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**Staging Body Politics in Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and Brian Friel's *Dancing At Lughnasa* (1990)**

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**ABSTRACT:** The present paper examines Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and Brian Friel's *Dancing At Lughnasa* (1990) within the paradigm of Performance Studies to dramatize an emotional rapture in an exasperated choreographic show. My interest in the performing body is pivotal to interrogate stage oral histories as performances in which the Native abject body appears as a signifying practice since the female performing body in question has no faith in a rationally unified subject. The Cree and Irish women's dance performances exhibit a patent example of bodies that materializes gender within the legacies of colonial histories. The native women's titanic power is reflected in a fast-moving structure full of frenetic moments to destabilize the monolithic logical and orderly structures escaping teleological assumptions of the linear time through the deployment of a physical lyricism, a rhythmical movement and a theatrical rapture. The Bingo Game and the Festival of Lughnasa give rise to the seductive abject body that hovers at the periphery of the indigenous women's consciousness. Therefore, performance – as a dynamic practice – is grotesque, fluid and ephemeral echoing the instability of the inward/outward border of the abject body.

**Keywords:** Body Politics – Native Performance Genre – Abject Body – Autobiographical Performance

**Introduction: Gender in Performance**

“Theatre is an art of body and art grounded in body” (Shepherd 7).

The present paper examines the “specific ways in which performance has been controversial in resisting the continuing effects of imperialism” (Gilbert and Tompkins i) in Native Canadian and Irish theatres. Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and Brian Friel's *Dancing At Lughnasa* (1990) interrogate the legacies of colonial histories and austere investigate the configurations of theatre space and its theatrical conventions: the performing body, props, dances and gestures as postcolonial encoded signs to underscore testimonial performances. Pairing gender and Performance Studies underlies ethnographic theatrical practices to capture bodily actions. Bodily presence subverts normative gender acts through choreographed movement reconfiguring the classical assumptions of dramaturgical insights. As such, dissolving hierarchies is a key premise to dismantle the mind/body dichotomy rethinking the body's materiality to be re-inscribed in a postcolonial womanist critique.

The corporeality of performance explores feminine materiality to address gender issues through the bodies of the Cree and Irish women as performers of physicalized writing “that gives material form to ideas, concepts, philosophy and theory, adding fleshiness to

abstraction, deconstructing the binary that privileges male cognition over female emotion” (McEvoy 64). In this sense, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* are interrogations of gendered mind/body opposition to challenge the supremacy of language and the conceptual. Postcolonial theatre-making addresses the corporeal defying the patriarchal rational imaginary to assert the primacy of the physical gendered female. What joins the two selected plays is a sense of performance as a practice that is at the heart of oral history. Oral history is interpreted as a “performance of possibility” (Madison 277) and as “a process of *making history in dialogue*, it is performative” (Pollock, *Remembering 2*; emphasis in original). On occupying the stage center, the marginalized bodies become transformative agents to tell personal histories resisting objectification and reclaiming their oppressed voices. In view of this, the premise of the present study is to question stage oral histories as performances which are sensuous in nature and artful in their achievement of scenic practice. Postcolonial stage speaks for the abject female body to stage postcolonial agency, thereby, the abject Self is a catalyst to articulate unruly subjectivity.

The present study offers a materialist reading of gender in performance to challenge male/colonial ideologies relying on “the incremental process of theatre-making [to underlie] a gender-conscious phenomenology of performance [emphasizing] bodies in space, improvising and testing expressive forms of corporeal thinking” (McEvoy 71). Significantly, the study also explores the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators defining the poetic experience of the performance itself within the polyphonic modes of dramaturgy. As Erika Fischer-Lichte writes, “a performance has very different *medial condition* stemming from its reliance on bodily co-presence” (19; emphasis in original). Performance spaces are atmospheric, transient and ephemeral dwelling on the actors’ vocality and physicality. The actor/spectator co-presence epitomizes the tonality of performance as manifested in the Rez and Mundy sisters’ singing voices, wild laughter, sobs and moans. Hence, the female performing body reinforces its material presence through its vocality and ritualistic physicality dissolving the boundaries between the phenomenal body and the semiotic one. Staging traumatized bodies is an amalgamation of violent colonial practices and personal archives perceived in non-linear performances. The theatrical enactments of painful silences, dancing, screaming and storytelling document colonial brutality, traumatic experiences and healing acts. More expressively, the performing bodies share a repertoire of agonizing memories enacted with dignity and pride defying white colonial records.

### **Rationale**

The present paper interprets *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* within the paradigm of Performance Studies to dramatize an emotional rapture in an exasperated choreographic show. Performance-based theatre embraces an illustration of the visual and aural signifiers to undermine the supremacy of language on stage. The Rez and the Mundy sisters’ dance performances exhibit a patent example of bodies that materializes gender within historical codes to expose the socio-economic malaise and the loss of spiritual fulfillment. Furthermore, the study interrogates postmodernist salient features to underscore the dialectic relation between language and metaphor, mundane reality and transcendence and finally between temporal and atemporal framework to escape ideological repression and to address a number of research questions: 1) What makes theatre Native? 2) What is a theatrical text? Is it

a script or a performance? Is the performer's body a postcolonial trope? 3) How far can a subversive Womanist theatre be Postdramatic? Gender performance has ensured the theatrical position of the female performer within the physical and dynamic gendered gaze. To establish the women performers as speaking subjects, the female bodies in performance involve not only the discourse of language, but also the physical presence to threaten the patriarchal structure with a rebellious corporal body.

I have been attracted by the close parallels between *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* on the levels of themes, settings and dramatic techniques within the paradigm of a rhythmical postcolonial dramaturgy. The female protagonists in both plays suffer from traumatic experiences and deep seated nostalgia for the precolonial past. Significantly, womanist histories displace the singular domination of imperialism's master narratives. Within this rationale, the indigenous women are written back into history to rethink colonial history's account and to rework its axiomatic forms through the use of metahistorical theatres which provide a postmodernist reading of the visual and aural signifiers. Performativity interrogates spatial and temporal teleological aspects to underscore the telling-showing dichotomy. Therefore, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* – as hybrid drama - attack mimesis and the performance tropes are considered subversive to destabilize fixity and binary oppositions. Finally, dancing dismantles axiomatic ways of conceiving historical narration to escape teleological assumptions of the linear time through the deployment of a physical lyricism, a rhythmical movement and a theatrical rapture.

