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“And What Are You Dreaming About?”: An Analysis of Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*

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Abstract

This paper argues that it is necessary to approach Tomson Highway’s play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, from a culturally appropriate perspective that draws on Cree understandings of the Spirit World, for such a perspective can create enriched possibilities for understanding the play, as well as greater awareness of Indigenous struggles and experiences in Canada. More specifically, this paper draws on the traditional meaning of dreams in Cree epistemology, in order to demonstrate that the play’s framing as a dream can be seen as having a dual purpose: first, to envision and prepare for possible trials and difficulties, and second, to find creative and peaceful solutions to pervasive problems (Ferrara, 2004; Nabigon 2006). This paper considers, furthermore that since the dreamer in *Dry Lips* is a male character, the play’s dream-framing addresses what Sam McKegney (2012) has identified as a common crisis of identity for Indigenous men, mainly their colonially-imposed alienation “from tribal-specific roles and responsibilities” (p. 241). Importantly, it is within this colonial context that the male characters in *Dry Lips* interact with, and express a lack of understanding and appreciation for, women. By paying attention to the colonial context and by using the Cree notion of ‘dream’ to analyze Indigenous masculinities, then, this paper provides an illustration of how the play gestures to Indigenous ‘ways of knowing’ as a means toward healing and decolonizing ends.

[Key words: Canada, Indigenous Criticism, Cree epistemology, colonialism, gender, masculinity]

1. Introduction

Near the end of Tomson Highway’s controversial play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), the lead character, Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik, awakens from a protracted nightmare. He has been sleeping, naked and snoring on the couch in his living room. He is startled when his wife, Hera Keechigeesik, enters the room with their newborn baby girl—he jumps up and falls off the couch, inciting Hera to ask him, “And what are you dreaming about?” (Highway, 1989, p. 128). Yet Zachary is too distraught to answer. Only when Hera sits down beside him and passes him the baby does he seem to calm down. He bounces the baby on his knee, and then holds her lovingly up in the air. As the stage instructions indicate, this is how the play concludes—with this image of “a beautiful naked Indian man lifting this naked baby Indian girl in the air, his wife sitting beside them, watching and laughing” (p. 130). This scene, which is remarkable for its sense of domestic happiness, peace, and balance, contrasts sharply with the alcohol abuse, violence, and dysfunction that characterize the majority of the play. Significantly,

however, these darker aspects occur solely within Zachary's dream—a framing that, this paper argues is crucial to carefully consider in ongoing critical discussions of the play. Indeed, this paper aims to show that this dream-framing intends to exaggerate, and thus meaningfully illuminate, the underlying and colonially-derived struggles, which shape the background of the fictional Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve.

2. Responding to *Dry Lips*' Contentious Reception History

Although *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* has generated an archive of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholarly engagements, the majority of these engagements characterize the play as forwarding problematic and colonially informed misconceptions of Indigenous peoples. The play premiered at Theatre PasseMuraille in Toronto on April 21, 1989 and soon garnered critical attention and awards. In particular, it won the Ontario Art Council's Chalmers Award and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award the year that it premiered. In 1991, however, subsequent performances of the play at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa drew a great deal of negative criticism, most notably from Indigenous women. Two of the most disapproving responses were those of Anishnaabe writer Marie Annharte Baker and Metis poet Anita Tuharsky, both of whom expressed concern that the play does not adequately assign responsibility to non-Indigenous people and institutions for the damages that they have caused to Indigenous communities. As Baker (1991) explains, "I worry about the unintended...A yuppie would go home [from the play] feeling relieved that Indians live on the rez [the Indian reservation] and in other parts of the city" (p. 89). Likewise, Tuharsky (1991) contends that *Dry Lips* perpetuates damaging perceptions of Indigenous peoples. She posits that the play even accedes "to create pleasures for the [wider Canadian] public which enjoys [negative] stereotypes and images," especially of women (p. 5). Following these responses, non-Indigenous critics also added to the condemnation of the play. Alan Filewod (1992), for example, asserts that *Dry Lips* "lets the Anglo audience off the hook," by not obliging non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own culpability in a history of colonial oppression (p. 21). The commonality between these criticisms is that they see the play as supporting, instead of questioning, colonial misunderstandings about Indigenous peoples. This paper refers to this reception history, because in turning to its own analysis—which utilizes the Cree notion of 'dream' to interpret *Dry Lips*—it aims to follow the lead of Anishinaabe scholar Armand Garnett Ruffo (2009), who contends that Indigenous concepts and 'ways of knowing' can provide an alternative method of interpreting this play, a method which may begin to productively address some of the complex and difficult issues raised by such criticisms.

