

# In the Rhythm of Cree Samba: transculturality and decolonization in Tomson Highway's Theatre

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**ABSTRACT**

The voice that comes from Indigenous artists, writers and activists in the Americas, in artistic works which can be related to Mary Louise Pratt's concept of autoethnographic expression (1992), inevitably engages with discourses constructed about them in order to reconstruct or deconstruct colonial narratives. However, some artists seem to go beyond the discussion of a colonizing voice *versus* a response from the colonized, since they engage with practices that include Indigenous knowledge in a global perspective. This is the case of Cree Canadian artist Tomson Highway. He creates a transcultural and transnational work that challenges territorial and genre conventions in a kind of practice that can be related to what Diana Taylor (2007) denominates hemispheric performance. Highway is an artist and a cultural agent that participates in the exchange of knowledge between cultures and in the continuation of Cree/Ojibway storytelling. His openness to artists and critics from many different countries, as well as the experience of travelling abroad as a musician in his cabaret shows, underline the value of his plays as a means of cross-cultural dialogue which creates knowledge. In this article, I demonstrate that Highway's shows in cabaret style employ transcultural phenomena and explore how his experiences in Brazil and his knowledge of Brazilian music have been integrated into his theatrical production. I propose a poetics of tricksterism as Highway's strategy to engage with the world in a global perspective and at the same time reinforce Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions.

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Indigenous artists, writers and activists in the Americas inevitably engage with discourses constructed about them in order to reconstruct or deconstruct colonial narratives, as a response to the “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” which characterize the contact zone produced by colonial encounters, as Mary Louise Pratt points out in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (6). Pratt also analyzes the construction of decolonial discourses in what she calls “autoethnographic expression”, or “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms (...) autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (7). However, some artists go beyond the discussion of a colonizing discourse *versus* a response from the colonized, since they engage with practices that include First Nations knowledges in a global perspective, and remind us, as Diana Taylor states in “Remapping Genre through Performance: From ‘American’ to ‘Hemispheric’ Studies”, that “[i]dentities are far more flexible and relational than formulated in the national frameworks of area studies and ethnic studies” (1424). This is the case of Cree Canadian artist Tomson Highway, who creates a transcultural and transnational work that challenges territorial and genre conventions, in a kind of practice that can be related to what Taylor denominates hemispheric performance.

Taylor explains that “performance as genre covers a broad range of practices that convey different affective and epistemic positions. These practices usually include theater, dance, music, and other arts that involve public presentation, as well as a spectrum of other practices” (1419). Furthermore, “Performed behaviors (whether codified as ritual, dance, and music or described more informally as the aesthetics of everyday life) also transmit knowledge and the collective memory of various groups” (1425). Highway’s integration of his work as a musician, playwright, theatre director, and novelist demands a genre definition that is broader and is able to acknowledge Indigenous and Western cultural practices.

Tomson Highway is a Cree writer from Northern Manitoba. His best-known works are the plays *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, *Rose*, and *Ernestine Shushwap Gets Her Trout*, as well as the best-selling novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. He writes in three languages: Cree (his mother tongue), French, and English, and has already published some of his plays in those three languages. He is also fluent in two more Aboriginal languages, Dene and Ojibway, and has some knowledge of Spanish. Cree mythology is central to his work, and it seems that he becomes the Trickster (Weesageechak in Cree and Nanabush in Ojibway) when he wears so many disguises, or goes into so many

different kinds of metamorphosis, in order to transmit his art to the world. One of his most notable experiments is the libretto to the Cree opera – *Pimoteewin (The Journey)*, a work sung in Cree, with an English narrator who provides translations to the audience.

His openness to artists and critics from many different countries is evident in his support of the translations of his works into other languages and his contacts with writers and critics from all over the world (Brazil, USA, Germany, Spain, Japan, and other countries)<sup>1</sup>. A classically trained pianist and composer, Highway has written music for his plays, as is the case of the musical *Rose* and his children’s play *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito*. The musical pieces from these two plays were transformed into a musical show in a cabaret style – with Tomson Highway as pianist, Patricia Cano as singer and performer, and a local saxophonist is invited to be on stage with them in every tour they make. The cabaret shows, which travel all over the world, have been fundamental for Highway’s diving into other cultures, which transforms his own writing.

