



DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

33

DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 33

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *DC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing Drama Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

sociation (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Tomson Highway

1951-

Canadian playwright, novelist, and children's writer.

INTRODUCTION

Highly regarded for writing plays that combine traditional Western dramatic forms with a Native worldview and mythology, Highway is credited with bringing Native Canadian theater into the mainstream in the 1980s. His best-known works, *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), use both humor and brutality to portray the social, economic, and personal difficulties faced by Native North Americans in the late twentieth century. Addressing the wide-ranging effects of European colonialism on the Native psyche, Highway's works expose the realities of reservation life, including a pervasive sense of emptiness, rampant substance abuse, and misogyny, against a backdrop of magical realism.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Highway was born on an island in northwest Manitoba on December 6, 1951. His parents, Joe and Pelagie Philomena Highway, were nomadic Cree Indians who supported their twelve children by hunting, fishing, sled-dog racing, and quilt-making. As a young child Highway spoke only Cree, but at age six he was sent to the Guy Hill Indian Residential School in north Manitoba, where all children were required to learn English. Highway's experiences in the government-funded, church-run residential school system, which aimed to assimilate Indians into white culture, would alter his life permanently and inform his later approach to his artistic endeavors.

Highway began studying classical piano at the residential school, an opportunity he would otherwise never have had, but he also was molested by a priest while there. In 1966 Highway moved to Winnipeg to attend Churchill High School, from which he graduated in 1969. During his undergraduate years at the University of Manitoba, he became an accomplished classical pianist, earning a bachelor of music with honors from the University of Western Ontario in 1975. The following year he received a bachelor's degree in English from the same university. Although he had intended to become a concert pianist, Highway was sidetracked

when, from 1975 to 1979, he found positions as a social worker at the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, the Native Peoples' Resource Centre, and other organizations offering support to Native people. This work convinced him to eschew a career in music in favor of one that would advance the concerns of Native Canadians.

During his years at the University of Western Ontario, Highway had studied under the award-winning Canadian playwright and poet James Reaney, who had fostered Highway's budding interest in the performing arts. Highway decided to combine his desire for social justice with his flair for theater, organizing three major Native arts festivals in 1982 and working for several Native Canadian theatre companies. In 1984 he joined Toronto's influential Native Earth Performing Arts, becoming the group's artistic director in 1986. That year Highway's first play, *The Rez Sisters*, was produced by the Act IV Theatre Company and Native Earth Performing Arts. A commercial and critical success, *The Rez Sisters* won a Dora Mavor Moore Award from the Toronto Theatre Alliance, and the Ontario Arts Council Foundation's Chalmers Award. Highway's 1989 play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* won these two awards as well, and in 1994 Highway was the first Native Canadian writer to be inducted into the prestigious Order of Canada.

In 2001 Highway began publishing children's literature, for which he is now highly regarded. He has served as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and Concordia University. Highway has received honorary doctoral degrees from Laurentian University, the University of Winnipeg, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Windsor, and Brandon University. In 2001 he received the National Aboriginal Achievement Award.

MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Highway's most important plays are *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which form the first part of a planned "septology" of plays that also includes the later musical *Rose* (2000). All of Highway's plays are strongly informed by his experiences as a child at the residential school and working on reservations after college.

In *The Rez Sisters*—"rez" is short for "reservation"—seven women, all related by birth or marriage, from a fictional Indian reservation travel by bus to Toronto to play in what is billed as the world's biggest bingo game. During the trip they reveal to each other and the audience the drudgery, violence, and hopelessness of their lives as well as the material wealth and emotional liberation that winning the world's biggest bingo would bring them. Despite the relative banality of the items the women dream of buying with their winnings—a stove, a toilet, a paved road for the reservation—Highway implies that Native culture has been consumed with and perverted by the materialism of the white society that oppresses it. What saves the women from total despair are their mutual support system, which infuses their relationships with warmth and humor, and the remnants of a Native mythology that emphasizes the universal cycle of death and rebirth.

