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Interview with Tomson Highway

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Abstract

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MARK SHACKLETON AND HARTMUT LUTZ

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

TH ... depending on what part of Canada you are talking about.... In the most isolated areas of Canada, furthest north and west, where communities have managed to live intact with minimal disturbance from outside influences, other than television (which has done a tremendous amount of damage in the past twenty-five years), languages are being rebuilt or are intact, and as a result of languages remaining relatively intact mythology has remained more or less intact. So that's one group of people who at least have nominal contact with their mythology through such means.

Then there's the group of people that migrated at a certain point in their histories, principally in the 1950s and '60s. There was a social revolution of sorts that occurred in Canada where for a number of reasons — one of which was the acquisition of the vote for Native people in Canada — Native people were finally able to move away from reserves, and to live

as recognised human beings, so to speak, in so far as the status of being a human being is equated with the right to vote. These people moved to cities and other major urban centres across the country and in the process of two or three generations of living in large urban centres, (anything from Toronto to Kingston to Sicamous) lost their languages and with that lost their mythologies.

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

MS *Why are Trickster figures so important to you in your writing?*

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

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

role in relaying messages between that divine force and humankind in the flesh, and that in the aboriginal perspective is the Trickster.

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

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

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

MS *Do you find any reaction though, against focusing on the Trickster by fellow playwrights?*

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

MS *What kind of reactions are there against an overfocusing on the Trickster figure?*

TH Basically it's been said that Nanabush doesn't drink, for instance. Some people have said that in the Native community. When in actual fact, from the other perspective he *does* need to drink in so far as we as Native people, you know, I as a Native person, drink alcohol. The Trickster, *my* Trickster, certainly drinks alcohol; my Trickster loves wine. But there are other people who are abstainers. So, of course, their Trickster wouldn't drink. Anyway, things like that have been said.

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

- HL** *We were talking the other evening, and I mentioned how when Dry Lips came out, there were some Native people who felt that the book was misogynist, and then reappraised The Rez Sisters and said, 'Yes, that's misogynist too'. Personally, I did not agree at all because I remember seeing The Rez Sisters in performance and I came out saying, 'Wow, those women are really strong!'. How do you react to criticisms like that? Does it affect you?*
- TH** No, I don't think so. I think that criticism like that is good. I think that the more controversy a work kicks up the more visible it becomes. I think that if people don't talk about it, don't argue about it, then it's that much more likely to be forgotten. So I've been very lucky in that sense, and it's been a very small amount of political criticism, and nothing compared to the kind of criticism that other writers in other countries have faced, which is in some cases exile, banishment, imprisonment, and execution. Nothing like that.
- HL** *Talking about exile, you live part of the year in Europe, and you travel all over the world, speak many languages. You're an international figure, and you live outside of Canada for lengthy periods. Would you see yourself as partly an expatriate writer?*
- TH** Well I live in France for six months of the year for a number of reasons. One of which is that I find the importance of the French language to the [Canadian] community of writers — no matter what background they are — is of the essence. Particularly for a Native Canadian writer, to be fluent in all three official languages — to speak the Native tongue, English and French — is of exceptional importance for a number of reasons, not least of which is the simple act of just holding the country together, because god knows we've come very close to the precipice of separation. The spectre of separation of course still faces us, square in the face, and it's very, very much a potential possibility. Perhaps a little less so than five years ago, but certainly it's still there, the divide. The cultural divide, the linguistic divide is there, and I think that it's unnecessary. I think that it's possible to bridge it, and if anybody can bridge it, it's the Native people, and specifically the Native artist, and most specifically the Native writers, the artists who deal with language. And even more important than that ... if Québec were ever to leave Canada, violence and bloodshed would be one of the inevitable results. Specifically *vis-à-vis* the Native communities that happen to be located right on the border between Québec and such provinces as Ontario and New Brunswick. There are Native communities who straddle that border, and Native communities — Native reserves — that exist within the province of Québec, including Kahnawakhe. If separation were to ever

occur the real possibility exists that violence would occur and bloodshed would occur — people would be killed.

HL *Do you mean like the reaction over Oka?*

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

HL *Do the people in the village where you live in Franc know now who you are?*

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

HL *Does living outside of Canada change your perspective on North America, on Canada in particular?*

TH Oh yes, very much so. There is something like a village mentality that threatens to asphyxiate the imagination for certain people when living just in Canada. There are certain sectors of the community who believe that only Native actors have the right to play Native roles. There are other sectors of the community who don't, who believe that everybody should have a right to play their parts. There are certain sectors of the community who believe that only Native writers have the right to write from a Native perspective and other people who subscribe to the opposite view. And I happen to be of the school of thought that says that theatre and writing has

nothing to do with race. I believe in the freedom of the imagination, freedom of expression, to the greatest degree possible.

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

HL *You have to get out of it?*

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

MS *Joyce, for example.*

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

MS *Writers who happen to be women are tired of being characterised as 'women writers', and some writers, like Caryl Phillips, are not willing to be labelled 'Black writers' as opposed to just 'writer'. Do you object to being called a 'Native writer' or 'First Nations writer', as opposed to a writer per se?*

TH I don't really care what I'm called. No, that doesn't really matter to me, that's the least of my concerns. There was a famous movie star who said that — I mean this is tongue in cheek, and I don't really subscribe to her

opinion: 'I don't really care what they say about me, as long as they talk about me'. Well, I don't really care what they say I'm called, ultimately. An interviewer once asked me 'How do you want to be remembered?', and it's like: 'What do I fucking care?' I'm not going to be here, it's not my problem, I don't really want to be remembered, to tell you the truth.

