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Resisting Translation and Tomson Highway's Rez Cycle Plays: Building Community Through Cree Language in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*

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Abstract

Inclusion of non-colonial language in theatre spaces is just one of the tools Indigenous playwrights can wield as a tool to make space for the inclusion of Indigenous voices. The Cree playwright Tomson Highway also uses this technique to build resistance. Highway, whose first language was Cree, includes his traditional language throughout his Rez Cycle plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), as a form of resistance against the colonial erasure of traditional Indigenous languages. Reading these plays can be a jarring experience for non-Indigenous readers, as Highway refuses to include in-text translations for his Cree dialogue, much like how the performance would be experienced for a non-Indigenous audience. While Highway includes translations in footnotes or post-text appendices, this highlights the important questions of audience, inclusivity, and translation. This article uses a methodological lens I have developed called Critical Dispositioning, which is specifically designed to facilitate ethical engagement with Indigenous texts by settler-scholars. This article will explore Highway's selective use of translation in his published plays (and rejection of it on stage) as a way of building community and highlight the ways in which Indigenous Theatre functions as a space of Indigenous resistance.

Keywords Indigenous drama · Translation · Cree · Tomson Highway · Critical Dispositioning

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Introduction

My introduction to Indigenous Theatre was through Tomson Highway's work. Highway, an influential Cree playwright, writer, and musician, has helped create an Indigenous Theatre scene in Toronto, Ontario, but his work has also seen reverberations across Canada and North America. As a settler-scholar, my first opportunity to read Indigenous work came during my undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto. Despite my Canadian public-school education, I never had the opportunity to read the work of Indigenous authors, and any actual education on Indigenous cultural studies was sparse. The fact that my first encounter with Indigenous Literature was in university is somewhat problematic; what is even more problematic is that most Indigenous courses (including the one I took) were taught by other settler-scholars rather than Indigenous scholars. The first Indigenous play I encountered was Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which changed the way I read and thought about drama and the possibilities of what can be enacted on stage. As a settler-scholar continuing this work, ethical engagement with Indigenous literature is necessarily foregrounded in my research praxis.

Tomson Highway was born in 1951 in Brochet, Manitoba. When he was six years old, he attended the Guy Hill Indian Residential School in Sturgeon Landing, Saskatchewan (Boyd, 2008). His first language, Cree, has been essential in his creative process. Highway's inclusion of the traditional Cree in his work is both influential and ground-breaking, as he deals with the "problem" of translation by refusing it. In his plays, we get immersed into moments of Cree language; translations are offered in removed ways for readers of the works but get entirely rejected for an audience watching these plays be performed. I will also be unpacking what I am calling "chaos moments" that appear at the climax of action in two of Tomson Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* (first produced in 1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (from 1989). These plays were both published by Fifth House, an Indigenous publisher based out of Saskatchewan, in 1988 and 1989, respectively.

As a settler-scholar, it is important that I state my positionality and foreground my commitment to ethical engagement with Indigenous texts. While I am currently living and learning in Toronto, Ontario, which is the traditional land of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, I would also like to acknowledge the land rights of all Indigenous peoples in what is colonially called Canada. It is important to foreground this acknowledgement in this work, despite Highway being from a different province, because his work is largely based on and grounded in Toronto's landscape. As I work through these two plays, some questions I am considering as I do this work are as follows: Why might Tomson Highway insist on refusing to translate Indigenous languages in his work for a settler audience? Why might he also choose to include translations in footnotes or appendices in the print versions of the same plays? And lastly, what is at stake or gained through Highway's insertions of Indigenous language?

Critical Dispositioning is a methodological lens I am developing that allows settlers to ethically engage with Indigenous texts by creating space for community-specific readings of texts, so as to not pull texts out of their Indigenous contexts and apply Western generic frameworks to them. This also rejects the idea of settler-scholars entering into an Indigenous analytical space that has the potential for dangerous slippage into appropriative reading practices (should settler-scholars do work from an Indigenous framework they are not a part of). Here, Critical Dispositioning is used to read both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* in a way that maintains a critical distance between myself, the settler-reader, and Highway's Indigenous perspective, both in the fictional Wasaychigan Reserve where the plays are set, and the Cree epistemological framework Highway writes from.