In “From ‘Sisters’ to ‘Comadres’: Translating and Transculturing Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*”, Pilar Somacarrera studies her experience of translating Highway’s play *The Rez Sisters* into Spanish. She focuses on the processes of translation and transculturation that take place in this transference and refers to Fernando Ortiz’s idea that transculturation can only occur if different cultures come into contact with each other and undergo some “disadjustment and readjustment” in the process (Somacarrera 42; Ortiz 98). In this article, I start from the assumption that Highway’s cabaret-style shows are transcultural phenomena and explore how Highway’s shows and travelling experiences in Brazil and his knowledge of Brazilian music have been integrated into his theatrical production. I propose a poetics of tricksterism as Highway’s strategy to engage with the world in a global perspective and at the same time reinforce First Nations cultural and spiritual traditions. The latest outcome of his tricksterism can be observed in the composition of a Cree samba in his play *The (Post) Mistress* (2013).

<sup>1</sup> One example is Pilar Somacarrera’s translation of Highway’s play *The Rez Sisters* (1988) into Spanish entitled *Las Comadres de la Rez*, published by the Canadian press Fitzhenry & Whiteside in their imprint Fifth House in May 2014.

## TRICKSTERISM: THEATRE, MUSIC, AND THE STORYTELLING GENRE

In an earlier article<sup>2</sup> I recovered Highway's definition of mythology as a narrative about the spiritual movements of peoples across the landscape (*Comparing Mythologies* 19) and focused on how Highway's plays recover Aboriginal storytelling and the feminine divinity of Indigenous mythologies. I argued that his conception of drama encompasses the literary genre from a perspective that centers on Aboriginal knowledge, and reinforces the origins of theatre 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, that is, to Mother Earth (Cunha 174). This argument is relevant here since Highway's movements across the globe are central for the production of transcultural art forms and for his commitment to the continuation of trickster storytelling. As Lina Perkins observes, in Highway's plays the trickster is a character as well as being a cultural figure:

Nanabush is neither a contemporary nor a readily available figure; he is a figure brought back from the past of a culture that no longer exists in any coherent form. The point of Nanabush's presence is that he has been forgotten, at least in part, and needs to be recovered. Because the Nanabush in Highway's work is a memory figure, he is subject to the exigencies of time, change, and human perspective. (206)

In "Traditional Values and Modern Concerns: The Committee to Re-establish the Trickster" (1997), Gundula Wilke explains that Highway recreates and reworks Aboriginal mythology in order to communicate with those who have moved away from their Indigenous communities into urban settings. In his essay "On Native Mythology", Highway highlights that in order for these myths to be relevant for his life, to his own system of spiritual beliefs, he has to "apply these myths, this mythology to the realities of city living" (29). Wilke also states that this adaptation to new situations is something intrinsic to Native cultures and mythologies, saying that "Native, orally transmitted mythologies, and Native cultures have never been static but were constantly adapting to new life situations" (10). Her argument works in a more generalized way, since she does not acknowledge any First Nations culture specifically. Lynn Mario T. M. de Souza echoes Wilke's ideas when analyzing the culture of the Kashinawa in Brazil and the symbology of the anaconda. He points out that the openness to a radical otherness, which is dangerous and at the same time desirable,

<sup>2</sup> In this essay I recover some arguments from the article "The Unending Appetite for Stories': Genre Theory, Indigenous Storytelling and Tomson Highway's 'Rez Cycle'", published in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* XXIX, 1&2 (2009):165-182, to explore how Highway's tragicomic genre is able to translate into English both Cree spirituality and the double logic of samba.

is symbolized in Kashinawa culture by the figure of the anaconda that cyclically changes its skin, and survives due to its necessary and constant periodical changes:

the logic of their cultural hero, the anaconda spirit; their openness to alterity and change has meant that they have never remained the "same"; the way they are now is not the way they were 100 or 500 years ago; and this, for them, is not loss or diminishing authenticity; it is vitality, the vitality that comes from the exterior, which, like the anaconda, remains the "same" by constantly changing skin – a lesson to be learnt before embarking on any simple dichotomization of relativism/essentialism, a quest for lost authenticity, or even a quest for the preservation of a cultural substance. (Souza 15)

In Highway's plays, the trickster emerges in new guises after contact with the dangerous otherness of Western culture, and might have learned the lesson that it is not by a quest for lost authenticity but by adaptation that First Nations knowledge and culture may survive. Highway incorporates the philosophy of the trickster in the transcultural aspect of his work. In his regular experiences and in the performances of his cabaret shows in Brazil, he has played the trickster and has dived into Brazilian culture so that Brazilian music is integrated into his theatrical performances. In his contact with Brazilian culture, he incorporates the logic of the anaconda spirit and opens his art to the alterity of Brazilian cultures so that his trickster may wear a transcultural skin: in other words, the trickster becomes stronger when his Cree discourse incorporates the rhythm of samba.

