Hélène Jobidon  
Professor Elspeth Tulloch  
Twentieth Century English-Canadian Theatre  
28 November 2012

The Plight of Aboriginal People as seen in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*  
and *The Rez Sisters*.

Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) are two major works in twentieth-century Canadian drama. Not only do they awaken Canadian readers to the plight of Aboriginal people and confront them with their responsibilities, but they also raise the consciousness of a segment of the Native women’s community (Nothof 6). While both plays present fragmented societies touched by racial prejudices and cultural losses, the authors adopt different perspectives and tones, conveying variant messages about Aboriginals' plight. In *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which is a modern trial play about a young Native woman who is alienated both from the reserve and city life, Ryga conveys a critical and pessimistic outlook about Native's hopeless situation as Rita is trapped by the white colonialist insensitivity. In *The Rez Sisters*, which is a modern tragicomedy, Highway presents seven sisters living on a reserve in Ontario and their craving to play Bingo as a means of escaping their problems; but, he recognizes his people’s legitimate aspirations for the survival of their nation. This paper explores the consequences of the loss of identity and way of life and how the clash between Native and non-Native cultures is depicted through the authors’ stories and characters. This essay will also show the authors’ divergent treatment of the themes of violence and self-destruction. Following Nothof’s interpretation, for the purposes of this
paper, rape is a metaphor for “the intrusive and destructive impact of one society to another” (217). Suicide and rape are dealt with by both authors: in *The Ecstasy*, these issues are inevitable tragedies that arise from desperate situations, while in *The Rez Sisters*, they are traumas that lead to transformation within the community.

When two cultures collide, most often one dominates, either exploiting or ignoring the other. In North America, the domination of white colonialists has led to the near extinction of various Aboriginal cultures. The Inuit, Métis and First Nations in Canada suffered one hundred and fifty years of deliberate politics of assimilation, which attacked their cultural identity and spiritual values. In Highway’s and Ryga’s stories, Native men and women adjust, at different levels, to the proximity of white society and its imposed laws. There is a gradation, from those who still practice the rituals, such as talking with the Trickster or spirit, to those who believe in white society’s values of consumerism and entertainment, as exemplified by the characters’ attraction to Bingo games and western music in *The Rez Sisters*. There are also those like Rita Joe and Jamie Paul who leave the reserve altogether but are unable to find their place in either world. They all suffer to various degrees from the clash between Native and non-Native cultures.

With his immigrant background and strong political convictions, Ryga knew very well the “demoralization and degradation” that plagued the Cree (Innes 14) and that contributed to the migration of younger generations towards urban centers. In *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, the main character is torn between the old life on the reserve and the new one offered in the city. In rejecting the Aboriginal way of life, Rita abandons her cultural heritage, yet she endures great pain and feels uprooted. In the concluding line of the play, through vivid imagery, Rita’s sister Eileen Joe, reveals how the cement in the
city made Rita’s feet hurt (Ryga 59). Clearly, as Abu-Swailem argues, "Rita's tragedy lies in the inevitable result of the deadlock in which the Indians find themselves between the reservation and the city"(75).

According to Boire’s analysis of the play, "the trial is an appropriate trope with which to dramatize colonizing encounters and their harsh legacies" ("Tribunalations" 9). Boire maintains that The Ecstasy is "typical of virtually all anti-authoritarian trial plays" (9). We witness an "irreconcilable" dialogue between Rita and the Magistrate, an "irresistible sentencing" in which Rita is the victim and the audience emerges as the central defendant (12). The Magistrate is the white colonialist and antagonist, the one who sees himself as a guardian of the law. He suggests to Rita that she return to her reserve, which is “her place,” thereby illustrating the typical white person’s inability to understand the Native. The Magistrate goes so far as to ask her to change her hair, her pronunciation, even her name, telling her: “This is not the reservation, Rita Joe. This is another place, another time…” (Ryga 38). But, Rita refuses to assimilate. We thus observe the clash between two cultures.

Ryga explores the impacts of this cultural clash by illustrating how the non-Natives’ deliberate disregard or indifference leads to the Natives’ suffering. Jamie Paul represents the men who are ignored by the whites. Unwilling to live on ancestral land, he wants to make amiable contact with the “other”; yet, he faces the dreadful plight of being ignored, invisible, and unacknowledged, and he ultimately loses his identity. Racial enmity on the part of the white people is manifested through their indifference to Jamie (Abu-Swailem 74). Jaimie's pain is particularly revealed in the following line: “They
don’t know what it’s like to...(…)to stand in line an’ nobody sees you!” (Ryga 54). In his analysis of the play, Boire associates this disregard with the erasure of identity (“Wheel” 63); invisibility does not prove non-existence; it proves “political blindness on the part of the audience” (63).

