

THE ROOTS OF CREE DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the foundation of contemporary Cree performance, tracing its existence to traditional Cree narratives. Contained within traditional Cree stories is the trickster, *Wasakaychak*. These oral stories are shared collectively, providing the community with relevant cultural knowledge. The thesis concludes that contemporary Cree playwrights and performers such as Shirley Cheechoo and Margo Kane maintain the roles of traditional storytellers because their work informs its audience about the history of the land and also comments on the state of the community. This study further demonstrates how the mythological character, *Wasakaychak*, remains an active part of Cree society by examining his significance within Tomson Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

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I would like to thank Eddie Bellrose (deceased) for sharing with me his comical and entertaining version of the *Wasakaychak* Creation Story. It is through his commitment, as a storyteller, that I was able to recover precious Cree cultural knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

This study was initiated because, as a performer, I felt it was necessary to acknowledge how Cree culture influences the realm of contemporary Cree performance and theatre. After examining Cree performers and their plays, I came to the conclusion that traditional Cree stories are the sources of knowledge and inspiration for many of these creative works.

I read numerous books, adaptations, and translations of traditional Cree stories. Contained in these books were the stories of Cree mythological beings. After studying these readings, I realized that the "performative" aspect of Cree storytelling is crucial for the survival of Cree culture. The function of a storyteller is to bring to life the characters and memories that arise from Cree people's experiences with the land. Essentially, the storyteller provides a history lesson, based on Cree values. I find it more moving and captivating to witness a storyteller perform rather than to learn about Cree mythological beings from a book.

Included in this thesis, then, is a recreation of an actual "telling" of a Cree traditional story. I hope to demonstrate how the storyteller creates a theatrical environment based on how he incorporates dramatic elements,

such as movement and sound, into a telling. Another non-textual source that I relied on in this thesis is a story told to me by my mother, Marina Manossa. I refer to it as the Granny Story and I've included it in this chapter, reinforcing the position that a contemporary Cree performer can and should rely on Indigenous contexts for creative sustenance.

As previously mentioned, I read numerous plays authored by Native Americans, as well as any available literary criticism about these plays. A common theme contained in all the plays I read focused on identity issues. The plays provide the performers and writers with a venue to communicate issues and concerns that are relevant to contemporary Native people. After deciding to include the Cree Creation Story as part of the opening chapter, I felt committed to focus on Cree plays and performances. The focus of this thesis is to acknowledge how Cree culture evolves to inspire both traditional and contemporary forms of performance. My commitment to the Cree works in this thesis also reflects the vast numbers of plays available. I decided to limit my research to plays created, performed and written by Cree people.

One of the most useful articles for this study was Floyd Favel-Starr's, "The Artificial Tree: Native Performance Culture Research." This article is among the few literary

resources which examines the methodologies of what Starr-Favel calls Native Performance Culture. I am hopeful this thesis will serve as a resource for those who are interested in examining the relationship between contemporary Native performance and traditionally based knowledge that evolves through storytelling. Based on my research there is no thorough study which examines this particular topic.

Finally, as a Cree contemporary performer, I felt I could use this opportunity to incorporate, into this study, my own experiences with performance. Ultimately, as a performer, the research and the reading of specific plays influenced the outcome and creation of my own performance work. I briefly mention this process (where applicable) in the following chapter introductions.

In order to discuss the relationship between the traditional storyteller and the contemporary Cree theatrical performer in Chapter One, I recreate the telling of the Cree Creation Story. This traditional story lays the groundwork for the entire thesis because I want to remind the reader that the inspiration for Cree performance is based on Cree philosophy. The manner in which the storyteller incorporates movements and sounds into his telling are based both on personal and shared knowledge from other Cree historians or storytellers. This traditional story is told by the late Eddie Bellrose and features the Cree trickster *Wasakaychak*.

Floyd Favel-Starr's methodologies on Native Culture Performance are explored and related to both Eddie's telling of the *Wasakaychak* Creation Story and the Granny Story.

My second chapter examines two plays, Shirley Cheechoo's, *Path With No Moccasins* and Margo Kane's *Moonlodge*. Both plays are one-woman shows, as the playwrights have also been the original performers. Through their writing and performance, both Kane and Cheechoo embody Cree culture. This chapter examines the text and performative elements of the plays. Ultimately, the themes contained in both plays serve as a reclaiming process for cultural identity. That is, since both characters have experienced Cree cultural loss, both plays deal with the role of memory in re-creating culture.

Kane's play, *Moonlodge*, definitely influenced a performance piece that I was working on at the time of my research called, *Mint Tea*. Like *Moonlodge*, *Mint Tea* is based on memories, and that is how my character is able to embrace her Cree culture. Also, the transformative qualities that a traditional storyteller possesses during a telling are related to the performance qualities contained in the two plays.

In this chapter, I also discuss the methodology that I used to create my play, *Mint Tea*. I acquired the methodology

from Floyd Favel-Starr. Incidentally, he directed *Moonlodge*, and so I focus on Kane's utilization of Favel-Starr's methodology as a source for the creation of *Moonlodge*.

Chapter Three reintroduces *Wasakaychak* into the thesis because the trickster character is central to both of the plays examined in this chapter. Playwright Tomson Highway refers to the trickster as *Nanabush* in both of his plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Highway uses the Ojibway word for trickster, rather than the Cree word *Wasakaychak*. In the production notes of *Dry Lips*, he explains:

both Cree and Ojibway are used freely in this text 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)

There are numerous sources of literary criticism on both plays, and I mainly used theatre reviews to discuss the character development and themes of these plays. I discovered that for *The Rez Sisters* I focused more on the play's character development to address its dramatic outcome. In my analysis of *Dry Lips*, my discussion of this play relied more on critical literature which focused on the

traditional roles and functions of the trickster. I also further analyze the performative qualities of Eddie's *Wasakaychak* Story, demonstrating similarities between Highways' *Nanabush* and Eddie's *Wasakaychak*.

This chapter acknowledges that for Highway writing is an act of resistance against the English language and cultural imperialism. Research into Highway's motives for using his writing as an act of resistance led me to create a dance piece titled, *Nimihitowin*, which in the Cree language means *the dance*. I created *Nimihitowin* as an act of resistance against the Indian Act of 1867 which included laws that banned Indian people from participating in their cultural dances.

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning of Cree Performance Culture

I have listened to many Cree interpretations of the *Wasakaychak* Creation Story, and each time the storyteller has insisted on including his or her own twists and experiences into the adventures of *Wasakaychak*. Each time, as well, the storyteller announced before the telling of the story that "this is how it really happened." One of the most memorable occasions I recall was when I was eighteen. I graduated from high school and was admitted into a Native Communications/Journalism course at a local college. Before classes started in the fall each admitted student was required to participate in a cultural camp, held during the summer, near the Rocky Mountains. I was the youngest student among my peers and listened for the next seven days to a lifetime of knowledge from the Elders who taught there. Ten students attended the camp, along with the head of the Native Communication/Journalism Program and two spiritual advisors. Eddie Bellrose, one of the spiritual advisors, had done a lot of counseling and healing work in northern communities. So, there we were, thirteen of us, all of us strangers to each other.

On the first night we gather into a sitting room. Eddie sits down in a brown leather recliner. He weaves his

fingers through the holes on the worn armrest. A few of us congregate around the doorway; his eyes give off a soft radiance, welcoming us with a content grin. Eddie's skinny braids rest below the front of his shoulders. He motions us with his shaky hand, to come in and sit. "My girl," he says, pointing with his lips, "Sit there." I sit next to him. His gesture of calling me, "my girl" brings me home to my family. Relatives older in age and family friends, when visiting our home, would talk to us kids in this comforting manner. Feeling more at ease, I nestle into my chair and scan the room. Two other students, Tom and Harley, continue a quiet conversation, laughing occasionally. The rest of us watch Eddie as he quietly rolls a cigarette and still proceeds to roll a couple of extras. I think to myself, "Yep, this is going to be a long night." Eddie looks up as he finishes licking the last of his rolled cigarettes and begins, "Okay, tonight I'm going to tell you about *Wasakaychak*."¹

Eddie is wearing a plaid shirt neatly tucked into brown pants. He appears at ease with everything he does. He slowly brushes off the leftover tobacco that has fallen onto his shirt and pants while rolling his cigarettes. Eddie focuses his attention on lighting his cigarette; he takes a

This is a recreation of Eddie's storytelling rather than his actual quoted words. I have chosen to follow the format of creative writing by representing Eddie's dialogue in quote marks.

puff and smiles, "Yes, he was quite the character, that one." I look around the room and everyone has a smile that seems to confirm Eddie's interpretation of *Wasakaychak*. Tom chuckles and elbows an already smiling Harley. Since we arrived at the camp, Tom is either smiling or laughing. Harley, more composed, nods his head a few times in response to Tom's elbowing. I laugh at Harley and Tom and soon the entire group is laughing. I look toward Judy, and she is shaking her head while laughing at the same time. I can tell by the quizzical look on her face that she really has no idea why she is laughing. Then Eddie begins, "This is how it really happened, a very long time ago."

"Okay, this one day, *Wasakaychak* and his brother were floating on a raft. They were not alone and had many of their animal relatives floating with them, down this river." Eddie pauses and takes a deep breath and heavily exhales. He hesitates and again takes another deep breath, as if it pains him to go on. "Okay, the earth is flooded because of *Wasakaychak*. He took revenge against the water creatures that had earlier killed his brother." Eddie's eyes solemnly search the room. He tilts his head to the side and shares his pain with us by cupping his chest with both hands. "Even though *Wasakaychak* brought his brother back to life, he still went ahead and killed those creatures." Bewildered, Eddie shakes his head. "Maybe the

water spirits took revenge too . . . cause I just don't know . . . I . . . ". He stops talking, as if lost in the spiteful actions of *Wasakaychak*. There is a look of puzzlement on everyone's face in the room except Tom's. Tom cannot contain his grin anymore and quietly laughs to himself. I want to laugh too because of Tom's flightiness. I also wonder why *Wasakaychak*, even though his brother was brought back to life, decided to kill these creatures. I remember asking my brother, Basil, the reasoning behind *Wasakaychak's* actions. He didn't really know either, but he did inform me that *Wasakaychak* was warned by a medicine man that a flood would occur if these creatures were killed. It was based on this warning that *Wasakaychak* built a raft; he knew the consequences of his actions.

Eddie's voice lowers and he looks around the room. "Shhhh . . . " he continues. The room is quiet and still. He captures our attention further by waving his hands toward himself. "Closer," he says. Everyone except Harley leans forward. He sits back, in a reclined position, with his arms folded over his chest and nods his head. The rest of us wait anxiously for Eddie to speak. "You know the one thing he forgot to do?" Eddie asks. Eddie drops his head into his hands and shakes his head in disbelief. "That *Wasakaychak* forgot to do something very important. What was it?" He asks again. Tom, confidently blurts, "He forgot to

grab a piece of the earth." Cheryl meticulously picks the lint off of her cardigan. Yawning, she says, "That's *Wasakaychak* for you."

Not everyone at the cultural camp is Cree, so the entire group may not be familiar with the *Wasakaychak* creation story. I did get the feeling though that the entire group could identify with the excitement, energy, and multi-dimensional personality of *Wasakaychak's* character. Within all Indigenous communities there exist numerous oral stories, containing many mythological figures. Kenneth Lincoln writes in *Native American Renaissance*:

Storytelling personally brings people together; it engages them collectively in giving and receiving the events of their lives . . . people share and pass on information, values, and beliefs through stories. They are entertained while learning their culture's crafts, skills and means of survival. They historically mark and recount events worth remembering, so that culture extends history as a collective experience." (223)

Creek scholar and writer Craig Womack also recognizes the significance traditional oral stories has within Native cultures, viewing these stories as "a body of symbols that deal with Indian pride, Indian activism, Indian resistance" (61). Womack urges us not only to acknowledge how these stories served the Native community in the past, but how the

"symbols" contained within "the oral tradition, might be used [presently] as a model for building nations in a way that revises, modifies, or rejects, rather than accepts as a model, the European and American nation. Oral tradition then becomes a useful tool rather than an ethnographic artifact" (60).

In general, a trickster character is overly confident, boastful, arrogant and conceited; he seems to ridicule with his shortcomings. Even though *Wasakaychak* is capable of transforming into various beings, his powers are limited, and in the end he is held accountable for his wrong doings. For Cree people he is responsible for the creation of many land formations that exist today. We are part of *Wasakaychak's* journey and have been since time immemorial; we see ourselves in him. This is why Tom found the events leading up to Eddie's announcement of *Wasakaychak's* misfortune so entertaining; he was familiar and could relate to *Wasakaychak's* fate.

In all of the adventures of *Wasakaychak* it appears that *Wasakaychak* may succeed in tricking an unsuspecting creature or being; however, an unforeseen event occurs, catching *Wasakaychak* off-guard. Eddie's voice is calm, and once again he is ready to continue. "That's right," he says, "*Wasakaychak* is always ahead of himself . . . you know . . .

always trying to trick the animals and not thinking clearly. That's why he gets into so much trouble . . . he tries to do too much at a time." Eddie sits back in his chair and lights another cigarette and comfortably rests his hands on his round stomach. Like Tom, I have laughed or held my breath, anticipating the consequences *Wasakaychak* will face, due to his hasty and careless actions. I laugh because *Wasakaychak's* character always assumes and believes that everything is going to end up the way he envisioned. However, just when one assumes this character is going to succeed in tricking or conning someone, his scheme falls apart, leaving *Wasakaychak* scrambling for order. Eddie's voice interrupts my thoughts. "So for many days and nights, *Wasakaychak*, his brother, and the animals floated on the raft, in search of land or even the tiniest speck of dirt."