Highway was influential in the development of an Indigenous Theatre scene based in Toronto, Ontario, which led to the creation of space for Indigenous voices and creative production within a more mainstream

theatre community. Highway acted as the Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts, or NEPA, one of the first Indigenous-led theatre companies in North America, which is also based in Toronto. NEPA, founded in 1982, has been at the centre of many influential playwrights and productions in the Indigenous Theatre scene, not just in Toronto, but across North America. In 1986, NEPA shifted from project-based productions and began "full-time operation with Artistic Director Tomson Highway" ("About us," n. d.). The first production of Highway's play, *The Rez Sisters*, was staged that same year, which later "went on to become the first North American, Indigenous written and performed production at the Edinburgh International Theatre Festival in 1989" ("About us," n.d.). NEPA has helped carve out space within mainstream, hegemonic theatre communities for Indigenous voices and actors, to allow them to tell their own community-specific stories in their own authentic voices and languages. It continues today to be Canada's oldest professional Indigenous theatre company.

Highway was influential in cracking open hegemonic theatre spaces and inserting Indigenous bodies, stories and voices in spaces they had never appeared before. His play, *Dry Lips*, was the first Indigenous play to be staged at Toronto's prestigious Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1991 (Nothof, 2019). Highway's work is still important and relevant today, nearly forty years after his first play was produced. He is still an active member of the Indigenous literary writing scene and continues to emphasise showcasing and including the Cree language in his work.

Three years after the *Rez Sisters'* debut at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, in 1994 Highway became the first Indigenous writer to be inducted into the Order of Canada (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021). Since then, he has received a number of prestigious awards for his literary achievement and contribution to the contemporary 'canon' of Indigenous writing in Canada. Highway, since his induction, has been awarded six honorary doctorates, and has been writer-in-residence at the Universities of Toronto, Concordia, British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University (Kamloops Campus) (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021). In addition, his contributions to Canada's theatre scene were honoured in 2015 when Highway was "awarded the Canadian Theatre Critics Association's biennial Herbert Whittaker-CTCA Award for his long-term contributions to Canadian theatre and his influence on and inspiration for First Nations theatre artists" (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021).

In 2022, Highway received "the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement" (Ng, 2022), the same year that he traveled across Canada to "deliver his CBC Massey Lectures" (Ng, 2022), which is a great honour and prestigious literary achievement in Canada only awarded to the most distinguished and influential Canadians. He is still actively publishing although he is putting more emphasis on Cree-language and children's books. He said in a press release for his children's book, *Grand Chief Salamoo Cook is Coming to Town* (2023), that Cree is "the first language [he] spoke when [he] came into this earth, so [he] feel[s] it's [his] responsibility to do whatever [he] can to help preserve it" ("Tomson Highway releasing," 2023). Finding ways to celebrate, elevate, and inject Cree language into contemporary spaces has always been a tenet of Highway's work, one that he has stayed true to over the decades of his writing career. Finding these intersections of contemporary creative production and traditional Cree language makes Highway's work relevant to both the Cree (and larger Indigenous) community and helps future generations of Indigenous writers and creatives see themselves and their stories in these spaces.

This article traces the power of language in highway's code-switching between English and Cree in his dramatic work, as well as the effect of this refusal of translation for an in-person audience (while making exceptions for a textual audience). In the first section, "Highway, NEPA, and Creating an Indigenous Theatre Scene in Toronto," I set up the context of this chapter by tracing the origins of Indigenous Theatre in Canada to a particular geographical location, Canada's largest city, Toronto. From here, I move on to Highway's use of language and resistance against translation in the second section, "Inclusion of Cree Language and

Highway's Resistance Against Translation." In the final section, "Taking a Closer Look: Unpacking Examples from *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*," I use pivotal scenes in both of Highway's texts, which I call "chaos moments" as parallel scenes that affect the overall reading of the plays.

Highway, NEPA, and Creating an Indigenous Theatre Scene in Toronto

Native Earth Performing Arts is Canada's "oldest professional Indigenous performing arts company" ("About us," n. d.). It was first founded in 1982 in Toronto, Ontario, by Denis Lacroix (Plains Cree) and Bunny Sicard (Nothof, 2022). Four years after its founding, NEPA was able to secure government funding, which "provided a degree of stability, and allowed for the programming of a season" (Nothof, 2022). This additional funding allowed NEPA to expand, relocating to a new office space, hiring of "its first full-time staff, including Tomson Highway as Artistic Director" (Nothof, 2022). The key tenets of NEPA from its inception include goals to "provide a base for professional Native performers, writers, technicians, and other artists," as well as "encourage the use of theatre as a form of communication within the Native community, including the use of Native language" (Nothof, 2022). These are values that are still being held as NEPA continues to grow and create space for Indigenous voices in theatre through their Aki Studio Theatre and their annual "Weesageechak Begins to Dance" festival for Indigenous drama.