In his Henry Kreisel Lecture at the University of Alberta, *A Tale of Monstrous Extravagance: Imagining Multilingualism* (2015), Highway defends the importance of multilingualism and considers music the original and only universal language. His knowledge of music and his career as a classically-trained pianist have been fundamental for his acknowledgment of Brazilian culture through a language that is universal – music, and a musical rhythm that has been so symbolic of Brazilian identity – samba. Samba is well known as an important element of Brazilian identity and cultural heritage. It has been defined as a sung dance, of African origin, in binary rhythm with obligatory syncopated accompaniment (Rangel 54, qtd. in Appleby 112). Although the rhythm is more recognized internationally as a result of the worldwide knowledge of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival, Guillaume Samson and Carlos Sandroni stress that the history of Brazilian popular music reveals a strong connection between Rio *samba* and Bahian *samba de roda*:

The latter was in fact often described as the “root” (and Bahia as the “cradle”) of Rio samba (or “*samba carioca*”). The narratives surrounding the origins of *samba carioca* emphasized the role of Bahian immigration to Rio in festivals and among the Bahian “aunts” such as Ciata, Presciliana (Donga’s mother), Amelia (the mother of another celebrated Rio “*sambista*” named João da Baiana, or “João, son of the Bahian woman”). *Samba* thus gradually evolved into a new form in Rio de Janeiro and, although scholars such as Alves (2002) and Lopes (1992) have criticized the simplistic nature of these narratives because they do not account for other influences, Bahian *samba* remains an unavoidable historiographic reference for Rio *samba*. (543)

The rhythm originally known by the term “semba” (from Angola) came to the Northeast coast of Brazil in the beginning of the sixteenth century when slaves were brought from Africa to work in the plantations of South America. Samba evolved to acquire a spiritual and political significance from what was initially an attempt by the slaves to preserve their African culture. During this period, the spread of religion was of the utmost importance, and for those who did not know the difference, the helpers, gods, or protectors that the African people worshiped were much like the saints of the Catholic religion. The slaves were therefore able to worship their *orixas* through song and practice, while others believed that they were practicing Christianity and helping the spread of religion. After slavery was abolished in 1888, people of African descent migrated south and began living near Rio de Janeiro, the birthplace of samba music. Despite the initial negative reaction to it and the attempts to suppress it, samba music continued to become more and more popular.

The migration of samba from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro made samba more than just music, as it became a dance and way of celebration. Samba music continued to evolve and became a part of the Brazilian culture and people, more than just those of African descent. Samba music started out with flutes, stringed instruments, and handheld percussions. Later in the 1930s the “batuques,” or African drums, were added and samba was integrated into the Brazilian Carnival, a large celebration with parades and celebrations (*Samba*).

The origins of samba show its importance as a means of resistance for African people who were forcefully removed from their homeland in the terrifying displacement caused by slavery. In their tragic journey to Brazil in the slave ships, African people sang and danced samba to express their suffering and as a means of survival, as composers Roberto Mendes and Capinam sing of a samba born in the hull of a slave ship: “The drumming of the waves on the longest of the evenings/ taught me how to sing”<sup>3</sup> (Birmingham 50).

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese: “O balanço das ondas nas noites mais longas/me ensinou a cantar”. The song “Yáyá Massemba” was composed by Roberto Mendes and Capinam and performed by Maria

Their song “Yaya massemba” became internationally known in the voice of Brazilian singer Maria Bethânia, and reminds us of the origins of samba as resistance to violence and oppression.

Samba can also be considered strategical as a means of maintaining African identity and culture, since African slaves were able to subvert the Catholic religion and preserve their spirituality. Therefore, samba is emblematic of spiritual survival and hope for the future. Although samba and Brazilian Carnival are usually associated with happiness, the logic of carnival stresses the suspension of a reality of oppression for a celebration of happiness that is temporary, although it empowers the oppressed in their efforts to change a social order of inequality. The coexistence of sadness and happiness, crying and laughter, are fundamental for the understanding of samba, so much so that Baden Powell and Vinicius de Moraes state in their world famous song “Samba da Benção” (Samba of the Blessing) that one needs sadness to compose samba, because “samba is sadness that sways”<sup>4</sup> (my translation). Such a statement incorporates the tragicomic logic of the trickster and shows how close the language of samba and the language of trickster storytelling might be. Highway writes his plays in a tragicomic mode so that they recreate the double-edged discourse that is performed by Nanabush, while at the same time they recover the ritualistic and ceremonial characteristics encompassed in Ojibway storytelling (Cunha 174). By learning how to sing and dance samba, the trickster is empowered in its double logic that incorporates sadness and humor, suffering and hope.