Arguably the most important character in the play is Nanabush, the Trickster spirit who figures prominently in Ojibway/Cree culture. In *The Rez Sisters* Nanabush is a male who interacts with the women in both the physical and spiritual realms. To Marie-Adele, who is dying of ovarian cancer, Nanabush appears as a seagull and urges her to fly to him. To the developmentally disabled Zhaboonigan, Nanabush is a stranger outside the post office, listening as she tells of being sexually assaulted by two white boys. Later, when the women get to Toronto, Nanabush is the bingo master, randomly drawing numbers that will decide their fate as winners or losers in the game. At this point the women become overwhelmed by their urge to win, and the scene devolves into chaos as they rush the stage and destroy the bingo machine. In the meantime the bingo master can be seen dancing with Marie-Adele, eventually turning into a blackbird and carrying her away to her death. Back at the reservation the women realize that they cannot base their lives on a game of chance and decide to make small but positive changes, signifying the renewal of life after death and the inherent strength of women in Native culture.

In *The Rez Sisters*' companion play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway highlights other aspects of reservation life by reversing the genders of Nanabush and the principal characters. Here Nanabush is portrayed as female, while the seven main characters are all men. This play differs significantly in tone from *The Rez Sisters*, which, despite its characters' rough edges, focused largely on the power of community and familial connections. In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, on the other hand, Highway places the emphasis on the men's rage and dysfunction, with little humor to lighten the mood.

Set on the same reservation as *The Rez Sisters*, and featuring characters who are mentioned but do not appear in that play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskas-*

ing uses the men's anger over the formation of an all-women hockey team on the reservation as a jumping-off point to chronicle the social ills brought about by European colonialism. In the play, seven Native men engage in various types of self-destructive behavior, from alcoholism to religious fanaticism to sexual repression, while channeling their sense of defeat and stagnation into open misogyny. In response, Nanabush appears as a number of different women—a comic figure who continually subverts and frustrates the men's expectations of both women and religion.

Despite the overall comic effect of his interpretation of Nanabush in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway's criticism of Western culture and Christianity's devastating destruction of Native life reaches a climax when Dickie Bird—mentally impaired from fetal alcohol syndrome and abandoned by his father—rapes Patsy, one of the female incarnations of Nanabush, with a crucifix. The play does end on a more positive note, however, as one of the characters, Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik, who had previously tried to assimilate himself entirely into white culture, awakes and realizes the events of the entire play have been a dream. This ending has been interpreted as representing the possibility of transformation in the Native community.

The next play in Highway's cycle, *Rose*, again addresses the problem of violence against women in Native culture, as well as Western violence against Native culture. For this play Highway chose the somewhat unusual genre of the large-scale stage musical. In his next play, *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito* (2001), Highway tells the story of a mosquito born without wings and her search for her life's purpose. Written to appeal to audiences of all ages, *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito* is a cabaret in English, French, and Cree.

Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout (2004) is based on a historical document wherein fourteen Indian chiefs signed a list of grievances against the encroachment of whites onto their land and presented it to former Canadian prime minister Wilfred Laurier when he visited Kamloops, British Columbia, in 1910. In the play, four Native women talk about and debate the loss of their land and culture as they prepare for the prime minister's visit. The play is noted for its use of comic absurdity to highlight the tragic dissolution of Indian rights in North America.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have for the most part focused their attention on the first two plays of Highway's cycle, and especially his interpretation of the Trickster Nanabush, who acts as a kind of bridge between the physical and metaphysi-

cal worlds. For Highway, the shape-shifting Trickster represents a fundamental aspect of Native existence that defines them as a people. Critics have noted Highway's success in weaving this Native spiritualism into a Western dramatic form to create a theatrical experience that mirrors the multiculturalism of Canadian society.

