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Voyeurism and Gendered Violence in Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners*

*Erica Parnis*

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Canadian playwright Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* is one of the best-known works of Indigenous theatre. It also contains one of the most controversial scenes: Dickie Bird Halked's brutal rape of Cree trickster Nanabush, taking the form of Patsy "Big-Bum" Pegahmagahbow. Highway intended this violence to be symbolic—by juxtaposing the play's comedy and its disturbing content, the playwright sought to present a critique of gendered and colonial violence. Yet, as many Indigenous women have criticized, the eschewing of positive female representations in favour of demeaning tropes only serves to perpetuate the characters' misogyny and violence (Baker 88). The rape scene in *Dry Lips* exemplifies the concept of emblematic sexual violence, a term I use to describe the dramatic practice of performing gendered violence or rape to symbolize national or cultural violation. While this concept is not limited to theatre, the innate physicality and proximity of the stage simulates a mutual exchange between viewer and performer and makes the performance of violence especially worthy of critique. The closeness of theatre also makes it more prone to voyeurism and sensationalism when portraying violence. Using sexual violence as a symbol risks confining the act to the realm of fiction, and this forces critics to ask: Is performing sexual violence an effective method of combatting it?

I explore the complexities of this question in two productions: Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips* and Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners*. Both use representations of sexual violence to criticize cultural and national corruption and communicate a political agenda. Where they differ, however, is in their implications. *Dry Lips* is a dangerous misstep in the use of emblematic sexual violence; Highway risks divorcing the act of rape from reality, confining it to the comical dream world. Audiences are encouraged to act as voyeurs, people who consume representations of gendered violence while remaining passive and inactive. Furthermore, Highway relies on the fetishistic trope that equates Indigenous women's bodies with the earth and uses rape to symbolize colonial violence—a concept with its roots in the oppressive colonial forces Highway sought to deconstruct. Gambaro's *Information*

for *Foreigners*, however, avoids voyeurism, and through her work I would like to assert that the counteractive element to voyeurism is the indictment of the audience. Gambaro does not perpetuate passivity because her staging choices and use of audience participation actively condemn both the violent acts and audiences' voyeuristic consumption of them. In short, although both of these plays use emblematic sexual violence to communicate their politics, Highway's choices run the risk of dematerializing the experience of rape and facilitating passive, inactive viewing. Gambaro, however, encourages viewers to engage with the play as critics, evaluating their role as bystanders and recognizing the effects of passive voyeurism.

Tomson Highway is an Indigenous Canadian writer most famous for his unfinished Rez heptalogy. *Dry Lips* is the second of these plays, all of which are set on the fictional Wasaychigan Reserve. They deal with similar themes, including the cultural impact of colonialism, misogynistic violence, and the introduction of Western gender roles and religion to Indigenous populations. Highway believes that gendered violence resulting from colonialism must be eliminated and attempts, through his work, "to prevent this kind of thing from happening to another Native woman" (Highway qtd. in Coté 15). Yet his plays have another aspect in common: nearly all of his plays use gendered violence to symbolize the "cultural, territorial, and spiritual dispossession brought about by colonialism" (MacKenzie 2). *Dry Lips'* Nanabush is portrayed as an exaggerated vision of Western femininity—as Gazelle Nataway, she has enormous breasts, and as Patsy, she has a comically large rear. Along with the rape scene, there is a stripper scene, as well as a moment where a hockey puck gets stuck between Gazelle's breasts. As William Worthen identifies in his introduction to the play, her physical appearance is reminiscent of the highly problematic "squaw" stereotype of a highly sexualized Indigenous woman (1682). Throughout the play, Nanabush is a figure of absurd physical comedy, and this has repercussions for how the disturbing rape scene can be interpreted. In Cree legend, Nanabush is a genderless trickster and teacher figure who uses humour to teach lessons. Although in *Dry Lips* Highway maintains Nanabush's role as a trickster, he also writes her as a feminine, highly sexualized Indigenous woman. As such, her rape is meant to communicate the cost of gendered and colonial violence. The fact that she is penetrated with a cross is intended to mirror the violation of Native spirituality by Christianity. Yet, the characters are never taught this lesson, and they never interact with Nanabush's true form because she is a spirit. It is later revealed that the entire play was a dream, and the misogyny described is a reflection of the men's attitudes brought on by a cycle of colonialism, just as Dickie Bird's actions are explained by his being born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Audiences, are encouraged to see gendered violence not as an individual issue but as a legacy

of colonialism. By using rape as a literary device in a symbolic dream, Highway perpetuates the objectification of women and the problematic depiction of female bodies as objects of conquest.

