Pattern Numbers, Numerical Symbols, and Political Aesthetics in *The Rez Sisters*[1] by Maria C. Casas

At the recent “Bridging Communities” CFHSS Congress in Saskatoon May 26-June 2, the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies devoted its meeting to papers and roundtables on Aboriginal cultures and literatures. One of the main themes to come out of the three days of discussion by a mixed group of Aboriginal- and European-descent scholars and writers was that scholarship on Aboriginal cultures and literatures should help Aboriginal communities. However, the title of Kristina Fagan’s paper, “Does Literary Criticism Matter to Aboriginal Communities?” expressed a basic dilemma for literary scholars arising out of this imperative.[2] While many emerging critics of Aboriginal literature use an interdisciplinary Native Studies approach that is nevertheless anchored in the social sciences, scholars working in English departments may well ask themselves about the importance of their research for Aboriginal verbal art,[3] whether oral, written, or electronic. The question is about disciplinary limitations as well as cultural ones: as one of the most persistent gatekeepers of European cultural capital in Canada through the twentieth century, English studies is in a poor position to reach beyond its own boundaries. Can Canadian literary studies, having been an important institutional support of British colonial literary culture, and then of nationalist Canadian literary culture, reinvent itself to engage productively with the verbal art of a multicultural, multi-national Canada? Can it do this, in the case of Aboriginal literature, without reinscribing the colonial relations of power it has nurtured for more than two hundred years? These questions necessarily precede the one posed by Fagan, and this essay explores them and the relevance of mainstream literary criticism to Aboriginal communities through a multicultural, multidisciplinary reading of Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*.

Disciplines have been considered institutions, schooling people in certain ways of perceiving and acting in and on the world (Foucault). Some contemporary disciplines, such as linguistics, have clearly-defined objects of study (language); others, such as cell biology, have both a defined object of study and well-established methods of enquiry and communication. These methods are in a dialectical relationship with the discipline: they cannot “discover” anything that is not discoverable by that method and anything that cannot be explained by that method lies outside the boundaries of the discipline. The discipline and its method are two sides of the same coin. Thus, very little can be discovered and communicated that is not already encompassed by the potentials of the discipline and by the genres of disciplined communication.

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[1] This is an expanded version of a paper delivered May 28th at the annual meeting of the CACLALS. My thanks to participants of the session and the conference for their many helpful suggestions and ideas.

[2] [explain what the paper was about]

[3] I use this term to denote a perspective on verbal texts (the “words” part of a text, whether performed or recorded in a range of materials, including writing) oriented to the creative or aesthetic. It avoids the term “literature,” which contains in its etymology (“liter”= letteXr) the orientation to the exclusively written of English studies.

One definition of genre is "a staged, goal-oriented, social process realised through [words]" (Martin). This emphasizes the role of words -- written or spoken -- in the collective work of reality-building that we carry out through disciplines. In the written genres of the experimental sciences, the format of journal articles is highly conventionalized so that readers trained in these conventions can quickly grasp the implications of the new information for a much larger body of knowledge. In these disciplines, a journal article or conference paper communicates (and puts at risk) only a very small proportion of the total information exchanged; most of the communication here actually takes place through a body of knowledge held in common by all readers, but not rehearsed in each text. The highly policed and conventionalized nature of these genres, reflecting the social structures of their disciplines, allows a huge amount of material to remain implicit.

English, however, is a jackdaw discipline. Borrowing freely from other disciplines (positivist, empirical sciences for New criticism, general linguistics during the linguistic turn of the 1970s-90s, cultural anthropology for the current "cultural studies"), English seems to feed on itself in a perpetually solipsistic dynamic. Once it comes over the horizon and into view of English scholars, an approach borrowed from another discipline becomes, often without discussion of the borrowing, a part of the grab-bag of objects of interest and methodologies of literary studies. In a barely perceptible smoothing of incompatible edges, those aspects of the borrowing that do not fit the assumptions of English studies silently disappear. So, during the linguistic turn in English studies, the rationalist assumptions of theoretical linguistics did not survive the sea-change into an English discipline rooted in textuality and increasingly interested in the multivalency, and then the social location, of signs.