Eddie shakes his head and butts out his cigarette. "It doesn't look too good for them. They have no food and the animals are getting tired." Eddie sighs. "So do you know what he does? He calls Beaver over because *Wasakaychak* knows he is a good swimmer." Eddie bolts upright and takes in a deep breath. He unbuttons the cuffs on his shirt and quickly rolls up his sleeves. Still holding his breath, Eddie sticks out his chest. I see the powerful and confident *Wasakaychak* emerge from Eddie's body. With his hands on his hips, he stands unyielding. Eddie's voice

deepens. He says, "my brother, Beaver, I need you to dive deep into the water until you reach the earth." Eddie makes out like he is diving, pushing the water to his sides, blowing air out of his lungs. He continues this diving motion like a wave flowing up and down. Still swimming, Eddie turns to Judy and says, "Beaver you are my brother, and I know you can do this." Judy smiles calmly and accepts Wasakaychak's request. Eddie takes another deep breath and continues the diving motion. His arms curve downward and then arc up; the rest of his body follows, curving like a snake. Eddie makes his way toward Colleen who is sitting next to Judy. Attempting to discourage Eddie's advance, Colleen curls up her body, hugging her legs toward her chest. She tucks her head into her arms. Tom chuckles loudly, which seems to cheer on Eddie. Even Harley is doubled over laughing. Eddie continues to dive, plunge, rise and swim around Colleen, but now each movement is greatly exaggerated. He sways his hips from side to side, adding some new choreography to the story. By this time, the whole room echoes with laughter. Tom is hysterical, holding his stomach; he laughs uncontrollably, falling off his chair. In a loud, drawn out voice, Eddie instructs Colleen. "You need to grab a speck of dirt and bring it up to me, and then I can make the land appear again." Peeking up at him, she nods shyly, giggles and drops her head into her lap,

hiding her face. Pleased with her response, Eddie relaxes and *Wasakaychak* disappears.

Eddie sinks into his chair and grabs a handkerchief from his pant pocket and gently blots his forehead. By now, he is out of breath but still continues. "The Beaver dived into the water," he announces. Eddie's hand shakes as he carries out the downward diving motion, this time like Beaver's paws dog paddling. He adds, "You know . . . those animals waited and waited for that Beaver to come up from the water, but it was a long time, and still he didn't show. They gave up, and thought that their brother, the Beaver, had drowned." Eddie's hands and arm movements flow gracefully from side to side, like waves washing upon shore. His upper body follows the wavy trail that his hands and arms are tracing out. His movements remind me of the waves back home in Calling Lake, gently washing against the sand. The sudden sound of Eddie's voice brings me back to the Rocky Mountains. He shouts, "From these waves came Beaver, gasping for air. It was *Wasakaychak* who pulled him from the water." Eddie's voice slows. "He didn't make it to the bottom. He has no dirt." Again, Eddie's body transforms into *Wasakaychak*. Sitting grand, he inhales, and his entire chest protrudes. Carefully, his eyes scan the room, until he finds another capable assistant. "You," Eddie's voice calls. His eyes focus intently on Harley. "It's up to you,

my brother, Otter. You must dive deep into the water until you reach the earth. We need just a small speck of dirt, even the tiniest particle will do. It's up to you, my brother." Harley sits up, honoured that *Wasakaychak* calls on him to help in the recovery of the earth. After announcing the dilemma to the Otter, Eddie settles back into his chair. It is as if he is waiting for a response. We all wait. The room is quiet. Harley looks toward us with admiration, as if we are the other animals on the raft. He doesn't speak, but nods his head self-importantly, accepting Eddie's request. We anxiously wait for the change in tone and rhythm of Eddie's voice. His voice is the orchestra that dictates the movements of his body. This is how he brings to life all the beings of the story. I look at my fellow listeners and notice that everyone is captivated by Eddie's presence.

He lights a cigarette, takes a couple of long puffs and lets the smoke escape out of the sides of his mouth. He opens his mouth to talk but stops. He rubs his forehead and briskly shakes his head. He is now ready to speak as if whatever he was previously going to say has escaped him. "The Otter really had no choice. His animal brothers were starving. There really was no one else who could do this, who could dive deep into the water and clutch some dirt." Eddie's "matter-of-fact" tone came about because he needed

to emphasize how important Otter's actions were for the survival of the entire animal community. In other words, *Wasakaychak* singles out Otter to help shape the destiny of all the animals; therefore, this gesture is not a time for the individual (Harley/Otter) to bathe in his own spotlight. Eddie puffs on his cigarette; he adds. "So, the animals waited and waited for the Otter to return. Things didn't look good. The animals wait for their brother to resurface from the blackness of the water." Eddie shakes his head from side to side, butts out his cigarette and exhales a mouthful of smoke. "Otter's body rose to the top of the water. He, like Beaver, was breathless. He didn't make it to the earth. He had no dirt for *Wasakaychak*." Eddie carefully scans his audience. He throws his hands up into the air, and asks us, "Now what?" We all sit quietly, waiting for Eddie's cue.

Harley sits in his usual reclined position, legs stretched out and arms folded over his chest. He focuses on the floor; his spotlight is dim. "All of a sudden, *Wasakaychak* and the other animals hear a tiny sound coming from the far corner of the raft." Eddie whispers. "It's coming from Muskrat. I will do it, Muskrat tells *Wasakaychak*. I will dive deep into the water and I will snatch some dirt for you." Eddie looks to us, posing another question. "Do you know what *Wasakaychak* said to

Muskrat?" We remain silent. He answers. "Nothing!

Wasakaychak brushed Muskrat off, by turning his back on his own brother." There is an urgent sound in Eddie's voice; his breath quickens. "And in that moment, a splash shakes the raft and Muskrat is gone. He disappeared into the water." I can hear the deep hollow sound that comes from Muskrat's plunge into the water. I can see the ripples of his dive, reaching the unsteady raft and still reaching outward beyond the deepest and blackest areas of the lake. Eddie quietly adds, "*Wasakaychak* dragged himself to the corner of the raft and sat there, slumped over. That *Wasakaychak* sure could pout . . . almost as well as he could gloat." Eddie slips in a smile, but then returns to his remorse. "*Wasakaychak* had given up, and some of the animals on the raft started to say their goodbyes to one another. It was a very sad moment."

Eddie's exhausted body lazily reclines into the armchair. Again, we wait in silence; we wait for the return of Muskrat. Out of the stillness, Eddie reaches his cupped hand forward, barely having enough strength to steady it in front of him. He holds that pose, and he stares beyond the walls in the room. In one motion, Eddie slowly lifts himself up from the chair, pulling and lifting something heavy toward his chest. It is Muskrat's body. Eddie's body shifts to a neutral stance, and he announces. "*Wasakaychak*

was the first to spot Muskrat's body surfacing. He alone picked him up from the water." Eddie repeats the same slow sequence of the pulling and lifting of Muskrat's body.

"*Wasakaychak* couldn't help but pity his brother. He laid his brother's lifeless body down on the raft and walked away." Eddie lowers his head, as if he were about to pray for Muskrat. He takes out his handkerchief and wipes along his forehead and around his eyes. Eddie takes some time to comment on the story, "Now, the animals really began to worry because they had never seen *Wasakaychak* act so lost. He always had a plan or trick for every situation, and most important he always had a back up plan." Eddie clears his voice. He whispers and pronounces every word quietly as if it were his last. "The raft continued to float on the lake without a word or sound coming from *Wasakaychak* or the animals."

Eddie lights the last of his rolled cigarettes and again leans back into his chair. He lazily blows the smoke from his cigarette toward the ceiling, where his eyes remain focused. "You see," Eddie says, "One of the animals discovered that Muskrat did get some dirt under his claws. *Wasakaychak* didn't even bother to look. He had given up hope on his little brother and didn't even check his claws." Eddie's body remains reclined in the armchair. Still looking up toward the ceiling in a daze, he continues.

"*Wasakaychak* came over to Muskrat and blew into his mouth, bringing him back to life. He took the tiny particle of dirt and began to roll it, and as he rolled it *Wasakaychak* blew into his own hand and the dirt grew and grew with each magical breath." Eddie leans toward his audience and manages to smile proudly at each of us, like we were his own children. I beam back at him.

During the course of his storytelling, some of Eddie's hair slipped out from his braids. His gray hair hangs loose around his jaw, and he clumsily brushes it away, tucking it behind his ear. Eventually, his hair wins out and remains dangling around his face. His performance ends. No longer transformed into *Wasakaychak* or the water, he, like the rest of us, enjoys the decline of the story's events. "Yes, *Wasakaychak* re-created the earth as we know it today. With his breath he grew forests and lakes. *Wasakaychak* wanted to make sure that the earth was large enough for everyone to live on, so he sent his brother, the Wolf on a journey to make sure it was. When his brother, Wolf didn't return after a long time, *Wasakaychak* knew the earth was large enough." Eddie grins. "You know something? *Wasakaychak* sure missed his brother, and he's been roaming the earth looking for him, ever since . . . really . . . Good thing, eh?" he adds, " . . . 'cause us Indians wouldn't have

anything to talk about, eh?"

Eddie is referring to the many stories that exist today which continue to be recounted by community storytellers. Contemporary *Wasakaychak* stories are a result of the encounters *Wasakaychak* has between his animal brothers and the land. There is actually a story about *Wasakaychak* misplacing his eyeballs, and about *Wasakaychak* whipping a birch tree, giving the birch its stripped markings. Eddie slaps his lap with one hand and wipes the tears from his eyes with another. Still laughing, he says, "Oh that *Wasakaychak* sure was something." A Cree person just has to mention the name *Wasakaychak* and people grin. How can we not smile when picturing *Wasakaychak* on the ground, clumsily looking for his eyeballs? I recall on many occasions, during a *Wasakaychak* story, thinking "oh no, not again," as *Wasakaychak* was about to trick yet another animal relative. From my experience a *Wasakaychak* story always captivates an audience. The listener never really knows how the storyteller will dramatize the story's events. I have seen one storyteller interpret *Wasakaychak* in a more "clown-like" fashion. Rather than portraying *Wasakaychak* the way Eddie does, where *Wasakaychak* appears physically powerful, forceful and strong, he made his physical attributes comical. This storyteller portrayed *Wasakaychak* slouched

over with a protruding buttock and arms as limp as spaghetti.

The collective manner through which knowledge, images, symbols, actions and humour are shared from listener to listener and from storyteller to listener is where I believe the essence of Cree performance arises. This is also the core of contemporary Native theatre. If someone asked me to imitate *Wasakaychak*, I could do so because he is so full of life, comedy, energy and magic. *Wasakaychak* comes from Cree land. Through our storytellers, we as listeners witness the movements, songs, and dances of water, trees, and various living beings. In Cree traditional stories, *Wasakaychak's* breath is magic, and he can breathe life into the dead. Through his breath he created the earth. For centuries Cree storytellers retained and passed on knowledge to their community. Today, thanks to the storytellers of Cree communities, I as a performer can approach my work and training based upon the history of my ancestors.

One story that I heard from my mother about my Great-granny has had a profound effect on how I view the ideas around sharing everything from food, to stories, to worldviews. My mother remembers eating a meal with her Granny outside of her tee-pee. My Great-granny refused to live inside a house, after they had been built for the people, and continued to live in her tee-pee, situated

beside her daughter's home. My mother remembers that her Granny made this terrific stew full of vegetables. I say terrific because usually Granny's stews consisted only of potatoes, turnips and moose meat. However, this stew was different. Not only did it contain its usual blend, but also the stew was full of carrots, peas, and beans. Both Granny and granddaughter slowly slurped and savored each spoonful. Their meal was interrupted, by the yells and screams of a man approaching the tee-pee. My mother said that the louder he screamed the more his face seemed to glow red. Clutched in his hand was a piece of string that he kept waving about while he yelled. Based on the anger and anxiety of this man in the long black dress, my mom thought that he was going to take the string to her Granny's neck. He didn't.

Earlier, the priest discovered some carrots, peas and beans missing from his garden. The priest had used the string to measure the footprints he found near the missing vegetables. He stood there, clutching the string, an invaluable witness, ready to prove that Granny was the guilty culprit. This man pointed at her feet and continued to scream at her in an unfamiliar language. He wanted to measure her feet. Unmoved by the priest's emotional outpouring, Granny disappeared back into the tee-pee and returned with a pair of non-matching black rubbers. Granny

wore the rubbers over her moccasins to protect them when she journeyed away from home. Granny was infamous for collecting and wearing mis-matched rubbers on her feet. No two pairs of Granny's rubbers matched up. So when the priest began the meticulous procedure of measuring the string to the size of each rubber, his calculations didn't work out as expected. Not exactly your Cinderella story, eh? The man was furious; he knew something wasn't quite right but couldn't figure it out. He took one last look at Granny, pointed his finger at her accusingly, muttered something to himself and stomped off. I'm sure he vowed vengeance, as my mother remembers it, because the two of them continued to share these bowls of hearty stew, and the priest made regular appearances at her Granny's tee-pee with his piece of string.

Granny's relations still came to see her, reminding her that the priest's vegetable garden was his and his alone. They hoped that these visits would stop this stubborn old woman from helping herself to the priest's garden. Like *Wasakaychak*, the stories of Great-granny shared among my family have the listener shaking her head in disbelief. When Great-granny is talked about in a joking manner, she is called crazy and eccentric. I view her, however, as a woman whose life was shaped by her experiences with her surrounding landscapes. Throughout her life, the earth had

nourished her and her children. So why was the priest's section of land (all of a sudden) any different from the rest of the territory that she knew so well? This story comes from Cree land and from the collective interactions of Cree community members and Cree land. These are some of the origins of Cree performance and contemporary Native drama.