Highway's *Dry Lips* represents an important step forward in the performance of Indigenous political activism, but his methods are questionable. We cannot consider his works wholly subversive when he relies on tropes that perpetuate not only sexism and rape culture but also racist stereotypes. As MacKenzie points out, Highway's recurring use of rape as a metaphor for colonial violence perpetuates derogatory stereotypes of Indigenous women that have their roots in the legacy of colonialism (8). In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock brings this trope to light, highlighting the sexist undertones of colonial narratives that designate the earth and its land as female and vulnerable to forced "penetration" by masculine colonizers (26). This harmful trope reinforces ideas of Indigenous women as submissive and vulnerable objects rather than individuals with agency.

As critic Ric Knowles emphasizes, *Dry Lips* equates penetration and rape with imperialism, which "risk[s] dematerializing the experience of their female subjects by metaphorically representing the effects of Christianity and colonization on Native spirituality through rape" (140). He also concludes that violence against women functions to "maintain gender hierarchies" and "perpetuate rape ... as the gendered and raced technologies of colonialism" (151). Furthermore, Highway's representation of rape is especially dangerous when we consider that Indigenous women are three times more likely to suffer from domestic violence and rape than white women and are less likely to report their experiences (Brownridge 164; Mackenzie 9). In spite of this, some scholars have argued that Nanabush's presence as trickster figure "actually refuses the power of rape by subsuming it within the mythological frameworks invoked" (Gilbert and Tompkins 215). Such explanations seek to justify the use of emblematic rape by placing it within the context of Indigenous authenticity and revival of traditional Indigenous stories. Yet this surreal element is complicated by the observation that Highway's scene resembles real-life incidents of Indigenous rape in the 1960s and 70s (Pearson 175). Although some critics have attempted to reimagine Nanabush's rape as a metaphor rooted in Indigenous magic, Knowles emphasizes that "the sign marks the absence of the material referent" and that emblemizing rape "risks effacing ... its lived, material reality for the women who are its victims" (141). Highway's representation of sexual violence reflects real issues with real consequences, and treating rape as metaphor undermines these issues, maintaining the misogynistic trope of female subservience that colonizers have historically used as justification for the oppression of Native women.

Published in 1973, nearly twenty years earlier than *Dry Lips*, *Information for Foreigners* is a work of participatory and site-specific theatre in which audience members are divided into groups and led by a guide through the play's scenes. The guides, as well as some audience members, are actors, and this blurs the lines between fiction and fact. The play depicts the Argentinian state's terrorism in the early 1970s, ranging from the "disappearing" of civilians by the state to a re-enactment of the Milgram experiment, which acts as a metaphor for the role of the audience as a spectator to violence. The subject of sexual violence is a young and unnamed female character who is "submerged," her face held under filthy water in a bathtub as a method of torture. She is shown multiple times in the play, dripping wet and crying, prodded and harassed by an unnamed man as the audience watches (Worrthen 1555). She appears again in the dark as a second guide slaps her rear and mutters, "No way you're a virgin!" In the next scene, the guide opens the door to see the girl surrounded by four men, and in response, he "closes the door" and "shooes people away with a false smile" (1560), allowing the audience to turn a blind eye to the girl's implied assault. The guides, meant to be figures of authority in whom audience members place their trust, repeatedly condone the girl's violation, taking pleasure in it and encouraging the audience to do the same, even offering the girl's chair to a female audience member (1562). As Gambaro implies through the Milgram experiment in scene four, audience members defer responsibility to the guides for the violence, even after scene thirteen, in which an audience member kills a woman before he "mixes in with the crowd, like one more spectator" (1565). With this stage direction, Gambaro blurs the boundary between spectator and perpetrator, making it clear that they the two work hand in hand. Gambaro uses audience participation to assert that passive bystanders allow violence to continue and therefore share in the responsibility.

As Diana Taylor argues in "Theatre and Terrorism," *Information for Foreigners* demonstrates the theatricality of the terrorist state—terrorism, like theatre, relies on the suspension of disbelief by its passive spectators. Terrorism, she argues, is designed to look like a stage trick, drawing on "the theatrical propensity simultaneously to bind the audience and to paralyze it" (Taylor 165–66). Audiences and bystanders react emotionally but never physically, paralyzed by theatrical tricks into inaction and passivity. As Taylor demonstrates, Gambaro criticizes this tendency for passivity in politics and, furthermore, in theatre-going. Gambaro uses the unique capacity for the theatrical medium to "actively critique the audience, and to create opportunity for reflection and motivation for action" (Burns 40). By drawing a parallel between theatrical tricks and the political deception that acts as a cover for terrorism, Gambaro creates a highly uncomfortable experience in which

audience members cannot find voyeuristic pleasure through immersion. Gambaro's audience members are not allowed to resign the disturbing subject matter to the fictional realm. Instead, they are criticized for authorizing and being entertained by violence. This echoes what William McAvoy states in *Theatre as Voyeurism*: that "site-specific performance turns us simultaneously into voyeurs, writers, and critics" who watch but who are also self-reflective, making connections and distinctions between performance and reality (88). Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners* is an excellent example of this duality; she criticizes the spectator's role as voyeur, encouraging critical thinking and forcing viewers to evaluate their own subjectivity.

