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Remembering the Trickster in Tomson Highway’s The Rez Sisters

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“Is there a time of the Other, another, separate history?”
— Kadiatu Kanneh

For critics of Tomson Highway’s theatre, the character of Nanabush has become something of a distraction.1 Nanabush, the Cree and Ojibway trickster figure, plays a pivotal role in both of Highway’s published plays, The Rez Sisters and its sequel, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. In conjunction with analysis of Highway’s political motives, the cultural weight of Nanabush has provided almost all the material for criticism on Highway’s plays. With the notable exception of Helen Gilbert, Highway’s critics tend to regard his plays as venues for political protest and to read his use of Nanabush as an assertion of the values of an intact and monolithic culture. Even those who recognize other strains in Highway’s writing give an inordinate amount of prominence to the trickster. William Morgan’s interview with Highway, for example, contains a great deal of information that has nothing to do with the trickster, including Highway’s remarks on his training as a pianist and on Greek myth and classical drama. The title of the piece, however, “The Trickster and Native Theatre,” proclaims these remarks to be comparatively insignificant. Perhaps it should not be surprising that many critics focus exclusively on his use of the trickster or that they treat his use of the trickster simply as a product of his politics, given Highway’s material and his statements elsewhere. Such a reading, however, oversimplifies both Nanabush as a character and the plays as a whole.

The primary difficulty with the readings I have cited above is that they ignore the fact that Nanabush is a character in a play, a product of dramaturgical craft, as well as being a cultural figure. This means two things: first, that he2 is not identical to the trickster figure who appears in Cree and Ojibway mythologies; and second, that he functions as part of an ensemble of other

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characters and that he must be assessed in relation to them. Nanabush’s importance to *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* is unquestionable. In the plays and elsewhere, Highway makes it clear that the trickster is central to his work.  

The Nanabush who appears in Highway’s plays has not simply been lifted from stories or histories. He has been drawn out of personal and cultural memory and must be drawn out further by the other characters in the ensemble. For Highway and for the characters in Highway’s plays, Nanabush is neither a contemporary nor a readily available figure; he is a figure brought back from the past of a culture that no longer exists in any coherent form. The point of Nanabush’s presence is that he has been forgotten, at least in part, and needs to be recovered. Because the Nanabush in Highway’s work is a memory figure, he is subject to the exigencies of time, change, and human perspective. The play’s emotional centre is not Nanabush himself but the ways in which other characters relate to him. Highway’s fascination with the trickster provides the occasion for a larger set of concerns that have to do with the past, with the mutability of cultural identity, and above all with the difficulties and subtleties of human memory.

This is not to say that Nanabush is entirely cut off from the world of the play. As an embodied memory, he blurs the lines of presence and absence. In *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush is present physically on the stage, but he is only half-present to most of the characters, who either do not see him or see him as a bird, as the bingo master, as a shadow, or as an emotion. He is a figure of divided temporal allegiances, spanning the gap between the present action of the play and the past of the people it portrays. The divided sense of time that results, like the “time of the Other” posited by Kadiatu Kanneh (148), recalls and subsumes the structures of evolutionary time attacked by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*. Nanabush’s time is a “time of the Other” not because it is “separate” from westernized time or from the time-scheme followed by the rest of the play, but because it is of a different nature. In Nanabush’s time, past and present are both intertwined and distinct. His function is to communicate his sense of time to the rest of the characters in the play.

The communication is not easy. *The Rez Sisters* is not, as far as the action on the stage is concerned, a temporally confused play. On the contrary, it is obsessed with the forward movement of time. It marks this obsession aurally and visually with, among other devices, offstage percussion, Pelajía’s hammer, Zhaboonigan’s counting and naming, and Annie Cook’s too-fast walk. It contracts time in the frantic money-raising scene and expands it in the scene in which Zhaboonigan’s rape is recalled. There is a temporal urgency in the play’s two main actions, the journey to THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD in Toronto and the parallel journey toward, or away from, Marie-Adele’s death from cancer. However elaborately they may slow or accelerate or ignore the passage of time, none of these distortions of time can stop time. The play moves sequentially from beginning to end, without more
than a pause or two. But in these pauses and in the memories to which they
give occasion, the play begins to gain a sense of its own past, the past of its
characters, and the past of their culture. The scenes in which characters
remember the past are scenes in which their identities and their histories are
set against the inexorable movement of time. The most significant of these
scenes are inspired by or presided over by Nanabush, whose complex tempo-
ral allegiance provides an opportunity for the laboriously creative act of
remembering.