Floyd Favel-Starr is a Cree from Poundmakers, Saskatchewan; he is a playwright, director and actor. In his article "The Artificial Tree," he defines Native Performance Culture as the "developing practices of our ancestors" (83). Before her death, Great-granny, like *Wasakaychak* continued to shape the land, even when it meant defying a priest, a government imposed authority figure within her community. She allowed the land to nourish her because according to her Cree worldview, food is a gift from the creator. In return, Great-granny would be both respectful and thankful in prayer to the land because it provided food for her and her family. The Great-granny story reminds us to continue looking at the land from a Cree worldview, asserting our right to maintain this relationship. Craig Womack articulates the role between the oral stories and the listener: "I would argue that oral traditions--legends and myths, if you will--performed in their cultural context have always been nationalistic and are told for the purpose of cultivating a political

consciousness" (61).

When Eddie tells a story, he acknowledges his listeners; therefore, he makes them part of his performance. Both the listener and the teller are actively involved in the process of storytelling; an exchange occurs. Eddie feeds off of the energy of the listener and something is shared, be it laughter or a new perspective. Sharing is vital to Cree performance because sharing is vital to Cree culture. Great-granny understood everything that comes from these lands has the potential to be shared. That is why she could never understand why the priest scolded her for taking from his garden. Storytelling is a time of sharing. Knowledge, humour, tears, songs and dances are shared collectively through the experience of storytelling. Storytelling is about sharing the history and knowledge about the land by recounting how beings since the beginning of time have interacted with it. According to Cree playwright Tomson Highway, in a speech he gave at the Native Theatre Symposium, when Native theatre performance is shared on stage, the audience witnesses "treasures that have been there for thousands of years. It [is] like finding a treasure chest filled with diamonds and silver" (2). Native performers are taking "the gems out of those chests [,] . . . showing them to a world that never realized what a richness of culture was hidden away just under the top

soil" (2).

Starr-Favel's article is based on his research of Native Performance Culture over a five-year period from 1991-1996. In an attempt to develop a working methodology for this research, he discovered it necessary to reduce Native songs and dances to their "bare essentials," and find the essence of what makes them Native (83). He feels this process, which he labels "reductionism," allows the Native performer to "isolate the basic building blocks of the song and dance, [where] these become the starting points for a creative and vital action" (83). These building blocks can then be developed, modified, revised or expanded. But since their Indigenous core has been carefully considered, they retain their Native cultural integrity in the face of artistic change (83). In order for Native artists to carry this out, we must know our own tribal songs and dances. It is up to us to conduct the necessary research. For Starr-Favel, the process of reductionism is the starting point for Native Performance Culture. Thus, we need to listen and learn from Great-granny stories, and as artists we should be able to be inspired from our land's powerful beings like *Wasakaychak*, Coyote, Raven and *Nanaboozoo*. Salish writer/performer, Lee Maracle reminds us that prior to the colonization of North America, there existed a theatre tradition for Native people: "Anyone who has seen those

story dances knows we have a theatrical tradition. Anyone who has watched Basil Johnston perform a story knows that the Ojibway have a theatrical tradition. We all have theatrical traditions. We all have theatrical tradition in our cultures [and] we haven't been schooled in that"(11).

Starr-Favel also points out that the artist's "starting points for creative and vital action" do not "differ in principle from other performance traditions" (83). An important distinction to mention between Western and Native Performance culture, however, is that for the Native artist, his or her "reference points are from Native culture [which] originate in this land. The artistic source is not transplanted and colonial" (83). To reiterate, the idea of working from an Indigenous source through songs, dances and stories reinforces the worldview of a Native performer whose creative starting points would then originate from the land of his or her ancestors.

Starr-Favel disputes the idea that Native Performance Culture is a fusion/synthesis of the traditional and the contemporary. He states that Native artists need to continue to develop and maintain a "working practical knowledge of our language, songs, dances, stories and histories" (85). In doing so, as artists we will continue like Great-granny to be influenced by a great worldview, reflecting and representing on stage who we are as

contemporary Native people.

Through Starr-Favel's research of the methodology of Native Culture Performance, he locates the root where Native artists can find their story, song, dance, rhythm and their spirit, without "internal conflict, colonization or beggary" (85). Native Culture Performance is not about Indian people on stage merely imitating Western theatre. As Starr-Favel discovered, Native Performance is its own culture, rooted, upheld, suspended and dancing from the magical breath of *Wasakaychak* and from the determination and stubbornness of our Great-grannies. A main distinction between contemporary Native performance and colonial Western theatre is that the roots of Native performance can be traced to the lands of this country. When Eddie tells a story, his sounds, words and movements are inspired from the land that he has experienced. When he imitates the sounds of the waves, unfolding upon a shore, it is a body of water that he has visited and experienced. It is a shore where his grandfather or great-grandfather fished and prayed and offered thanks. It may also be a body of water that the old people have warned Eddie to stay away from because *Wintigo* (Cree/Ojibway cannibalistic creature) has been spotted there. Native performance theatre comes from a specific source and entails a particular language, which unfolds movements true to the story. These specifics reflect Native

performance as distinct from Western theatre based on where the creative process arises. That is why Native performers, writers, and directors need to do the necessary ancestral research, so they can continually be inspired from these unambiguous and powerful sources. In his author's statement, Ojibway playwright, Drew Hayden Taylor sees himself as a contemporary storyteller carrying on the tradition of storytelling: " . . . Much like an actor or writer, a storyteller uses his body, voice and imagination to take the audience on a journey. If that is not the essence of theatre, Native Theatre, I do not know what is" (203).

CHAPTER TWO

Your Medicine Will Come From Your Own People

Contemporary Native performance is a celebration. Native Performance Cultures celebrates the journey Native people have endured in their homeland. It is through Native performance that stories unfold on stage through voice and movement. Native performance is a celebration of a nation's spirit. By revealing stories on stage in front of an audience, the evolution of Native performance culture bears witness to its power. In Native performance there exists recognition of spirit within the piece of work by its performer(s). What is this spirit and where does it arise? These are questions a performer explores through Indigenous song, dance and language. In June 1998, at the National Native Theatre Symposium, Cree playwright/actor, Margo Kane addressed the topic, "Culture, Spirituality and Native Theatre":

When we talk about languages we are talking about how it is that we communicate . . . the essence, the spirit, the message so that it touches your audience. It is not just what they hear, it is what you are trying to impart. They get that message in your spirit, how they see it visually, how they hear it . . . we talk about communicating and inspiring and

talking about issues, events and things that are important to our various communities. We are talking about getting at the heart of what it is we are trying to communicate. (9)

In this chapter, I will be focusing on two plays, Margo Kane's *Moonlodge* and Shirley Cheechoo's *Path With No Moccassins*. Based on these two plays, I will examine how each playwright transforms her experiences into her performance and writing based on issues that are both significant and relevant to the survival of Cree culture.

In Margo Kane's monologue play, *Moonlodge*, the audience is exposed to the lonely and lost spirit of the central character Agnes, who is separated from Cree culture due to an upbringing in the non-Native foster care system. In an attempt to connect her to her "tribal heritage," her foster mother agrees to enroll Agnes in the Brownies. Agnes participates in a typical Brownie gathering where she "earnestly drums in Hollywood tom-tom tradition," sings so called Indian songs, poses like a cartoon Indian with her "arms and legs crossed," and wears a headband and feather (89). By creating the Brownie scene, Kane portrays how disconnected Agnes is from her Cree roots, since she was raised in various non-Native foster homes: "The only Indians I saw were on television. I remember Walt Disney Injuns. They were pretty little princesses named Princess

Minni-Haha and big, fat redmen with flat noses" (90).

During the play's course of events, Agnes hitchhikes to San Francisco, rides a Harley Davidson, goes to Santa Fe, meets a character who resembles Marlon Brando, then encounters Lance (an Indian cowboy), a white wannabe shaman and Millie (an older Indian woman). It is through these people and places that Agnes tries to find out who she is. When Agnes decides that she wants to go home, she finds her way into a Cree ceremony called a Moonlodge: "Lance! Another Powwow? Uh-no, thank-you. There's somewhere else I've got to go" (105). Up until this point in the play *Moonlodge*, Agnes follows other people's journeys. Agnes realizes that she cannot find her Cree roots through the Brownies, through a wannabe shaman, or even by following her friend Lance from powwow to powwow. Kane makes it clear that Agnes can only learn about who she is as a Cree woman from her own people.

Within Cree culture, the Moonlodge ceremony celebrates womanhood. Women gather together during their menstruation to pray and to honour themselves as women, as life givers. Within the same context a woman's menstruation is referred to as "moon-time" or a woman is experiencing her "moon." Ojibway and Cree cultures are very similar in this teaching; when a woman is on her "moon," the presence of a grandmother-spirit is with her. Odawa/Ojibway elder, Edna

Manitowabi told me that a woman's moon-time is a sacred time; the woman's spiritual power is strong because of the spiritual presence of the grandmother. Thus, a woman's moon-time is an occasion for the woman to rest, look inward, question her life's journey and meditate because she has the wisdom, intuition and guidance of a grandmother-spirit. When Agnes joins the women in the Moonlodge, she feels at home and at peace with herself. She has finally found the Cree family that she has been longing for, the family that she was deprived of as a result of being fostered away from her community: "Outside the wind rustles in the trees. Inside the laughter ripples around the circle. It's like I've always known these women . . . They're like my aunts . . . They're like my sisters!" (83).

In the Moonlodge, she is relaxed, using her sweater as a pillow; she no longer imitates the stoic and stiff Hollywood Indian images that she learned from outsiders (106). Agnes is not watching a Hollywood version on television of what Indians are supposed to be doing; she is for the first time participating in a ceremony with other Cree women. Through her play *Moonlodge*, Kane takes the audience and her characters on a journey full of spirit, based in Cree culture. She uses the theatre as a vehicle to relay the "heart" of the issues that are alive in Indian communities. Obviously one of the main issues in *Moonlodge*

is identity. What Kane reveals through Agnes is the story of a Cree child who was removed from her family, and raised in non-Cree foster homes, without any regard given to her culture of origin.

Although the play *Moonlodge* is not based on Kane's life in particular, it is both personal and historical to her because it is a story that has surfaced from the voices of her ancestors, her culture. Kane explains in the play's foreword that in Canada during the "mid-50's there was a systematic effort to deal with the 'Indian problem' " (79). It was initiated and enforced by the Children's Aid Department, the church and police. It was a time when "Metis and Indian communities of the prairies feared 'the scoops' " (79). These outside authorities "literally scooped [children] into a car," taking them to foster homes, away from their families and communities, "without any reasonable explanation" (79).

This systematic removal of children would often happen over the span of a year in a particular [Native] community until there were no more children left. Many never saw their children until years later. Parents were devastated, whole villages destroyed . . . Many Metis and Indian people were illiterate at that time . . . They were ill-equipped to deal with government agencies. Native courtworkers and other translators

were unavailable to them. It is believed that

'scooping' was one of the last moves by the government to break the backs of the people. (79)

Moonlodge reclaims this moment in Canadian history and refers to this time as "scooping." In the performance of *Moonlodge*, Kane shows us what happens to a young girl when she is "scooped" away from her family and placed in non-Native foster homes. She tells us the story of Agnes, and through her memories we relive Agnes' resistance. Probably one of the most emotionally moving moments in *Moonlodge* is the actual scooping of Agnes and her siblings by the priest:

Mom: No you don't! They're my kids!

Agnes: Gy-yah! Ni Mama! Let me go! No!

Mom: No you don't! They're my kids! Eddie you take care of your brother. Robbie don't cry. Don't hurt her! Sarah stay close to your sister. Annie it will be okay. Agnes I'll come for you soon.

Agnes: The last time I saw my mother, she was runnin' down the road after the car. Why did they take us? (86)

Through Kane's characterization of both Agnes and her mom, we hear, feel and see all sides of this traumatic occurrence. We hear the mother's fight for her children. We feel the confusion and hurt of the child when she is removed from her home, never to see her mother again. None

of these events were revealed to me in high school Canadian history classes. Yet it is part of Canadian history. The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), Newsworld and Vision TV recently collaborated and produced a documentary titled *Residential Schools: Moving Beyond Survival*. In the media release, Rick Harp who co-hosts these television specials comments "you could travel from one remote area to another and hear an almost duplicate story" from the Indian survivors of the residential school system. He adds, "There are individuals who say, 'you weren't beaten, you weren't molested, so you weren't abused.' They are wrong--the abuse began with the removal of the children."

This removal of children would disrupt anyone's family and has been devastating to Cree communities, in particular disrupting storytelling, the passing on of Cree culture. The grandparents and the parents of the children who were removed from the community had no one to share their stories, their knowledge. There were no Indian children left in the communities. Those who did manage to take part in the transference of knowledge with Cree storytellers were forbidden to repeat those stories and were terrorized by church officials if they did. Unlike Eddie, the storyteller, there are some elders who refuse to talk about *Wasakaychak*. At the Elders Lodge in the Cree community of Wabasca, my uncle experienced an instance where some elders

remained silent when it came to talking about Cree beings like *Wasakaychak* or *Wintigo*. Their silence is the result of being removed from their families, placed in foster homes, or put in residential schools, without the security of being able to freely celebrate their Cree culture.

Native performance is both personal and historical for the Native audience. They recognize the stories being performed on stage as their own. Native playwright and actor Leonard Linklater believes that it is a sign of a successful show when the audience thanks him for "reflecting their lives on stage" (10). The non-Native audience is also empowered by Native performance because they are exposed to culturally specific Indigenous knowledge and education. In the play *Moonlodge*, the audience witnesses a reclaiming process by Kane because she defines "scooping" and the impact it has had on the Native community.

Prior to the written and staged version of *Moonlodge*, Kane states in the play's 'Notes' that she learned to "trust the 'voicings' that come from physical movement work and memories released in the process" (81). In March 1999, I wrote and performed *Mint Tea*, a one-woman multi-disciplinary show at the Buckskin Theatre Festival in Penticton, British Columbia.