Highway (b. 1951 - ) reworks Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs* (1965) to depict the harsh realities of seven Cree women living in a reservation in Northern Ontario. Yet, they are quick-witted and spiritually resourceful enough to control their destinies in opposition to Tremblay's Québécois women who are defeated by a dark sense of nihilism. Highway's canonical counter discourse is a two-act play performed by an indigenous cast. Highway defines Native theatre as the one that is "performed and produced by Native nations themselves and theatre that speaks out on culture and the lives of this country's Native people" ("On Native mythology" 29). This destabilizes the colonial power by illustrating a storyline that frees the play from the constraints of the naturalistic theatre space. Creating a movement-centered play determines a performing action that is punctuated by memory and re-enacted history to attain a release from the psychological legacy of colonial violence. The storyline follows the pattern of journey motif since the Cree women are on a comic quest to attend The World's Biggest Bingo Game in the city of Toronto to win the one million dollars. The Big Game is a shared economic aim tackled from a gendered perspective to signify the deep sense of sisterhood acting as a catalyst to fulfill humble dreams. The plot is disrupted by tense verbal arguments as well as by memories of the past abuse to displace official colonial records.

Friel (1929 – 2015) deploys language in a performative rather than a mimetic sense as "a disclosure of personal and historical meanings" (Kearney 46) undermining the sovereignty of language on stage and reconstructing theatrical ruptures. *Dancing At Lughnasa* is a dramatization of "ahistoricity" favoring non-linearity to "mock history" (O'Toole 203) and to explore private memories within an expression of subaltern defiance to colonial hegemonic power. Friel embraces a non-linear performance landscape which itself becomes a metaphor for theatre itself. This de-privileges the control of the dramatist himself over the text to

reinforce the autobiographical topographies of the Mundy sisters within “the ontology of paganism” (Boltwood 6). *Dancing At Lughnasa*, thus, privileges the performing body and physicality is incorporated within the elements of rituals as the play’s subtitle indicates “robustly pagan Irishness” (Boltwood 176). This inclination addresses the Irish mind that embraces both heart and intellect, imagination and rationality, thereby, it favors “a more dialectical logic of both/and: an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence” (Kearney 9). This creates a rich and an exotic quality of the Irish personality that accepts diversity by holding two views of life. In this sense, the Mundy sisters’ exasperated show is a rhythmical theatrical rupture dramatized in flashback to reclaim pre-Christian rituals on the eve of the manufacturing revolution struggling for survival in a hostile colonial/patriarchal society.

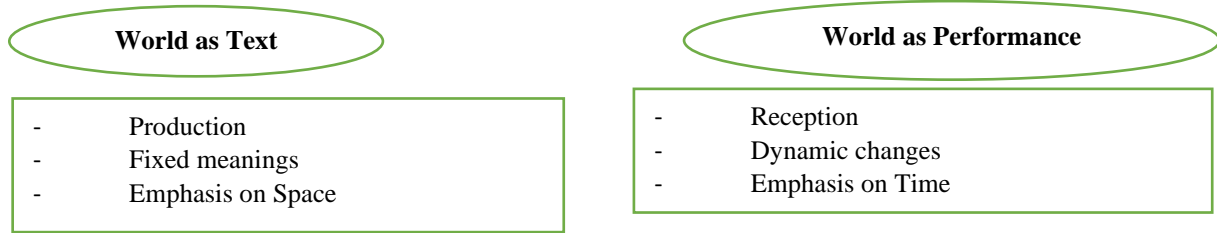
The two dramatists dedicated their theatrical texts to their indigenous women: Highway’s sisters and Friel’s aunts. Highway addresses the “cool Rez sisters” (*The Rez Sisters* IX). Friel makes a tribute in the “Dedicatory Note” to “Five brave Glenties women” (4) whose names are those of his real aunts with whom he spent his Summers when he was a child. This establishes a drama with autobiographical resonances that fuse memory and history – a drama structured by autobiographical accounts and testimonial performances within the double time-scheme. Finally, the two dramatists establish fictional imaginary settings: Highway’s Wasychigan Hill Indian community and Friel’s Ballybeg in Donegal. Both dramatists exhibit honor of their native rituals as concretized in the depiction of the mythological trickster Nanabush and the Celtic god Lugh to expose the pitfalls of claustrophobic communities. Both mythological figures are inserted in a ritualistic drama to break down the boundaries between indigenous fluid stage and western realistic theatre.

### **Native Female Performing Body**

Native, as a term, implies a historical connotation of imperial legacies. It refers to indigenous nations who existed long before the arrival of the white colonial settlers. Native performance seeks to recuperate indigenous identity and to reclaim Native womanhood since “women’s bodies often function in postcolonial theatre as the spaces on and through which larger territorial or cultural battles are being fought” (Gilbert and Tompkins 214) to create a subversive performativity described as an “action that disturbs, disrupts and disavows hegemonic formations” (Bhabha 146). Accordingly, performativity is the interwoven triad of identity, gender and race. To study performance as performativity is to become conscious of the performance itself as a contested space where meanings and desires are generated and multiply interpreted.

The study of the performing body has been delegated to Cultural Anthropology and Folklore Studies. However, my interest in the performing body is pivotal to relate it to gender histories communicating harsh colonial experiences in terms of mythic rituals within movement-based theatre in which the body is the dominant mode of expression. Is gender an act? Gender is an act of performance that is “repeated” (Butler 140). Gender identity is “performative” rather than being an expression of a predetermined “essence”, thereby, we “do” gender rather than we “are” a gender. Performance is about “doing” something rather than “re-enactment” (140). Within this rationale, Native performance marks the shift from “viewing the world as text to the world as performance” (Conquergood 179). It is a shift from