Highway's involvement in NEPA was central to inserting Indigenous voices and presence into the mainstream Canadian Theatre scene through his role as the artistic director, and with the way he has been able to showcase authentic Indigenous depictions in contemporary life. Before Highway, NEPA was reliant solely on crowdsourcing funds and donations from community members to fund productions. Their staff was entirely volunteer-based, and they relied on support from other Indigenous arts organizations in Toronto, like the Association for Native Development in the Performing Arts (ANDPVA). Highway was the first paid employee of NEPA, coming on as the Artistic Director when NEPA had secured government funding through the Ontario Arts Council[1].

Highway's *Rez Sisters* was first produced in 1986 simultaneously by the "De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island, on the reserve of Wikwemikong" and by NEPA at "the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto" (Fouache, 2015, p. 258). The same year, it won the "prestigious Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play and was published by Fifth House" in 1988 (p. 259). Three years later, *Dry Lips* "premiered at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto" in 1989, which later "won the Ontario Art Council's Chalmers Award and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award" (Diel, 2014, p. 16). In 2010, Highway published Cree-language versions of *Rez Sisters*, called *Iskooniguni Iskweewuk* (Highway, 2010a), and *Dry Lips*, called *Paasteewitoon Kaapooskaysing*, which he calls the original version of the play (Highway, 2010b). Both texts were published by the Fifth House, the play's original publisher.

Ojibwe/Swampy Cree artist and writer, Lisa C. Ravensbergen, sees how Indigenous bodies have typically been depicted in Canada's national narrative in the context of trauma. Ravensbergen posits that the "accepted national narrative seems to believe that [Indigenous] collective trauma is the only thing . . . Indigenous peoples and artists . . . think or care about. This perpetuates the larger myth that [their] worth lies only in the story that includes settlers" (Robinson, 2016, p. 182). Highway, through his efforts to Indigenize theatre, tries to circumvent these traumatic narratives, showing an Indigenous audience an authentic depiction of themselves, while also destabilizing the settler expectation of Indigeneity as a tragic thing for a general Canadian audience. Operating in the vein of what writer and literary critic, Gerald Vizenor (White Earth

[1] At this time, Indigenous Theatre was seen as a fringe group of the larger mainstream theatre scene in Canada. Because of this, it received little attention or support from mainstream networks and relied on collaborations with other theatres and Indigenous groups in Toronto for support, both financially and for the use of larger theatre spaces. NEPA, despite being a government funded company since the early 1980s, did not secure its own permanent theatre space until 2012 when they opened the Aki Studio Theatre in Toronto.

Minnesota Chippewa), calls *survivance* (Vizenor, 2008), Highway shows the real, ugly, honest and joyful side of Indigenous life, but does not succumb to or slip into these tragic narratives without laughter. *Survivance* is central to Highway's work as it is a necessary tool to provide an authentic representation of Indigenous life, characters, and experience in a contemporary space in what is colonially called Canada. Highway does not shy away from the struggles that Indigenous communities face in the wake of settler colonialism, like the aftermath of the Indian Residential School system (IRS)[2], the loss of traditional language, cultural, and spiritual knowledge, systemic addiction issues, and sexual violence (often towards female characters).

For Highway to show an authentic depiction, he includes both these very beautiful and very ugly truths. One way that he does this is by adopting an observational stance, where unsettling is key. This unsettling space is often occupied by settlers, whose discomfort can act as a productive entrance into complex conversations around settler colonialism. Generative unsettling can allow for what are otherwise familiar academic terms to be redefined, or perhaps more clearly defined, in order to address, and in Highway's case, to intentionally avoid "the increasing co-optation of discourses of reconciliation by a hegemonic network of institutions and agents" (Wakeham, 2007, p. 11, as cited in McCall, 2013, p. 57).

Through the unpacking of NEPA's history and tracing the entrance into the theatre of NEPA's first Artistic Director, we can see the work Highway did to get NEPA on the map, not just in the defining of Indigenous Theatre as a genre, but also in shifting his work from this previously considered fringe group, as Indigenous Theatre was considered at the time, into hegemonic Canadian Theatre discourse. Highway's *Rez Sisters* was, for the first time, an Indigenous play that was being produced at prestigious, longstanding theatres and taken up in conversation by mainstream Canadian Theatre networks. This marked a huge shift for Highway's career, NEPA's future funding and reception, and a pivotal moment for Indigenous Theatre as a genre.