Similar to Kane's experience in creating *Moonlodge*, I learned to trust the voicings that arise out of physical

movement work. My points of inspiration for generating material for the entire show came from this type of process. After going through various physical exercises, I recorded in my journal whatever thoughts and stories surfaced. Essentially this is how I created text, movement and vocal sound for the show *Mint Tea*.

The performance piece *Mint Tea* was inspired from Cree cultural contexts where I incorporated a trickster character into the rape scene. I chose the trickster because his character can be flashy, suave, and slick. As the sole performer of *Mint Tea*, I transformed from the main character into the trickster and finally back into the play's main character. These gestures came about from observing how storytellers like Eddie interpret the trickster and also from processes like Kane's where she engaged in physical movement work to discover memories. From these memories and gestures, she created the characters that appear in *Moonlodge*.

In *Mint Tea*, I relied on the mannerisms of the trickster to deceive the main character. In the play, the trickster rapes the main character to the sound-scape of a crowd cheering and heckling. I chose to include a scene like this because I have listened to stories where Cree women have been raped, and bystanders did nothing to aid the woman. While doing physical movement work, I recalled or

released the memory of hearing these rape stories. I remember the initial shock I felt, the outrage I experienced as I clutched of my hand, to my chest. These gestures appear in *Mint Tea*, acting as the catalyst for that particular character's story. I used the trickster as the rapist in *Mint Tea* because he is both a positive and negative force within the context of Cree storytelling. Within a single *Wasakaychak* story, the trickster can portray qualities ranging from sympathy to callousness. For instance, in Eddie's version of the Cree Creation Story, we witness *Wasakaychak*'s rejection of Muskrat. We are also exposed to a compassionate *Wasakaychak* where he alone hauls Muskrat's lifeless body from the water. I embody the essence of *Wasakaychak* into *Mint Tea* based on Eddie's interpretations. Thus, this process for generating creative material for the sake of performance serves as a means of conveying cultural and individual truths.

This exercise for producing creative material was introduced to me in 1991 at the Native Theatre School in Toronto under the direction of Floyd Favel-Starr. He believes that memories are stored in the body and that by engaging in certain movements and gestures the body will unleash memories and stories. He helped us tune into these stories, making us aware of any thoughts, ideas, or voicings that surface, as a result of the physical movement.

Cree poet, Louise Halfe, in her book of poetry, *Bear Bones and Feathers*, also acknowledges these voicings, which influence the content of her writing: " . . . the stories inside me demanded face. They became my medicine, creating themselves in the form of poetry" (127). Unlike Kane, Halfe does not indicate that she engages in physical movement work to generate ideas or create poetry. She listens to the stories that are contained within and similar to Eddie's points of inspiration; she draws upon her surrounding landscape. Through her poetry Halfe imparts a Cree worldview of the land similar to the themes contained within the Great-granny story; Halfe's poetry is sustained from the gifts creation offers. In the afterword of *Bear Bones and Feathers*, she writes:

Whatever traveled into my thoughts, I immediately wrote, no matter how absurd or obscure . . . I bore feelings that needed song . . . the wind blew its soul into my ears, and the water spoke its very ancient tongue. These stirrings were not unfamiliar since I come from a place where all creation and its gifts are naturally accepted. (126-27)

For Halfe, Kane, Starr-Favel, and myself, being able to listen, write and perform from the stories that are contained within validates our own experiences and recreates the history of our ancestors based on a Cree interpretation.

Agnes in the play *Moonlodge* reclaims self, community and Cree culture. This is how Agnes finds her way back to her own people, ending her pan-tribal searching. By entering the Moonlodge ceremony, Agnes is able to celebrate her Cree culture and her womanhood. In order for Agnes to tell her own story, she first needed to find her way home to her own people so she could celebrate and embody Cree culture, guided by her own voice.

In *Moonlodge*, Millie's character is an archetype of Indian communities. She is the woman that children "cling" to; she is the one who makes sure everyone has a cup of coffee; Millie is the woman who makes everyone feel welcome whether family, visitors or strangers:

Agnes: Lance? Mmmm! Coffee! At the next camp a woman pours steaming coffee into mugs and hands them around. A child clings to her skirt, her braids are swinging--Good morning! Coffee? Oh, yes. Thank you.

Millie: Help yourself to some cream and sugar . . . my name is Millie. Agnes. That's a good Cree name. Are you Cree? You don't know!? Your first powwow! Ohhh. (101)

Millie takes on a grandmotherly role toward Agnes. She points Agnes homeward, recognizing that she is yearning to belong to some family, some community: "You look confused. Your medicine will come from your own people . . . What

about your family? Maybe that's what you should be lookin' for!" (104-5). It is through Millie that Agnes enters the Moonlodge, finding a community of women. In doing so, Agnes connects to the Cree Moonlodge ceremony which allows her to gather, pray, and honour with other women to celebrate the power they possess as women. Consequently, *Moonlodge* reclaims Cree culture because it celebrates with the audience a young girl's journey into womanhood, into self-acceptance. When Millie tells Agnes that her medicine will come from her own people, she informs Agnes that she needs to go home, to her own people, to her own land, to find herself. The message in the play *Moonlodge* is to trust the inner "'voicings'."

In the performance of her play *Moonlodge*, Kane transforms from character to character by engaging in specific positions illustrating a character or an emotion. When Kane changes into the father character, her chest protrudes, her voice lowers, and she attempts to sing parts of a song that Agnes remembers him singing. Prior to Kane's characterization of her father, she is Agnes, a young girl about 10 years old, full of energy. Her character changes from Agnes to the father after she is startled by a memory of him (85). In order for the memory of her father to come alive on stage, Kane's character Agnes recreates a location that is specific to her recollection of him:

Agnes: I poured the tea for the grownups after dinner. Their voices got louder and louder--and my father's was right along with them. My Father. He was tall, headscarf, long braids . . .

Father: When are you gonna wake up! They been taking from us for a long time and now we're taking their welfare cheques! I'm not gonna take this lyin' down! (85)

She reverts back to the character Agnes after she completes the memory of her father. Agnes is the storyteller. It is through her memory that the other characters come alive on stage; similar to the way that Eddie tells the *Wasakaychak* story because he too takes on the characteristics of the various beings in his stories. I illustrated Eddie's dramatization of characters in Chapter One when I described how Eddie personifies Beaver. When Eddie talks about Beaver being out of breath, Eddie's hand shakes as he carries out the downward dive, like Beaver dog paddling. By the end of his story, Eddie no longer transforms into *Wasakaychak* or becomes the water because this marks the end of his performance. Similarly, in *Moonlodge*, the play opens and ends with the character Agnes. She introduces us to the Moonlodge: "The Moonlodge--the place where only women sit during their moontime . . . I lie back and feel the hard earth beneath my blankets. My thoughts drift to my first

time in the lodge" (83). Agnes closes the play from the Moonlodge: "The sparks and ashes from the fire drift up and out of the smokehole of the teepee of the Moonlodge" (107). It is part of her journey to share her Cree culture with us, the audience. Storytelling contains physical transformation, character change and cultural embodiment as displayed in Eddie's *Wasakaychak* story and Kane's performance of *Moonlodge*.

When Eddie tells a *Wasakaychak* story, his movements and dialogue are created from memory and based on specific landmarks, animals, and Cree mythological beings. While driving through Wabasca, my mom talks about her Granny, and she points out specific land areas where they picked Saskatoon berries. She also shows me where the priest from the Granny story lived. Still standing is a small shack with weathered walls caving in. I imagine my Great-granny kneeling while uprooting the carrots that she used in her stews. I see the priest in his garden, discovering the footprints. I laugh and shake my head, muttering to myself about how "crazy" my Great-granny was. Based on Eddie's own personal experiences with the land, he unfolds his memories to an anxious audience. That is his research and his foundation for Cree storytelling. *Moonlodge* is no different because, as a performer, Kane shows the history, the spirit and the root of each character's existence.

The healing element within Native performance is not possible when audiences view performers purely as victims sharing their stories. The healing occurs because Indian people are telling their own stories, their way, whether those stories are sad or comical or both. The audience needs to understand that Native performance is not always negative, depressing stories of our existence since colonization. The healing occurs after the reclaiming process begins. How can we as Native performers be viewed as victims? Through performance we are actively redefining ourselves against the misconceptions that mainstream media and literature have incorrectly foisted on us for so many years.

The sovereignty of Native people was threatened when European worldviews were forced into the minds of Indigenous people via such events as the "scoops" and the residential schools. Native performance reclaims sovereignty because Native performance is about telling Indian stories. By using its own mythological creatures and archetypes, its format is based on and inspired from Indigenous knowledge. When a Native performer creates a play it is about sovereignty, not only within the play's context but sovereignty in the sense that the Native performer/writer decides what will be revealed and how the show will unfold.

I cried during Kane's dramatization of the removal of

Agnes from her home in *Moonlodge*. I noticed other Native audience members lower their heads and silently cry. I am almost certain that every Indian person has met or will meet someone who was removed from his/her community as a child and raised in non-Native foster homes. Kane states in the playwright's foreword:

To this day, Native people continue to find their way home. Many were adopted or fostered out-of-province, some to the United States, some even to Europe. Many come home with tragic stories of abuse and memories too painful to push aside. They and their families have begun the slow process of healing, rebuilding themselves and their communities. (79-80)

It is important to recognize that there exists a reclaiming process within Native performance. In the previous chapter, the Great-granny story is retold within my family, and Eddie shares *Wasakaychak* stories even though, at one time during the residential school era, these stories were silenced. In her story, Great-granny reclaims the laws that govern Cree land and culture from the priest by maintaining her relationship with the land. Despite the threats that the priest hurled toward Granny, she continued to nourish herself and her family from his garden. She exercised her right given to her by the Creator to eat what the land provides. In Eddie's *Wasakaychak* story, the earth

is rebuilt with the help and prayers of all the animals. These two stories show the relevance and awareness that Cree people have when it comes to the land and everything that lives within it. Bruce King in "Emergence and Discovery: Native American Theatre Comes of Age," reaffirms the importance of relaying Indigenous stories:

We as a people are about storytelling. We have wonderful stories of other worlds, of creations of life, of mystical figures like coyote, Raven, Deer Woman, and countless others . . . With these come all the stories that contain lessons on morality and behavior, and respect for all that surrounds us, about healing and giving, wisdom and courage. These stories are about us. We cannot look to others to define and determine these stories. We must assume responsibility ourselves. (168)

While telling a *Wasakaychak* story, Eddie exaggerates certain movements, like the swaying of his hips from side to side, imitating a comical version of *Wasakaychak*. He usually brings the audience into waves of laughter. We laugh because Eddie looks hilarious imitating *Wasakaychak*; we also laugh because this is Eddie's unique interpretation of this particular character. As the listeners of our storytellers, we look forward to and anticipate just how far the storyteller will go to use his body and voice to

personify his characters. Equally important to how the story is told is how the audience member hears, for example, a *Wasakaychak* story or a Granny story. How we hear these stories as Indigenous artists is important because the next step is how we translate, reclaim and interpret them within our work.

The reclaiming process occurs when Eddie tells a story or when someone in my family tells a Granny story because as Cree people we know and understand the context and the essence of Cree community stories. That is to say we know the meanings behind the untold layers. Those layers come out in our performances, through sound, silence and movement. We have all experienced losing loved ones to alcoholism and to other addictions. We understand what colonization and oppression has done to the people in our communities. We have also experienced the love, generosity and kindness that comes from our own families, our own people. That is why it is so important for Indigenous people to reclaim and tell their own stories. We can best interpret our own experiences and then share them with an audience because we have lived out the stories and listened to them; we have grown up with the people, the elders, children, aunties, uncles and grannies. Through his work as Program Director and choreographer for the Aboriginal Dance Project at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alejandro Ronceria

has come to believe that, "As an aboriginal person you know what the [dance] piece is about. What the issues are, what we are representing. What we are doing here is about us. We don't try to fake things. There is a unity because people can identify with everything . . . so you feel a big support, respect and commitment. There's a lot of passion" (33).

Native performance reclaims and recreates cultural knowledge, not only for the performer on stage, but its roots grow outward toward the audience. Through her research, Kane provides an authentic account of Indigenous and Canadian history. In *Moonlodge*, the audience is exposed to the resistance, the voices, and the thought processes of those Cree mothers, fathers, and children, whose independence was taken from them. Like Eddie's *Wasakaychak* story and the Granny story, *Moonlodge* challenges what the Canadian education and political systems have accepted, preserved and presented as the only true history of these lands.

Contemporary Cree performance artists Shirley Cheechoo and Margo Kane carry on the storytelling tradition in their work by embodying a history of the land performed through Cree dance/movement, song, prayer and language. Through their work as Cree performers, they remind Indigenous people that we have survived the colonization of our lands. They

continually define who we are and where we come from.

Kane's monologue play *Moonlodge*, and Cheechoo's one-woman show *Path With No Moccasins*, portray a period in Canadian history when Indigenous people were denied access to their own cultural knowledge. In other words, they were denied the right to listen and learn from storytellers like Eddie, who told the *Wasakaychak* stories, or they were denied moments with their grannies.

In the stage productions of *Moonlodge* and *Path With No Moccasins*, each performer exposes a void in her characters' spirituality, center of existence, and culture. On another level the on-going physical and spiritual journey necessary to keep alive the spirit of the character is visible throughout the entirety of both shows. As performers each woman is committed to each moment on stage. They don't insert a song *only* because it sounds good or create movement *only* to fill time and space on stage.

For example, when Kane's character Agnes dances intertribal for the first time at a powwow, it is aesthetically captivating. Agnes is in awe of the Powwow scene: "I am standing in a huge dance arbour surrounded by bleachers full of Indians. Around the dance floor sits at least a dozen big drums surrounded by singers and their families and friends"(99). On stage Kane imitates this

scene, demonstrating to the audience the various types of Powwow dances. Agnes joyfully fancy dances, kicking and twirling around the stage.