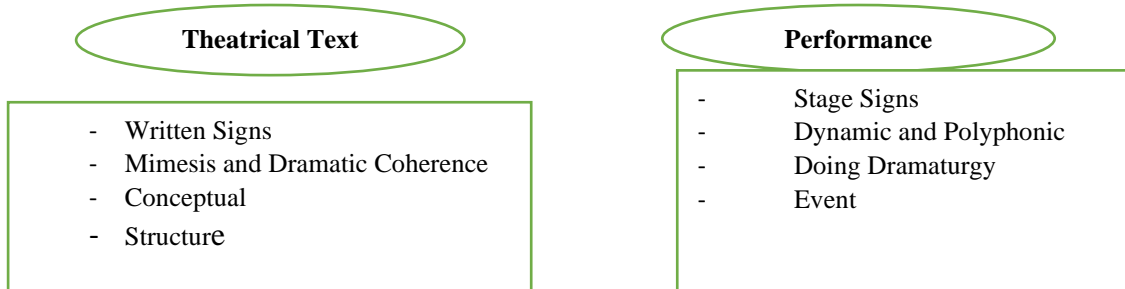
referentiality to ephemerality and spectatorship. This paradigm shift can be envisioned as “a set of oppositions” (179):



**Figure 1**

Fresh and sensory performance enhances “embodied practice” (Conquergood 180) investigated as “an intensely sensuous way of knowing” (180). The performing body - as a provocative space of knowing - explores bodily sensations as well as imaginings of decentered and polyphonic sensibility.

Native staging is process-oriented and hermeneutical since indigenous performance engages with the spectator’s dynamic interaction between the stage and the auditorium as illustrated below:



**Figure 2**

This visual illustration reconfigures the relationships between actors, spectators and dramaturgical embodiment emphasizing the nature of performance as a practice to examine performed events such as “dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals – that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors” (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 3). In view of this, the totality of the theatrical performance - in terms of scenography and the choreography of movement - is about the rhythmized assemblage of musical ceremonies, festivals and dancing bodies to destabilize the theatrical coherence blurring “the boundaries between the world onstage and offstage, between form and content, and between fictional words represented and the reality of what happens on the stage” (Bleeker 38). Thus, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* enact cultural memory and the embodied memory – displayed in bodily sensations, musicality, grotesque dance and wild singing – requires a materialist presence in a subversive performance.

It is noteworthy that the performance should start with the actor “for the actor is at the center of the mise-en-scène” (Pavis 55) and the focal point is to establish a performance space interwoven in a vigorous relation between the spectators and the stage. The performing body on stage is a practice and a process that is eventually perceived by the audience through strategies of staging. In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann proposes a theatre that exhibits a unique “intersection of aesthetically both scenic and body dynamic practices dominated by grotesque forms, rhythm and tone in opposition to static dramatic text or

Aristotelian dramaturgy” (68). The present study centralizes the feminized performance that “distills a ‘truer’ true than real life itself” (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 4) to stage a corporeally female body and to dismantle the traditional notion of embodiment. This juxtaposes the spiritual void of the Western postmodern worldview and the life-affirming one of the Native peoples. *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* are selected since they are vibrant examples of a Formalist theatre which rejects mimetic action to enhance a lyrical performance with no plot, but “energetic” musical-rhythmic ceremonies foregrounding “peculiar temporality and spatiality of the scenic process itself” (Lehmann 74; emphasis in original) to inspire new dynamic dramaturgy.

### ***The Rez Sisters: Autobiographical Performance***

The term “First Nation” has been “adopted by Canada’s indigenous people in a politically astute move that reminds other North Americans that the land was already occupied when Europe claimed it” (Gilbert and Tompkins 13). Thereby, the term Native refers to the indigenous inhabitants of the settler-invader colonies. Genocide has been the Native’s most traumatic experience threatening indigenous identity and communal culture. Being a Native Cree dramatist, Highway is overwhelmed by the shackles of the White occupation. As such, Aboriginal Theatre relies heavily on Cree mythologies and stories of survival to reclaim memory and history. Cree philosophy is a self-rejuvenating power that regards life as a joyous celebration. This establishes a “performative repertoire” (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* xvi) to defy hegemonic structures through testimonial performances that require a disruptive materialist presence.

Highway’s portrayal of the Rez sisters empowers their deep sense of dignity and physical superiority. He posits in the play’s “Production Note”: “make the Rez cool, to show and celebrate what funky folk Canada’s Indian people really are” (*The Rez Sisters* IX). The Rez sisters are physically strong performing hard and masculine work: Pelajia is seen with her silver hammer to nail shingles on the roof wearing “faded blue denim men’s coveralls and baseball cape to shade her eyes from the sun” (1 [Stage direction]). Emily Dictionary is “one tough lady, wearing cowboy boots, tight blue jeans, a black leather jacket [with] a loud voice that paralyzes all movement in the room while she speaks” (37 [Stage direction]). Annie Cook’s walking is described as “mighty fast. Must be excited about something” (*The Rez Sisters*, 9). Annie’s first appearance is “All cheery and fast and perky” (9 [Stage direction]). She is obsessed with the Country rock, Fritz the Katz. The Rez sisters struggle to attain their dreams sharing hardship, anger and laughter to overcome both callous patriarchal and colonial practices.

The thought-provocative question: Is autobiographical performance a woman’s genre? Autobiographical performance and marginalized womanist voices are responses to traumatized and raced bodies. Testimonial times are shared between the womanist bodily actions on the stage and the spectators revisiting indigenous history and communal beliefs. In this sense, the decolonized body on stage is a doorway to political ideologies that occur all the time with and through that body whose movement is an agent to reclaim its identity. The Rez sisters’ harsh past experiences are redeemed when they settle down their old disputes and renew their bond of sisterhood. The journey functions as a salvation to challenge colonial trauma and genocide dissolving the oppressive monotonous life on the reserve. The Rez sisters exhibit the human spirit to overcome socio-economic ills and even face death

courageously. In so doing, the Native women's silence has been broken as displayed in the intimate gossip, vibrant singing, wild dancing and bold confessions to announce a state of transformation.