Despite the accolades his plays have received, Highway has not avoided negative criticism. Some commentators have noted a tendency to address too many issues at once, which can make his plays lack focus. According to Martin Knelman, reviewing Larry Lewis's 1991 revival of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, "For all its energy and flashes of talent, *Dry Lips* is a bit of a mess. Highway wants to cram in his tragic vision of native history, but his ideas aren't fresh or coherent; he keeps striking hysterical notes." That production of the play also drew condemnation from feminist critics, many of whom believed Highway presented an unbalanced portrait of the characters' violent misogyny that only served to reinforce it. Others argued that the large-scale commercial production in Toronto had removed the play from its cultural context, hence the misunderstanding.

Nevertheless, the dispute did not diminish Highway's importance as a Native playwright and a Canadian artist more generally. Mark Maufort summarized: "He not only offers searing visions of the Canadian Indian entrapped in a hegemonic white society: thanks to his use of Indian myths and European artistic patterns, he also manages to transcend the particular to formulate a compelling statement about mankind lost in a universe dominated by an indifferent God."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Plays

A Ridiculous Spectacle in One Act 1985
The Rez Sisters 1986
Aria 1987
New Song . . . New Dance 1988
Annie and the Old One 1989
Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing 1989
The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool [with René Highway and Bill Merasty] 1989
Rose 2000
The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito 2001
Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout 2004

Other Major Works

Kiss of the Fur Queen (novel) 1998
**Caribou Song / Atihko nikamom* (juvenilia) 2001

**Dragonfly Kites / Pimihakanisa* (juvenilia) 2002
Comparing Mythologies (lecture) 2003
**Fox on the Ice / Mahkesis miskwamihk e-cipatapi* (juvenilia) 2003

*These works, comprising the trilogy *Songs of the North Wind*, are written in both Cree and English.

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

Tomson Highway, Mark Shackleton, and Hartmut Lutz (interview date 2 March 2002)

SOURCE: Highway, Tomson, Mark Shackleton, and Hartmut Lutz. "Interview with Tomson Highway." *Kunapipi* 25, no. 2 (2003): 74-85.

[In the following interview, conducted March 2, 2002, Highway discusses what he sees as the importance of stepping outside one's own culture and language to avoid "ghettoised thinking," and the influence of his musical training on his writing.]

The following is an edited extract from an interview with Tomson Highway which took place at the University of Helsinki, Finland on March 2, 2002. Highway had the previous day given a talk humorously entitled, 'The History of the World in 60 Minutes Flat', in which he focused primarily on mythology. Contrasting Greek, Christian and Cree mythological worldviews, he argued that to destroy mythology is to destroy ourselves. He also talked more generally about his work and explained how musical structures and counterpoint underpinned all his writing. Highway's talk, illustrated by excerpts on the grand piano from his plays/musicals, was the highlight of a two-day Canada Seminar entitled, 'First Nations: Symbolic Representations'. The interviewers are Mark Shackleton, who organised the seminar on behalf of the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies, and Hartmut Lutz, who gave the keynote speech at the seminar.

[Shackleton]: *I found fascinating what you said during the session that you gave yesterday—that there are three groups of Native peoples who have different degrees of awareness of Native mythology.*

[Highway]: . . . depending on what part of Canada you are talking about. . . . In the most isolated areas of Canada, furthest north and west, where communities have managed to live intact with minimal disturbance from outside influences, other than television (which has done a tremendous amount of damage in the past twenty-five years), languages are being rebuilt or are

intact, and as a result of languages remaining relatively intact mythology has remained more or less intact. So that's one group of people who at least have nominal contact with their mythology through such means.

Then there's the group of people that migrated at a certain point in their histories, principally in the 1950s and '60s. There was a social revolution of sorts that occurred in Canada where for a number of reasons—one of which was the acquisition of the vote for Native people in Canada—Native people were finally able to move away from reserves, and to live as recognised human beings, so to speak, in so far as the status of being a human being is equated with the right to vote. These people moved to cities and other major urban centres across the country and in the process of two or three generations of living in large urban centres, (anything from Toronto to Kingston to Sicamous) lost their languages and with that lost their mythologies.