This part of the show is not merely to show off Kane's ability and skills as a dancer but remains part of her character's journey to connect with who she is, relaying that discovery to the audience. At the Powwow, she is among "real" Indians and not Walt Disney's versions of what Indians look like. Each movement and sound comes from the performer's own research in preserving the spirit or the Cree core of the piece.

The content of Shirley Cheechoo's one-woman play, *Path With No Moccasins*, contains dialogue that is dictated, created and inspired from a Cree worldview. Shirley is the main character, and all the events in the play revolve around her. In the play's opening, she maintains a conversation with the moon, alternating between addressing the audience and the moon. She asks the moon questions about the well being of her family and of her friend, Eleanor, who was also a student at the residential school before running away. Shirley describes Eleanor as the friend, who made us "do things that would get us in trouble" (15): "The moon, the moon, I wish you'd come into this room. I want to know how Eleanor is doing? Is she dead? Everyone says she won't make it" (9). Shirley describes the

moon as "a ball of smoke surrounding me. It's me inside that ball of smoke" (9). Shirley shares with the audience her personal relationship with the moon. The play opens with Shirley locked in a room at residential school; she can see the moon through a small window. The character's dialogue is specific to her worldview, and so the spirit of the dialogue is specific to the performer and writer's worldview. The character is not talking to herself; rather, she reaches out to the moon emotionally, displacing the idea that the moon is just a ball of gas and solids. Despite her bleak situation of being locked in a room, Shirley retains her cultural memory and brings it to life with the moon as her observer.

The spirit of Shirley's dialogue and actions on stage toward the moon arise from Cree theology. The moon, and its rich associations with women-centered themes, links the play strongly to *Moonlodge*. The moon within some Cree teachings is referred to as grandmother-moon. The manner in which Shirley's character, who is nine years old, calls out to the moon for nurturing is similar to a child reaching out to her own grandmother. She relates the comfort and security of sleeping with her feather blanket, a gift from her grandmother, to the presence of the moon: "When the moon comes into my room . . . It protects me. Inside it is cold, but I don't care. I can find my feather blanket that my

grandmother gave me. It comes with the moon. I'm glad I can find it . . . " (9).

Shirley sings a lullaby in Cree. When translated into English, the song means "sleep baby sleep, that's the way" and "she's sleeping now" (18). Besides the audience, the moon is the only other presence she acknowledges while she is locked up in a room. Shirley is lonely, angry and scared, and she openly shares these emotions with the moon: "If my brother Ben was here. He wouldn't let them lock me up like this. But, he's in another residential school. I don't even know where. That train. Always taking me away making me let go of my father's hand, to show him that I have to be brave . . . " (9). Cree lullabies are generally sung by the mother or grandmother and are used to comfort and soothe a restless child. Shirley's singing of the lullaby is nostalgic, as if her own grandmother is singing to her, calming and comforting her. She recalls her childhood when she says, "Smoked fish all hanging in rows, the water singing as it hits the shore. The loon's calls out in the middle of the lake. The shadows of parents paddling, checking the nets, floating in the water as the sun tries to come through the mist" (10). Through Shirley's recollections of early childhood events, based upon specific land locations, the audience is able to witness glimpses of Cree traditional territory. Like the *Wasakaychak* and the

Great-granny story, Cheechoo's play informs the audience about some aspects of Cree Indigenous knowledge. For example, many Cree communities are situated near bodies of water, and therefore Cheechoo's play contains many references to lakes, canoes, rows of smoked fish, and fishing nets, showing her community's relationship to water. A large part of her diet prior to residential school came from the life forms that existed in the surrounding bodies of water, and so Cheechoo's memories about her relationship to water is reflected in the play's dialogue: "One time we almost starved. I think it had to do with me feeling sorry for a small beaver. My mother told us 'we're not supposed to feel sorry for animals we kill for food because if we did, they'd stop coming.' But this beaver was so cute. She was right. They didn't come" (25-6).

Path With No Moccasins also contains Shirley's experiences in reference to the power and magic of water spirits. In the play, she relives a moment where she is drowning and is willing to give up on her life; the water spirits save her: "I can't breathe . . . I'm running out of air . . . There's a bright blue light . . . I can do this. What? Stop it! Stop pushing at my feet. I want to go to paradise, you know heaven . . . I want to die . . . it must be time. It's getting dark . . . I don't want to go up. What's pushing my feet? Water spirits, stop it. No" (39-

40). Cheechoo provides a worldview that acknowledges the power of the water-spirit. It not only saved her life, but Cheechoo also provides an account of the water taking the life of her father: "Water spirits where are you? Come on, I've come to confront you. Damn you! I trusted you! Show me a sign. Why did you take my father away? Talk to me . . . You were cold and freezing and you wouldn't let go of him. Why?" (38).

Since water within Cree societies is viewed as the blood of mother earth, it is used in the cleansing and purification ceremonies, the spiritual cleansing of the body, of the soul. Shirley's relationship to the water is one of cleansing. She is releasing all her tears, all her anger that has built up over the years and releasing it to the water spirits. Many spiritual teachers from various Indigenous Nations encourage people who are feeling angry to go to a body of water and either sit beside it, or yell toward the water. It is believed that the water-spirits will remove all the anger, pain and anguish from your body. During any Cree ceremony or prayer, the spiritual leader always offers thanks to the water. Within Cheechoo's play, the water spirits are the cleansing and purification element, the healing ritual that Shirley connects with. To the spirits, she says,

Water spirits of the black rocks, I've come again.

Show me a sign that you are listening. You, you
cleansed my silence as I allowed you to dance with my
spirit. Now, I'm aching and tired and I don't want to
be a wandering spirit walking with holes in my
moccasins with no place to go and mend them. (37)

Cree storytellers like Eddie share the power and magic of the supernatural through stories about the land and about *Wasakaychak*. According to the Cree Creation Story, *Wasakaychak* "took [a] tiny particle of dirt and . . . rolled it . . . [*Wasakaychak*] blew into his own hand and the dirt grew and grew with each magical breath . . . *Wasakaychak* re-created the earth as we know it today." Since Cree stories contain knowledge about spiritual and supernatural beings, Indigenous performers can also transform such existences into the context of their work because it is part of their own research based on their own communities. Within Cheechoo's one-woman play, she dramatizes the water spirits to invoke her own personal healing and survival.

Cheechoo's play, *Path With No Moccasins*, is based upon Shirley's life before, during and after the time she spent at residential school. She provides insight into the impact colonization has had on her and her community. Like the monologue play, *Moonlodge*, the audience is able to witness parts of the performers' lives or their families' lives through their performance. Cheechoo's character portrays the

struggles she has with addiction, low self-esteem and violence. As performer and writer of the show, Cheechoo literally confronts these experiences on stage and exposes the character's personal struggle with these addictions.

At one point in the play, she engages in a conversation with a bottle of whiskey. Through this interaction, she depicts her loneliness and anger, at twenty-one years of age, with no one to reach out to, not even the moon: "C.C. bottle. How come everybody started drinking, like at the same time? Why were they beating on each other? Was it my fault" (28)? Her choice of comfort is no longer her grandmother but a bottle of whiskey, her "true friend . . . who takes away the sins of the world . . . " (23). Similar to *Moonlodge*, Cheechoo's character, Shirley, is raised away from her parents and her community. She is raised at a residential school; Shirley exposes the grief that the parents and children feel, during the removal of the children from their community: "The days of summer must never end, but they always do. The lines of boats docking in Moosonee. With all the children sad and mothers crying, wailing over the sound of the train whistle. My father holds my hand and I pretend to be strong so he'll be proud of me . . . He smiles and kisses me but his eyes tell me he's sad" (19).

As Shirley reaches adulthood, like Agnes, she feels

isolated: "Indian children are never alone . . . They have grandparents and uncles, all kinds of relatives to hold them. Where are mine" (30)? *Path With No Moccasins* is an important play; it needs to be shared with many audiences because it not only relives the traumatic events that happened to Shirley during her time as a student at residential school but also shows her character's ability "to move towards . . . healing without fear and into the new light . . . " (48). As mentioned earlier, Kane's play, *Moonlodge* is not specifically autobiographical, but Cheechoo's, *Path With No Moccasins* is her life transformed into a 90-minute play. What appears to keep Shirley alive throughout her personal journey and eventual self-acceptance is her ability to remember the beauty and the hardships she and her people endured:

My father also got sick, so it was harder for us to get food to eat. He had this growth on the back of his neck . . . My mother boiled the water and burned the needle and sat my father down on a stump. She took out her scissors and cut him open . . . She took out this thing that looked like a big spider . . . When she was finished he passed out for about four days . . . While he was out, I put his hockey game on the radio or his favourite country station, hoping he'd wake up. (26)

Through all of Chee-choo's tragedies that are relived

within her performance of *Path with no Moccasins*, she confirms Bruce King's idea that, "We are here today because we survived. Oral tradition, *shaped and held through performance*, maintains a sense of identity with the past, but it also has a sense of continued existence" (167).

Although the play is predominately written and performed in English, its outlook comes from a Cree perspective. According to Tomson Highway's statement made at the National Native Theatre Symposium, Cree culture is "based on a system of mythology, theology . . . that has been passed down to us, there is no beginning according to the creation of the universe. It is an endless circle" (16).

Like Eddie's storytelling style which includes his listeners in his telling, Cheechoo includes dialogue directed "to us," the audience. Her character asks "us" questions such as " . . . was it my fault?" In doing so, she removes the "fourth-wall" concept, a style sometimes employed in Canadian theatre "where the audience views the play through an invisible wall and . . . the audience and performer should not acknowledge each other's presence" (Wilson and Goldfarb 284). By acknowledging the presence of the audience, Shirley brings the play closer to traditional storytelling. It is what keeps the show alive

with the same spirit and compassion that Eddie uses while telling the *Wasakaychak* story.

As an audience, we are with Shirley for the entire journey of the show. She is sharing her life story, and sometimes we do not want to listen to the atrocities she is reliving: "They pulled me off the bike, dragged me into the ditch. They took my clothes off . . . I didn't fight back . . . no matter how old I am, someone wants to do this to me" (30). We endure with her, and as the audience we encourage her with our tears, silence and laughter. When Eddie recreated the moment on the raft where *Wasakaychak* gave up the hope of saving the animals and the earth, I too felt the fear and uncertainty of their fate especially when Eddie lowered his head as if to pray for Muskrat. Lived experience is recorded in performance through meaningful gestures, embodying the evolution of Cree knowledge.

Contemporary Native performance is rooted within the essence of its culture and community. Kane's monologue play, *Moonlodge*, opens with her character, Agnes, a young woman talking about the significance of the Moonlodge for Cree women. Starting from that moment, Kane's play takes the audience back into her childhood and into her womanhood. The play revolves around these rites of passage, ascending from Agnes reliving certain memories. Agnes engages in

gestures to evoke memories and relives those actual memories on stage. When the play ends, Agnes is positioned in time where the play started--back at the Moonlodge. The Moonlodge is the central axis of the play and all the events that the audience witnesses spiral from that point. Although the play has a beginning, middle and end, the journey undertaken by the performer through those points on stage is not linear. Both Kane and Cheechoo use their main characters to take the audience from location to location, from character to character, almost within the same breath, based on memories. This format for the reliving of memories is similar to Eddie and the telling of a *Wasakaychak* story; he brings to life different characters with slight changes in his body alignment and pace of breath.

In December 1997, Cree playwright Floyd Favel-Starr staged his own adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vayna*, calling it *House of Sonya*. He created the script by having the actors improvise scenes that arose out of experiences of their past. True to his style of creating performance, Starr-Favel had the actors attempt physical movement exercises, hoping to unleash the memories contained within the body. He states:

I think that our bodies are much like an abandoned house full of evocative shows and remnants, of past loves and joy. The movement qualities of the play were

based on this principle. Once again it was about remembering. The postures of the body were based on half-completed actions as opposed to clear complete actions. This was because the body was remembering and if you complete the action then we are not remembering, but illustrating. In my hand is the hand of my father, in my chest is the event of childhood. In the angle of the head is the memory of grandmother's body on the day she said, 'Don't be afraid,' as I was leaving for school in the non-native world. There in a physical posture on the stage is the day the sun burned me as her words pierced my body. (2)

Similar creative techniques that Starr-Favel discusses are employed throughout the course of both Kane and Cheechoo's plays. That is, Kane and Cheechoo's main characters regain and uncover information and precious memories through embodying fragments of past-lived moments. They return home from the residential school or the foster home; they return home to their communities and find family. The processes which Kane and Cheechoo use in writing and performing their ideas is where the roots of Native performance arise. Also, the spirit of resistance contained in the Granny story, or in storytellers like Eddie, who continually maintain and perform Indigenous worldviews, provides the Indigenous artists with the

knowledge necessary to write, tell stories, and share songs and dances.

In conclusion this chapter attempted to address the creative sources of inspiration of the Cree performer and playwright. These unique sources include the use of personal memories and gestures to tell the story, which are rooted in one's ability to embody her culture. The right to embody and tell stories about ones' own community reclaims Cree perspectives and resists the stereotypes that mainstream media has attempted to mold onto Native people. The next chapter examines how playwright Tomson Highway allows Cree cultural styles to shape the content and ideas of his plays.

CHAPTER THREE

Celebrating The Polarity of Cree Culture

This chapter will focus on the Tomson Highway plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. I will attempt to relate how Cree traditional narratives influence these works.