What are the assumptions of English and why are they so powerful while at the same time so invisible? English as it is taught in Anglo-American departments is an inductive discipline: a plethora of textual details are gathered to eventually become the basis for statements made about a text. Like the famous British common sense, the things a reader perceives are assumed to be self-evident, especially once they have been communicated as a "reading". In traditional departments, students are trained to "close-read" literary texts; and yet, it takes two or three years of hard work to learn this most commonsensical of activities. In less traditional departments, reading frameworks are taught. Feminism, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory are interpretive frameworks for readings that are assumed to be as personalized and original -- as unmediated by social location -- as the more traditional, unframed "close reading." When English studies in Canada goes to conferences and publishes in journals, similar readings proliferate; it is not uncommon to see several different, usually complementary readings of a small number of favoured texts *du jour* across a range of journals. The lingering and highly generalized use of the term "to read" for what English scholars do tells us why English departments are often the largest in an arts faculty and why English is the best funded of the humanities disciplines: this kind of reading is subconsciously[4] seen as an

[4] Many English scholars would deny that the kind of reading they carry out and teach is related to basic literacy. This would be too "reductive." Yet in this era of shifting funding, "to read" as a generalized term is tenacious precisely because it lets English have its cake and eat it too. The connection between basic literacy and the highly

extension of the very basic literacy also covered by the term "to read." From this point of view, English teaches, and practices, advanced literacy.

For Aboriginal cultures in Canada, both meanings of the term "English" -- English language and English literacy -- have been associated with cultural genocide.[5] Aboriginal children were placed in boarding schools through most of the twentieth century in a programme of cultural assimilation designed to "take the Indian out of the boy", according to the X (X). Corporeal punishment for speaking any language other than English reinforced in a visceral way the desired separation between Native subject and Native language (Brant). In many residential schools, reading and writing were taught in close association with cultural assimilation, since literacy was seen as a powerful "civilizing" force. Outside of the schools, missionaries to Aboriginal communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries taught English literacy to facilitate access to the Bible, while also translating and transliterating the Bible into major Aboriginal languages and writing systems such as Cree syllabics. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are called "religions of the book" precisely because their central teachings are codified in writing; reading, writing, and the book are therefore not only important icons but also highly valued in practicing belief.

Now that admiration for Aboriginal cultures is on the rise and they have become better valued in many quarters, the very specific role of the book as cultural icon in Europe and in the history of European colonization is more visible. The Bible, and the book, may not retain the connotations of universality they once had. The importance of oral narratives, of song, performance, and ritual, and their development in Aboriginal-controlled electronic texts in film and digital recording (Kuniak [*Atarnajuat*]; see also Sophie's article), remind us that writing is only one medium for verbal art; and that poetry can be in the first instance spoken, chanted, or sung instead of written. Further, the generic, cultural, and social relationship between story, song, and performance is different in different Aboriginal cultures; and all of these in turn are different from the European constellation of genres.[6] While literary genres are produced and reproduced/read in writing in Europe, in Aboriginal cultures some stories are told. Some stories are written. Some stories are sung. Some stories express and develop community values -- like the religious art of contemporary Buddhism -- while showing the virtuosity of the artist. Some stories are private, belonging exclusively to family or individual. This makes us aware of the culturally-contingent nature of genres, and of the culturally-contingent division of European verbal art into its specific literary, disciplinary, and rhetorical genres.

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sophisticated reading practices of, for example, a deconstructionist can be perceived when we remember that reading even simple sentences is a highly complex interpretive skill.

[5] This is not to ignore the benefits of literacy perceived by Aboriginal people, or the eagerness of many students to acquire it. I would like to avoid a polarized binary here between literacy as decadently "civilized" and illiteracy as blissfully innocent. My point is historical; a connection can easily be made between print as a technology and the cultural subjugation of First Nations, and it is a connection that has been made by Aboriginal writers: "The written word, the bible book, almost destroyed our faith in who we are, and so, we have come to view the written word with suspicion and apprehension" (Brant 50).

[6] I am not arguing that genres are European (genre is an analytical category that can be applied to any communicative act in), but that the genres of poetry, fiction and drama as they are conceived of in English departments is specifically European.

It could be argued that cultural studies is an attempt to take account of these differences, but has English really taken the lessons of cultural anthropology to heart? Findlay's call for "new alliances between English literary studies and Indigenous studies" is, as he acknowledges (367), slightly utopian. My view is that such an alliance cannot take place until English studies sheds its deeply-held, Eurocentric orientation to the exclusively written. King has argued that "much of the contemporary fiction written by Native writers attempts to create a bridge between oral tribal literature and contemporary written literature."(7) While this statement may apply more convincingly to Native fiction when the statement was made in 1987 than it does today, English ignores the role of traditional Aboriginal genres in what is now considered Aboriginal "literature" at the risk not only of perpetuating its role in the cultural assimilation of Aboriginal cultures, but also, ultimately, of making itself irrelevant. English scholars need to go beyond the book, and beyond a focus on purely written texts. The *oral* narrative, in fact, is a useful synecdoche for those things about an Aboriginal literary text that at present an English scholar cannot "read."