Inclusion of Cree Language and Highway's Resistance Against Translation

Highway's inclusion of Cree in both plays is done in interesting ways, particularly signaled by his refusal to translate the Cree moments in the text for a live audience. Interestingly, in the print versions of Highway's Rez Cycle plays, translations for the Cree moments are given but not readily accessible. *Rez Sisters*, the first play in the cycle, includes translations for the Cree moments in footnotes further down on the page—a more immediate translation for non-Indigenous readers of the play, but still with a level of removal from the text. In *Dry Lips*, Highway takes this a step further, offering entire scenes in Cree which are translated in full, but the translations are included as a post-script appendix of the text.

This interesting use of Cree language and refusal of translation for live audiences raises questions of inclusivity, audience, and the potential for discomfort in Highway's work. Cree is central to Highway's writing process and the construction of his plays. He clarifies that "[he is] actually using English filtered through the mind, the tongue, and the body of a person who is speaking in Cree" (Highway, 2008, p. 33, as cited in Somacarrera, 2014, p. 43). According to Métis scholar, Warren Cariou, Highway described the publishing process of his Rez Cycle plays as "a kind of linguistic homecoming, insisting that [both] *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* had originally been composed in Cree and only translated into English" (Cariou, 2014, p. 581).

Thinking about the politics of translation, we can turn to the thoughts of literary theorist Gayatri Spivak. When considering creative expression in the literary arts, Spivak sees language as "one of the many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves" and in this capacity, "making sense of ourselves is what produces identity" (Spivak, 2009, p. 200). If language functions as a tool for identity-building, it inherently

[2]The Indian Residential School system, or IRS, was a system of government-funded and organized schools for Indigenous peoples with a focus on assimilation towards 'Canadian' values and a stripping of Indigenous language, culture and spirituality.

carries the baggage of identity politics within it. When we consider translation, the bridging of a text or an idea across disparate epistemological frameworks, Spivak sees the translator as being at the mercy of the text itself, having to "surrender to the text" (p. 205). The translator "must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner" (p. 205). Translation becomes a kind of intimate knowledge of a text, which can exist in both ideological spheres. As Spivak notes, "unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, [they] cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (p. 205).

Postcolonial translation (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Niranjana, 1992) calls for a necessary contextualization of the work in translation in relation to the hegemonic system it is being translated into. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) remind us of the political nature of translation, where the systems from which translations emerge get inscribed into the work itself, recalling how "translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems" (p. 6). Translations are not just an "aesthetic act" but a weaving together of systemic values, which rarely, as Bassnett and Trivedi point out, "involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors, or systems" (p. 2). Niranjana (1992) goes even further when considering the politics of postcolonial translation, suggesting that "translation both shapes and takes shape 'within the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism'" (Niranjana, 1992, p. 2, as cited in Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999, p. 4). Turning this towards Highway's work, we can read Highway's refusal to translate for a live audience as a reaction of the audience's entry into the intimacies of the play. Both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* grapple with the struggles faced within Indigenous communities in Canada in the aftermath of the Residential School system. Both these plays were staged in Toronto for predominantly white, settler audiences. In this refusal to let the audience members fully enter into the world that Highway has built, perhaps there is a layer of protection for these stories, reserving them for the Indigenous audience members who can appreciate and articulate the experiences being staged. For Highway, the refusal of translation is a rejection of Euro-Western literary control over his Indigenous stories and his voice as an Indigenous person. It is a rejection of colonial dominance, just as surely as it is an act of resistance and a demand for visibility in a society set on eliding voices like his.

One of Highway's greatest skills is the way he is able to "successfully feature[s] some of the issues currently afflicting [Indigenous] peoples' lives in Canada for the benefit of white audiences" in his work, according to Cécile Fouache (Fouache, 2015, p. 259). Highway's work is so unique and important to study because of what Fouache calls the "renewed interest in the everyday life of reserve [Indigenous peoples] in Canada" (p. 267). Highway was able to do this by "show[ing] the existence and richness of his people and to give them back a pride in themselves by combing Western and [Indigenous] dramatic forms of expression" (p. 268). Highway's work is important to Indigenous audiences because of the authenticity in his representation of Indigenous life in mainstream theatre spaces. Here, we see that Fouache thinks that this is specifically for the "benefit of white audiences." While the question of Highway's audience is an important one, Highway's staging of his plays with Indigenous cast members in mainstream theatre spaces may attract a larger settler audience due to venue location; however, he still keeps some of his Indigenous content as "insider" information for Indigenous audiences through the inclusion of Cree language and spiritual elements, like the presence of Nanabush, the Cree trickster figure, as a character in both plays.