Tomson Highway's play *The Rez Sisters* relates the lives of seven Indian women. During the play's 1986 premier, the aboriginal community was buzzing with excitement. It was the first time in Canada a play was written, directed and acted entirely by an Indian cast. It was the first time in Canadian history when a Cree playwright had a play produced (professionally) for viewing by both an aboriginal and a non-aboriginal audience. The Ojibway trickster, *Nanabush*, also made his stage debut in Highway's play apart from the major stage debut he had already made in the oral traditions many years earlier. All of this occurred almost 100 years after, as one historian notes,

the advocates of repressive measures . . . read the revised version of Section 114 of the Indian Act which was adopted in the summer of 1895. The new wording offered a definition of what was forbidden and sought to extend the prohibition on the potlatch to the [Indian] dances of the plains. (Titley 166)

Highway's play then as with any Indigenous art form, is partially an act of resistance. During an interview, Highway revealed, "that he may spend the rest of his writing life trying to sort out his anger at the Catholic church, the compulsory English language, and European cultural imperialism" (Hodgson 3). We witness this process in both of Highway's plays, in his 1988 staging of *The Rez Sisters* and in his 1989 production *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

With a flair for "Cree-ness" Highway portrays the tragedies experienced by Native people as a result of colonization. His plays go beyond the embodiment of his anger; however, they celebrate the existence and survival of Cree culture. Through the use of *Nanabush* in his plays, Highway reminds us to learn from the polarity of the trickster character. The trickster's actions can be inspired from both integrity and shame. Through the trickster we learn to find balance in our existence, and we learn to live with balance in a community. In the following plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, I will examine how Highway dramatizes the trickster character, hoping to restore the balance within the fictional community of Wasaychigan Hill.

Highway's two plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* stage dance, dialogue, and songs inspired from Cree and Ojibway

cultures. Translation is part of Highway's creative process: " . . . he imagines his plays in Cree, and translate them simultaneously as he writes" (4). By working from Cree and Ojibway contexts within his plays, Highway reminds us that Native people have a cultural knowledge that is thousands of years old. Denis Johnson, in an article entitled "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway," says the plays,

. . . reflect Native cultural values, values which stand diametrically opposite some Christian European ones: in this case visible, sensual, genderless articulation as opposed to sombre, abstract, patriarchal discourse. This must be why, although we can understand what Highway's characters say, we can scarcely believe what we're hearing (255).

Johnson's statement is accurate in regards to the qualities of the Native language. As Highway's work makes clear, there is no gender, and therefore no gendered hierarchy, within the structure of Cree language. Johnson also acknowledges "the fact that Highway's first language is Cree contributes to his unusual dramatic style" (255). That is, through *Nanabush*, Highway creates a contemporary Cree trickster story. For example, In *Dry Lips*, *Nanabush* becomes the pregnant Black Lady Halked, bringing to light the existence of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) within Indian

communities. Johnson explains, "Dickie Bird's mother [Black Lady Halked] gave birth to him, leaning against a lurid jukebox, in the Dickie Bird Tavern after which he was named. Her severe bouts of drinking resulted in the fetal alcohol syndrome which left Dickie Bird both mute and emotionally unstable" (261).

In true Cree trickster fashion, *Nanabush* relives an event where lessons need be learned; in this case, it is Black Lady Halked's behaviour during pregnancy. Pierre and Spooky tell the story and *Nanabush* demonstrates, warns and reminds us of the lasting consequences of our actions: "Nine months pregnant and naked, she holds a bottle of beer up in the air and is drunk almost senseless Nanabush/Black Lady Halked, begins to writhe and scream, laughing and crying hysterically at the same time and as she does, her water breaks" (92-3). Pierre, the bootlegger of the community adds, "And that's when Dickie Bird Halked, as we know him, came ragin' out from his mother's womb . . . in between beers, right there on the floor" (93). Prior to European contact FAS was not a factor in the health of Native communities. As in the historical narratives of the Crees, *Nanabush*, in *Dry Lips*, teaches and brings to light the seriousness of inappropriate behaviour like Black Lady Halked's mixing alcohol with pregnancy. We do not witness *Nanabush* preaching like the character, Spooky Lacroix, a

born-again Christian. *Nanabush* recreates various scenarios of what can be; whereas, *Spooky* rambles on about the way things will end:

When the world comes to an end? The sky will open up. The clouds will part. And the Lord will come down in a holy vapor. And only those who are born-again Christian will go with him when he goes back up. And the rest? They will die. Big Joey, for instance, they will go to hell and they will burn for their wicked, whorish ways. But we will be taken up into the clouds to spend eternity surrounded by the wondrous and the mystical glory of god. Clear as a picture, *Dickie Bird Halked*, clear as a picture. So I'm telling you right now, you've got to read the book. (37)

Kenneth Lincoln explores the teaching role trickster encompasses within traditional Cree stories: "Comically dispossessed, for the most part disregarding interdependencies, Trickster stays on the prowl in the shadows of time, never satisfied, alert to whatever new original sin disrupts the world and keeps it going on going"(147). *Nanabush* is on the "prowl" throughout the entire play. She transforms into the memories of *Black Lady Halked* and becomes the spirit of *Patsy Pegahmagahbow*, *Simon Starblanket's* fiancé.

In *Dry Lips*, Simon represents the younger generation,

the future of the community. He believes it is his responsibility to the Wasaychigan Hill community to bring back the traditional ways through the drum and through Indian dancing (45). Prior to Simon's speech, scene III opens with "the magical flickering of a luminescent powwow dancing bustle . . . a second-and larger-bustle appears on the upper level of the set . . . The two bustles "play" with each other almost affectionately, looking like two giant fire flies . . . The smaller bustle finally reaches the downstage area and from behind it emerges the face of Simon Starblanket. He is dancing and chanting in a forest made of light and shadows. The larger bustle remains on the upper level; behind it is the entire person of Nanabush as the spirit of Patsy Pegahmagahbow" (38). Simon states, "we've got to learn to dance again" (43). Although, the only other person to witness Simon's speech besides *Nanabush* is Zachary, it seems he is the one who needs to hear it the most. Rather than acting responsibly toward his wife and child or finalizing his plans for his future business, a bakery, he wakes up at "Gazelle Nataway's place with no shorts on" (45). Simon Starblanket dies in the play but his message is delivered, his words remain and so do the dance images created between him and *Nanabush*.

Highway relies on a traditional Cree storytelling format as the basis for the dramatic structure of *Dry Lips*.

Zachary is present during Simon's speech, and so he is warned and urged by Simon that "something has to be done" to bring back the people's power (43). Simon states he is going to bring the drum back to the community even if it kills him (52). This forewarning is similar to traditional Cree narratives; Kenneth Lincoln explains its use in trickster stories:

The inverse unknowns in all this tricking, by way of narrative parable, make the Cree conscious of radically contingent variables to keep alive. They survive a deceptive world vital within critical play. Acted out dangers, comic or close to the bone, serve to wake listeners up with well imagined fear. Skeptism grounds sympathy to keep the heart honest. The tales point toward a certain cautious empathy with an unpredictable, uncontrolled world. (132)

Dry Lips is about Indian people waking up and taking responsibility for the future of their community. At the end of the play, Zachary wakes up and realizes he dreamed all of the horrific events of the play, including the Gazelle Nataway's episode. He wakes up on his own couch and sees his wife, Hera Keechigeesik, carrying their baby (127). *Dry Lips*, as the play's epigraph suggests, exposes the poison so the healing can take place. For example, Dickie Bird's biological father, Big Joey, finally acknowledges

him, "Eehee. Nigoosis Keetha. Mootha Wellington Halked Kipapa. Neetha . . . kipapa. ('Yes. You are my son. Wellington Halked is not your father. I'm . . . your father.')

" (101). Two tragic events occur in the play which shake the community members into talking and into taking action, the death of Simon Starblanket, and the brutal rape of Patsy by Dickie Bird.

According to Mark Shackleton, "Patsy's rape with a crucifix is symbolically the rape of Native culture by the forces of colonizing Christianity, but as Patsy is really one of the incarnations of the spirit of Nanabush, the shape-shifting trickster can absorb the pain and survive" (218). This statement supports the idea that *Nanabush* draws attention to the areas in Indian communities where changes need to occur. Indian people are suffering as a result of the abuse that has happened since colonization. Since Highway is a product of that abuse, stemming from residential school, he incorporates the poison (abuse) into his writing as part of the healing experience for Indian people. Highway uses his writing to speak out against the atrocities that he has experienced while at residential school. Shackleton explains Highway's relationship to his plays, his culture and his colonial experience:

Uprooted from his indigenous culture at the age of six, he suffered a violent indoctrination into the

mainstream culture, a process which involved changing his name, his language and his cultural identity.

Indoctrination for both Highway and his brother Rene also involved sexual abuse by trusted Roman Catholic authorities, an experience that would be transformed into the potent image of rape as a metaphor for colonial subjection in all his works. (220)

Big Joey and Creature witness the rape scene in *Dry Lips*. Big Joey actually holds Creature back from Patsy's aid. Since Dickie Bird uses a crucifix to rape Patsy/*Nanabush*, *Nanabush* is drawing attention to the Christian symbol. Based on Highway's own experiences with Catholic priests, he portrays the ones holding the crucifix as the biggest sinners. Kenneth Lincoln explains how the Cree traditional stories address facades and how things are generally not as they appear:

Trickster teaches, by comic negative example, that this shifting world bears careful looking into. Masking and duplicity are naturally embedded in behavior, as every naturalist observes. The living survive through and despite trickery, perhaps even learning from its inventive, if untrustworthy ways. (145)

Dickie Bird is able to start healing because he finally knows the truth about his biological father. He is lied to about who his father is by Spooky, his uncle: "Why,

Wellington Halked's your father, Dickie Bird Halked. Don't you be asking questions like that . . . And don't you ever let no one tell you different" (37). Through Creature and Big Joey, the play provides glimpses of Spooky before he accepted the Lord into his life. Behind the Christian doctrine is the mask that Spooky wears. Creature advises, "Don't listen to Spooky Lacroix, Dickie Bird. You follow Spooky Lacroix and you go right down to the dogs, I'm tellin' you that right now . . . Oh, he was bad, Dickie Bird Halked, he was bad." (60)

Following Patsy's rape, Pierre also speaks up and acknowledges his responsibility to help with the healing of Dickie Bird Halked: "Don't you worry a wart about that court appearance, Dickie Bird Halked, I'll be right there beside you tellin' that ole judge a thing or two about that god damm juke box" (123). Prior to Patsy's rape, Zachary asks, "w-w-w where's that nephew [Dickie Bird] of yours, Spook" (83)? Dickie Bird Halked has not been home for four days and Pierre informs both Spooky and Zachary that Dickie Bird Halked was last seen "pacin' the bushes . . . lookin' for all the world like he had lost his mind" (83). Spooky's feeble reply is that he'd be out there himself except his wife is liable to "pop any minute now" (83). Both Pierre and Zachary ignore and deny the poison that exists within the community, apathy. Rather than going out into the forest

looking for Dickie Bird Halked, Zachary says, "Lordy, lordy, lordy, I'm telling you right now, Spooky Lacroix, if you don't do something about that nephew of yours, he's liable to go out there and kill someone next time" (83). Pierre adds, "Bah. Them folks of his, they don't care. If it's not hockey, it's bingo she's out playin' every night of the week, that Black Lady of a mother of his" (83). The lack of concern and compassion that these characters display for Dickie Bird is no different from their reaction to his birth in a bar seventeen years earlier. Subsequent to *Nanabush's* reenactment of Black Lady Halked's labour, Simon is outraged, and Spooky "unwilling to face up to the full horror of it . . . turn[s] his back and pretend[s] to laugh" (94). *Dry Lips* is about the breakdown of responsibility. The tragedy that Dickie Bird is involved in, the rape of *Nanabush/Patsy* is due to a breakdown of community responsibility. Through characters like Joey, Spooky and Pierre, Highway draws our attention to the lack of compassion and love within Indian country, urging us to take responsibility to stop the violence.

If *Dry Lips* is about community disintegration, then as writers, performers and audience members we need to acknowledge what is happening within Native communities. As stated earlier, *Dry Lips* contains many of the functions of a

Wasakaychak story, where lessons and cultural protocol are ignored, in order to warn people of what can happen if people are no longer willing to take responsibility. Thus, in order for positive change to occur in Native communities, we need to be further inspired from our own cultural sources, sharing stories about our communities.

Unlike our ancestors, contemporary Native people are free to explore Indigenous story, song and dance without persecution. We are free to learn to dance again. Brian Titley's book, *A Narrow Vision*, includes a chapter that examines Native repression in Canada when government officials enforced Section 114 upon the lives of Indian people. Severe actions were administered against those who chose to ignore this particular section of the Indian Act: "P.J. Williams, agent at Battleford, reported in January 1897 that he had arrested five Indians of Thunderchild's reserve for holding a "give away" dance. Two had been given suspended sentences while three had been given a two-month prison term" (167).

There are extensive dance notes contained within both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*. *Nanabush* in *The Rez Sisters* "is to be played by a male dancer--modern, ballet, or traditional" (xi). In *Dry Lips*, *Nanabush* is female; she shimmies and sashays across the play's opening scene. We also witness this freedom of the body while Eddie tells a

Wasakaychak story. During a telling, his body moves as soft as a wave and just as quickly transforms into a rigid *Wasakaychak*. Highway once stated during an interview that, "Dance is a metaphor for everything in our culture: for ritual, for art, for religion. Dance is a metaphor for being, so if we cannot dance, we cannot pray" (2). In *The Rez Sisters* we see Nanabush mirroring and imitating the women as they march to the store: "Nanabush still in the guise of seagull, follows them and continues to play tricks, mimicking their hand movements, the movements of their mouths" (35). Nanabush's role in both of Highway's plays is to highlight the qualities of the characters, usually making fun of their physical attributes.

Nanabush's further role is to bring forth the inner secrets of the plays' characters, and he/she does this through movement. For instance, in *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush goes through agonizing contortions as Zhaboonigan reveals to him how two white boys raped her with a screwdriver (47-8). Through the various interludes between Marie-Adele and Nanabush, we listen to her fears surrounding her imminent death. Playwright Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa) refers to Mohican musician Brent Micheal Davids who believes that "dance serves as the supportive base for positive tribal/individual identity"(qtd in Geiogamah 286). Davids

states that 'the dances and music that can be created are really about who we are, not necessarily about what we produce. More importantly [in productions] we are the dance, and we are the music ourselves' (286).