Then of course there was the third group of people. One of the reasons why groups of Native people migrated from reserves was for reasons of higher education and greater employment opportunity. In so far as this second and third generation of people went on to acquire higher education at universities and at university levels, these people, through sheer intellectual effort, managed to study mythology and literature and revived the mythology and literature in their own respective community. People started writing stories about their own communities in their own languages, and assisted in the revival of languages and, in so far as the revival of languages is assisted through such means, the revival of mythologies.

[Shackleton]: *Why are Trickster figures so important to you in your writing?*

I guess we all operate as human beings. What animates us as living entities is our contact—in partnership with material reality—like our fleshly existence, our molecular reality, our physical substance, our bodies. What permits that body to move is a creation magic that can only be attributed to some miraculous power that is beyond human comprehension, and that has been most frequently defined as being a divine form—'God', for lack of a better word. And nobody has been truly successful in finding out what that animating force is. Neither theologians nor scientists—whether we are talking physicists, or molecular cellular biologists, or theologians—have been able to really get down to the root of the question as to what it is that makes us living human, living animate creatures. And neither has religion. So the closest that people have been able to come it seems to me is to an understanding that this motivating force is beyond human language, and that in order for the human mind, the human intelligence, the human consciousness to be able to get a grip on what

that truth is, a new language has had to be invented to express those realities, and that language is mythology.

So mythological universes, mythological worlds have been created by the visionaries of our respective cultures to explain the various forces that govern our lives at its various levels—we're talking physical, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, emotional. And at the centre of those mythological worlds or universes, exist certain characters, certain hero and anti-hero figures, and generally speaking most world mythologies—not always but to a very large extent—will have one central figure who plays the greatest role in relaying messages between that divine force and humankind in the flesh, and that in the aboriginal perspective is the Trickster.

So who we are as a people and who we are as a culture I think can best be defined by pinning down to as great an extent as possible the nature and the substance and the content and the significance of this creature called the Trickster. And that's why, I think, he fascinates me.

[Lutz]: *Many years ago you and, I think, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and Dan Moses, founded the Committee to Re-establish the Trickster, and I don't think there have been issues of their magazine for a decade or so. What has happened with the project and what was the motivating force behind it?*

Well, the title said it all. Aboriginal mythology at that point in time, just like aboriginal languages, as with so many languages the world over, were in danger of extinction. And so the first generation of Native writers started writing about Native mythology, decided it was a necessity to make a concerted effort to revive this mythology, to revive this character, the Trickster. And that's why it was called the 'Committee to Reestablish the Trickster'. I don't know what happened to it.

[Shackleton]: *Do you find any reaction though, against focusing on the Trickster by fellow playwrights?*

Yes. I think it is a necessary reaction. I think all movements have to have a negative reaction in order for them to continue moving forward. Yes, there has been some. Not much. There's been disagreements as to the interpretation of the Trickster figure, but then there will always be, you know. There's god knows how many in interpretations of the Christian God.

[Shackleton]: *What kind of reactions are there against an overfocusing on the Trickster figure?*

Basically it's been said that Nanabush doesn't drink, for instance. Some people have said that in the Native community. When in actual fact, from the other perspective he *does* need to drink in so far as we as Native people, you know, I as a Native person, drink alcohol.

The Trickster, *my* Trickster, certainly drinks alcohol; my Trickster loves wine. But there are other people who are abstainers. So, of course, their Trickster wouldn't drink. Anyway, things like that have been said.

There have been negative reactions to the violence associated with my Trickster, particularly in *Dry Lips*—you know, the rape scene in *Dry Lips*. But I think that that was my intention, to provoke argument, and to provoke discussion. In so far as that was my objective, I think I have been totally successful.

[Lutz]: *We were talking the other evening, and I mentioned how when Dry Lips came out, there were some Native people who felt that the book was misogynist, and then reappraised The Rez Sisters and said, 'Yes, that's misogynist too'. Personally, I did not agree at all because I remember seeing The Rez Sisters in performance and I came out saying, 'Wow, those women are really strong!'. How do you react to criticisms like that? Does it affect you?*

No, I don't think so. I think that criticism like that is good. I think that the more controversy a work kicks up the more visible it becomes. I think that if people don't talk about it, don't argue about it, then it's that much more likely to be forgotten. So I've been very lucky in that sense, and it's been a very small amount of political criticism, and nothing compared to the kind of criticism that other writers in other countries have faced, which is in some cases exile, banishment, imprisonment, and execution. Nothing like that.