#### TRICKSTERISM AND CREE SAMBA: ROSE AND THE (POST) MISTRESS

The influence of Highway’s Brazilian musical experiences can be firstly observed in the song called “Rio in High January”, which is sung and played in *Rose* (2003), as a possibility of escaping sadness and suffering. *Rose* is the third play in his ‘Rez Cycle’, which also includes *The Rez Sisters* (1988) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). These three plays take place in the fictional reserve of Wasaychigan Hill, on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. The 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

Bethânia in the album *Brasileirinho* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> In Portuguese: “O samba é a tristeza que balança”. “Samba da Benção” was composed by Baden Powell and Vinicius de Moraes and performed by Maria Bethânia in her album *Que Falta Você Me Faz: Músicas de Vinicius de Moraes (How I Miss You: Songs by Vinicius de Moraes)* (2003).

of Western values. 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. The character that becomes the embodiment of violence is Big Joey. While *The Rez Sisters* centers on the seven women from the reserve and *Dry Lips* on the seven men, *Rose* focuses on the battle between male and female forces, since a woman, Chief Big Rose, becomes chief of the reserve for the first time.

Highway's political statement in defense of women is recurrent in his plays, and as I defended in an earlier essay (Cunha 178), the trickster characters Rosetta, Rosabella Jean Baez, and Chief Big Rose perform this connection between the material and the spiritual realms to engage Emily Dictionary in the continuity of this battle for balance and the end of violence against Ojibway women and spirituality. As Perkins argues, "the play's emotional centre is not Nanabush himself but the ways in which other characters relate to him" (206). Since Nanabush appears in the form of three spirits who can interact with the material world, the trickster transforms the stage into a space for ceremony, survival and resurrection, as we observe in Rosabella's words to Chief Big Rose at the end of the play: "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; ellipses in the text).

Samba appears in the play for the first time in the emblematic scene of Big Joey's castration – Scene Thirty-Six A: Big Joey's Basement, in which the song "Rio in High January" is played and sung as an act of resistance to Big Joey's violence. The women prepare a trap for Big Joey by sending Liz Jones to seduce him so that they can castrate him as revenge for his physical abuse and violent mutilation of Pussy Commanda. Firstly, Liz seduces Big Joey and starts singing the song as an invitation so that they escape to a place like paradise:

Let's escape, let's fly, you and me, to some place far, far away, where no one can hurt us, where no one can touch us...  
*(Starts singing)* "Rio in high January, the beaches of Rio,  
 Just the thing to do this year don't you fancy Rio, Brazil;  
 Oh the sun and the waves of the ocean, oh yes;  
 I so wanna go to that city and learn how to samba and hey!" (140; ellipsis in the text)

In Scene Thirty-Six B: The Hospital Room, Pussy Commanda appears in her hospital bed "barely alive, singing weakly, and slowly, the slow 'interlude' to the song, 'Rio in High

*January*" (140). The change from the setting of seduction, in which Liz and Big Joey dream of the beaches of Rio, to the dreadful situation of Pussy Commanda in the hospital strategically emphasizes how the song encompasses the logic of the trickster that is characteristic of samba as both a way to celebrate hope and happiness and as a strategy of survival for escaping sadness and suffering. Big Joey's castration in the following scene also happens when "Rio in High January" is played, as women act "to put their seal on the ultimate pact" (141) against the oppression represented by the male characters. There are no speeches, but only the production notes with the music to be played: "*When the instrumental break starts (and the samba rhythm has returned), the woman [sic] march into Big Joey's basement – HERA, VERONIQUE, PHILOMENA, ANNIE (...), all moving slowly, as in a ceremony*" (141). The ceremonial aspect of the scene stresses how the play, the performance and the music encompass both a political and a spiritual dimension, so that Big Joey's castration becomes a sacrificial ritual of healing and redemption for women, since it is watched by the trickster female characters who are in the spiritual world, and whose deaths resulted from male violence that in its turn is a consequence of the oppression of colonialism. Emily is the character who has the role of performing the most dramatic part of the ritual:

*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 to 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 – all as ...* (141; ellipsis in the text)

The tragicomic characteristic of Highway's plays is clearly underscored when the violent scenes of Pussy Commanda's torture and mutilation and Big Joey's castration are followed by a celebration of the end of the phallogocentric order on the reserve. Big Joey's castration is celebrated in Carnival style as "Rio in High January" continues to be played. Male characters enter the stage dressed in skimpy bikinis, adopting the sensual characteristic associated with Brazilian women during Carnival, so that aggressiveness and violence are subverted in a comic way:

*The stage explodes with all the men in the show (except, of course, BIG JOEY and CREATURE) dancing on dressed in "dental floss" bikinis, Carmen-Miranda-fruit headdresses, penis-shaped maracas in hand ... and dancing a samba from hell! And*

singing (with the women, as the latter take BIG JOEY down gently, and wrap him in the poultice, bandages, a bathrobe, etc.). (141)

In *The (Post) Mistress* (2013), Highway incorporates his trip to South America in 2007-2008 into another trickster performance. This play results from a cabaret show whose premiere was held in Sudbury on August 7 and 8, 2009. The play was first produced in 2011, and it was subsequently published in 2013. The main character is Marie-Louise Painchaud, a forty-nine-year-old francophone woman who grew up and lives in Northern Ontario. She is the postmistress at the post office in Lovely, a small town in a farming community, in francophone Northern Ontario, near the mining city of Complexity. The monologue by Marie-Louise has two acts, in which she tells the audience the stories of the local inhabitants by reading their letters through the envelopes. As traditional First Nations storytellers often do to introduce their performances, Marie-Louise starts the play by introducing herself and identifying her ancestral roots:

In fact, my ancestors here go back four generations to the time my great-great-grandfather, Armand Boulanger, and his wife, Hortense, came here as a newly married couple from Alma, Quebec, near Lac-Saint-Jean, to avoid starving to death and when they got here – this was in 1860 – they gave birth to fourteen children one of whom was my great-grandfather, Lucien Boulanger who married a Cree Indian woman from somewhere up north and played the accordion as did his youngest granddaughter, my mother, Florence Poupette-née-Boulanger. (3)

Highway's depiction of Canada stresses how French and English interact in a land which was primarily populated by Aboriginal peoples and languages. He also acknowledges the fascination that Aboriginal Canada has had for researchers and scientists, from anthropologists to linguists, who inevitably take the risk of reproducing colonial practices by mapping languages and cultures. In *The (Post) Mistress*, the relationship between researchers and First Nations people is ironically represented by the description of Sylvie Labranche's Brazilian lover. Her lover writes to her once a month since he had to fly back home, after his term at the university in Complexity ended one year earlier, "back to his wife and children in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the sexiest city in the world" (4). Highway's transcultural journey in the Americas influences his reading of Canada in this play, as he approximates Cree and Brazilian cultural backgrounds:

He writes in Cree, can you believe it, this Barbaro Botafogo? Because, you see, my friend Sylvie Labranche is Métis – part Cree from Manitoba, part French from here –

and this Barbaro Botafogo is a ... a lingua, lingu... something or other whose specialty is aboriginal languages and who came to Canada to study the Indians though, myself, I have no idea why the Indians have to be studied, but anyway. (5-6)

Highway's Cree samba "Taansi, Nimiss"/ "(Hey, Big Sister)" is introduced in the play when Marie-Louise reads Labranche's welcoming words in her letter. She approximates the sounds that come from Cree to those of Brazilian Portuguese in a very comic style, and tells the audience that Botafogo speaks twenty languages, but Cree is his favorite one, because "if you sing it to samba," this Barbaro Botafogo has said to my friend Sylvie Labranche, 'sounds just like Brazilian Portuguese, same hot, sexy syllables'" (5-6). Highway chooses the city of Rio de Janeiro as emblematic of Brazilian identity in *Rose* and in *The (Post) Mistress*, just as Rio samba becomes the rhythm in which trickster Marie-Louise sings her song.

The tragicomic genre which characterizes Highway's trickster plays is also present in *The (Post) Mistress*. The story of Sylvie Labranche and her secret lover from Brazil starts Act 1 in a joyful tone; however, the mood is completely reversed when Marie-Louise introduces the story of Rosa Lee Johnson, who ends up killing her violent husband when he tries to shoot her. The ending of Act 1 shows a recurrent theme in Highway's plays:

alcoholism and violence against women. Here, Rosa Lee's husband Gus Cassidy, after "Having drunk ten whiskies at the Brew (...), would slap her with his hand now/ When she pleaded for his love,/He would tell her he loved her/Then attack her with one crunching shove" (31).