Building on Western dramatic forms and conventions, Highway is able to manipulate generic conventions to work for his storylines. Fouache notes that Highway also "inserts [these forms] into a Cree outlook in terms of language, culture, spirituality, and contemporary social issues to achieve a balance between the two poles" of identity (pp. 266–267). The question of audience is an important one to consider when looking at Highway's work—on one hand, Highway is telling Indigenous stories, using Indigenous language and

mythology, as well as Indigenous actors to stage these narratives—his work is very much *for* an Indigenous community, not necessarily one that is Cree, like himself, but one that has experienced and understands the struggle of what it means to be Indigenous in Canada. On the other hand, Highway is staging these works at predominant theatres in Toronto, theatres that are very much a part of the hegemonic, mainstream Canadian Theatre scene that are frequented by predominantly settler audiences. I think Highway's intended audience is *both* communities—he includes elements in his plays that build community for Indigenous audience members, like his use of Cree language, but is also aware of the many settler audience members and builds in aspects of the play to purposefully unsettle and create discomfort in the audience, like his refusal to translate the Indigenous languages present in his work.

Lindsay Diel thinks that *Dry Lips* especially has "predominantly been appraised from within a Western framework" (Diel, 2014, p. 17), but this does not mean that it was not written with the intention to transcend the bounds of mainstream theatre, that it was not meant to straddle the line between Western and Indigenous epistemological spheres. This simultaneous work in both Indigenous and Western spheres is one "translation" gap within Highway's work; Highway is unable to "translate" all of these experiences and significances that would make sense for a Cree, or even an Indigenous, audience, but would be lost on a Western audience—the elements are there if you have the framework to "read" them, but this does create a gap between a settler audience and the narrative they are seeing staged. In this way, there are two levels of translation at work in the play: the literal translation (or refusal) of the Cree language and the social or ideological translation of the community-specific details and knowledge present in the play.

Considering translation as a concept, we can turn to Simona Bertacco's thoughts, when she reminds us that "making another language palpable to your listeners or your readers, playing or struggling with the ambiguity that the space between languages allows are all very common experience to 'foreigners' of any time and place and qualify the interlanguage that they speak, marked as it is by the process of translation" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 178). If we follow Bertacco's thoughts here, we can see that the translation gap exists not only between language and worldview but is also intentionally used by Highway to alienate or 'Other' a predominately settler audience.

Considering Highway's work in relation to Bertacco's thoughts, we can see how Diel calls on Nadia Ferrara's thoughts on Cree 'ways of knowing,' to make this assessment, recalling the different way dreams are viewed in Cree culture versus Western culture. The flattening or Westernizing of cultural elements in Highway's work actually serves to eliminate their cultural and community-specific importance. Bertacco counts three instances of this code-switching within *The Rez Sisters* (p. 188), which she considers to function "as markers of dramatic moments and as chorus" (p. 188). NunatuKavut scholar, Kristina Fagan Bidwell, reads this a bit differently, considering the "code-switching, jumping back and forth between various languages and styles, [Indigenous writers] challenge the dominance of any one language. By keeping the reader 'off balance,' the writers bring their language choices to the reader's conscious attention, refuting the transparency of language and reminding us of the powers of language: to disrupt, confuse, exclude as well as to include, inform, and amuse" (Fagan, 2010, p. 26, as cited in Leconte, 2018, p. 18).

Bertacco tells us that "as readers, we often encounter textualities that resist a monolingual reading by putting us to the test in terms of linguistic, literary, and cultural competence. It may very well happen that we miss a pun or a cultural allusion because we don't know all the languages or the rhetorical protocols the text is using" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 182). This is an important tool that Highway makes use of in his work, keeping cultural or community knowledge coded for Indigenous audience members. This helps build community within and surrounding his work for Indigenous audience members to connect with the actors, storytelling, and cultural details. This simultaneously serves to keep settler audience members separate from these

stories through cultural distance. Not all knowledge is for every audience, and Highway enacts a secondary refusal of translation in his rejection to translate community details or Cree storytelling elements to let settler audiences 'in' on the action of the plays.