[Lutz]: *Talking about exile, you live part of the year in Europe, and you travel all over the world, speak many languages. You're an international figure, and you live outside of Canada for lengthy periods. Would you see yourself as partly an expatriate writer?*

Well I live in France for six months of the year for a number of reasons. One of which is that I find the importance of the French language to the [Canadian] community of writers—no matter what background they are—is of the essence. Particularly for a Native Canadian writer, to be fluent in all three official languages—to speak the Native tongue, English and French—is of exceptional importance for a number of reasons, not least of which is the simple act of just holding the country together, because god knows we've come very close to the precipice of separation. The spectre of separation of course still faces us, square in the face, and it's very, very much a potential possibility. Perhaps a little less so than five years ago, but certainly it's still there, the divide. The cultural divide, the linguistic divide is there, and I think that it's unnecessary. I think that it's possible to bridge it, and if anybody can bridge it, it's the Native people, and specifically the Native artist, and most specifically the

Native writers, the artists who deal with language. And even more important than that . . . if Québec were ever to leave Canada, violence and bloodshed would be one of the inevitable results. Specifically *vis-à-vis* the Native communities that happen to be located right on the border between Québec and such provinces as Ontario and New Brunswick. There are Native communities who straddle that border, and Native communities—Native reserves—that exist within the province of Québec, including Kahnawakhe. If separation were to ever occur the real possibility exists that violence would occur and bloodshed would occur—people would be killed.

[Lutz]: *Do you mean like the reaction over Oka?*

Well, the people would refuse to leave Canada, and a lot of Native communities would refuse to leave Canada—I can't talk about Oka—I think it's above and beyond that. Once bloodshed happens it just never stops . . . reprisals generation after generation, just dreadful. And anything that can be done to avoid this situation is of the utmost importance for anybody who can possibly do it. And I think that for Native peoples themselves to become fluent enough in foreign languages is of the utmost importance. One of the reasons why I live in France part of the year is to perfect my French to the extent that I can. The other reason of course is that it's almost impossible for me to live in Toronto anymore because I get so many requests. Over the period of my residency in Toronto two years ago I used to get about 350 requests a year for speaking engagements, interview, playing the piano, concerts, benefits, night clubs, write book forewords, book jacket blurbs, and on, and on, and on—and from all over the world. It became impossible to try to accommodate even one-twentieth of those requests. People would come to my door in Toronto and ring my bell and say 'If you speak at my daughter's high school I'll give you \$600'. I'd get accosted on street cars, in the subway, in public washrooms, in bars, at airports, on the airplanes flying across the country, at baggage collection points, and so on, and so on, and so forth. It just became impossible for me to work. So I just had to find a place away from that zoo for at least six months of the year in order to write in a place where nobody knew me. And that's France.

[Lutz]: *Do the people in the village where you live in France know now who you are?*

No. . . . Or at least not as a general population.

[Lutz]: *Does living outside of Canada change your perspective on North America, on Canada in particular?*

Oh yes, very much so. There is something like a village mentality that threatens to asphyxiate the imagination for certain people when living just in Canada. There are

certain sectors of the community who believe that only Native actors have the right to play Native roles. There are other sectors of the community who don't, who believe that everybody should have a right to play their parts. There are certain sectors of the community who believe that only Native writers have the right to write from a Native perspective and other people who subscribe to the opposite view. And I happen to be of the school of thought that says that theatre and writing has nothing to do with race. I believe in the freedom of the imagination, freedom of expression, to the greatest degree possible.