Traditional Cree storytelling, according to Kenneth Lincoln, "encode[s] ways of remembering, thus preserving things taken into the tribe" (135). Naturally, the trickster *Nanabush* is included in both of Highway's plays; his plays record and tell the contemporary stories of Indian communities. Both plays, *Dry Lips* and *The Rez Sisters*, contain a rape scene. During a 1996 CBC television interview Highway referred to the rape in his work as symbolic of the abuse Native people suffered as a result of colonization. He also spoke of the physical rape of Native women that Highway witnessed while living in Winnipeg where police authorities did nothing to investigate these incidences. The trickster sometimes embodies colonization where these contemporary Indian stories contain themes of rape and abuse. That is why both of Highway's contemporary Cree performance plays contain rape scenes; the plays are revealing the history of these lands.

Johnson argues that Highway's dialogue should be understood in relation to the historical context of the play (255). One important context is the influence of Christianity within Indian communities. As discussed

earlier in this paper there are two theological belief systems contained within *Dry Lips*: Cree traditionalism represented through Simon Starblanket and Christianity coming from Spooky Lacroix. One must read the play keeping in mind Highway's experience with the Catholic residential schools. In written comments about this thesis Craig Womack, assistant professor of Native American studies at the University of Lethbridge, stated:

when you are dealing with Highway's work, you are dealing with a total repudiation of Christianity. Unlike some Crees, who might see their Catholicism as a significant part of their "Creeness," Highway, at least in his work, only sees Christianity as a means of violence, physical and psychological. The bloody cross used in the rape in *Dry Lips* is a not too subtle symbol of this religious absolutism. I think Highway's work advocates the complete overthrow of Christianity, nothing short of that.

Consequently, the content of Highway's plays are based both on his experiences of being raised in a Cree hunting and trapping lifestyle, to attending a Catholic residential school. According to Laguna scholar Paula Gunn-Allen the awareness we are raised with will ultimately be reflected in our literature and art. She says:

. . . the purpose of literature is clear only when the

reader understands and accepts the assumptions on which the literature is based. A person who was raised in a given culture has no problem seeing the relevance, the level of complexity, or the symbolic significance of that culture's literature. We are all from early childhood familiar with the assumptions that underlie our own culture and its literature and art. (54)

Highway's plays feature *Nanabush*, a Cree-Ojibway mythological creature whose purpose in traditional stories is to teach the community. Highway integrates *Nanabush* into his plays, allowing *Nanabush* to confront the violence stemming from Highway's experience with residential school. In *Dry Lips* the rape of Patsy/*Nanabush* by a crucifix held by Dickie Bird may appear out of context in terms of its symbolic relationship to Christianity. However, as mentioned earlier by Cree scholar Craig Womack, Highway's writing deals with the damage that Christianity has wrought in the Native community. Through his plays, Highway shows the effects colonization has had on the Cree community. Similar to the Cree perspective embodied in Eddie's stories, Highway's plays are inspired from his own personal experiences with the land; he was born in Northern Manitoba; his dad was a trapper and fisherman.

When a traditional Cree story is told, the audience is usually familiar with its context. For example, the

language, the values, characters or songs may sound familiar. This is because storytelling is a collective experience. However, in Highway's plays the audience may not be familiar with the Cree/Ojibway contexts. And as with any "telling" of a story, it is the responsibility of the listener or audience to learn and understand what the Cree/Ojibway symbols represent. Not only is the listener required to remain receptive for the entire story, but it is also the responsibility of the listener to understand the cultural contexts of the story. Richard Preston in his book, *Cree Narrative: Expressing the Personal Meaning of Events* explains:

The amount of content that is understood or assumed in some Cree narratives is more than a matter of the identity of individuals and requires the active participation of the listener in filling in the gaps with their understanding of the context either from knowing the particular narrative, or from knowing, from other narratives or experiences, what belongs in the particular context at the particular point indicated. Thus demand for the participation of the listener in knowing how to interpret omissions or clues is . . . a kind of psychological forcing, obliging the listener to keep pace with the events and with a sense of sequence of contents that the events require. (281)

The Cree content within Highway's plays arise from the Cree language and so it is important to recognize the challenges that arise for Highway during the translation process. Highway stated during an interview that "the hardest part I find in the translation process is that the English language is not terribly funny. It's a language of the head, it's a cerebral language, it works from up here. Cree is a very visceral, physical language and instinctual language . . . " (4). I believe that is why Highway relies on song, dance and *Nanabush* so he can convey as authentic a rendition as is possible of the plays' Indigenous contexts. Highway's plays are similar, in their staging and embodiment, to that of a Cree storyteller like Eddie (see Chapter One). Eddie, who incorporates his voice as part of the telling, adds movement, recreating the location and beings present in the narrative.

Creating his plays from an Indigenous core, Highway demonstrates that prior to contact Indian people had songs, dances and stories, and further that we have libraries full of Indigenous histories, emerging from contemporary Native performance. His plays go beyond the effects colonization has had upon Indigenous people; he exposes the strength of Indian cultures by integrating Cree-Ojibway language, dance, humour and trickster into his work. An obvious strength of Indian culture that Highway portrays in *Dry Lips* is that

despite tragedies, Indian people will endure. The play *Dry Lips* ends on a positive and uplifting note with Zachary a "beautiful naked Indian man lifting this naked baby Indian girl up in the air, his wife sitting beside them watching and laughing" (130). Highway's plays are realizations that Indian people "had a history, that we had a culture that was different" (CBC interview).

The inspiration for his plays extends beyond contact and the introduction of Euro-Canadian history. Highway continues to write stories, create drama and tell histories as Cree people had prior to contact. Alan Filewood, in, "Receiving Aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the Crisis of Cultural Authenticity," states that "the idea of authenticity, of authentic voice, is the idea of culture ratified by historical experience, and to a large extent is a reinscribed reaction to oppression--reinscribed in that the very notion of aboriginality which is itself a category of understanding introduced by colonialism" (365). Highway shakes up the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, a process Filewood describes wherein Native identity and community are defined and objectified through the process of colonization.

In both *Dry Lips* and *The Rez Sisters*, Highway creates two communities where his characters refuse to conform to common stereotypes like the stoic Indian or the noble-

savage. In other words, through Highway's portrayal of the Wasaychigan Hill community, there is little room for Filewood's notions of defining aboriginality as a result of colonization. Rather, Highway creates his characters from a Cree perspective based from his Cree language.

Highway's plays are inspired from Highway's experiences with the land and with Indian people. In his play *The Rez Sisters*, there are seven Indian female characters: Pelajia Patchnose, Philomena Moosetail, Marie-Adele Starblanket, Annie Cook, Emily Dictionary, Veronique St. Pierre and Zhaboonigan Peterson. These characters live on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve but represent various types of women from all Indian communities. Every community, for example, has the "busy body," the chatterbox, and in *The Rez Sisters* Annie Cook fills this role. Annie's mannerisms and dialogue are described in the stage directions as, "cheery . . . fast and perky." She often exclaims "Hallooooo" and "Toodle-oo" (9).

Annie's half-sister Philomena makes fun of her as she "spies Annie's approach a distance up the hill." She carries on with her sister, as well as Annie's half sister, Pelajia Patchnose: "Why I do believe that cloud of dust over there is Annie Cook racing down the hill" (9). Annie is very proud of the fact that her daughter, Ellen, lives with a French man outside of the community. She refers to her

daughter's boyfriend with a superior air: "His name is Raymond. Not Raymond. But Raymond. Like Bon Bon"(12). Everybody in the community is aware that Ellen " . . . lives with this white guy in Sudbury," and the only reason Annie mentions her daughter is to allude to the boyfriend who is Caucasian. She says, "then I will go to all the taverns and all the night clubs in Toronto and listen to the live bands while I drink beer quietly--not noisy and crazy like here--I will bring my daughter Ellen and her white guy from Sudbury and we will sit together" (35).

Annie demonstrates the presence of neo-colonization within Indian communities. She uses contact with Caucasians to attempt to raise her own social standards. Throughout the play she makes reference to her internalization of the dominant culture's values and its members to be superior over her own. Annie says, "Aw, these white guys. They're nicer to their women. Not like Indian guys. Screw you, drink all your money and leave you flat on your ass" (86).

In Anne Nothof's article, "Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation," she writes, "The seven women-sisters, half-sisters, step-sisters--all hope to realize their particular dreams by winning the jackpot . . . in Toronto. The means, then, is heavily compromised by non-White popular culture, and even the ends--the women's goals--are pervasively in terms of materialistic white society"

(36). If Annie wins the jackpot, she will "go to every record store in Toronto [and] . . . buy every single one of Patsy Cline's records" (35). She makes no reference to her community, toward helping her family, or toward improving the conditions of her home.

Philomena on the other hand, dreams of buying a new toilet for her home, and if she wins the jackpot, she will hire a lawyer to find the child she gave up for adoption some 28 years ago (81). Even Veronique, the Betty Crocker of the community, dreams of buying a "great big stove . . . the kind that has the three different compartments in the oven alone . . . [She'll] cook for all the children on the reserve . . . adopt all of Marie Adele Starblanket's 14 children . . . and even cook for Gazelle Nataways poor starving babies" (36).

The character Veronique is similar to Annie; she likes to gossip. Whereas Annie is interested in finding out other people's business, Veronique is the community informant and instigator. The other characters refer to her as the "trouble making old crow" and as " . . . some kind of insect, sticking insect claws into everybody's business" (44-5). It is Veronique, however, who brings news to the other women about the biggest bingo in the world. She keeps the circle of women informed about the happenings outside as well as inside the community:

Anyway. I was walking down by that Big Joey's shameless little shack just this morning when guess who pokes her nose out the window but Gazelle Nataways--the nerve of that woman. I couldn't see inside but I'm sure she was only half-dressed, her hairdo was all mixed up and she said to me: "Did you know . . . that Little Girl Manitowabi told me her daughter, June Bug McLeod, just got back from the hospital in Sudbury where she had her tubes tied and told her that THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD is coming to Toronto.

(27)

Annie compares Veronique's meddling to a leech, "sucking off everybody else's life," suggesting that Veronique has nothing better to do because she has no children of her own (46). She has an adopted daughter, Zhaboonigan, but Marie-Adele accuses Veronique of adopting her only for the disability cheque (48).

The sisters, Pelajia Patchnose and Philomena Moosetail, are rarely apart and serve as the commentators of the community, together poking fun at the other women. Pelajia wants to leave and move to Toronto. She speaks out about the dysfunction around her: "No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush" (6). Pelajia begins the play from her roof, repairing its shingles, and from there is able to see

beyond Wasaychigan Hill, beyond its boundaries and its chaos. She wants nothing better than to be on the North Channel, "sailing away somewhere" (2). Philomena dismisses Pelajia's vision and daydream, reminding her that, "This place is too much inside your blood. You can't get rid of it. And it can't get rid of you"(4). Pelajia says, "the old stories, the old language. Almost all gone . . . was a time Nanabush and Windigo and everyone here could rattle away in Indian" (5).

Such pessimistic statements contained within the play come from a community of women who have experienced loss. They also foreshadow Highway's next play, *Dry Lips* which is much darker in tone. By mentioning *Nanabush*, Philomena acknowledges a memory, integrating him back into the community where he belongs. She states, "Nanabush will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on" (59). Mark Shackleton writes about the hope contained in Highway's plays despite the cultural losses experienced by the characters: "In *Dry Lips* the emphasis is on the survival of a culture; in *The Rez Sisters* the focus is more individual . . . The structure of the play is in fact formally a comedy . . . which is dreamed by Zachary. The strange and frightening events of the night (the effects of a colonial past on the Native present) dissolve away to be replaced by the positive image of harmony in which the play ends" (218).

As in Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, Kane's character, Agnes, has experienced tremendous cultural loss. She is different, however, from Highway's characters because she was removed from the community, fostered out to non-Native families, and therefore does not have an Indian community with which to identify. Agnes has no one to share *Wasakaychak* stories with or to make references to *Nanabush*. She relies on her fragmented childhood memories and throughout the play transforms into the characters she remembers. Agnes is described in the stage directions as giggling, wrapping her arms around MOM, laying her head on her belly. She then remembers that her mom "was laughing and I hung onto her skirt, my head against her belly . . . I was making frybread, standing on a stool in front of the stove for a big dinner . . . Before dinner, Uncle Alvin sang--in Indian . . . The room was full of people-and food! Meat and-berries and macaroni salad and frybread. I made the frybread. Uncle Alvin was singing. (84-5)

Shirley Cheechoo's *Path With No Moccasins* and Kane's *Moonlodge* are plays based on a young woman's journey home. The events in the plays revolve around the characters' memories of their biological families. Agnes states, "I wanna go home" (106) and Shirley runs away from residential school several times trying to make it home (20). Both Agnes and Shirley provide perspectives of what it is like to

be outside of the Indian community. Both characters rely on memories, portraying a lapse in accessing their cultural knowledge. The opposite is true for *The Rez Sisters*, and *Dry Lips*; we see how cultural loss presently works inside the community. For example, after the rape of Patsy, her husband Simon Starblanket calls back the oral tradition and medicine people, "Weesageechak! Come back! Rosie! Rosie Kakapetum, tell him to come back, not to run away, cuz we need him . . . (110).