This critical examination of voyeurism in Gambaro's play stands in stark contrast to Highway's *Dry Lips*, both in the way that sexual violence is represented and in the way that the playwrights intended their audiences to interact with violence. George Rodosthenous argues that theatre makes voyeurism "an acceptable art form where the audience removes its forbidden attributes through collective viewing" (16). Considering this, Highway's brutal rape scene is morally dubious in its attempts to convert rape into an art form. Voyeuristic theatre brings pleasure to audiences, inviting them to take part in the audiovisual sensations on stage. Thus, when performing an abhorrent act such as rape, it is not ethically right to encourage or allow audiences to merely watch the act without this power imbalance being brought under scrutiny. Gambaro is successful in this sense because her audience members are confronted with the reality of their passive voyeurism. At the end of the play, they are forced toward the exit, police sirens wailing as one guide chants:

Theatre imitates life  
 If you don't clap  
 It means that life is rotten to the core  
 And we may as well just head for the door. (Worthen 1572)

In this absurd final scene, Gambaro drives home the idea that by watching or clapping, audiences have accepted the violence they have witnessed. In effect, she uses the "interpersonal, proximal and potentially interactive nature" of theatre to confront the audience's collective guilt (Burns 48). Audiences are able to leave the theatre, but they are not able to disengage from the play's violence. The curtains are not drawn, actors do not smile and bow, and when theatregoers leave the venue, they still hear screaming and sirens. Audiences watching *Dry Lips*, however, are separated from the violent act of rape by countless layers of distance—the evil act is confined to the stage, to misguided fictional Indigenous men, and to the reserve. Gambaro's audiences are not able to disengage in this manner, and unlike those in

*Dry Lips*, bystanders who watch violence passively are confronted with their guilt. Audiences of Highway's play are the passive voyeurs that Gambaro criticizes, watching from their comfortable seats and responding emotionally to what is shown but never responding physically or taking action. Gambaro condemns passivity both on the dramatic stage and the stage of terrorism, while Highway's work, despite its valuable anti-colonial message, allows audiences to interpret rape in a passive, symbolic, and disengaged way.

David Waterman argues that “[r]ace, gender and sexual orientation have meaning primarily in how they are performed, resisting and/or accommodating social pre/proscriptions, exposing power relations” (86). In short, the way that gender is performed is indicative of the power relations that imbue and influence these categorizations. Although both of these plays depict gendered violence as indicative of national and cultural violence, the difference is that Gambaro has designed her production to confront and condemn passivity and to force audiences to think about their role in perpetuating violence. Gambaro's crying girl signals the Argentinian terrorist state's manipulation of the tendency to suspend disbelief. As Gambaro implies in the Milgrim experiment scene, this look-but-don't-touch attitude is what allows corrupt authority figures to maintain power. Highway's representation and performance of femininity, however, relies on the very tropes of Indigenous female submission that fuelled and perpetuated colonial violence against Indigenous women (Berlando 18, 20–21). If we consider the implications of these plays through the lens of Waterman's ideas, we see a major difference: Gambaro exposes power imbalances and reveals the performativity of corruption. In contrast, Highway's performance of femininity risks accommodating social prescriptions of female subservience and, furthermore, perpetuates the imbalanced power structures that it represents by confining the female experience to a symbol.

If there is anything to be learned from the gendered violence depicted in these plays, it is that the performance of sexual and racial violence is not a sufficiently powerful tool in combatting it. Tomson Highway frequently stated, “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed,” and he turns to humour to draw the poison out (Longclaws 6). Although it is a step forward, mere representation is not enough; as Indigenous critic Marie Annharte Baker expressed, “It is a small comfort to see poison. I hope the cure doesn't kill” (68). Yet even Baker, one of Highway's harshest critics, admitted that exposing the poison of misogyny and colonialism was a comfort—if only a small one. It is simultaneously inadequate and entirely necessary that acts of gendered violence be performed. Gambaro proves it is possible to represent gendered violence without dematerializing its lived experience. Highway's *Dry Lips*, in spite of its flaws, is a testament to the necessity

and difficulty of using theatre to deconstruct violence. It is increasingly clear that creators and performers must engage in political activism, but this cannot be done at the expense of real individuals. By juxtaposing the works of Gambaro and Highway, however, we are one step closer to a deeper understanding of the relationship between theatre and activism. Sexual and racialized violence remains a pressing issue both in Canada and on a global scale, and the media representations of such violent acts deserve as much critical attention as the violence itself.

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