I find the act of writing to be so difficult, and the act of getting published and/or produced so difficult—they're next to impossible—that I wouldn't wish it on anybody else on the face of the earth. I need every ounce of my energy just to see my writing through, and to see my work through to being produced and/or published. I don't have any time or energy left to go around telling people what they can or cannot write about, and *how* they can or cannot write about it. That's none of my business. As far as Native actors playing Native roles is concerned, on the logistical level, in terms of getting work produced, the dictum that only Native actors have the right to play Native roles may be reasonable to a Native actor's ears but, strictly speaking, in a very practical sense it's death to a Native playwright's career. Artistic directors and producers of consequence will not touch it, will not produce you. So your work languishes, you do not get produced and eventually your career just dries up, so you have to go to other forms of writing just to survive financially. So, you know, I just believe in working with people who are generous, people who are kind, people who are large of spirit, who are wonderful and laughter-loving, and those are my favourite kind of people, and that kind of thing has nothing to do with race.

[Lutz]: *You have to get out of it?*

You just have to get out of it. Ghettoised thinking, that's what that is. And ghettoised thinking can of course kill internally. Kill communities, kill the imagination, kill the will to write, and all those things. So getting out of that was, I think, at a certain point in time an absolute necessity for certain people, as it has been in the past for many other artists who've left their countries and worked elsewhere, sometimes permanently.

[Shackleton]: *Joyce, for example.*

Oh, yeah. To get beyond that village perspective, to achieve a universal, international, cosmopolitan perspective, because there comes a point when you just want to write about the human condition and not just about your own village.

[Shackleton]: *Writers who happen to be women are tired of being characterised as 'women writers', and some writers, like Caryl Phillips, are not willing to be*

labelled 'Black writers' as opposed to just 'writer'. Do you object to being called a 'Native writer' or 'First Nations writer', as opposed to a writer per se?

I don't really care what I'm called. No, that doesn't really matter to me, that's the least of my concerns. There was a famous movie star who said that—I mean this is tongue in cheek, and I don't really subscribe to her opinion: 'I don't really care what they say about me, as long as they talk about me'. Well, I don't really care what they say I'm called, ultimately. An interviewer once asked me 'How do you want to be remembered?', and it's like: 'What do I fucking care?' I'm not going to be here, it's not my problem, I don't really want to be remembered, to tell you the truth.

[Lutz]: *You want to live. . . .*

It would just be nice if I were forgotten as quickly as possible after my death, you know. I think there are certain people who still don't understand that. There are people out there who actually write not because they want to become rich and famous and make lots of money or any of that stuff. It's the will to have fun, first of all, to be a happy and fulfilled person, and what makes me a happy and fulfilled person is when I contribute to the well-being of the community around me, and the betterment of the community is the health of communities, is the healing of communities, and the people as individuals within the community, whether your community is your family, your extended family, your neighbourhood, your city, your province, your country, your planet. And that's what I care about. I don't care what I'm called.

[Lutz]: *I think what you said, or what you developed, is in the best sense also a cosmopolitan view of human existence, and yet you come from a very specific region, a specific culture. You use the mythology from that culture and very often I thought, and I think people have said that too—I must have read it somewhere—that the tribal is the universal or the cosmopolitan. Do you find that in your roots?*

I think you have to start from somewhere. You have to start from the root of the tree in order for the tree to grow, and grow into the most fabulous branches in the universe possible. And I've had that unique experience in Japan, where I've managed to get a lot of work through some extremely generous and wonderful Japanese friends. Last year we did *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in the Japanese language with an entirely Japanese cast and design team, directorial team and so on and so forth—one of the most fabulous experiences of my life! They were kind enough and generous enough to fly me there to act as a consultant to the director and the design team on the script, on the elements of design, on the elements of music. The

person I worked with most closely was the director and he kept wanting to make it his perspective. And his approach to me was too small. Because that wasn't my perspective at all. My perspective was: a story takes place in a very specific community from a very specific cultural point of view; it ultimately is about the universe or the human condition. We're all in the same boat *vis-à-vis* such enormous questions, universal questions, as the gender of God. I think, you know, we've all been fucked over by the patriarchal system, and that there comes a time when it's just got to stop or else no-one will survive. It's a universal question. Once they started thinking in those terms, they started to turn it into a Japanese story, and by the end of it, it was just amazing. It was incredible. It was this tiny 250-seat theatre with a very small stage—a tiny stage that was twice the size of this room, but by the end of the play it was like the stage was the size of the universe, having gods battling up there in the sky—gigantic figures from Japanese mythology, these gods and goddesses fighting it out to the last. It was just a magnificent experience . . . so it worked for the Japanese actors and the Japanese design team, and it worked for Japanese audiences because of that.