In *The Rez Sisters*, Pelajia is able to bring the women together because of her ability to acknowledge the cultural losses in her community, coupled with her vision to see beyond "the chimneys, the tops of apple trees, the garbage heap behind Big Joey's dumpy little house" (2). She demonstrates what can be accomplished between the women when they work together, dismissing Veronique's concern about the location of the meeting: "We should have met at the priest's house" (62). Pelajia replies, "No! We're gonna work this out on our own. Right here" (62). Pelajia's words and actions remind the women that leadership comes from the people, the community, and not from an outside source like the church. Without band funds, and without the priest's influence, the women embark on their fund-raising activities, having only "10 days to find this money" (69).

Based on their meeting, chaired by Emily, the women

"start their fundraising activities with a vengeance" (70). In the fund-raising scenes the stage directions portray the women working together: "Annie, Philomena, Marie-Adele, Zhaboonigan, and Veronique stand shoulder to shoulder and pass the following [items] . . ." (71). We are told that "Emily goes to the cash register and tallies their earnings; she works the register with tremendous speed and efficiency" (73). As part of their fundraising activities for their trip to the "biggest bingo," Emily and Annie sing at a cabaret, Philomena baby-sits, Pelajia hammers and repairs things, Veronique bakes, and Zhaboonigan washes windows. Each character draws upon her own skills to raise her share or more, so all seven women can attend the bingo.

This spirit of cooperation is also seen in the Cree creation story where *Wasakaychak* interacts with all his animal brothers. The listener is reminded that the survival of the community is dependent upon every being. Muskrat volunteers to dive deep into the water in search of the earth. Since Muskrat is one of the smaller animals on the raft, *Wasakaychak* doubts Muskrat's ability to accomplish this feat and disregards his offer. In the end, it is Muskrat's heroic efforts and courage that saves the earth from its flood-state. In *The Rez Sisters*, it is evident that the contribution of each member of the Wasaychigan Hill reserve provides the community with a sense of balance; each

character has her place. Playwright Drew Taylor says, "*The Rez Sisters* has seven women all of equal importance, all with an equally important story. No one person is more important than the other . . . Each of the Rez Sisters has her own story and it is of equal weight and equal strength within the context of the play" (261). The *Wasakaychak* story reminds us about our own personal power and how important it is to share that with our community. When *Wasakaychak* does not acknowledge Muskrat's ability to aid him, there is an imbalance and all the other animals on the raft lose hope. Conversely, in the Wasaychigan Hill community, with the death of Marie-Adele, Veronique attempts to stabilize the loss experienced by the community, offering to cook for Marie-Adele's husband and her children:

I bought a roast beef yesterday. A great big roast beef. Almost 16 pounds. It's probably the biggest roast beef that's been seen on this reserve in recent years. The meat was so heavy that Nicky, Ricky, Ben, and Mark had to take turns carrying it here for me. Oh it was hard and slippery at first, but I finally managed to wrestle it into my oven. And it's sitting in there at this very moment just sizzling and bubbling with the most succulent and delicious juices. (111)

This surprising act of goodwill on Veronique's part is explained in Denis Johnson's article, *Lines and Circles*.

Johnson states:

The death of Marie-Adele creates regenerative ripples throughout most of the cast of characters. Up to this point, for example, Veronique St. Pierre has shown herself to be a small-minded gossip frustrated by her own childlessness. After Marie-Adele dies, Veronique breathes life into her own dream by moving into the Starblanket home to take care of Marie-Adele's family.

(259)

Marie-Adele's death takes the focus off of the characters' individualism, particularly Veronique's, if only for a while, reminding her that there are children to be fed. The changes within the women of the community are explored by Alan Filewood who supports the idea that "Nanabush is a transformative agent whose presence enables the development of the plot" (367). The trickster is a powerful being of the spirit world. His role in *The Rez Sisters* or in any *Wasakaychak* story is not to blame the character for her wrong doings or to label her as bad or evil. Nanabush does not condemn any of the characters in the play. According to Highway's notes contained in *The Rez Sisters*, the role of the trickster character within Native culture is to "teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit"

(xii). In *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush is part of the Wasaychigan Hill Indian community. Cherokee writer Thomas King states that "The trickster is an important figure for Native writers for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony" (xiii).

In Act One of *The Rez Sisters*, "a full scale riot breaks out, during which the women throw every conceivable insult at each other" (44). Nanabush enters the scene with an exhausted Marie-Adele almost collapsing from her illness. The fight stops as the women watch in silence while Marie-Adele struggles to regain her balance (50). Nanabush's presence is crucial for the survival of the community of these women. Nanabush appears when chaos occurs in the play and may even be responsible for its onset. This is consistent with his or any trickster's characteristics. According to the *Clowns and Tricksters* encyclopedia, "In the escapades of Nanabozhoo, [Nanabush] the Algonquians show the far-reaching consequences, both positive and negative, of people's actions and interactions. Nanabozhoo both creates . . . and destroys . . . and in doing so represents the scheme of possibilities in the world" (149). That is what makes him different from Christianity where God is

represented as only good.

James Stevens compiled a book of stories, titled *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree*, and he includes stories in which *Wasakaychak* is destructive. One such story is called, "Wee-sa-kay-jac and the Little Baby." In the story a woman from the tribe he is visiting approaches *Wasakaychak*. This woman tells him he is so slow that he cannot "keep up with the antics of her little baby" (36). *Wasakaychak's* challenge is then to imitate everything the baby does. If he cannot keep up "with the activities of the little one," the baby will be declared the winner, the winner over *Wasakaychak* (36). *Wasakaychak* copies everything the baby does. He crawls, digs into the dirt, plays, cries, and sings. "Then the little one shit in his pants. Finally, Wee-sa-kay-jac . . . could not keep up with the activities of the little one so he killed him" (36). The darkness contained within Highways plays can also be found in the Cree oral traditions. *Wasakaychak/Nanabush* is capable of both destructive behaviour, as in killing the infant, and procreative behaviour as in Chapter One's story when he breathes life into Muskrat.

Kimberly Christen's *Clowns and Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture* notes that *Nanabush* "has the power to transform himself into anything or anyone

he desires. This distinctive ability affords . . . [him] . . . the luxury of finding out many things about the communities in which he lives . . . [he] . . . listens to private conversations, sneaks into restricted meetings, and generally does whatever he pleases"(150). For example, in Highway's play *The Rez Sisters*, *Nanabush* is aware that Marie-Adele wants more time on earth. In resistance to her eminent death, she tells him, "No! Oh no! Not yet. Not yet. Give me time. Please . . . Get away from me" (92). He also is aware that if she wins at the bingo she will buy "an island . . . the most beautiful island in the world" (36). *Nanabush's* appearances serve as a reminder to Marie-Adele that her time on earth is limited. Marie-Adele is aware of her approaching death, and after an encounter with *Nanabush*, asks the other women, "what time is it?"(94).

Growing up on a trap-line, Highway listened to numerous stories about *Wasakaychak*. According to opening notes in *The Rez Sisters*, prior to residential school, he spent the "first six years of his life . . . among the lakes and forests of remote northwestern Manitoba, trapping in winter and fishing in summer" (vii). As discussed in the previous chapters, a traditional storyteller, like Eddie, has sources of inspiration for his creativity. The basis of his storytelling arises from his own personal encounters with the land and its inhabitants as well as the knowledge that

was passed on to him from storytellers of his childhood. In *The Rez Sisters*, *Nanabush* takes on three contemporary guises, the seagull, the black hawk, and the bingo master. Highway believes the trickster character to be "as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology"(xii).

In *The Rez Sisters*, *Nanabush* interacts with the two characters, Marie-Adele, and Zhaboonigan, who is mentally disabled. When *Nanabush* appears in the play as a seagull, these two characters are the only ones who can see "the spirit inside the bird and can sort of . . . recognize him for who he is"(18). Marie-Adele is dying from cancer, so it is her illness that heightens her awareness of the spirit world. In many Native communities children with mental illnesses or physical disabilities are viewed as being closely connected to the spirit world. This is because the challenges they have to overcome just to survive are far greater than those of a person who is born without these ailments.

According to Kimberly Christen, in "the Cree cosmos all beings interact to maintain the world and their community"(228). The interactions between *Nanabush* and Marie-Adele preserve that ancient Cree worldview where non-human and human beings interact. Laguna scholar and writer, Paula Gunn Allen says that "Christians believe that

God is separate from humanity and does as he wishes without the creative assistance of any of his creatures, while the non-Christian tribal person assumes a place in creation that is dynamic, creative and responsive" (52). In the production notes of *Dry Lips*, Highway describes a set designed specifically for *Nanabush*, showing the importance of the relationship between the spirit world of *Nanabush* (upper level) and the community (lower level) of Wasaychigan Hill: "The upper-level of the set was almost exclusively the realm of *Nanabush* . . . easy access was provided for between the lower and upper level of this set" (10).

In *The Rez Sisters*, *Nanabush* at first appears to restore balance at the "biggest bingo in the world." Disguised as the Bingo Master he participates in a scene where the women are seated at a long table facing the audience: "The scene is lit so that it looks like the, 'The Last Supper'" (102). Immediately thereafter, there is a revolt on stage, and thus any possible Christian interpretation of the play is replaced by Cree images of the spirit world. The Wasaychigan Hill women are once more in a state of frenzy, not unlike the fight scene:

The Bingo Master calls out number after number--but not the B 14--with the women improvising responses. These responses--Philomena has 27 cards!--grow more and more

raucous: B 14? Annie Cook? One more number to go! The B 14! Where is that B 14 . . . until the women have all risen from the table and come running downstage, attacking the bingo machine and throwing the Bingo Master out of the way. The women grab the bingo machine with shouts of: "Throw this fucking machine into the lake! It's no damn good . . . Bingo cards are flying like confetti. Total madness and mayhem. The music is going crazy . . . out of this chaos emerges the calm silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master . . . the Bingo Master changes, with sudden bird-like movements, into the nighthawk . . . Marie-Adele meets Nanabush.

(103)

Interestingly enough the play moves from the bingo hall into Marie-Adele's funeral proceedings. Zhaboonigan is noted as trying to "go" with Nanabush and Marie-Adele into the spirit world. Zhaboonigan, like the Muskrat of the Cree Creation Story, does not fear the unknown. Earlier in the play, Zhaboonigan makes references to liking "the birdies," meaning Nanabush. She is told to stop talking to the birds as Veronique tells her she is "crazy enough as it is"(53). A sense of order and peacefulness replaces the chaotic bingo scene as the women sing an Ojibway funeral song. It is also

the first time in the play when Marie-Adele's voice welcomes Nanabush. She goes from calling Nanabush a "stinking thing," in the first section of the play to speaking of his wings: " . . . ever so soft wings . . . beautiful soft . . . soft . . . dark wings . . . take me . . . come . . . come and get me . . . "(104).

Cree storytelling is full of mystical beings; the trickster is only one of them. Highway uses *Nanabush* in a contemporary theatrical performance, sharing what Indian people have honored in their cultures since time immemorial. When Indians bring spiritual beings into their performances, they do not contain that mysterious, spooky, or eerie stigma that is evident in Western performances that have characters or subject matter dealing with spirits and ghosts. Maybe for Indians it is the trickster character that keeps us all connected between the living and the dead. Highway adds:

Our Spirituality comes from our dream world . . . we're very connected to everything else in that way. We acknowledge that the spirits of our ancestors are still with us, that they still walk this land, and are a very active part of our lives and our imaginations. We still have that while mainstream culture doesn't. It's lost that faith, that magic, that wonder. (Hodgson 5)

Since our cultures have always acknowledged the spirit world, our identity continues to be reflected in plays like

The Rez Sisters and *Dry Lips*, which are based on and connected to our Cree traditional stories. In *Dry Lips*, as the opening epigraph reminds us, is about poison. The dream framework of *Dry Lips* demonstrates that the play is equally about community breakdown as it is about restoration. *The Rez Sisters* is more about the importance of developing equilibrium among the contributions of a community and its membership. Also, Highway uses *Nanabush*, weaving her/him throughout the plot of each play. Thus, Highway's inspiration comes from Cree movements, songs and language, embodying Cree performance through his plays, with *Nanabush* continually warning us of what not to become.

CONCLUSION

After completing this study it became clearer to me that contemporary Native performance is a natural extension of one's cultural belief system. Specifically, in Cree contemporary performance, there exists lineage or memories inspired from Cree traditions. For instance, the contemporary plays explored in this thesis illustrate how the performers and playwrights rely on Cree cultural knowledge to reclaim and renew traditional storytelling methodologies. This was particularly evident for me, after actually witnessing both Margo Kane and Shirley Cheechoo perform their plays on stage. The one-woman plays of both Kane and Cheechoo portray the main character engaging in numerous character transformations. That is to say, they utilized skills storytellers like Eddie Bellrose have for many years by embodying various elements of Cree culture into their plays, into their tellings.

Through this study, I have also realized that Tomson Highway's plays bring Cree/Ojibway culture into high school and university classrooms, thus into peoples' imaginations. Essentially, his plays are based on Cree/Ojibway contexts,

requiring the literary critic's research to be culturally specific. In order for literary critics to discuss his plays, they need to be knowledgeable about the development of the trickster character within the Native community. However, similar to listening to a traditional story, the reading of Highway's plays can too be experienced on many levels. The responsibility rests with the listener or reader. The more I research the Cree/Ojibway contexts of Highway's plays, the further I perceive his work as a learning resource for the Native community. Similarly, the more I re-examine a traditional story, the further I am able to witness knowledge that is both useful and crucial for the survival of Cree culture.

As an endnote to this thesis, I am told that my Great-granny continued to stubbornly assert her right to live from the teachings of her Cree grannies. My mother remembers entering her Granny's tee-pee one day and it smelling of fresh pine boughs. Immediately, my mother noticed the fire burning in the center pit of the tee-pee. It was summer and something was different because the only time Granny made a fire inside the tee-pee was at night when she was getting ready to sleep. Granny did most of her cooking on the outside in the fire pit. Although Granny peacefully departed, she left my family with the inspiration to dream a Cree existence.

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