In *The Ecstasy*, the chief Davie Joe realizes that the reserve will die if it does not change. In a poignant gesture, Davie Joe touches his heart and contradicts the priest who cherishes the old life on the reserve; he says that if they only fish, hunt, and cut wood, they will be dead before a hundred years (Ryga 53). They both helplessly witness the departure of Rita and Jamie, and are incapable of saving her from her sordid fate at the hands of murderers and a prejudiced Magistrate.

In contrast to the ignominy and despair of *The Ecstasy*, Tomson Highway’s play, *The Rez Sisters*, is a drama about transformation and accommodation, and the outcome is hopeful. Rather than talking of assimilation, one can argue that Highway deals with the mutability of the Aboriginal people’s cultural identity. His story of contemporary women on the Wasaychigan (“window”) Hill Indian reserve conveys a message of openness and exchange. As Nothof has noted, the women on the reserve, their history, as well as the proximity of Toronto and white culture, reveal a cultural *mélange* of both Native and non-Native worlds (2). Highway, who spoke only Cree until the age of six and who left the reserve at that age to attend a Roman Catholic residential school, belongs to the first generation of university-educated Aboriginals. Consequently, as Howells points out, Highway’s vision is always double: he dreams in Cree and is inspired by his Cree heritage. Yet, he writes in English and he distances himself from his culture by his white
English-Canadian education (85). He has accepted his “postcolonial Native identity” (85) and has expressed his desire for a state of metamorphosis and transformation rather than a state of stagnation for every society (Nothof 2).

This certain degree of accommodation is well-portrayed in the The Rez Sisters. The seven women (sisters, half-sisters and step-sisters) aspire to have access to white products and to incorporate white ways of living that would alleviate the drudgery of women: better stoves, toilets, and adequate plumbing—all products that have become essential in twentieth century life. In the same way, white culture has made its way into their lives. Annie loves country music. Véronique who loves to cook, dreams of becoming rich and famous and preparing a “steak tartare de-frou-frou” in the style of Jehanne Benoîit (Highway 37). Pelajia, the leader among the group, is hammering on the roof at the beginning and end of the play. She is a strong character who is reconciled with Western housing and urban planning, and she is a symbol of accommodation to the other culture as well as a symbol of self-determination.

In the opening dialogue, Pelajia and Philomena argue about the life on the reserve and their sense of belonging. Pelajia complains about the losses of “old stories, old languages” (5) and complains about how things are not as they "used to be" (4). She unabashedly describes the alienating life on the reserve: “Everyone here is crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wife and husbands and forget about our Nanabush” (6). A little later, Veronique adds to this criticism: “This reserve, sometimes I get so sick of it” (26). The negative consequences of the loss of Aboriginal
culture prevail throughout *The Rez Sisters* although in a generally lighter mood than in *The Ecstasy*.

Aboriginal children are given up for adoption out of the reserve, thus lose their identity, and their parents forever long for their unknown child. Both plays address this issue. In *The Rez Sisters*, Philomena tells how she had to give up her child for adoption and how she wishes she could find her child in Toronto. Similarly, in *The Ecstasy*, in a discussion about founding a family, Rita mentions that Clara Hill is unaware of where her children are (49). “Goddam it!”(49) answers Jaimie, revealing the extent of his anger about this cruel fact. In the trial, when confronted by the magistrate about what she will do with her girl, Rita answers that she would rather kill her child than give her away as the Magistrate suggests she should (35). Parting with one's progenitors is a definite rupture; a vacuum is created in Aboriginals’ cultural continuity and their lineage.

Violence in all forms permeates both plays. For women, it is extremely difficult to live on reserves; they become alienated in vicious cycles of violence, and some adopt self-destructive patterns, a topic that both playwrights address. Emily Dictionary in *The Rez Sisters* is a victim of her alcoholic husband's beating on a daily basis. He nearly kills her when he comes in at night drunk and almost sinks an axe into her spine (51). She leaves the reserve unable to cope with her life and joins a biker gang. Emily recalls Rosabella's words about the difficulty of being an "Indian" woman: “how fucking hard it is to be an Indian in this country” (97). In a touching monologue, constructed in short, powerful sentences, Highway transmits Rose's plight very cleverly: her loss of cultural belonging, and her abuses of drugs and alcohol that lead her to take her life (97). Emily,
in sharing the suicide of her intimate friend and lover, confides a tragic story in her sisters, and therefore also in the audience. The impact is immediate. Emily's monologue reinforces the drama and leaves no ambiguity on Highway's intention of revealing the extent of the Aboriginal men’s and women's despair. Escaping from the reserve is thus a hoped for, but unsatisfactory solution for women in *The Rez Sisters* as well as for Rita and Jamie in *The Ecstasy*.