Highway uses "transculturation" as a "tool of survival for minority language culture," according to Bertacco (p. 187), but also considers the way that the inclusion of a non-colonial language, whether it is translated or not for an audience, can leave behind the residue of the history and significance of colonial encounters, in a productive way. Bertacco also tells us that "if translation is a bearing across of meaning . . . translation affect[s]—and functions as—their poetics and leaves a palpable trace of the passage from one language to another" (p. 183). In Highway's work, there is a level of translation happening between the Indigenous community elements that has to happen in order for them to be re-produced on stage. It is the level of contextualization and unpacking for a settler audience that is rejected in many instances.

Pilar Somacarrera, the translator for the Spanish-language version of *The Rez Sisters*, tells us that "many critics . . . have noted that the process of translation exerts violence against the other" referring to critics like Lawrence Venuti, Jacques Derrida, and Carol Maier (Pascual, 2013, p. 56, as cited in Somacarrera, 2014, pp. 42–43). Highway, in his rejection of the on-stage translation of the Cree language, avoids the potential danger of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the Cree conversations and idioms taking place in English for a live audience. The translations provided for the print version create a different layer of meaning and interpretation for the reader to digest as they work through the play. The potential for violence here is diminished, however, since Highway himself is translating these into English. Somacarrera, in their awareness of this potential for violence in their role as the translator of Highway's works, is essential in keeping their work and process ethical. I appreciate how they flag this, especially in that they are translating to Spanish, another colonial language, even if it is not directly related to the colonization of the land and area that Highway is from or writing about. Somacarrera's awareness of the overt implications of this translation means that they will be more thoughtful in potentially reproducing colonial violence in this text. This reflective act is an example of critical disposition at work. Here, Somacarrera is modeling the self-reflexive 'dis-positioning' work, analyzing their positionality and biases that they may carry into their analysis or impose on the text through their translation. Since translation, as an act, requires the translator to filter the text through their personal lens, their way of seeing the world, Critical Dispositioning makes one more aware of the ways in which their bias is influencing the text. In these moments, one could follow Somacarrera's model of translation, where they found a way to translate the spirit of the text, though it differs from 'textbook' translation in the shift from "sisters" to "comadres".

By looking at the different ways in which translation is tackled for in-person versus textual audiences of Highway's work, we can see that translation was not provided for productions of either of Highway's plays but was included in the print versions of *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*. Despite being provided, the translations were not readily-accessible, still removed by a layer of formatting in both versions, highlighting Highway's refusal to translate Cree words and scenes. In Highway's work, the refusal of translation is an act of resistance, an intentional rhetorical move on Highway's part, telling his stories in his primary language (Cree) and reclaiming space for his culture within a system that has sought to erase both his language and his presence. This resistance against translation is also a way to build community, allowing Cree audience members to enter into a protected space within the production while simultaneously excluding non-Cree or non-Indigenous audience members. This discomfort from being 'Othered' has the potential to be a space for generative and productive understanding of the systemic colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples in Canada, even on a small scale, just for the space of the play.

Taking a Closer Look: Unpacking Examples from *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*

Taking a closer look at two moments in Highway's work, we can unpack what I am calling "chaos moments" found in two of Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986), and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). These "chaos moments" are moments of climax in the play, where movement, sound, and layers of time converge to create a 'soundscape' of music, language, and action.

As I read these two plays, I will be using Critical Dispositioning to guide my thinking. What I mean by this is that I flag moments in the text where community-building works are used, works that signal a collective Indigenous audience (like "us," "we," or "our") and call myself back, reminding myself that I am not the intended audience of these works, strengthening the critical distance between myself and the plays. In doing so, I am also making space for community-specific readings of these texts. In both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, Highway rejects the on-stage translation of the Cree language used. Highway is creating this gap, and in a sense, enacting a kind of Critical Dispositioning between the predominantly settler audience and the Indigenous worldview being portrayed on stage.

"Chaos moments" are sites of rupture where the critical distance seems to collapse for both settler and Indigenous viewers. In *The Rez Sisters*, right after the climax of the action in the text, the "chaos moment" occurs where the women from the Wasaychigan Reserve attend the BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, which is held in Toronto. The Bingo Master, another guise of Nanabush, the Cree trickster figure, comes to take the sick and dying Marie-Adele to the Spirit World, signaling her death. In this 'denouement' of action, Marie-Adele does not go gently with Nanabush. Instead, she begins yelling at him in Cree. He takes on the guise of a Nightbird, ready to take her soul to rest. Marie-Adele says to Nanabush in Cree: "U-ni-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma, so that's who you are," which means "Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are" (Highway, 1986, p. 104). In this moment, she recognizes Nanabush. She sees beyond his guises as the Cree trickster who has come for her.