The fact that Nanabush seems like a figure from “another time” might make
him problematic for students of Fabian. His complex sense of time and identity
provides a counterpoint not only to the evolutionary time that Fabian rejects,
but also to the perhaps equally problematic “coevalness” (Fabian 31) that he
suggests as an alternative. Fabian sees the forms of anthropology current in his
own day as hopelessly self-involved. Instead of approaching other cultures on
their own terms, evolutionary anthropology expects to see, especially in tribal
cultures, a picture of its own culture’s past. Refusing to acknowledge their
“coevalness” with their subjects, Fabian argues, evolutionary anthropologists
propagate “a science of other men in another Time [...] a discourse whose
referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject”
(143). Fabian’s concept of coevalness – which he calls “the ultimate assault on
the protective walls of cultural relativism” (34) – places all human beings, all
mythologies, and all memories in the same time frame. He criticizes anthropol-
ogists for claiming to study the past, when everything and everyone they study
exists in the present. By conceiving of their subjects as “primitive,” he argues,
they confuse the truth about their own time, which is that it contains many
ways of life and many cultural patterns. Hunter-gatherers, he argues, are not
“less advanced” than investment bankers; they are simply different. To study
anthropology is not to study the past of the industrialized West, but to study a
multifarious human present, in which human beings are separated by habits, by
ideas, and by space, but not by levels in some temporalized scheme of
progress.

The problem with this, as critics after Fabian have found, is that any unified
time scheme tends to be the time scheme of the dominant party. The concept
of divided times is not without (reluctant) supporters. In his essay, “Place,
Time and the Black Body,” for example, Kadiatu Kanneh presents Fabian’s
“coevalness” as an ideal, but he immediately subverts this ideal by asking, “Is
there a time of the Other, another, separate history?” (148). Kanneh’s question
expresses something close to nostalgia for what he calls “different times”
(143). Citing Homi K. Bhabha’s “insistence [...] on the need for patterns of
response which recognize the association of time and identity with the ambival-
et institutions of power” (149), Kanneh concedes that such questions risk
capitulating to the imperialized divisions of time and space. As both he and
Bhabha acknowledge, the concept of separate times persists even in the minds
of those who consciously reject it. Since eradication is apparently not possible, the only alternative is a “pattern [...] of response,” a way of transforming an old and outmoded concept into something new.

For Highway, the concept of separate times becomes a way to articulate the different time-schemes that exist within a single culture. Highway suggests that a culture’s own past exists alongside its present, but that it has become inaccessible. His attempt to “re-establish the trickster” is in part an attempt to show that the trickster has been there all along, that he is “coeval” with the people who have forgotten him. It also acknowledges the changes in cultural practice that make Nanabush seem like a figure from another time. In Highway’s theatrical practice, Fabian’s somewhat politically naïve ideal is shown to be impractical, despite the fact that it improves on the imperialist thought encouraged by traditional evolutionary anthropology. Instead, Highway portrays a multivalent concept of time, whose layers are not marked as stages of development or as indications of value. He acknowledges that cultures have pasts that are and are not part of their present. He also acknowledges that evolutionary time can still affect the way that people think, even if it has been expurgated from anthropological theory.

Both as a character and as a historical figure, Nanabush is integral to Highway’s shifting sense of time. Nanabush’s position in the play, like that of the native Canadian in a predominantly white country, is ambiguous. Although he focuses the cultural memory of the play, Nanabush functions more as a catalyst for memory than as something to be remembered. He mirrors or mimics the movements of other characters, drawing attention not to himself but to their memories and their identities. He is an evanescent figure, deliberately constructed but impossible to pin down. In the foreword to The Rez Sisters (a litany he repeats in Dry Lips), Highway writes:

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

This description of Nanabush – thought to have “left [...] when the whiteman came,” but nonetheless “still here” – suggests that Nanabush has gone into hiding, that his apparent absence from the cultural landscape is a subterfuge. If this is the case, remembering Nanabush is simply a matter of recognizing him in whatever “guise” he has assumed. In his interview with William Morgan, on the other hand, Highway implies that Nanabush is gone: he says that Nanabush was “almost killed” by the intervention of white culture and that his (Highway’s) task as a writer is to “bring him back regardless” (Morgan 133–34). If this is the case, remembering Nanabush involves not just recognizing him but putting him back together, re-membering him. The surface contradic-
tion between these two remarks suggests not only that Nanabush’s position in the play is uncertain but that it is meant to be that way.