How do scholars trained in a European tradition of literary criticism, then, read an Aboriginal literary text, and especially those aspects of it that come from an oral tradition of verbal art? Here, the alliances between English and Indigenous Studies that Findlay advises are more difficult and complex than may initially be perceived. Traditional English literary studies is based on the Oxford philological tradition that studied the history of the English *language* and its expression in verbal art; how can this encompass oral narratives in Aboriginal languages? If it can't (for, given the number of different Aboriginal languages, this seems, practically-speaking, impossible), how does it reconcile its long-standing philological impulse, carried through in close readings that base statements about a text on the language of the text, with the need to make literary criticism relevant to Aboriginal communities?[7] What aspects of narrative meaning-making transcend language? What aspects of song and poetry transcend the sounds of the original text? Questions of the nature of translation and transcription then become important, and this is where literary studies' current links with cultural anthropology (through cultural studies) may be helpful.

Although there seems to be very little research on Aboriginal verbal art *as literature* in anthropology, there is a thriving sub-discipline of linguistic anthropology called ethnopoetics. Ethnopoetics is the purview of present-day inheritors of Boasian salvage-anthropology, in which field-linguists transcribe and sometimes translate Native North American oral narratives. Inevitably, questions about the best way of carrying out transcriptions and translations of Native North American oral narratives arise, and present-day transcribers and translators of Aboriginal oral narratives (e.g., Wickwire, Cruikshank, Robinson, Bringhurst) often follow the lead of ethnopoetics scholar Dell Hymes. In a fascinating work called *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*, Hymes recounts his discovery of the highly-patterned nature of Native North American oral narratives. Small, seemingly unimportant words (particles) that had seemed irrelevant to the narrative actually play a crucial role in its structuration. They help the story-teller mark

[7] This section circles back to the question of making literary criticism relevant to Aboriginal communities, but from perspective of the needs of Aboriginal communities and not of the development of English as a discipline.

places in the telling at which there is a repetition, a turn, or a similar rhetorical patterning. As a transcriber paying attention to these particles, then, Hymes uses the visual resources of Western print -- line breaks, variable left margins, vertical spacing -- to elucidate this structural (not linguistic) rhetorical patterning. He names these units of structure *lines, stanzas, episodes,* and *scenes*, using terms from the written poetic and dramatic traditions of Europe to make the functions of these structural components clear to those steeped in European traditions -- and to make the point that these texts should be valued as literary and not as the objects of the anthropological gaze.

In a further discovery, Hymes finds that lines, stanzas, episodes, and scenes are often grouped according to a specific number. Different cultures, including different Native North American cultures, rely on different pattern numbers. In later work, he summarizes these patterns as based on either the number two or the number three, depending on culture, teller, and situation ("Use All" 99-104). Hymes links his discovery to established observations in folklore and narrative studies, writing that "in a story with a series of siblings, say, or repeated actions, the number of siblings and actions will accord with such a number" (99).

English-language cultures structure their oral narratives and their important cultural symbols in patterns of three -- and as a corollary of three, five (a repetition of three, Hymes writes, that uses the middle number as a fulcrum for two threes (99)). Goldilocks gets lost in the woods one day and finds an empty house with three bowls of porridge, three empty chairs, and three empty beds (that is, three times three). Three bears, return to the house and frighten her away (with three-fold repetitions of "who has eaten my porridge?", etc.) Rumpelstitskin turns around three times before each of this three transformations; and in the story of the three little pigs, the three pig brothers are blown out of their home by a wolf (nearly) three times. Cultures structure their rituals and symbols using their pattern number as well. In English North America, we get three wishes. We get three guesses. And we get three strikes in baseball, before we're out. In sacramental terms, the holy is a trinity (father, son, and holy spirit); and (not coincidentally) the holy family is a trinity as well (father, Madonna, and child). Other languages that use predominantly three- and five-part relations are the Native American Chinookan and Tlingit languages, Xhosa (southern Africa), and Nguna (Pacific). On the other hand, many Native American languages structure their narratives in patterns of two (and its corollary, four (99)).[8]