3. The Need for a Culturally Appropriate Perspective

Contemporary Indigenous criticism in Canada is currently concerned with exploring new analytical strategies by which Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics might engage responsibly with Indigenous-authored texts. In a recent edition of *The Canadian*

Journal for Native Studies, for instance, Indigenous scholars Niigonwedom James Sinclair and Renate Eigenbrod (2009) articulate the need for “a respectful, meaningful critical language” that arises directly from Indigenous cultural production and affirms traditional knowledge (p. 3). Yet it is also important for non-Indigenous scholars in Canada to recognize that their understanding of Indigenous cultural production and knowledge is not conditioned by the weight of lived experience, and this places limitations on what these scholars can and should address. This means that non-Indigenous scholars must endeavour to draw upon Indigenous sources, while also resisting the impulse to assume a position of absolute authority on these sources. As a non-Indigenous person living in Canada, therefore, I acknowledge myself as a settler scholar who is seeking to destabilize the limits of my own culturally produced interpretative practices, by re-examining this text in relation to Indigenous epistemologies.

This paper hence investigates the play’s framing as a dream, not as a simple or straightforward narrative device, but rather as a complicated aspect of the text, which holds profound meaning that is lost when it is read through a Western lens. Its intention is to unsettle the critical tendency of non-Indigenous scholars to discuss *Dry Lips* as a ‘flawed’ or ‘problematic’ text, for such a tendency can have a pernicious effect: it can exclude this Indigenous-authored text from recognition as a source of alternative insight and consciousness, as well as reinforce the assumption that the text is primarily intended for a Western audience. Indeed, despite its cast of Indigenous characters, and its conspicuous use of both English and Cree languages, *Dry Lips* has predominantly been appraised from within a Western framework. This framework for understanding the play is limiting, often confining the play’s more intricate aspects to Western ideas about conventional play-writing. For instance, Roberta Imboden (1995) describes the play’s dream-framing as a mere “comic ... twist in the plot” (p. 118). In contrast to these potentially reductive readings, this paper maintains that it is necessary to approach the play from a culturally appropriate perspective that draws on Cree understandings of the Spirit World. Such a perspective can create enriched possibilities for appreciating the play, as well as generate an awareness and discussion of Indigenous struggles and experiences in Canada.

This paper draws on Cree scholarship, as *Dry Lips* is a Cree-authored text. In exploring the play in terms of the meaning of dreams in Cree ‘ways of knowing,’ this paper contends that Zachary’s dream can be seen as having a dual purpose—first is to envision and prepare for possible trials and difficulties, and second is to find creative and peaceful solutions (Ferrara, 2004; Nabigon 2006). Furthermore, since the dreamer in *Dry Lips* is a male character, this paper argues that his dream addresses what Sam McKegney (2012) has identified as a common crisis of identity for Indigenous men, mainly their alienation “from tribal-specific roles and responsibilities” (p. 241). McKegney explains that “colonial processes have intervened in traditional gender roles,” unsettling centuries of gender balance and supplanting it with patriarchy (p. 243). Importantly, it is within this context that the male characters in *Dry Lips* interact with, and express a lack of understanding and appreciation for, women. By paying attention to this context and using the Cree notion of ‘dream’ to analyze Indigenous masculinities, then, this paper

provides an illustration of how the play gestures to Indigenous ‘ways of knowing’ as a means toward healing and decolonizing ends.

4. Healing the Poison of Colonialism

Highway signals his creative focus on healing and decolonization in his epigraph to *Dry Lips*, by utilizing a quote from Indigenous political activist Lyle Longclaws: “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed” (Highway, 1989, p. 6). Reading the play through the lens of the epigraph indicates that Highway’s intention is to expose the ‘poison’—what he sees as the potential source of difficulty and pain in Indigenous communities—and hence to promote ‘healing,’ reconciliation and understanding. Moreover, Highway suggests in his production notes that the manner in which he will explore this ‘poison’ is through a “dreamscape,” which is meant to “highlight the many magical appearances of Nanabush in her various guises” (p. 10). It is important to approach Highway’s narrative with the understanding that the action takes place in a dream, and thus does not portray real-time individuals and events. Indeed, the female characters are not intended to represent an essentialized depiction of Indigenous women—especially since the men in the play only interact with Nanabush, who is, in effect, reflecting and caricaturing the men’s preoccupations and fears regarding the women. That Nanabush is a caricaturization, and not a lifelike portrayal of Indigenous women, is underscored by her exaggerated appearances—at various and alternating times throughout the play she is pictured with “a huge, outsized prosthetic belly,” “gigantic breasts,” or a “very large bum” (pp. 52, 79, 110). Once again, these exaggerated appearances are meant to reflect and underscore the complexes and shortcomings of the men. This becomes particularly clear in an investigation of Nanabush’s significance in Cree epistemology.