### **Phantasmagoric Bingo Game**

Bingo mania is symbolic of escape from poverty; an enterprise to realize humble dreams and to go beyond the bleak life as manifested in a myriad of aspirations; Marie Adélé's utopic island and good medical diagnosis, Philomena's new white toilet, Annie's Country music records and Veronique's new kitchen stove – all are modest hopes for a better and decent life. The gendered quest depicts the fusion of realistic and imaginary multiple settings: Pelajia's roof and basement, Emily's store, Band's council, the van, the Bingo hall and the grave site to convey a sense of physical freedom and a flow of movement. The women's "*fundraising activities with a vengeance [underlined] by a wild rhythmic beat from the musician*" (70 [Stage direction]) depict their enthusiastic about earning much money very quickly to be able to travel to Toronto. They are indulged in hard jobs with a frenzy mood of excitement visualizing "*The movement of the women [that] covers the entire stage area, and like the music, gets wilder and wilder*" ([Stage direction]). This poses key questions: What is the purpose of any movement? Why and where the performer moves? Bodies are primarily performative and the use of space dramaturgically lies in the actor's physicality. As such, the performers' movements in space involve the use of rhythm to create a performative action as well as to explore moods and physical liberty.

Aesthetically, it is the personal kinetic sphere of the indigenous women to reclaim their physical freedom through staged stories of survival. The articulating corporeal female bodies control the theatrical space which is both literal and metaphoric, mnemonic and a dynamic microcosmic within a tangible paradigm of their sense of belonging and community. The move to the Bingo palace is indicated through the use of lighting "*full blast*" (100 [Stage direction]) and the Bingo Master is "*the most beautiful man in the world*" (100 [Stage direction]) magically occupying the stage center. The appealing theatrical aspect is the participation of the audience as detailed in the stage direction, "*The audience plays bingo, with the seven women, who have moved slowly into the audience during the Bingo Master's speech. Playing alone. Until somebody in the audience shouts, "Bingo!"*" (101). The intervention of the audience is significant to the here-and-nowness of the theatrical performance as discussed by Della Pollock: "performance is a promissory act. Not because it can only promise possible change but because it catches its participants – often by surprise – in a contract with possibility: with imagining what might be, could be, should be" (*Remembering 2*). Spectatorship functions as a driving force to enhance a rhythm of an empathy with the dramaturgical experience in an ambiguous spatio-temporal framework that seems to be neither imaginative nor real, and both at the same time. The spectators are surrounded by the soundscape of their own voices rather than by the actors' physical vocality setting the emotional intensity of the whole dramaturgical insight.

A Bingo table is "*magically appeared with Zhaboonigan at the table's center ... the scene is lit so that it looks like 'The Last Supper'*" (102 [Stage direction]). This brings to mind the fifteenth-century painting by da Vinci to tell the last days of Jesus's life. Expressively, the Bingo Game is the last event shared by all the Rez sisters before losing Marie-Adélé. The



Bingo Game is absurdly staged to symbolize a larger-than-life experience. The Bingo cards – “*flying like confetti*” (103 [Stage direction]) – creates a circus-like spectacular that is fluid, eerie and dreamy to mirror the Rez sisters’ unruly bodily movements on the stage. The game chaotically ends: “*Total madness and mayhem. The music is going crazy [and the] stage area, by means of ‘lighting magic’, slowly returns to its Wasaychigan Hill appearance*” (103 [Stage direction]) to bury Marie-Adelé’s dead body. It ends on a cathartic theatrical note to lament Marie-Adelé’s death visualized through the use of the light-scheme in a representation that bears a resemblance to the iconic portrayal of Jesus’s Last Supper. The visual clue is described as “*a surreal sort of glow*” (102 [Stage direction]) to evoke physical mobility, freedom and to illustrate Marie-Adelé’s transfiguration after experiencing severe pain. In this sense, the Bingo Game is hilarious and its surrealistic feature destabilizes oppressive patriarchal/colonial practices. The whole play becomes a Bingo Game and the polyphonic structure juxtaposes stage/surrealist scenography and audience/Bingo Game/reality conveying an air of enthusiasm, pleasure and rebellious inclination. Hence, the Bingo Game scene is climactic in the sense of reactivating a collective memory and in repossessing indigenous cultural milieu.

The remarkable theatrical practice is the use of imaginary places that are created through mime on stage: the walk to the store, the march to the Band office, the move from the van to the Bingo hall and from the Bingo hall to Marie Adelé’s grave scene. This emphasizes a sense of fluidity and proposes a performance theatre that can shock the audience to shatter a false reality. This enhances the tendency to speak of the body as a dramaturgy in itself: the body is “a proposition of *dramaturgical content* that is simultaneously inscribed and performed” (Behrndt 189; emphasis in original). It proposes a body that moves through space and time to decenter the workings of hierarchies and to inspire a new history. Time zones are telescoped to move from one scene to the next one without transition in order to interpret a dramaturgical presence of the female bodies in motion subverting fixed colonial stereotypes.

### **Testimonial Performance**

Indigenous theater is deeply rooted in the oral culture. Orality is “a logical extension of the storytelling technique [and] the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step” (Taylor, “Alive and Well” 29). The seven Cree women’s personal tragedies are all of equal prominence to authenticate Native survival stories. The presence of a physical body exposes aggression, physical abuse and sexual violence which afflicted First Native women whose bodies function as the spaces on which the spiritual and the cultural battles are being fought to reclaim womanhood; a poignant theme of Aboriginal repertoire so as to maintain rebellious Native voices through testimonial performances.

The night trip to Toronto is structurally unique to underlie the sisterhood consciousness revealing the innermost secrets and sincere emotions. The Cree women are engaged in “*intimate conversations*” (77 [Stage direction]) and talk in pairs. Philomena confesses her affair with a white married man thirty years earlier and the relation has ended with an illegitimate baby. Marie Adelé expresses her fear about her children’s future prospect as she is dying of cancer. Emily Dictionary narrates the domestic violence she has experienced with an alcoholic husband who attempted to beat her with an axe. This domestic trauma drives her to seek a lesbian bond with Rose who has dramatically died in a road

accident. Back to the reserve, she is sexually involvement with Big Joey and becomes pregnant. Her cyclical journey from being victimized to lesbianism is a symbolic healing and a self-rejuvenating potency which is at the heart of the Cree philosophy.