Basing a reading on pattern numbers can transcend differences in language and medium while staying true to the deep structure of Aboriginal verbal art. Some Aboriginal people have been socialized through institutions like the discipline of English to value only the dominant, English colonial literary culture; others perceive value in both traditions; others, only in Aboriginal traditions of verbal art. In all cases, I take as one of the spiritual and cultural-political needs of Aboriginal people a valorization of Aboriginal verbal art on its own terms. While this may immediately seem a generalizing essentialism, I also take the position that much contemporary Aboriginal verbal art is engaged in syncretic processes that mix media,

[8] This is not a comprehensive list; it depends on the research that has been done in different cultures following Hymes' initial discovery of the intricate cultural patterning of oral narratives in the 1960s.

languages, and world views. I want to take Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* as paradigmatic of this process and show how it can be read using pattern numbers

Highway has said that *The Rez Sisters* has many patterns of seven because of the special significance of the number seven [source] to present-day First Nations: it is the seventh generation, according to a nineteenth-century prophecy, that would rise again [stolen continents; also, Niigon said seven is to do with the directions of the earth - esp. Cree -- ask him to ask his wife]. The first thing we learn when reading the play is that there are seven "sisters" (half-sisters, a sister-in-law, and an adopted daughter), because their names and ages are listed on a "Cast of Characters" page just behind the title page. They all live on a reserve on Manitoulin Island. The eldest sister is fifty-three years old - a prime number -- and the next eldest is forty-nine (seven times seven). The next three sisters are thirty-nine, thirty-six, and thirty-two years old.[9] One of the sisters has fourteen children (two times seven). Another sister had a child twenty-eight years ago (that's four times seven), whose adoption and loss continues to haunt her. The seven sisters decide to go to Toronto, where they hope to win a huge bingo jackpot. However, their lucky number, B14, is never called, and in revenge the sisters trash the bingo machine. Meanwhile, the sweetest sister, who dreams of nothing but a peaceful, rural domestic life, and who owns a white picket fence with fourteen posts, is battling cancer. She dies at the bingo game. Her number is up.

The language of numbers in the play initially seems to do with the extended bingo metaphor. Much dialogue is about numbers, and therefore necessarily *in* numbers. When the sisters are planning their trip to Toronto, for example, they concentrate on the numbers:

> PELAJIA: ... We chip in, buy groceries and cook at my son's.
> VERONIQUE: I'll give $10.
> EMILY: You old fossil. You want us to starve?
> PHILOMENA:$50 a day. Each.
> EMILY: Philomena Moosemeat! That's $50 times seven people times four days. That's over $1000 worth of groceries.
> VERONIQUE: Imagine!
> MARIE-ADELE: Okay. Veronique St. Pierre. You cook. $20 apiece. Right?
> EMILY: Right. Next.
> PHILOMENA: Anybody writing this down?
> ANNIE: I'm gonna go to Sam the Recordman.
> MARIE-ADELE : I'll make the grocery list.
> PELAJIA: How much for gas?
> VERONIQUE: ***Still in dreamland over the groceries***. $1000!
> PHILOMENA: ***Flabbergasted***. Nooo! You goose.
> ANNIE: $40.
> EMILY: $150. Period. Next.

[9] Alas, I have never discovered the associations or significance of these numbers, but my guess is that their importance lies in their intervals: between the first two is four, between the last two is three. The sum of these two intervals is seven, but musical intervals are also important in the patterning of chords and melodies in the [XX] mode of classical European music.

> PELAJIA: We got 10 days to find this money.
> MARIE-ADELE: What's it cost to get into the bingo?
> VERONIQUE: All the Indians in the world will be there!
> PHILOMENA: $50.
> ANNIE: And we're gonna be the only Indians there.
> (67-69)

The game of bingo, remember, is a game of chance in which numbers are called out at random. When the sisters are finished their fund-raising for the trip to Toronto, Pelajia sums up, again with numbers: "Bottle drive. Ten cents a bottle, 24 bottles a case, equals two dollars and 40 cents. 777 bottles collected divided by 24 is 32 cases and nine singles that's 32 times $2.40 equals $77.70. ...Washing windows at $5.00 a house times 18 houses. Five eights are 40, carry the four and add the five is 90 bucks less two on account of that cheap Gazelle Nataways only gave three dollars." (74) The thematic purpose of these numbers seems to be to support the trope of bingo and emphasize the role of chance – and chaos – in the lives of the seven sisters. In important respects, *The Rez Sisters* mimics a game of bingo.