In a prologue to the play, Highway provides a detailed note on his conception of Nanabush, describing that the character should be seen as a trickster figure who “straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit” (Highway, 1989, p.12). Nanabush is thus an “extraordinary” and mysterious character that can change gender and take on several “guises” (p.12). Highway further intimates that Nanabush can interact with people in a number of different ways, but always with the goal of imparting lessons to “teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth” (p.12). Armand Garnett Ruffo (2009) supplements Highway’s description of Nanabush, by explaining that Cree teachings center on a notion of restoring and maintaining balance “with the inner and outer environments” (p. 95). According to this worldview, alcoholism, violence, and abuse can be considered “sicknesses,” telling indications that an individual or a community is out of balance (Ruffo, 2009, p. 97). To be sure, in Zachary’s dream, these sicknesses are readily apparent and even shocking—the male characters consume alcohol, denigrate women, and partake in sexual violence. However, it is worthy to consider how these elements may be embellished in order to make them both visible and unavoidable. Cree healer Herb Nabigon (2006) elucidates that Nanabush, as a mediator for the Great Spirit, “forces us” to encounter our weaknesses, so that we may learn to

avoid pitfalls, such as greed and selfishness, and become more caring beings (p. 80). From this perspective, then, Nanabush’s role is to present lessons that will compel Zachary and the other male characters to confront their problems and transform themselves.

The dream in the play can therefore be interpreted as a symbolic vision, moving Zachary outside the confines of his daily existence to disclosed deep-seated fears and frustrations, as well as incite personal transformation and balance. This understanding of the dream does not diminish its wider social or cultural significance. As Nadia Ferrara (2004) notes, in Cree ‘ways of knowing,’ dreams are viewed as “actual experience[s] of the self,” which are in some ways more meaningful than experiences in the waking life (p. 69). More specifically, dreams are treated as “important vehicles by which humans communicate” with both their larger community and the Spirit World (Ferrara, 2004, p. 69). Though Zachary is the specific dreamer, then, this does not mean that the events that happen in the dream are irrelevant to other men in the community—especially since Ferrara explains individuals in Cree communities are expected to share the responsibility of their problems, working collectively with others towards solutions. In this case, the problems that the play exposes concern all men in the ‘Wasy’ community, conveying their need to recover balanced relationships with each other, the women, and their traditional beliefs.

Cree scholar Randy Lundy has observed that the opening line of the play, “Hey Bitch” (Highway, 1989, p. 16) gestures to the point of rupture in the relationships of the ‘Wasy’ community. As he describes, this derogatory phrase “makes it clear that much of the men’s confusion, anger, feelings of powerlessness ... arise from a lack of understanding ... of women and feminine realities” (Lundy, 2001, p. 106). These first words, spoken by Big Joey and directed towards his partner Gazelle Nataways, are an indicator of the men’s trivializing and disrespectful attitude toward women. More specifically, it reveals the misogyny of Big Joey, who is associated with the most tragic and violent events in the play: the birth of his son, Dickie Bird Halked—who suffers from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and whom Big Joey refuses to recognise; the brutal crucifix rape of Nanabush (in the guise of Patsy Pegahmagahbow) by Dickie Bird; and the subsequent accidental and suicidal death of Simon Starblanket. When asked why he does not intervene to stop the rape of Nanabush, Big Joey vehemently responds: “Because I hate them! I hate them fuckin’ bitches. Because they—our women—took the fuckin’ power away from us” (Highway, 1989, p. 120). In response to Big Joey, Spooky Lacroix, the most traditionally-minded of the male characters, asserts, “They always had it” (p. 120). This assertion can be appreciated with the recognition that in traditional Cree societies, “women held authority in the political, social, and economic spheres of family life. Women were honoured and respected by their men [and t]his respect permeated throughout the community” (Nabigon, 2006, p. 63). As Sam McKegey (2012) identifies, furthermore, colonial interventions in Canada, such as the Indian Act, residential schooling, and capitalist consumerism, have worked to eradicate this traditional understanding of gender balance, by imposing patriarchal values and displacing women from positions of power. The sexism exhibited by the male characters in *Dry Lips* is thus a

disturbing indication of this colonial situation, as well as wider patriarchal values which serve to diminish and objectify women.