In musical terms, the mode of the play changes from samba to tango in Act 2, which might have also been inspired by Highway's stay in Buenos Aires in the summer of 2008. In the play, the letter from Irene Latulippe, in which she describes her adventures in Buenos Aires and her lover Ariel Juan Antonio Eduardo Pablo Augusto Alejandro Bellavista, is recited by Marie-Louise through the song entitled "When I Was Last in Buenos Aires, Argentina". The memories of Buenos Aires make Marie-Louise think about love and death, and she tells the audience about her first husband, Winston Turner, who died, and her second husband, Roland Painchaud.

As the second act develops, it becomes clear that Marie-Louise is the trickster of this performance. She transgresses the norms by reading the private stories of her clients, although she considers the effects the letters have on her as part of her job. The tragicomic mode of trickster narratives is incorporated in the letters selected by Marie-Louise since,

as she says, “they’re not all funny, these letters. Sometimes, they bring bad news, of death, for instance” (47). The last letter describes the funeral of Cree sculptor Zesty Gopher and contains a Cree prayer, which is prayed along with the funeral song “Some say a rose”.

In Cree mythology, the trickster (Weesageechak) is in an intermediate position between the living and the dead. It is right after singing the funeral song, in which it is said that “Some say that life on this Earth has an ending that comes/When the human heart beats no more” (50), that Marie-Louise admits she forgot to tell us she is dead. At this point, we understand the ironic title of the play, with the word “post” in brackets, and Marie-Louise’s expertise in reading letters through their envelopes:

So now that I’m dead – I mean, why do you think I can read letters through their envelopes? Ha-ha, tricked you, didn’t I?! – now that I’m dead, I work in this great big post office here in the sky handling mail between the dead and the living, letters they send to each other through their dreams – the human dream as the ultimate postal system: imagine! – an endless river of dreams that passes through these hot little hands of mine, so I’m very busy as you can see. (64)

The final words of Rosabella in *Rose* and of Marie-Louise in *The (Post) Mistress* reaffirm how the logic of the trickster is based on its intrinsic power of adaptation to resist and survive. The spiritual movements of Highway’s trickster across the landscapes acquire a global dimension, as his movement as an artist across the globe transforms his artistic work so that Ojibway and Cree knowledge are integrated into a transcultural form of art. Highway incorporates samba into his plays and theatrical performances and is able to communicate with both Brazilian and Canadian audiences in a sense that their stories of colonial oppression are acknowledged through music and literature.

In his essay “Why Cree is the Funniest of All Languages”, Highway defends that “languages are shaped by mythologies, world views, collective dream worlds” (164), and while the English language is marked by the first eviction from the garden narrated in Christian mythology, in Cree “there is no gate blocking the entrance – or the exit from – the garden (...). We are allowed into that garden of joy, that garden of beauty, to gambol about as much as we want to” (165), and the Trickster also lives inside the garden. Highway’s trips to South America affect the different guises that his trickster characters assume when he realizes that Brazilian samba also allows this entrance into the garden of joy, as much as the rhythm of samba and Brazilian Portuguese are associated with the humor, laughter and pleasure of Cree language. His Cree samba shows how North and South America integrate to challenge notions of colonial victimization and celebrate the continuation of

Cree mythology, as it is emblematic of how Black and Indigenous peoples have transformed sadness into laughter to survive and resist colonialism in the Americas.

Highway’s openness to Brazilian and Latin American cultures and his integration of different knowledges to redefine his identity as a Cree Canadian artist show the importance of rethinking decolonizing practices beyond the borders in which the colonial encounter took place. His Cree samba is not only a musical piece that recovers Cree spirituality as a strategy of resistance to colonial oppression in Canada, but also a means to express how the Black slaves had to become tricksters to subvert Christianity and maintain their cultural and spiritual heritages in Brazil, as much as Brazilians have learned how to dance in the rhythm of “the sadness that sways” to survive in conditions of social inequality and oppression. In his transcultural journey, Highway dives into trickster storytelling to recreate innumerable possibilities of survival in the contemporary world and reminds us that, as Taylor states, “none of these Americas exists independently of one another; we are all constantly bumping up against one another in ways that challenge any pre-fixed notion of place or identity” (1424).

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