But the play is also intricately structured, like a traditional oral narrative, using the pattern number three. The play has nine scenes grouped into three groups of three by changes in setting. In Act One, the settings are Pelajia's roof; Marie-Adele's porch; and then Emily's store. In Act Two, the settings are: Pelajia's basement; then the van on the road to Toronto; then the bingo hall. Act Two is twice as long as Act One, and it ends by repeating the settings of Act One, but in reverse order: Emily's store (again); Marie-Adele's porch (again); and Pelajia's roof (thus circling back to the very first set).

Three is the pattern number in English-language cultures, as we have seen, (though it might also be the pattern number for Ojibway and Cree, the other two languages of the play -- ask Niigon). In a 1992 exchange with Highway, interviewer William Morgan remarked that he was

> interested to hear your comment [in a previous public talk] on the significance of the number seven in the structuring of some of your work. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera writes of how his works each fall into seven parts. He as well had extensive training in classical music. Kundera says that the work of many classical composers contain a seven-part structure, and he believes that this is why, no matter how he starts out to write a novel, it will end up containing seven parts analogous to those musical compositions. (131)

Morgan seems to question the cultural specificity of the number seven or perhaps Highway's account of what the number seven means in his work. Highway replies: "To tell the truth, this just seems to happen when I write, as it comes from my spine, my being" (131).[10] This is an interesting essentialism -- it neither accepts nor denies Morgan's account of the source of Highway's inspiration for the number seven, but appeals to a somatized, wordless knowledge as a way of dealing with a seeming contradiction. It does not seem to have occurred to either interviewer or interviewee that the number seven may have a presence in different traditions

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[10] Morgan, hilariously, replies, "That's just what Kundera says." (132)

shared by the same artist (Highway trained for many years as a concert pianist), or that the number seven may play a double role in a syncretic Christian and First Nations cultural text. Though classical musicians, including Highway, may be compelled to structure their written works in seven parts, that does not mean that seven is not also an important number to a First Nations musician-playwright and his local audience.

In the same way, the play may be structured in threes not just because of shared number patterns between CreeX and English, but because of the ternary structure of classical European music. Highway has said of his method of composition that "sonata form is applied to the to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk," (X). It is easy to see a sonata exposition, development, and recapitulation in the *The Rez Sisters*, with the exposition taking place over the three scenes of Act One, the development spread over the first three scenes of Act Two, and the recapitulation over the last three scenes of Act Two. However, unlike the basic sonata form, in which the recapitulation brings back its themes in the same order in which they were first introduced, this recapitulation reintroduces the scenes of the exposition in reverse order (roof, porch, store; store, porch, roof).[11] This, and even more intricate patterning, is the type of structure brought out by Hymes in his readings of Native American oral narratives.

The number three also patterns Philomena's description of Bingo Betty, the high priestess of Bingo:

> In the old days, when Bingo Betty was still alive and walking these dirt roads, she'd come to every single bingo and she'd sit there like the Queen of Tonga, big and huge like a roast beef, smack-dab in the middle of the bingo hall. One night, I remember, she brought two young cousins from the city -- two young women, dressed real fancy, like they were going to Sunday church - and Bingo Betty had them sit one on her left, with her three little bingo cards, and one on her right, with her three little ones. And Bingo Betty herself sat in the middle with 27 cards. Twenty seven cards! Amazing. (16-17)

Twenty-seven is three times three times three. Allusions to narrative of the New Testament ("still alive and walking these dirt roads"), to bingo as holy sacrament ("like they were going to Sunday church"), and to Bingo Betty as not only the priestess presiding over the bingo game, but the sacrificial "roast beef" (or body of Christ, shortly to be consumed) cannot fail to evoke Christianity, and especially Roman Catholic rites.[12] However, the reference to the Queen of Tonga reinforces the syncretic aspects of this description of a modern religious ritual: bingo.

The reference to roast beef occurs both *before* the central bingo game scene, in this monologue, and *after* the central bingo game scene, in Veronique's rapturous account of her new stove: "I bought a roast beef just yesterday. A great big roast beef. Almost 16 pounds. It's probably the biggest roast beef that's been seen on this reserve in recent years. The meat was so heavy that Nicky, Ricky, Ben and Mark had to take turns carrying it here for me." With the big, central bingo game in Toronto as the Last Supper (see the stage directions for the scene 'lit so

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[11] I am indebted to my student, Rima Basu, for this description of sonata structure and analysis of the play in these terms.