The indigenous presence to enact stories of survival and to dismiss the colonial assumption of the vanishing Indian is at the core of associations between performance, politics and history. In this sense, Pollock proposes fundamental questions: “What does it mean to represent the past? How have politics shaped traditions of representation?” (“Performing Writing” 3). Autobiographical Performance is “inherently fraught with the complexities of the relationship between history and representation - between what happened and what is remembered and performed” (Carver 15). The spectator subtly asks: Why is this appropriate, here and now, to me? Thereby, the autobiographical act evokes a sense of resistance, challenge and transformation. Autobiographical performances move towards an intense physicality: “the *body is absolutized* [and] what happens is an interesting volte-face: as the body no longer demonstrates anything but itself [thus] the body becomes the *only subject matter*” (Lehmann 96; emphasis in original). Testimony of trauma is a dramaturgical strategy to rebut the Western power of the written word as a dominant form to maintain the cultural/political hegemony. Moreover, the act of witnessing one’s own or others’ trauma enables “the subject to reconstitute the experience of objectification” (Oliver 194), hence, the Rez sisters have survived pitiable conditions with stormy humor, gusty wit and optimistic outlook. Their autobiographical performances document their poor lives releasing catharsis to create an emotional/physical intricate bond with each other.

### **Nanabush: An Agent of Performative Repertoire**

Marie Adélé and Zhaboonigan take ownership of their stories creating authentic autobiographies with the aid of Nanabush, a traditional native Canadian spirit. His dual roles signify performative manipulations of the history/time structure within the metatheatrical device to contribute to the notion of temporality by breaking the time frame of the play. The role of Nanabush is performed by “a male dancer – modern ballet, or traditional” (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* XI) who embodies the theatrical performance literally and metaphorically. As a trickster, Nanabush is a shape-shifter switching genders and having many manifestations. Tomson manipulates the mythic trickster figure to dramaturgically push the plot forward through the theatrical use of infinite space, cyclical time frame and the movement between the immaterial world and earthy places.

Dance is “a metaphor for everything in our culture: for ritual, for art, for religion. Dance is a metaphor for being, so if we cannot dance, we cannot pray” (Highway, “Life and Times” 2). Nanabush’s dancing conveys the embodied performance to communicate spiritualism through bodily expressions as he does not verbalize any spoken lines. He is the only male in the cast switching between states of being going “beyond gender identity” (Fortier 205). Although Nanabush is “essentially comic, clownish”, “he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great spirit” (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* XI) to represent the oral memory of the Cree women and the lost Indian spiritual culture. As a transformative agent, Nanabush hovers everywhere occupying the stage in different guises; as a white bird (seagull) to symbolize joy, as a black bird (nighthawk) to foreshadow death and as a glittering Bingo Master to embody wish fulfilment. He occupies the emotional center of

Marie Adélé's and Zhaboonigan's movements as they can "*see the spirit inside the bird and recognize him for who he is*" (18 [Stage direction]). A close spiritual connection is established among the trio; Nanabush and Marie Adélé and Zhaboonigan. In his white feathers, Nanabush invites Zhaboonigan to join him and she intimately calls him "Nice white birdie" (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* 48). As a white seagull, Marie Adélé speaks a lengthy monologue in Cree language to show familiarity and comfort. The main paradox lies in the time-scheme; Nanabush occupies the circular time while the two Cree women exist in the linear one.

The interrelated notions of place, time-scheme and autobiographical acts are eloquently displayed when Marie Adélé romantically dances in the arms of the Bingo Master "*with sudden bird-like movements into nighthawk to escort her into the spirit world*" (104 [Stage direction]) to relieve her pain and to attain a reunion with the spiritual repertoire. When Nanabush appears to Marie Adélé in dark feathers, she realizes that her death is imminent and has "*a total hysterical breakdown*" (92 [Stage direction]) sobbing and screaming. Thereby, the performance space is switched into a listening space to foreground the materiality of the female voice illustrating the close bond between body and voice manifested in screams, sighs, moans, sobs, and laughter: "These utterances are unmistakably created through a process that affects the whole body: the body doubles over, contorts, and enlarges. These non-verbal utterances also impress themselves physically onto the listener" (Erika Fischer-Lichte 35). Thus, the female performing body, with its movements and voices, sets the physical soundscape in the performance to evoke a repossession of physical identity and spiritual culture.

The indigenous woman/land trope is figured in Zhaboonigan's diseased body which is deliberately reduced to its sexual function by the white colonizers. The white assault has caused her a historical trauma which Nanabush embodies in performing the "*agonizing contortions*" (48 [Stage direction]). The brutal White rape is the perfect metaphor of violating indigenous culture and of usurping the native land as concretized in the colonized female body that has been an object of colonial fascination and revulsion:

In colonial representation, exclusion or suppression can often literally be seen as 'embodied'. From the point of view of the colonizer specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or the 'primitive', are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images.... [T]he Other is cast as corporeal, carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloging, description or possession. (Boehmer 269)

The colonial records describe the Indians as "bloody thirsty monsters" (Trigger 15), "idolatrous and immoral" (Trigger 34) to justify the violent sexual penetration for "the project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable - and by extension, that Native lands are also violable" (Smith 12). This intellectual racism regards indigenous women's bodies as objects of conquest, thereby, they are "vulnerable to the phallic thrust of the masculine colonizer technology" (McClintock 26). The White savage gangs have put a screwdriver inside Zhaboonigan as she is seen "*pointing to her crotch underneath her dress*" (47 [Stage direction]). Being mentally retarded, she uses simple and brief sentences that mirror her disorder mental state and her tone is lighter than her rough Rez sisters. "Traumatic memory", Aleida Assmann postulates, is "encapsulated in the body" (21)

to depict the sufferer's body as "a body of evidence" and as a "truthful recording of the past" (Wald 97). Hence, staging Zhaboonigan's suffering is a theatrical enactment of traumatic historical experiences and an act of healing as well.

Native performance is a spiritually-based worldview as structurally manifested in the circular plot – starting and ending with the same scene of Pelajia's act of hammering on the roof and Nanabush in his guise as a seagull seen "*dancing to the beat of the hammer merrily and triumphantly*" (118 [Stage direction]). The act of hammering significantly establishes both the physical and the psychological motion setting the rhyming tone of the play's soundscape. Thereby, the Rez sisters' journey is cyclical in the physical and spiritual senses concretized in the extensive use of tempo to denote the flow of time. What is more, Cree, as a language, is "hilarious, genderless and sensual [in opposition to the] somber patriarchal discourse" (Johnston 225). Reclaiming indigenous spirituality is theatrically performed to maintain a distinctive language, traditions and practices. Cree's cultural worldview is an embodiment of a timeless healing to address colonial calamities. Indigenous ceremonial practices are filled with a linguistic aliveness, a communal renewal and authentic feelings.