Undoubtedly the worst form of violence besides murder is rape, which in both plays, can be perceived as a metaphor for all the violence perpetrated against Native women. Zhaboonigan’s sexual assault is based on the true story of a gang rape on a Native girl by a group of white boys with a screw driver that left her bleeding to death. In *The Rez Sisters*, rape is a traumatic event, but somehow subdued since Zhaboonigan, a mentally disabled child, reveals her trauma in a cathartic dream-like experience with the Trickster, a healing figure. As Perkins mentions, Nanabush, the magical spirit, acts as "a vessel of her memory, contorting his body in the agony that she cannot quite comprehend" (264).

Nanabush symbolizes transformation. After the chaotic scene of the Bingo game, where “total madness and mayhem” prevail, and the music is entrancing (Highway 103), Nanabush changes his role from Bingo Master to nighthawk, the Ojibway angel of death, that welcomes Marie-Adele’s last breath. “Because Nanabush participates in both cultures, elements of each may be accommodated, without a necessary destruction” (Nothof 3).
In contrast, in *The Ecstasy*, the multiple rapes and murders are the culmination of Rita’s descent into hell. Portrayed as a strong, passionate woman, Rita refuses to tolerate the Magistrate’s and murderers’ insidious remarks and attacks.

When she is murdered, she is much more than just a skid row casualty; she represents immense cultural loss that goes beyond class or ethnicity. In fact, with one principal character, the use of a chorus, music, and a large stage, Ryga wrote a play with all the inevitability and power of a Greek tragedy. (Hoffman 180)

Thus, in an expressionist rendition, the lighting and noise effects from a distant train and its whistle combined with the overlapping voices set the nightmarish mood; the physical language of the characters as they engage in intense moments at a frenzy pace and the spiral of events, which goes beyond realism, trigger the audience’s emotions as they witness two brutal murders. First, Jaimie is viciously beaten and left dying under a passing train; then, Rita screams for help as she is assaulted by four men but dies. These two characters represent all Native people killed in racist murders, and who are crushed in the hands of amoral police officers or powerful rulers of a dominant system.

It is a tragedy for any community to be disregarded, pushed aside, have its land stolen, and endure multiple injustices and abuses. In Canadian history, the plight of Aboriginal people has only very recently been truly recognized and addressed. In 2008, The Canadian government officially presented its long-awaited apology for residential schools. Thus, at the time of the first performances of these plays, in 1967 for the *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and in 1986 for *The Rez Sisters*, few were aware or wanted to see the
cruel treatment of Aboriginal people in the country. This situation needed to be denounced, and Ryga felt a necessity to speak out vehemently for the Aboriginal. For Ryga, an activist who comes from a Ukrainian rural village in Saskatchewan, the crimes are not Rita’s, but are “the continuing ideological exploitation of women, indigenous peoples, land rights, and natural justice” (Boire, "Wheels" 71). Ryga communicates his message to his audience in a direct, acute, and Brechtian manner; he puts them on the bench of the accused. Tomson Highway, on the other hand, offers a more optimistic view about the possibilities for regenerating Aboriginal identities in Canada in The Rez Sisters (Howells 92). There is a sense of peace and hope in The Rez Sisters, an optimism in a new generation, hope for better living conditions and the empowerment of women, who stand as the backbone of the communities.

In both plays, the theatrical experience is tense and electrifying. Memories of the past are not only told, but relived. The audiences navigate in time, through the fantasy of dreams and reminiscences, such as David Joe’s vision of a flock of white geese chasing Rita, which foreshadows her tragic fate. Rita is caught in a spiral of events, the seven sisters interact in multiple climactic scenes, from the riot to the car ride, to the Bingo game; all scenes adroitly echo the Aboriginals' deep-rooted pain, complaints, and aspirations. These plays have now attained national and international recognition, which is not surprising since the human tragedy of disregard, disrespect and intentional indifference is still the lot of many people, such as the many minority groups who constantly strive to reappropriate their voice, and reclaim their identity and their way of life amidst the overwhelming power of ruling groups.
Works Cited