[12] Highway was educated at a residential school by the Jesuit brothers.

that it looks like "The Last Supper" ' (X)), it's clear that Christ the roast beef has made the passage from living flesh to sacramental meal in this three-panel tryptich, completed by the end of the play. But in the church of bingo, sex is also a sort of spiritual nourishment: with Highway's signature lewdness,[13] the roast in Veronique's very next sentence suddenly seems to be a giant penis: "Oh, it was hard and slippery at first, but I finally managed to wrestle it into my oven. And it's sitting in there at this very moment just sizzling and bubbling with the most succulent and delicious juices. And speaking of succulent and delicious juices, did you come to call on Eugene?" (111)

Christian rites, trickster oral narratives, the seventh generation, and European symphonies. Nothing demonstrates the relationship between different aspects of contemporary Aboriginal experience like the tightly-knit elements contained in a single pattern number or numerical symbol.[14] As Murray points out, "in varying degrees, all verbal performances studied as 'Native American literature', whether oral, textualized, or written, are mixed, hybrid; none are 'pure', or, strictly speaking, autonomous. Native American written literature in particular is an intercultural practice." (X) When considering a work as a mix of traditions many Native writers and critics of Native literature have discussed the problem of defining both "Native" and "Native literature," including King in an introduction to the 1987 special issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. In it, he defines Canadian Native Fiction as "literature produced by Natives" (7) -- but not before listing a number of contradictions that using the term "Native" raises. This problem of isolating the meaning of the word Native or Aboriginal -- which individuals it may refer to and what cultural artefacts it may justifiably be applied to -- constantly founders on a categorical approach.

An alternative approach to such a mixture is to bypass the frames "Aboriginal" and "Western" as two parents of *The Rez Sisters* seen as a parodic, hybrid text and to explore the inextricable mixture of a syncretism at work in its numerical symbols and patterns. I use the term syncreticism, rather than hybridity, for specific reasons. Hybridity is the current term (see Horne, Appleford, Murray, Radin), used in much current postcolonial and Aboriginal literary criticism (with or without a reference to Bhaba's *Location of Culture*). However, the term carries nineteenth-century, imperial connotations of hybridity as a botanical metaphor in which two "pure" parents produce a sterile offspring.[15] Hybridity, in fact, evokes its opposite, purity; and especially in the field of genetics, it suggests the "blood" metaphors (half-blood, pure blood, blood "quantum") of racist discourse. The great syncretic religions of the New World, on the other hand – Voodoo, Santeria, Rastafari, Macombe -- show what rich and ultimately indivisible semiotic systems can result from a syncretic process. Syncretisms are cultural products; hybrids are biological.

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[13] Highway has said that the Cree language is a "dirty" language, doesn't see sex as a sin, etc. (ref - talk and Johnson.) Thus, the lewdness is possibly not Highway's as a personal attribute, but his translation of the sexually explicit aspects of, especially, trickster stories, which sometimes can be highly scatological and feature genitalia.
[14] My thanks to Susan Gingell for suggesting this formulation of the mixture and its reasons.
[15] thank Simone

Balance

Numbers in *The Rez Sisters* may also play a balancing role. As King and many other critics of Aboriginal literature have remarked, in an Aboriginal world view, the universe is defined as a set of relationships. “The relationship between humans and the deity, the relationship between humans and the animals, the relationship between humans and the land,” according to King, are all understood to be in balance (7). Good and evil are not antagonistic to each other, and for the universe to be in its properly balanced state, there has to be evil in it as well as good. This is an accurate description of the character and function of Nanabush in the play; s/he is there to keep a balance, or to reinstate a balance, as some critics suggest, in the lives of the seven sisters. At the same time, the numbers in the play, the constant reference to numbers and even the function of counting, seems to be a resource for finding balance for the characters. When the youngest sister, Zhaboonigan, is upset, she is calmed by counting to fourteen along with Marie-Adele, who counts the fourteen posts on her fence using the names of her fourteen children;[16] and when Zhaboonigan is knocked over by Nanabush, “she lies there on the ground, watching in helpless astonishment and abject terror. Underneath Marie-Adele’s screams, she mumbles to herself, sobbing [...]: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... Nicky Ricky Ben Mark ... eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve...”(93)