This uncertainty is suggestive. As I have said, Nanabush is not simply an irreverent spokesman for a non-Anglo culture. As a memory figure, Nanabush complicates the problem of perspective already apparent in the squabbles of the other characters in *The Rez Sisters*. He is as difficult for Highway to grasp as he is for Zhaboonigan to catch or for the play’s audience (native Canadian or Anglo) to understand. Only two of the “rez sisters” – Zhaboonigan and Marie-Adele – recognize Nanabush well enough to speak to him. The rest see him as a bird or do not see him at all. He mocks them and presides over their bingo games and their arguments and their fundraisers, but he never communicates with them directly. Nanabush is both “still here” and not here, both now and then, both annihilated by white culture and bad memory and utterly unaffected by them. Like the rest of the characters in *The Rez Sisters*, he stands on shaky cultural ground.

Thus, it is too simple to say, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins do, that “[t]he significance of the trickster as a traditional native Canadian force/spirit takes on a specific contemporary component when he appears as the dynamic, handsome man calling the bingo numbers” (Gilbert and Tompkins 144). The quality of being contemporary does not transfer so easily. The staging of *The Rez Sisters* makes this clear. Nanabush’s transformations stage the act of remembering a figure dismembered by temporal distance: that is, they remember him, taking him apart and putting him back together. In part because it represents such a radical shift in temporality, transforming Nanabush is difficult both for the actor/dancer portraying him and for the costume designer and the wardrobe assistants who sew his costumes and help him get in and out of them. He appears in full bird regalia ten pages before the bingo scene, in which he enters “dressed to kill: tails, rhinestones, and all” (100). The approximately six minutes between the two appearances is adequate, though not more than adequate, for a complete costume change. Nanabush’s transformation into the Bingo Master is unseen, as is the backstage scrambling involved in it. His second transformation, however, the change from the Bingo Master into the nighthawk, is accomplished in full view of the audience. As he dances with Marie-Adele, “the Bingo Master changes, with sudden bird-like movements, into the nighthawk, Nanabush in dark feathers” (103). The difference between the two quick changes is an exercise in audience education. Nanabush’s appearance as the Bingo Master is just that – an apparition, unprepared, a bit shocking. It preserves the illusion that Nanabush has something magical about him. His second, visible transformation dispels that illusion. It displays to the audience the continuity and the disjunction between the contemporary and the mythic, each of which is fully articulated and neither of which is a subordinated “component” of the other. In this scene, Nanabush is re-membered both in the sense of being put back together and in
the sense of being recognized. He is, as Highway says, “[brought] back” by an act of theatrical imagination, and he is demonstrated to be “still here,” still part of the world in which the play takes place. He exists in two guises, in two costumes, in two times, in the mythic past and in the immediate present. He navigates between them only with difficulty.

The difficulty of re-membering Nanabush reflects the difficulty with which other characters in *The Rez Sisters* remember their own pasts. Nanabush makes space for remembering within the constant forward motion of the play, but it is nonetheless a painful process. The “rhetorical tactics of inversion” (Mitchell and Hearn 109) associated with the trickster enable Nanabush to draw reflection and remembering out of the temporal confusion that he encourages. The scene of half-comic violence in the middle of the first act breaks off as Nanabush “makes a grab at” the seventh, Zhaboonigan. All freeze, and in the silence, we become privy to Zhaboonigan’s submerged memory:

> Are you gentle? I was not little. [...] Boys. White boys. Two. [...] They ask me if I want ride in car. Oh, I was happy I said, “Yup.” Took me far away. Ever nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here. *Pointing to her crotch, underneath her dress*. Many, many times. Remember. Don’t fly away. Don’t go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a Screwdriver. [...] 

> *During this last speech, Nanabush goes through agonizing contortions.* (47–48)