This scene's Cree translation is provided for the reader in a footnote further down on the page. The footnote reads "Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are...at the rest on the rock...the master of the game...the game...it's me....me...come" (p. 104). For a live audience, however, there would be no such translation offered, keeping this pivotal moment of a woman confronted with her own death as a private experience for her and her community members, rejecting translation as a refusal of the commodification of Indigenous suffering and tragedy by a settler audience. This moment is one of recognition, where Marie-Adele recognizes Nanabush for who he is. She also hints that she saw through his earlier iteration as the Bingo Master and knew that was not *only* who he was. She is confused at first, mistaking him for her husband Eugene, but when she fully recognizes him as Nanabush, she is ready for him to take her spirit away from the land of the living. The scene culminates with all the women gathering around Marie-Adele and singing to her an Ojibwe funeral song. They chant "Wa-kwing, wa-wking, nin wi-i-ja," which the footnote tells us means, "heaven, heaven, I'm going there" (p. 105). Marie-Adele is finally at peace. This song is not provided for a reader of the play, but an audience would get to experience it. In refusing to include this in the published version, I cannot help but think that Highway is also resisting the commodification of such a sacred song.

The "chaos moment" in *Dry Lips* comes at a similar place in the play's plot. In *Dry Lips*, the Wasaychigan women have created their own Indigenous women's hockey league that catches on until it becomes the "Aboriginal Women's World Hockey League." At this moment, we see Big Joey, who is an announcer for the WASY Reserve radio channel, commentating on the game (Highway, 1989, pp. 124–126). As the action continues and gets more chaotic, Big Joey slips into Cree, giving a play-by-play on the women's hockey game without translating every word—some words are 'untranslatable,' like the name of the team, the Wasy

Wailerettes, and hockey terms, like "right winger" and the "particular puck" that previously found its way inside the jersey of Gazelle Nataways (double-cast as Nanabush) from the earlier hockey scene, stopping the game (p. 75). In the last hockey scene, the chaos of action ruptures as Big Joey Cree play-by-play continues. Big Joey announces, "Hey, soggi pagichee-ipinew 'particular puck' referee Pierre St. Pierre . . . igwa seemak wathay g'waskootoo like a heard of wild turtles" (pp. 124–125). The translation of these lines, "Hey, and referee Pierre St. Pierre drops the 'particular puck'... and takes off like a heard of wild turtles," is provided in the post-text appendix (p. 133). The chaotic action and frantic commentary is broken up by "Bits and pieces of Nanabush/Gazelle Nataways' 'strip music' and Kitty Wells' 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels'," which we get in a stage note, reminding the audience and the actors of Nanabush's earlier arrivals in the play, and that Nanabush is still present, in this moment, but also in the space of the theatre through the return of Cree language for this scene. Translation for this whole scene, including the code-switching between Cree and English, is not provided on the page, but rather included as an appendix in the back of the book (pp. 133–134). Again, this is a layer of meaning that a reader of the play would get, if they look for it, but a live audience member would be excluded from.

It is interesting that Highway uses such a similar construction for each play's plot structure, putting these pivotal moments in similar spots, but also choosing to have these moments of rupture and inclusion of traditional Indigenous languages when Indigenous women have placed themselves in the context of a global event, getting worldwide attention, Whether it be from the Biggest Bingo in the World or a the Aboriginal Women's World Hockey League, Highway is choosing to have the world watch (both within the play, but also through the audience) as Indigenous issues and language are foregrounded.

In both of Highway's plays, traditional Indigenous languages are used at a time of intense action to rupture the scene, to confuse and create discomfort for settler audiences, but also create community for Indigenous audience members. From my settler perspective, the way Highway strategically translates and refuses translation works to unsettle Western positionalities. The effect is to keep me, as a settler, un-settled and to make me an outsider to the play's action. Simultaneously, these same aspects invite Indigenous audience members into the action. Bertacco considers these rupture moments of Cree language as a way of "establish[ing] in a permanent way the speech of a community that is likely doomed to disappear . . . mostly written in English and often performed only in English, but the trace of Cree and [Anishinaabemowin] as the languages spoken on the reservation, as well as the pervasive use of community's 'village English'" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 187).