On this question of balance, Knowles has read the *The Rez Sisters* as having been written in an exclusively European tradition of avant-garde modernism that surfaced in Canada in the late 60s: “For the modernist critic and artist, art is nonreferential and non-representational, and it functions within its own separate realm, satisfying its own internal and disinterested standards of logic, clarity, integrity, and autonomy” (54-55). This is a negative critique, and it is worth addressing as a critique of the form-oriented bent of Hymes’ ethnopoetics. On the surface, an emphasis on form seems to erase the social meanings of a text, and Knowles stresses the political “containment” (62) created by form-oriented literary works such as *The Rez Sisters*. He sees ‘the passions, opinions, and tragedies of the represented lives of the play’s Native women... [as] primarily important for their formal role in a “well-wrought” design.’(63) However, the plight of the Rez sisters trapped in poverty, doing their best to deal with the constant stresses of familial separations, alcoholism, occasional violence, and most of all, boredom on the reserve, is made the premise of the play. In the first speech, we are told what the problem is:

I take issue with the assumption that form can be divorced from cultural content, remembering that even numbers, which would seem to be the least culturally-conditioned signs and the most amenable to translation and transcription, are strongly associated with particular symbolic and narrative traditions. But I also puzzle about the power relationship between audience and native theatre group when stereotypes of Aboriginal women as drunk and promiscuous are so easily consumed (*The Rez Sisters* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award in

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[16] This is an interesting comment by the playwright on the meaning of numbers: they name things; like names, they point to ineffable meanings that both elude and are captured by their naming.

1986X); when "sonata form is applied to the to the spiritual and mental situation of *a street drunk*," as Highway has said of his method in *The Rez Sisters* (emphasis mine); and when a perceptive critic like Filewood can write: "When I watch Tomson Highway's plays I am discomfited by the unresolved relationships of colonialism; my gaze is returned but my power as colonizer is unchallenged; ultimately I am afraid that my response disqualifies itself." (28)

Filewood contrasts his experience of watching *The Rez Sisters* with watching Tunooniq, an Inuit theatre troupe briefly in Guelph, of which Filewood's experience was baffled pleasure at encountering a performance artistry that he was not completely able to understand (24-25). Other academic critics of Native theatre in Canada have also taken a very carefully positioned stance in relation to plays and performances, speaking only for themselves and making their social identity very explicit. This is probably in response to the very high emotion generated by the 1980s and 90s appropriation debate and then by contemporary nationalist movements and efforts to entrench Aboriginal copyright. While Filewood is right to position himself carefully as he "reads" *The Rez Sisters* in "Averting the Colonizing Gaze: Notes on Watching Native Theater," a less self-conscious approach would make the reading more flexible and therefore perhaps more useful, remembering that not all watchers are European, that the text will make its meanings differently to different readers, and that many signs, including numbers, are multivalent. The play of pattern numbers in *The Rez Sisters* shows that a work written out of multiple traditions has room for multiple readings consonant with those traditions. For example, Krasner, an American academic theatre critic, characterized the play when it was first performed by the New York Theatre Workshop in 1993, as "a hybrid of linear realism and American Indian ritual...Nanabush.. represents both comedy and pathos... Bingo supplies the leitmotif of the play."(X) This is the tenor of description from most of the metropolitan theatre reviewers. An exception is Rainwater, who read the two elements of bingo and the trickster Nanabush in a 1991 review somewhat differently:

> Nanabush appears... finally as "Bingo Master" in a "bingo hall" universe, where one's fate may hang on a missing "B14". Furious at the "fool of a being [who] goes and puts... Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, [and] dishes out this lot we got," the women storm the Bingo Master's stage and carry off his bingo machine. Nanabush the Bingo Master is not to be outwitted, however. He takes Marie-Adele away, and the other women find themselves back in Wasaychigan singing her funeral song. (X)

Rainwater's characterization of the trickster Nanabush and of the nature of bingo are closer to the mythology and cosmology of West Coast and other transcribed oral narratives that I've read; and her description of the action as outside of Western concepts of time and space (the women suddenly find themselves somewhere else) strikes me as an interesting reading of what *I* had read as a European literary convention. Checking the stage directions for this transition in the action, I see, "The stage area, by means of "lighting magic," slowly returns to its Wasaychigan Hill appearance."(103) Where people acculturated outside of Native cultures (like myself) construe this as a "cut" according to Western theatrical and cinematic conventions, Rainwater ascribes to Nanabush power over linear time and topological space, which is the kind

of power Indigenous trickster gods in fact are said to have. Furthermore, European linear time is not as important an organizing principle in Aboriginal oral narratives as it is in European narratives.