[Shackleton]: *Where are you going from here? You have said at some time that you are producing a cycle of seven plays about the Rez. Is that project still going on?*

Oh yes. It will probably take me a lifetime. It may very well be that a number of them will never be produced during my lifetime, but they are being written as we speak in one form or another. So, yes, the project is still very much on the go, and as to whether or not I'm around for the actual finishing of the project is not a major concern of mine. I think I have been extremely fortunate to have been given the opportunity to express the ideas that I have been able to express so far—for a Native Canadian, you know, for an Indian boy from one of the tiniest, most remote, most isolated, most inaccessible and most disadvantaged Indian reserves in the country. I don't come from Toronto or Vancouver or Montreal or Winnipeg or anywhere near the centre in Canada. I come from one of the most isolated places on earth. It's been fun, it's been great, but there are days when I think that . . . it's not so much that it's enough for me, so much as it is time for somebody else to take over. Sometimes it feels that it's a relay race, you know. And every community has a responsibility of carrying the baton for a certain time and a certain distance, and I think I have carried the baton for a certain amount of time and a certain distance and I think it's other people's time to take over.

[Shackleton]: *You've written, of course, both plays and a novel. I understand that you're working on another novel.*

I think I'm happiest when I've got several projects going on, simultaneously. I've never been really one to work exclusively on one thing at one time. It bores me. I'm happiest when I'm in the kitchen cooking for forty people. Like four pots going, and the oven going, the whole batch of whatever! That sense of chaotic creative activity! So I write novels, I write plays and I write music, because I can and because I had to.

[Shackleton]: *One thing that links your plays and your fiction, and you mentioned this in the conference, is of course musical structure. Would you like to talk a bit about the musical structures in drama and in fiction. Are there parallels or is it very different?*

Well, I was trained as a musician, as a classical musician. I remember my teenage years in Winnipeg, for instance, when I was at the age of 15, 16, 17, 18 going to high school. Well, in those days, music was not an elective, so whatever musical education you had, you had to get it outside, after school or before school and on weekends. And I remember—and God knows Winnipeg can be cold—while everybody would get to school at 9 o'clock and leave at 4 and go on to their respective whatever, I would get up at 6 and by 7 o'clock I'd be at my harmony teacher's. Monday morning would be counterpoint, and Thursday morning would be history and then Saturday afternoons would be piano, performing probably. I never really knew what I was doing at the time; I knew I just had to do that, I just had to learn how to write counterpoint. Part of it of course was that you had to work towards the diploma, this very arduous course. Then I went down to the university and I got very intensive training on all the forms of music. I was in a fabulous trio, in tours playing Mendelssohn and Mozart and Beethoven and Shostakovich, I remember, and all kinds of things. It was just fantastic.

Then, of course, we saw a lot of concerts and a lot of symphonies. We got to know the 7th symphony of Beethoven, 3rd Mahler, and so on and so forth. We studied the structure of these pieces, we learned how to write fugues, we learned how to write sonatas. We studied orchestration, we learned how to write for a symphony orchestra, all this stuff. And we studied German *lieder* and French *chanson*, meaning the songs of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel and Henri du Parc, and the German *lieder* composers, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Hugo Wolf. And you studied the structure of these songs. How they were written, the techniques of melodic construction. Italian *bel canto*, opera, the architecture of the ultimate architecture of melody, to my mind, melody making. When your whole youth has been infused with this information—by the time I was twenty-three I had this extraordinary education which stays with you—that's like the foundation of a house that you've built, and