancouver: Talonbooks.

Hoy, Helen

2001 *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude

1967 *Antropologia Estrutural*. Trans. Chaim Samuel Katz and Eginardo Pires. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro.

-
- 1989 *Antropologia Estrutural II*. Trans. Maria do Carmo Pandolfo. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro.
- Maracle, Lee
2007 "Oratory on Oratory." *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U P. 55-70.
-
- 2004 Personal Interview with Rubelise da Cunha. 4 June.
- Mojica, Monique and Ric Knowles (eds.)
2003 *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada.
- Taylor, Diana
2007 "Remapping Genre through Performance: From 'American' to 'Hemispheric' Studies." *PMLA* 122.5: 1416-1430.
- Taylor, Drew Hayden
1996 "Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 31.3: 29-38.
-
- 2002 "Canoeing the Rivers of Canadian Aboriginal Theatre: The Portages and the Pitfalls." *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*. Ed. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi. Brussels: P. I. E., 25-29.
-
- 2007 "Native Theatre's Curtain Call? Twenty Years Later, the Medium is Set for a New Stage." *This Magazine*: 29-31.
- Taylor, Drew Hayden and Elizabeth Theobald
1997 "Storytelling to Stage: The Growth of Native Theatre in Canada." *TDR* 41.3: 140-152.
- Todorov, Tzvetan
1990 *Genres in Discourse*. Trans. Chatherine Porter. New York: Cambridge U P.
- Wood, Michael
2007 "The Last Night of All." *PMLA* 122.5: 1394-1402.