HL *You want to live....*

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

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

TH I think you have to start from somewhere. You have to start from the root of the tree in order for the tree to grow, and grow into the most fabulous branches in the universe possible. And I've had that unique experience in Japan, where I've managed to get a lot of work through some extremely generous and wonderful Japanese friends. Last year we did *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in the Japanese language with an entirely Japanese cast and design team, directorial team and so on and so forth — one of the most fabulous experiences of my life! They were kind enough and generous enough to fly me there to act as a consultant to the director and the design team on the script, on the elements of design, on the elements of music. The person I worked with most closely was the director and he kept wanting to make it his perspective. And his approach to me was too small. Because that wasn't my perspective at all. My perspective was: a story takes place in a very specific community from a very specific cultural point of view; it ultimately is about the universe or the human condition. We're all in the same boat *vis-à-vis* such enormous questions, universal questions, as the gender of God. I think, you know, we've all been fucked over by the

patriarchal system, and that there comes a time when it's just got to stop or else no-one will survive. It's a universal question. Once they started thinking in those terms, they started to turn it into a Japanese story, and by the end of it, it was just amazing. It was incredible. It was this tiny 250-seat theatre with a very small stage — a tiny stage that was twice the size of this room, but by the end of the play it was like the stage was the size of the universe, having gods battling up there in the sky — gigantic figures from Japanese mythology, these gods and goddesses fighting it out to the last. It was just a magnificent experience ... so it worked for the Japanese actors and the Japanese design team, and it worked for Japanese audiences because of that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then, of course, we saw a lot of concerts and a lot of symphonies. We got to know the 7th symphony of Beethoven, 3rd Mahler, and so on and so forth. We studied the structure of these pieces, we learned how to write fugues, we learned how to write sonatas. We studied orchestration, we learned how to write for a symphony orchestra, all this stuff. And we studied German *lieder* and French *chanson*, meaning the songs of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel and Henri du Parc, and the German *lieder* composers, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Hugo Wolf. And you studied the structure of these songs. How they were written, the techniques of melodic construction. Italian *bel canto*, opera, the architecture of the ultimate architecture of melody, to my mind, melody making. When your whole youth has been infused with this information — by the time I was twenty-three I had this extraordinary education which stays with you — that's like the foundation of a house that you've built, and you never leave, it becomes a part of your life, a part of your wisdom as you approach old age.

And so to this day when people ask me who are your teachers, my teachers are Bach and Beethoven and Brahms and Mozart and Chopin and Rachmaninov and Prokofiev. So I use that knowledge — seeing as I couldn't become a professional musician, I was frustrated in that career choice, for a number of reasons, which don't really need an explanation at



Tomson Highway at the 'First Nations: Symbolic Representations' seminar, University of Helsinki, Finland, March 2002.
Photo: Courtesy of authors.

this point in time. The point being that I'd just become a musician in a different sense, in a different context. I'd become a musician using words as my music. So now I write plays and novels. And I think of plays now as sonatas for a solo instrument, like a piano or a cello, and I think of novels as symphonies, in terms of symphonic structure, and all the elements of phrasing, breathing, modulation, key. The key of D flat major expresses a certain psychological perspective, the key of C minor something else entirely, and so on and so forth. Counterpoint, harmony: all those things infuse my work because I just had this fantastic education as a mere kid.

MS *Are the characters in your plays like instruments in the orchestra?*

TH Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think of them as saxophone characters or flute characters....

MS *What about the novels? Would Champion represent a kind of instrument or would he be different? Or Father Lafleur...?*

TH I think in those terms. I don't think *literally* in those terms. I don't set about making notes. Just the rhythm of my writing has been influenced by that kind of thinking, but I don't actually put it down. It just works that way for me in an internal sense. It's like when you're making music, sitting at that piano. For high-level concert artists, singers, cellists, whatever, I think there comes a point in performance, in the process of performance, where it ceases to become an intellectual process ... it crosses a certain border on the sensual and subconscious level.

MS *What do you feel is the role of the artist in the community, and how much respect do you think the artist is given for what he or she does?*

TH I remember hearing a doctor say to an artist across the dinner table in front of about ten other people. 'Hey, the grants must be good this year, eh?' And the artist had no response. But I thought about that, because I just found it to be a very biting comment, an ignorant comment, and an insulting comment, ultimately. The answer the artist should have said across the table if he'd been as rude, and as unwise, he should have said 'Not as good as yours', because doctors live on grants from the Ministry of Health. Judges in the legal profession live on grants from the Ministry of Justice, and in our case from the Ministry of the Solicitor General as well. Teachers live on grants from the Ministry of Education, as do principals and other educational administrators, including university professors to a very large degree. The difference being that artists do their work way before the community or the individual gets sick. Doctors and lawyers do theirs when it's way, way, way too late; and comparatively speaking the amount of grant money that the artist gets is nothing, peanuts, to the amount of grant money which the doctor or lawyer gets.

HL *So you see this as an investment in the future.*

TH Oh, absolutely. You know, the average prison inmate — and I don't know what the prison populations in your respective countries are, but certainly I know what they are in my own country — a certain kind of individual packs the prison system of our country, as it does of every country the world over. But in my country I would venture to say that the average prison inmate gets a \$30,000 Canada Council grant every year of his life. Sometimes for life for having committed unspeakable acts to other human beings and to their respective communities. The average artist is lucky if they see one \$15,000 Canada Council grant in a lifetime, and look what they do *vis-à-vis* the individual and the health of the community. And that's \$30,000 that should be much more constructively put to use in schools, educational institutions, such as colleges and universities, hospitals and artistic and cultural institutions.