Finally, the absence of the male figure is symbolically displayed in the Rez sisters' massive insults to each other and the extensive use of lexical items full of sexual lures such as "fucking self-righteous old bitch", "You slippery little slut" (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* 44) and "fat-assed floozy" (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* 47). This subtly signifies the sisters' apprehension about being sexually dysfunctional. They strive to be in full control of their bodies to counter male hegemony. For example, Emily Dictionary is depicted with masculine tendencies and described by her sisters as a "truck [with] a voice like a fog-horn" (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* 45). The Toilet Humor Scene also highlights the trope of the grotesque body and its scatology-producing 'lower stratum'; "*Throwing the toilet door open, she sits there in her glory, panties down to her ankles*" (43 [Stage direction]). Philomena is in view of the audience ordering the sisters to "shut up, all of you, and let me shit in peace" (Highway, *The Rez Sisters* 43). Poignantly, it is Philomena who wins \$ 600 and eventually buys the new wide white toilet.

### ***Dancing At Lughnasa: Female Bodies on a Ritualistic Transformation***

Historically speaking, *Dancing At Lughnasa* is set in a post-partition, pre-troubled epoch marking the ruthless encroachment of modernization upon small rural villages for "modernization is replacing the old certainties to breach the family home" (Jones 155). It depicts the grim lives of the five unmarried Mundy sisters and their elder brother Father Jack who has come from a missionary in Uganda. Like Highway's Cree women, the Mundy sisters are doubly colonized; they are caught between pre-Christian, wild dancing bodies and repressed ones under the patriarchal control and the trauma of imperialism. The Mundy sisters are set in complete contrast to Butler Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan in being no longer national symbols of Mother Ireland. Friel revisits the romantic image of the Irish women to create a subversive performance landscape that transcends all physical constraints and moves beyond the mundane reality.

Kate is a firm national school teacher and the "*wage-earner*", Agnes and Rose are hand-knitters with "*little money*" while Chris and Maggie "*have no income*" (7 [Stage direction]). Maggie is the "joker", an energetic baker and a caretaker of "simple" Rose who

shares affinities with Highway's Zhaboonigan to signify the social ills of colonized communities. All women are seen wearing "*wellingtons and large boots*" (7 [Stage direction]) which indicate their masculine tendencies to perform tough work in a manner akin to the seven Cree women. The Mundy sisters are distinguished by the power of handcraft which is an emblem of the family integration awaiting destruction by the forces of rough industrialization manifested in the new knitting factory. All their personal tragedies are moved into a theatrical center to voice the rebellion of the abject female body celebrating passionately the Celtic festival named after Lugh, the pagan deity of reaping the crops. The rural women relocate their physical presence to reclaim joyfully their sense of humanity defying rigid socio-political mores and domestic life disintegration.

### **The Abject Female Body**

The Mundys are rendered voiceless in a marginalized, suppressive community overwhelmed by domestic chores and responsibilities. However, a ritualistic hectic dance rehumanizes them until they exhibit a wild enthusiasm dramatized in the "*kitchen throbbing with the beat of Irish dance music*" (10 [Stage direction]). Accordingly, the female body represents two different Irelands: Celtic Ireland and an industrialized one. The Celtic calendar is a key event of a ritualistic transformation while modern Ireland marks the encroachment of industrialization and technology. The Mundy sisters suffer physically from a liminal status and their celebration of the festival is a sisterly act to move beyond physical limitation and psychological trauma to enjoy the sacred and the profane, the unconscious and the conscious identifying the Irish mind which rejects the "orthodox dualist logic of either/or" (Kearney 9). Both paganism and Christianity co-exist in the collective memory – a dynamic fluidity that defines humanity. Ritual is both an action and a physical motion that replaces the oppressive word that proves to be dysfunctional and inexpressive.

The bodily ritualistic transformation can be interpreted within the theory of the abject body and the "Dual-Subjectivity" or "Double-Othering" strategy (Gilbert and Tompkins 231). In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva tackles the abject's persistent attempts to haunt the borders of identity to dissolve the unity of the subject. These attempts are a central part of the identity process to confirm the subjectivity through the abjection of the other. The abject body constantly violates its own boundaries disrupting the disposition for physical self-control and social decency. The ritualistic exuberance – akin to "jouissance" - drives the abject to accept the grotesque body to defy laws (15). Kristeva's abject body, hence, puts subjectivity into crisis to underline the state of dissolution and subversive identity. In *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imagery Abjection*, Barbara Creed states that the "place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where 'I am not' [to be deposited] on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the Self from that which threatens the Self" (65). Significantly, the abject divided self is fully conscious of the boundaries of subjectivity and identity. The Native abject body appears as "a signifying practice": "the subject is a contradiction that brings about practice because practice is always both signifying and semiotic where meaning emerges only to disappear" (215). "Dual-Subjectivity" ensures that "a single character is embodied in several ways, even in several sites" (Gilbert and Tompkins 231). The Mundy sisters' bodies are breached to "signify more than just a corporeal unit" (Tompkins 504). Their bodies are described as being "*consciously subverted ... consciously*

*and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced*" (31 [Stage direction]). Therefore, the Mundy sisters have created their own imaginary borders in full recognition of the dual-subjectivity state to experience a sense of spontaneity and disruption. The duality of the abject body as subject (rebellious and transgressive) and as object (frustrated and repressed) is dramatized in their vigorous and full-bodied dance as illustrated in the stage direction, "*They look at each other; half smile in embarrassment; feel and looks ashamed and slightly defiant*" (32). The performing bodies embody the conflict between ancestral memories and a gloomy present after the Anglicization across Ireland's landscape.