Zhaboonigan’s memory of Nanabush (“I saw you before”) and the process by which she recalls the rape are intertwined. He becomes the vessel of her memory, contorting his body in the agony that she cannot quite comprehend. She tells herself (or perhaps Nanabush) to remember, but it is only through her interaction with Nanabush that she remembers the “white boys” who raped her and the object they used. Nanabush’s presence is a necessary condition for her memory of her own experience, as well as for memories of larger – and perhaps, in an immediate sense – irrelevant cultural truths. Even with Nanabush’s assistance, Zhaboonigan’s memory is little more than a linguistic phenomenon, unnaturally distant from her emotional experience of it. Like Nanabush, it is both present and not-present in her psyche. The word “screwdriver” shocks the audience’s ears, but it is delivered without emphasis, separated from the grammatical structure of the monologue by Zhaboonigan’s misplaced period. Peeling away from what it signifies, it becomes an object almost of curiosity. This dream-like quality is intensified by the vague, imperfect metric echo of the word “remember” in “screwdriver”: the stresses shift, but the number of syllables in the two words is the same, and they are the only two words of more than two syllables in the speech. The echo’s imperfection allows Zhaboonigan to pause, puzzled, over the sound of the second word. It
does not sound quite right. She remembers and knows there is something wrong with her memory, but she does not know exactly what it is. The sense is left to Nanabush. His "contortions," however, graphic as they may be, represent rape no more directly than Zhaboonigan’s speech does. If anything, they are more theatrical than her plain recitation of her memory, not least because they are performed by someone whose connection with the victim is limited to empathy. The scene does as much to create distance between the present and memories of the past as it does to make the past more immediate.

Zhaboonigan’s rape, submerged by the banalities of her day-to-day life, enters a separate and parallel stream of time in the play, a stream of time marked not by dreams and wishes (bingo, Toronto), but by pain, violence, and death and by the remembered figure of Nanabush. Nanabush is, in this capacity, the comic face of tragic self-recognition. His white plumage darkened into the feathers of the night bird, Nanabush interrupts the narrative flow of the play on two more occasions, both of them having to do with Marie-Adele. On the first of these occasions, the narrative and the trip to Toronto have already been interrupted by a flat tire. Standing by the side of the road,

Marie-Adele begins talking to the bird, almost [as] if she were talking to herself. Quietly, at first, but gradually — as the bird begins attacking her — growing more and more hysterical, until she is shrieking, flailing, and thrashing about insanely.


While the trickster can be comic, that is clearly not always the case. The answer to Zhaboonigan’s question — “Are you gentle?” — quickly becomes apparent in this example: Nanabush, at least in his night-bird form, is adamantly not gentle. Nor, as Marie-Adele’s questions indicate, is he entirely recognizable. The uncertainty of his identity is apparent, even though Marie-Adele, talking to him “as if [...] talking to herself,” expresses a kinship with him that she does not consciously define. Like Zhaboonigan, the only other character who has any inkling of who Nanabush is, Marie-Adele sees in Nanabush something of herself. This is what makes the encounter frightening. She does not want to recognize Nanabush or his apparently direct access to the most painful aspects of her life. She does not want to remember him any more than she wants to remember her own circumstances. For Nanabush, death and violence are not frightening concepts to be ignored at all costs — quite the opposite. His intrusion into Marie-Adele’s life, like the intrusion of her cancer, is a threat from within as well as without, a threat to her concept of time. “Not yet,” she pleads, “Not yet. Give me time. Please.” Nanabush brings her back to herself, back to the fundamental rhythms of life and death disturbed by the artificiality and the shortsightedness of the play’s central action. The
bingo game is a diversion, replacing Marie-Adele’s journey from the world of the living into the spirit world with a road trip to Toronto. Marie-Adele asks for time, for deferral — “not yet” — and pushes Nanabush away. They are not on the same timetable, and she is not yet able or does not yet want to recognize his time as her own.

Nanabush’s final intervention, and Marie-Adele’s reaction to it, are as striking in their tranquility as the first two instances are in their violence. As the rest of the women, incensed by their bad luck, tear the bingo hall apart,

[... the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele [emerges] waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. [...]

MARIE-ADELE U-wi-nuk u-wa? U-wi-nuk u-wa? Eugene? Nee. U-wi-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma so that’s who you are ... at rest upon the rock ... the master of the game ... the game ... it’s me [...] come ... come ... (“Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It’s you, so that’s who you are.”) (103–04; translation in original)

The simplicity of Marie-Adele’s recognition (“Oh. It’s you”) belies the theatrical work required to produce it. In Nanabush’s world, preparation for death does not involve sorrow or repentance, as it does in the Christian tradition, but a certain amount of pain, a good deal of talking, a night or two on the town, and a willingness to accept ironic coincidences. Death, the final “game” of which Nanabush is master, arises out of the chaos and the banality of the bingo hall and out of the theatrical act of remembering that takes place there. The stark realities of racialized violence and death form an undercurrent in The Rez Sisters, a parallel course of memory and futurity that, like the submerged Nanabush, is both “still here” and waiting to be re-discovered. Even when what is submerged is tragic, painful, and fatal, Nanabush’s intervention — the intervention of a particular history and of the collective sense of identity that history creates — is a necessary step and, in the end, a step toward peace. As the epigraph to Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, a quotation from Lyle Longclaws, puts it, “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed.” This exposure, which depends on Nanabush’s powers of temporal inversion, can only take place in “the time of the Other,” a time that shares a good deal with the stretched time of the stage. Death, and the deep fears it evokes, brings that time closer. So does bingo. So does remembering.

