

Representations of Ojibway Community Identity through Gender Play in Tomson Highway's "Rez Cycle"

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Working Thesis/Hypothesis

For my Master's thesis, I will study Tomson Highway's texts The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, and Rose, each of which offers a glimpse into the rich history of Aboriginal culture through a unique and important art form: Aboriginal theatre. Highway makes use of Aboriginal cultural symbols throughout each of his plays that do not just deal with the legacy of colonialism; rather they highlight aspects of Ojibway culture and community that exist today—for better and for worse. The balancing act Highway maintains serves as a method for both Native audiences and non-Native audiences to participate in the process of reconciliation.

In my thesis, I will focus on Tomson Highway's use of gender play in his "rez cycle" in order to express the modern communal aspect of Ojibway identity in relation to historical and traditional Ojibway identity, specifically through the female and the feminine.

Situation in the Field of Native Studies:

Studies in Native literature are beginning to move from merely identifying the colonial legacies and towards affirming the cultural identities that have always been and remain part of indigenous communities. I would like to ensure that my thesis moves in this direction as I explore the representation of Ojibway community in Highway's dramas in relation to specific discourses of gender.

Most existing readings of Tomson Highway's "rez cycle" have looked at each drama as a critique of settler colonialism. Those readings are valuable to the study of his plays; however, Highway also uses his plays as tools to highlight Ojibway culture and tradition and their continuing importance in communal and individual identities. As audiences watch his plays, they become witnesses to history and the present. Although Ojibway tradition is important, it has adapted and will continue to change as the world changes. Lisa Brooks talks about the need to "participate in the ongoing activity of the birth/transformation/creation of the land that we inhabit" (Brooks 239). Highway demonstrates this necessity through each of his characters and the events in each of his three plays. For example, Nanabush serves to emphasize the importance as well as the difficulty of embracing the communal and participatory aspects of identity as he/she encourages the audience to begin to reconcile the past with the present. Highway demonstrates that though traditional culture and present day circumstances may seem to oppose one another at times, they actually work together to create a uniquely contemporary Ojibway identity in current day society.

Major Research Goals:

One of the major goals that I have in regard to my thesis is to begin to identify Ojibway communal culture and identity in Tomson Highway's "rez cycle". There is a rich culture and history that is revealed and promoted throughout Highway's plays in spite of the colonial legacy that still informs Aboriginal experience.

It is also my goal to explore the concept of melding the past with present day representations of Ojibway community while looking specifically at gender play within Highway's dramas. In each of his plays, Highway has written women as the warriors who take action; it is women who are the strongest characters (even when there are no women characters as in "Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing") in his plays. The impact these females and their actions have on the male characters varies, but sends a message about unity vs. division no matter the reaction.

I plan to conduct research not only on the plays, but also on the history of the Ojibway in Canada (specifically those on the Manitoulin Island reserves) and historical traditional and spiritual beliefs about gender and community as well as modern Ojibway community. As stated previously, colonial history cannot be ignored in this subject as it is closely interwoven with current attitudes, culture, and changing traditions, but the focus will be on identifying aspects of Ojibway identity outside of solely that history. In essence, I'd like to attempt a different reading than most of the readings that have been done thus far.

Organization and Chapter Outline:

The organization and chapter subjects of my thesis are outlined below.

Chapter One: Introduction to topic and field of study

Chapter Two: Ojibway traditions and cultures and the changes to them over time in regard to gender roles and issues

Chapter Three: The application of Ojibway cultural identity and Community to Highway's plays

Chapter Four: Concluding thoughts summing up the thesis and expressing the challenge of and to future study

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