*Dancing at Lughnasa's* double presence is displayed in the ritual-theatrical time dichotomy; the ritual time is timeless, fluid and temporal to remove the events from the constraints of naturalistic theatre space. Celebrating the harvest of Lughnasa is a re-enactment of history to attain a release from the physical legacy of racism. Consequently, the Mundys' carnival bodies are multiple and transformative. They are performing corporeal signifiers that are "open to multifarious inscriptions" (Gilbert and Tompkins 205) rendering them "as dialogic, ambivalent and unstable signifier(s) rather than a single, independent and discrete entity" (205). The dance of the abject female body is interwoven with family narrative history both metaphorically and realistically, irrationally and rationally, thereby, "the actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation" (Lehmann 135). In this sense, the Irish female body becomes a locus of subjugation and insurgence psychologically and physically. The female performing body does not only embody the character on stage, but also the *Self*. Both are present since the staged body represents the *Other* through the *Self*. Both the actor and the *Self* share the space and the body in a performance landscape and herein lies the recognition of dual-subjectivity.

### **Can The Subaltern Dance?**

The audience witnesses the household chores performed by the Mundy sisters as stated in the stage direction; they are "*busy and work in silence*" (2). They work together to maintain a sense of wholeness to face traumatized identities which have experienced freedom through physical celebration as the act of "encoding identity through movement, dance often functions as a mode of empowerment for oppressed characters" (Gilbert and Tompkins 40). The Mundy sisters scream, laugh and dance like "excited schoolgirls" (Friel 11) to break their monotonous life, thus, dance is a spectacular practice and an act of communication to convey emotional/instinctual values within erotic physicality. Dance is deviant, transient and ephemeral to eschew stable meaning physically and herein lies the vital strength of the pagan celebration that relies upon female bodily energies. This challenges the adult Michael's narrative control, a point explained by Friel himself, "Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement – as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness" (84). *Dancing at Lughnasa* promotes non-naturalistic dramatic strategies depicting the corporeally dissolving five personalities of the Mundy sisters into each other. Musicality and wild dancing occupy the stage center in a rural setting to uncover a particular historical moment materialized in troubling dancing bodies corporeally in dialogue with a colonial context.

The Mundys' ceremony embodies "the whole spectrum of movements and processes that have no referent but are presented with heightened precision; events of peculiarly formalized communality; musical-rhythmic or visual architectonic constructs of development; para-ritual forms, as well as *the ceremony of the body and of presence; the emphatically or monumentally accentuated ostentation of the presentation*" (Lehmann 69; emphasis added). Kate's bodily dance is both "*controlled and frantic*" (31 [Stage direction]); it is a strange duality that embodies the clash between pre-Christian liberated body and strict Catholicism. Maggie's flour mask is a transformative performance practice that entices the rest of Mundy sisters to join the wild dance with a Dionysian spirit concretized in dynamic actions as dramatized in the stage direction, "*loud music*", "*pounding beat*", "*jumping, leaping, shouting, calling and singing*" (9). It is "the painful and pleasurable physicality" (Lehmann 96) that functions within the semiotic process of signification; "as its presence and charisma become decisive, the body also becomes ambiguous in its signifying character, even to the point of turning into an insoluble enigma" (96). This is well-illustrated in Maggie's reaction to the Irish Dance Music by a Ceili band: "*her features became animated by a look of defiance, of aggression absorbing the rhythm with a white frantic dervish*" (30 [Stage direction]). The Mundy sisters move "*sensuously [and their] wellingtons pounding out their own erratic rhythm*" (31 [Stage direction]). This creates a theatrical/poetic image that paralyzes the grim reality in a grotesque mode that assembles exuberant memories and ritualistic dances that gear towards transcendence unveiling private tales interwoven with political clashes.

Dancing in circle with clapped hands evokes intimacy and union while the female bodies move to an audible exterior music in a frenzy manner. Kate resists joining in but suddenly leaps to her feet and emits a loud "Yaaaah!" conveying a transitory escape from all imposed restrictions. The materiality of this energetic practice emerges through the materiality of the voice as tonality gaining "physicality because the voice leaves the body through breath, and it creates spatiality because it spreads through the space and enters the ears of the listeners" (Fischer-Lichte 36). Maggie "paints" her face with flour pushing "*her hair back from her face and pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask [emitting] a wild raucous 'Yaaaah'*" (30 [Stage direction]). In a similar unruly manner, Christina dances madly "*on top of the table tossing Jack's surplice!*" (31 [Stage direction]). The female performing body's vibrancy is turned into chora-graphy to deconstruct verbal discourses and instead of linguistic representation, soundscape creates ruptures within the corporeal and vocal unity. The paganism of the Mundy sisters' hectic spectacle is juxtaposed with Chris's and Gerry's romantic dance: "*He suddenly swings [Chris] round and round and dances her lightly, elegantly across the garden*" (43 [Stage direction]). They are a "beautiful couple" (Friel 43) dancing very well evoking a dynamic practice that appeals to sensory metaphors.

Michael remembers the wild happiness of his aunts when they have got their first wireless set, Marconi. The radio acts as a catalyst to seduce the Mundy sisters to dance enthusiastically as it communicates exotic music. It creates a theatre from a largely static situation to reject a neat arrangement of events. The ritual soundscape is a way of capturing ancestral memories within the ruptures of a colonial history. Structurally, the domestic kitchen is matriarchal and functions as an empowering performance space with its visual stage rhizome: tableau with a garden, a wall-less kitchen and a hearth. However, the Catholic



Church lurks in the background of this carnival setting evoking ominous tones to assert the state of marginalization in a male-dominated community. As Marconi's music fades in the midst of this "*hectic activity*" (34 [Stage direction]), the sisters bitterly resume their domestic chores, and the dance is seen as an "*erratic moment [that creates] a grotesque*" (34 [stage direction]) dance. Again, they are traumatized identities as concretized in their possession of a cracked mirror which signifies their sense of estrangement and feelings of marginalization. The fractured mirror evokes distorted selves to implicitly reveal the reality of the festival of Lughnasa as a mockery of unfulfilled desires and frustrated aspirations.