When the Bingo Master and the game he supervises (but does not control — that is left to the random-number-generating bingo machine) are unmasked, so are the temporal contradictions under which the characters of the play operate. The numerous competing time-schemes and markers of time are dispersed. The percussion instruments in the orchestra pit are silenced. Pelajia swings her hammer — silently. Annie Cook stops marching around. The company sings the Ojibway funeral song. Pelajia addresses Marie-Adele’s grave:
[...] Best bingo game we've ever been to in our lives, huh? [...] Kinda' silly, innit, this business of living? But. What choice do we have? When some fool of a being goes and puts us Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, dishes out this lot we got right now. But. I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here. [...] (105)

The time that the women in The Rez Sisters inhabit contains both the baggage of the past, of "this old earth," and the exigencies of the present, "this lot we got right now." The group to which they belong -- "us Indians" -- complicates the relationship between the two. Their past is the past of Nanabush, of myths that the dominant culture has suppressed or mocked or minimized. Their present contains the additional difficulties of life as an "Indian": poor medical care, few economic opportunities that do not involve leaving the community, as many of the women's husbands and sons have done, and the literal and figurative violence of the white world evoked by Zhaboonigan's rape. Practicalities -- and impracticalities, like THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, with all of its mythic resonances -- hamper the women's connection to the past.

The time that Nanabush represents is a time of the Other within the self, a time inextricably part of the other characters in The Rez Sisters and separate from them. Nanabush is both past and present. He is "still here" and must be brought back. He contains the split between the mythic and the contemporary, between Native and white culture, between the game of bingo and the game of life and death, between memory and experience. Even for Nanabush, Fabian-esque "coevalness" is impossible to sustain for more than an inarticulate moment. Both the near-silence imposed on him for the bulk of the play and its inverse, the empty and wordy banter of the Bingo Master, place him in the role of the witness, the re-actor, the mimic. He is part and not part of the action; or rather, he is intrinsic to the action in a way that is not revealed until the climactic scene in the bingo hall. Nanabush's mimicry, his approximation of sameness, self-consciously marks his difference from the other characters, as do his silence and his violence. Mimicry, however, prepares the way for his entry into the most central concerns of the play, both the ostensible and the real. The Rez Sisters exposes the temporal fissures that divide a culture against its own memories, fissures that run as deep, if not deeper, than the cracks that separate one culture from another. Highway's use of memory both distances his characters from the history he evokes and forces them to recreate it in an intensely personal way. Although the past is remote, it is not dead. Highway does not propose a return to the past, but a growing awareness of history, a self-conscious remembering that is the first step toward redefining a scattered culture.
NOTES

1 See Wilke, Morgan, Nothof, and Johnston. For a more balanced perspective, see Gilbert 390–93.
2 The trickster is both sexes and neither, and Ojibway, conveniently, has a third-person pronoun that conveys this ambiguity. Since English is not so convenient (Nanabush is not precisely an it) and since the trickster in The Rez Sisters is portrayed by a male actor, I will refer to him using the masculine pronoun. In Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, the dancer portraying Nanabush is a woman.
3 In the late 1980s, he and several other Ojibway and Cree writers living in Toronto formed the (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, which published new works by native writers in The Magazine to Re-Establish the Trickster (Wilke 137–41).
4 According to my (rough) calculations (The Rez Sisters 93–100).
5 Even the smoothest quick change invites disaster: seams rip; snaps give; the arms and legs of various garments get tangled up in themselves; jackets, hats, or ties are forgotten or stepped on; crew members take a smoke break at the wrong time. The point of this assertion, however, is not to call attention to the scrambling but to point out the fact that it is unseen by the audience, that it is constructed so as to preserve theatrical illusion. The second transformation is not.
6 Bonita Freeman-Witthoft writes that, “[a]mong many tribes [including Ojibway, Cree, Tlinget, and Navaho], a large cycle of trickster tales exists along-side of a formal mythology, with the same left-handed twin playing somewhat different characters in the two cycles” (21). The trickster figure is dignified and self-conscious in one context and blundering and careless in others. Although Highway’s Nanabush is not much of a blunderer, he is capable of playing both serious and comic roles.

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