The play further reveals how the eradication of traditional Indigenous values has contributed to communal dispiritedness and dysfunction. For instance, at various times throughout the play, the male characters suggest that someone should take ‘responsibility’ for Dickie Bird, or else he may, as Zachary suggests, “go out there and kill someone” (Highway, 1989, p. 83). This dialogue is particularly telling as it hints that Dickie Bird’s violent outburst may have been prevented with close mentorship or parenting. Furthermore, the suggestion that ‘someone’ should ‘do something’ about Dickie Bird proposes a certain shirking of responsibility, especially given that within many traditional Cree communities, it is believed that everyone is affected by, and therefore responsible for, everyone else (Ferrara, 2004, p. 69). Many of the male characters in *Dry Lips* attempt to deny their part in the unfortunate circumstances of Dickie Bird’s birth, by placing the blame solely on Big Joey. For example, Pierre St Pierre tells Dickie Bird: “I’ll never forgive your father, Big Joey...for letting your mother do that to you” (Highway, 1989, pp. 57-8). However, Pierre also admits that the other men were also “in the same room” with Black Lady Halked when Dickie Bird was born, and none of them intervened to assist her (p. 57). The circumstances of Dickie Bird’s birth thus underscore the erasure of traditional Cree values regarding communal responsibility and care in the ‘Wasy’ community.

Significantly, the stage directions throughout the play also suggest a caricatured portrayal of the scene of Dickie Bird’s birth. These directions include Nanabush in an exaggerated and sexualized guise performing a striptease while the men “*are going wild, laughing, applauding and drinking*” (Highway, 1989, p. 87). This provocative representation of Nanabush, which is often construed as a demeaning portrayal of Indigenous women, has been the focus of scathing critical responses to the play, such as those of Marie Anneharte Baker (1991). However, this paper insists that the play intends to situate the narrative focus on the actions of the male characters, and not those of Nanabush, who is figured as a trickster within the play and thus only illuminating the men’s limiting preoccupations regarding women. That Nanabush is serving to expose the shortcomings of the men is all the more evident when it is considered that while Nanabush is performing the striptease, Black Lady, pregnant and neglected, is also present at the very same bar. In focusing their attention on Nanabush instead of Black Lady, the men are essentially enacting their rupture from a balanced and respectful worldview, and their conversion to one that sexualizes and devalues women. While one can see why critics like Baker would be distressed by this scene, it is nonetheless a moment that hopes to reveal the ‘poison’ of the dysfunctional gendered violence and intergenerational effects of colonial impositions, such as residential schools and patriarchal political policies. It is also a moment that hopes to contrast with, and thus serve to highlight, the peaceful resolution —of love and stability—in the final scene.

5. Conclusion

This paper has forwarded the argument that there is a need to explore a culturally appropriate and contextually situated approach to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*—one that would consider the play’s dream-framing in relation to the meaning of dreams in Cree ‘ways of knowing.’ Such an approach, it has suggested, can highlight the contrast between Western patriarchal values, which pit men and women in opposition to one another, and traditional Indigenous values, which emphasize “gender balance, complementarity, and twinship” (McKegney, 2012, p. 260). Indeed, this contrast is perhaps most evident near the end of the play when Simon Starblanket determines to challenge Nanabush. He exclaims: “If God, you are a woman/man in Cree but only a man in da Englesa, then how come you still gottacun...” (Highway, 1989, p. 113). Nanabush quickly interrupts Simon, by saying “a womb” (p. 113). The womb has particular meaning within traditional Cree knowledge, where it signifies a commonality and connectedness amongst all peoples (Nabigon, 2006, p. 85). This idea of connectedness is important, as Nabigon stresses that people should endeavor to work together to understand and heal their pain, otherwise the next generation might inherit and be paralyzed by such pain (Nabigon, 2006, p. 66). This is, in essence, the message with which *Dry Lips* ends. As I mentioned at the beginning of my analysis, Highway finishes the play with an image of Zachary holding his baby girl up in the air—in this celebratory manner, Zachary expresses his love, admiration, and commitment to his daughter, a representative of the next generation of women. The difference between the dream and real life is accentuated in this closing moment by the fact that, throughout the dream, the baby has been “played by a doll,” while in the production notes Highway stresses that “for the greatest effect, Zachary’s baby, at the very end of the play, should be played by a real baby” (Highway, 1989, p. 10). The dream, though disturbing, is not real life, though its message has very real implications.

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