### **Father Jack's Decolonized Body: Going Native Rhythmically**

Dance – inspired by the harvest festival – is a mythic enactment of Father Jack's African ritual performance. Father Jack's physical movement is unique in the sense that it is inspired by the African pagan melodies instead of the Irish ones. Father Jack's bodily dance is described as a "*structured beat whose rhythm gives him pleasure*" (41 [Stage direction]) and his singing is "*incomprehensible and inaudible*" (52 [Stage direction]) as well. The wordless ritual dance emphasizes the "breath, rhythm and the present actuality of the body's visceral presence [that] take[s] precedence over the logos" (Lehmann 145). Father Jack relies on bodily dance to communicate his inner most feelings since his "vocabulary has deserted" (Friel 49) him. Father Jack has lost the linguistic power to communicate verbally, yet, he relies on bodily expression as a motif of transgression and freedom that resides in wild paganism.

The appeal of the African rituals makes Father Jack's choreographed performance individual not shared by his sisters signifying a break away from Ballybeg's claustrophobic atmosphere. The strict orthodox Irish Catholicism is threatened by the Celtic and the African rituals since they release a fiery passion, a point argued by Elizabeth Grosz:

If the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways. (64)

Like the Mundy sisters, Father Jack's performing body is not a passive object dominated by the regimes of powers, but a site of resistance. Father Jack embodies the postcolonial struggle of both the African and the Irish natives for self-independence. This comparative ethnography also highlights the difference between the Ryangan rituals and that of Lughnasa in the sense that there are no boundaries between the spiritual rites and the secular every day affairs in the African ancestral celebration while the believers of god Lugh are considered savages and the kitchen dance is performed in secret in the back hills. A question poses itself: Is Father Jack in Ireland or Uganda? Although the performance is linear in the real time, it gives rise to temporal moments simultaneously in Father Jack's subconscious. This temporal/spatial ambiguity takes place within the dark hidden part of Father Jack's mind because the Native performances produce a here that is not here and a now that is not now and agitatedly divide time and space into layers of fluid and elusive structures. Father Jack's bodily dance expresses

his diasporic experience and recuperates the ‘distant home’ as he is unable to distinguish between the Celtic festival and the African tribal rites. More significantly, Father Jack’s engagement with the African rituals is a reworking of the noble savage motif visualized in his shabby army uniform. He and Gerry enact a Ryangan ritual in which they swap hats; a theatrical implicit critique of strict institutionalized religion that has failed to address the spiritual/emotional inclinations.

Finally, the male presence is not powerful enough as theatricalized in the contrast between the Mundy sisters’ strong thumping of boots and the kite sticks used by Father Jack to drum with. Kate ends Father Jack’s staged dance throwing away the sticks; “They aren’t ours. They belong to the child” (Friel 53), Kate comments. Her religious rigidity has no space for paganism. This explains why Father Jack feels cold in Ballybeg, a repressive city set in opposition to the East African wilderness. On the other hand, the male narrator is a Frielian technique to exercise a control over the Mundy sisters’ traumatic experiences. This stands in contrast to Highway’s testimonial performances in which the Cree women have full power of their own authorship. The adult Michael’s narration exhibits fluid imaginations of past memories incarnated within the borderline of the actual and the illusory as dancing with closed eyes maintaining the dreamy atmosphere. The Mundy family float on sweet and frenetic sounds and move rhythmically to respond to the mood of the music. Michael is lured by the music of the thirties associated with his parents whose love story is sealed with an elegant dance, however, this music nostalgia matches neither his aunts’ Dionysian dance nor Father Jack’s African rites.

## Conclusion

What intrigues the argument of the present study is the question of body politics in performing indigenous theatres. The representation of the female performing body has been investigated to reveal a deep inclination to return to the body to emphasize the roots of the *Self* in a time where conventional categories of identity undergo a radical challenge. The term politics refers to how performed practices of the female performing body are related to Native performance. Native performance is fundamentally a microcosmic paradigm of how the female performing body comprehends the spaces and worldviews that dominate the domestic life. The process of memory-making is performative residing in oral gendered histories. Performance of oral histories is transformational since it enhances embodied autobiographical and memory acts. Both Tomson Highway and Brian Friel interrogate the essentialisms of transcendental Native performance and the surrealist/postmodernist dramaturgy. This can be interpreted as an act of appropriation to create a ‘Third Space’ that moves beyond the Western theatrical practices and ancient spiritual dramaturgy in order to generate a new visual syntax within the performance-based spectacle. Physical theatre emphasizes the bodily co-presence of both the actors and the spectators to reject the teleological mimesis-based theatre.

The critical thrust of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* is the articulation of indigenous womanist aesthetics of self-discovery. The healing voices encapsulate Indianness/Irishness as powerful mythic theories of survival. As such, the present study affirms the poetics of staging the female body within Nativist Ethnocritical Discourse; a legitimate theoretical framework of tribal poetic strategies to eschew Eurocentric viewpoints that fail to embrace indigenous criticism in academia. Thus, staging the female body is an

authentic performative enterprise to fervently represent nationalistic sensibility within fluid indigenous theatre. On deconstructing the monolithic critical discourse, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* are transformative epistemologies embracing a highly rich dialogic approach to hopefully contribute to Native Studies. The Womanist concept in question dismantles the white tyranny through myth, rituals and story-telling tradition to reinforce hermeneutic possibilities for making a cross literary aesthetics manifested in the cultural borders between Native America and Northern Ireland. The Indian American and Irish cultural commonalities are set as dynamic textual practices to spiritualize ancient values and to indigenize Native/womanist Theatre as a vehicle for resistance and survival. *The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* are a celebration of woman-centered societies in which the maternal control of resources and household goods questions patriarchal colonizers and gender issues from a tribal-oriented paradigm. Land/memory paradigm encapsulates personal histories as a lifeway and as a range of aesthetic strategies to counter western forces that have consistently silenced native tribal worldview.

*The Rez Sisters* and *Dancing At Lughnasa* examine Native performance within the here and now paradigm since the performers and the audience move into recognition of possible reconciled realms that they inhabit. The Cree and Irish women's titanic power is reflected in a fast-moving structure full of frenetic moments to destabilize the monolithic, logical and orderly structures. The Bingo Game and the Festival of Lughnasa give rise to the seductive abject body that hovers at the periphery of the indigenous women's consciousness. The Native abject body appears as a signifying practice and the female performing body in question has no faith in a rationally unified subject, therefore, performance – as a dynamic practice – is grotesque, fluid and ephemeral echoing the instability of the inward/outward border of the abject body.

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