Many characters in Highway's plays (including Highway himself) are survivors of the Residential School system that was active in Canada from the early 18th century up until 1996. This system attempted to systematically erase the Indigenous culture and language and assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the colonial society. The fact that Highway retains his first language, Cree, and that he is making an effort to preserve and transmit it through his work is an act of resistance against a system that tried to destroy his ancestral language and culture. The fact that Highway has his characters speak Indigenous languages in mainstream Canadian Theatre spaces is an act of resistance. These moments are a rupture in the fabric of the Canadian colonial project, which is still ongoing today.

It is important to consider the resistance and implications of using traditional Indigenous languages within a dramatic Western setting after such thorough and pervasive efforts to erase it. Ravensbergen said that when she was younger, she "was told the fact that [she] exist[s] is a political act. [She's] come to understand that it's a political act to be *seen*" (Robinson, 2016, p. 190). I would like to extend this further by considering Highway's use of language and translation in his work as resistance. I think that Highway would argue here that it is also a political act to be *heard*, and to be heard authentically in traditional Indigenous

voices and languages. Because these texts were, according to Highway, originally conceived of in Cree and translated into English in order to be performed and read by a wide, Western audience, there is a particular kind of gap that is created between the intended meaning and what gets performed. The closest we get to the 'original' intention of the play is the rupture moments where Cree is inserted into the play.

Bertacco reminds us of the cultural significance of the trickster figure in Highway's plays, Nanabush, who goes by other names and takes other forms for different Indigenous groups. At the beginning of each Rez Cycle play, Highway provides a "Note on Nanabush," where context is provided for a non-Indigenous audience that Nanabush is a shifting entity, taking many names and guises (Highway, 1986, p. xiii). Bertacco frames this in the context of language and translation, reading Nanabush as "the perfect embodiment of translation: neither animal nor human, neither God nor man, the Trickster or Great Translator, puts with its own presence the issue of untranslatability at the very centre of this story" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 191).

"Chaos moments" in both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* can be read as parallel scenes, shaping the way we interpret their respective texts through the use of Indigenous language and refusal of translation, but also in the way dramatic conventions are broken for an audience. These scenes can also be read in a way that puts them in conversation with one another—two "chaos moments" from the same place but at different times and for different audiences, reading the actors on stage as one embedded audience, and the actual audience in the theatre as another. Critical Dispositioning is an essential reading practice for settlers engaging in Indigenous work as non-Indigenous readers. By flagging community-building words and sitting with the discomfort of being excluded from action through Highway's refusal for translation, creates a space of discomfort where understanding and healing can occur.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through Highway's revolutionary dramatic work, for the first time, Indigenous Theatre was brought out of the fringes and was set centre-stage in the larger Canadian Theatre scene. Highway's work with his Rez Cycle plays ruptured the bounds of theatre, breaking conventions just as easily as character's broke the 'fourth wall' in the *Rez Sisters'* interactive mid-play bingo game. Indigenous stories were finally being told by Indigenous storytellers and actors and were being taken up as part of the larger Canadian Theatre scene as a fully developed genre, rather than an indie sub-category of fringe theatre. Toronto, as a metropolitan nexus, served as the perfect backdrop to gather urban Indigenous theatre artists and writers to do this work, especially with the ongoing development of NEPA at the time.

More recently, Highway is continuing his project of transmitting Cree language to the next generation, like with his children's book he published in 2022. In an interview with Tobin Ng for Broadview, Highway was asked: "what can be done to preserve Indigenous languages?" (Ng, 2022). He replied simply, "Writing them" (Ng, 2022). Highway is both a writer and a musician, so writing books and music in Cree is essential in his project to transmit the language, preserve it, and even get people who do not speak Cree to "start singing in the language" because his work is so catchy (Ng, 2022). Overall, Highway's inclusion of Cree and strategic translation and refusal to translate makes for a compelling story, one that has the power to create discomfort and community in both Indigenous and settler audiences.

NEPA also continues to carry forward the work that Highway started as its first Artistic Director. Now entering into its 42nd season, NEPA continues to support emerging Indigenous playwrights by providing hands-on practical skills for Indigenous theatre artists. With the establishment of their permanent theatre space in 2012, the Aki Studio Theatre, they also continue to stage Indigenous plays, share Indigenous stories and promote Indigenous voices and languages—where translation into colonial languages is always optional.

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