In 1987, Moses paraphrased Highway as saying that he "uses characters like themes and thinks of character conflict in terms like counterpoint and contrast" ("Trickster Theatre" 88). This "formalism" can be read as simultaneously a part of the European classical music tradition, Anglo-American traditions of the literary avant-garde, and Native North American oral traditions. It is easy to make a connection to Indigenous verbal art traditions after reading that Moses (an Aboriginal writer) challenges "the universality of conflict and character, respectively, as ... defining features of all drama" (qtd. in Knowles X). The conflicts in *The Rez Sisters*, I have always thought, seem, on the one hand, gratuitous and unmotivated by character; but, on the other hand, they seem motivated quite distantly and in a global way by situation. One of the grand, central fights in the play, a performance of conflict in the violent and foul-mouthed free-for-all in the general store in Act I, is set off by the word "gang-bang"[43]. Are community memories of Helen Betty Osborne's rape the source of the frustrated energy of the sisters, mirroring the anger and despair of Indigenous communities all over Canada? The seven sisters, tipped into a loud verbal confrontation by a seemingly small detail (the word "gang-bang"), do not seem to be angry at each other for conflicts arising out of the play's action, but they are surely angry.

According to Johnston, Pelagia, "by the end of the play... [has??] accepted her own talent for leadership, and determines to use it to genuinely improve conditions on the reserve rather than just to complain about them" (258). Yet there is no textual evidence for this neat, rather familiar (to me) character development in linear terms. Rather, Pelagia is seen at the very end of the play in exactly the same position with exactly the same complaints that she had at the beginning of the play, an ending that has always puzzled me with its seeming sacrifice to form -- it completes a perfect circle -- over the conventions of character and plot development that I (a Euro-Canadian reader) bring to the play. I have no answer for this puzzle, but I am willing to look for one from the increasingly active Aboriginal writers and critics presently working in Canada. Finally, with apologies to Johnston for once again taking issue with a reading in his well-written and informative essay on *The Rez Sisters*, Marie-Adele "comes to accept her own death in the same way that she accepted life, gently and with love"(258-9). However, it seems to me that the logic of the play's imagery suggests that Marie-Adele gains more than a peaceful death -- it is Marie-Adele who "wins the jackpot" with her death, in the verbal idiom suggested by the organizing trope of the play. While I can follow the logic of this image, I am at a loss to explain why death is treated in this way.

It seems important to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the insular practice of Filewood and others (e.g., Appleford), speaking only for themselves, and on the other hand, a blithe assumption that the Western conventions that are undeniably at work in the play are the only ones at work. An important practice of English scholars in reading Aboriginal literature is to leave room for the unknown and to learn about the very different knowledge and *structure* of knowledge of Aboriginal nations. This is the obvious prerequisite for an English scholar to be

of service to Aboriginal communities. As previously stated, the generic, cultural, and social relationship between story, song, and performance is different in different Aboriginal cultures; and different in turn from the European constellation of genres. Knowing why and under what circumstances an Aboriginal text is produced and reproduced; how and why to listen to stories, to write them down, and to tell them; and how and why stories are told in the ways they are told -- all of these things -- the literacy practices of Turtle Island -- are what English needs to learn to engage with the verbal art of First Nations.

Can it do this without reinscribing the colonial relations of power it has nurtured for more than two hundred years? Filewood's essay speaks to this question directly, somewhat implicitly suggesting that Highway's intercultural positioning of the *The Rez Sisters* creates a space for European audiences to reinscribe the power relations of colonialism. Only if an English scholar minimizes the strangeness -- to a colonial gaze -- of the text will colonial relations be perpetuated. An important byproduct of alterity in a text, after all, is to stimulate new knowledge.

Will the challenge of being useful to Native communities defeat English studies, displacing its cultural authority? Or, as is more likely, will Aboriginal verbal art remain within the purview of social sciences like politics and anthropology, while English retains its cultural authority at the expense of an expanded role in contemporary Canada? Unless English scholars take on the project of learning about Aboriginal verbal art on its own terms, focusing on the knowledge base of both Aboriginal peoples and Indigenous studies, English will remain a colonizing enterprise. Because of its history, there is no available middle position.

Works Cited