June Scudeler

"This show won't mean anything unless it comes from 'the people'"

wâhkôhtowin in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* Movie Treatment

In a scene from the unpublished 1992 movie treatment of what would become Tomson Highway's 1998 novel,[1] *Kiss of the Fur Queen,* Pamela Buckskin and Simon Okimasis try out the script for *The Theft of Children* "at a sleazy dive of a bar . . . on a bunch of Indian street drunks, having them read the various parts, to much hilarity" (52).[2] While it is unclear which character utters the parenthetical words "This show won't mean anything unless it comes from 'the people'" (52), Simon, Pamela, and Simon's brother, the playwright Jeremiah, insist on building connections between their artistic work and the larger Indigenous community in Toronto. Like Highway himself, who insisted that the initial run of *The Rez Sisters* be performed at Toronto's Native Canadian Centre (Mietkiewicz D1) for an Indigenous audience, Simon, Pamela, and Jeremiah ground their theatre productions in wâhkôhtowin, "the Cree value of kinship or interrelatedness" (Reder ii). Through wâhkôhtowin, the brothers, both fictional and real, engage with various communities to create art that exposes residential school abuses and foregrounds Two-Spirit,[3] lesbian, gay, trans, and queer (2LGBTQ+) rights. The film treatment enables the reader to understand how wâhkôhtowin counteracts the active assault, particularly toward 2LGBTQ+ people, on Cree kinship systems. The devastating effects of this attack render Gabriel and Jeremiah less equipped to confront colonial oppression. Reading the novel and the film treatment together illuminates how Highway's work insists on the importance of wâhkôhtowin in decolonization.

wâhkôhtowin means kinship beyond the immediate family or the state of being related. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice elaborates the

parameters of such relationality by defining kinship as "an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships" ("Go Away" 151). Relationships with other people and other-than-human beings, in Justice's formulation, are based on reciprocity—an integral part of kinship responsibility. For Simon and Jeremiah, their kinship network extends throughout Toronto's Indigenous theatre community, which constitutes a family that nurtures them, especially Simon as a gay Woods Cree man. While it is clear that Simon and Jeremiah's Roman Catholic parents love them very much, Simon is unable to tell his parents that he is gay. To support his adult identity as a gay man in the city, he must form a kinship network based on artistic and emotional bonds, while honouring wâhkôhtowin by mentoring other Indigenous performing artists.

Although the novel includes Woods Cree stories and ways of knowing, the movie treatment's portrayal of an outspoken and assertive HIV-positive gay[4] Woods Cree dancer would have been truly path-clearing if it had been produced. In the novel, the residential school challenges the familial and kinship ties Gabriel and Jeremiah have with their reserve community and family, with harmful results for both brothers: Gabriel becomes sexually masochistic, and Jeremiah clings to Catholicism and denies himself any bodily pleasure. The movie treatment is an unexplored and important piece of Highway's artistic evolution, particularly as a way to understand the unsettling nature of Gabriel's sexuality. By focusing on the movie treatment and the changes between Simon and Gabriel, I argue that wâhkôhtowin is essential for Simon to actively criticize colonization, homophobia, and the residential school system. Gabriel, who seems to lack such an extended supportive kinship network, which includes his brother, articulates racism and homophobia, but does not confront the forces behind them. Winona Stevenson (Plains Cree) explains that because "most Indigenous cultures are collectively-oriented rather than individualistically-oriented, individual stories reflect concern for community welfare" (266). While Gabriel's personalized critique of Catholicism is powerful, the movie treatment shows that collective action against heteropatriarchy and colonialism is even more so.

I became aware of the treatment while working in the René Highway collection at the University of Guelph's library archives, and given my interest in René Highway's choreographic and performance work, I was intrigued by the profound differences between his portrayal as the

sexually promiscuous Gabriel in the novel and as Simon, who has a more conventionally monogamous relationship, in the movie treatment. My research on the Highway brothers prompts me to conclude that the movie treatment is much more autobiographical than the novel. The treatment's use of real names—Joe and Pelagie, René and Tomson Highway's parents' real names, instead of the novel's Abraham and Mariesis, as well as Brochet, their reserve located in northwestern Manitoba, instead of Mistik Lake—inspires a more non-fictional reading. Highway even portrays the real-life Guy Hill residential school that he and his brother attended.

Highway describes the proposed "four-hour miniseries" as a "a semi-autobiographical drama of epic proportions, opening with grand shots of caribou herds in the North and moving to lavish scenes of professional theatrical productions in Toronto" (Gessell D4). The treatment and the novel follow the same general trajectory, but use very different narratives to tell Simon and Gabriel's stories. Simon and Jeremiah are born in northern Manitoba to semi-nomadic, Cree-speaking, Roman Catholic parents; they are abused culturally and sexually at residential school. Highway first mentioned the project that led to the novel in a March 1991 article: "Tomson Highway's beginnings are in him still. Theatrical, marvelous beginnings. Call them, he says, The Kiss of the Fur Queen" (Hannon 28). In 1992, two years after René Highway's death, Highway turned these beginnings into a play script, then into a treatment for a two-part television movie (Stoffman E4). Unable to have the movie produced, Highway then made *Kiss* into a novel. While critics like Sam McKegney have recounted the various iterations that led to the novel, the unpublished movie treatment has not been analyzed until now.

Highway reveals that he thought "about writing a non-fiction memoir, but it seemed too far-fetched. . . . Then I tried to write it as a stage play,[5] then as a movie. I actually did four drafts of a script but my way was blocked. Finally, I did it the only way possible" (qtd. in Stoffman E4) by making *Kiss* a novel. A fictionalized first-hand account of residential school in the early 1990s would have been revelatory. Television would have provided an ideal medium for reaching a large audience. Highway states "for once or twice I'd like to take a show into every living room in Brochet and to every reserve in the country. You can only do that with television" (Prokosh C28). He positions his audience as Indigenous communities, especially ones that are not able to see his theatrical productions (Prokosh C28), both in remote communities and in the city. Highway's movie would have enacted a form of kinship by

bringing together an Indigenous audience across Canada. Residential school survivors would have seen their stories reflected on TV.

The intimate reading experience of a novel means a different audience. Although Highway states that he wrote the novel for a "Cree readership. . . . I hope to reach the kids in the mall in Saskatoon and Winnipeg" (qtd. in Stoffman E4), a television movie in the 1990s would have been more accessible to remote reserves. McKegney explains that between 1991 and the publication of the novel in 1998 a "great deal had changed in the discursive environment," including apologies from many churches and the "publication of historical works like J. R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision*" (107). He goes on to argue that, although the failure to produce the movie meant that Highway was unable to reach a larger audience, the novel format allowed him to "deal far more extensively with Aboriginal heritage materials and to illustrate their ongoing utility in the struggle toward Indigenous empowerment" (107). Though the novel certainly shows the survival of Woods Cree ways of knowing, it also demonstrates the damaging effects of the breakdown of kinship ties for both brothers.

Isabelle Knockwood (Mi'kmaq) remembers, "traditionally . . . older brothers and sisters were absolutely required to look after their siblings. When they went to residential school, being unable to protect their younger brothers and sisters became a source of life-long pain" (60). The brothers are guided by their close relationship throughout the movie treatment because "the relationship between brothers [was] regulated by the laws of kinship, which recognized the close yet separate and independent existence of each" (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 34). Jeremiah's ability to save his brother from a caribou herd foreshadows his later inability to rescue Gabriel from abuse. The caribou and their energy save Gabriel by inspiring him to dance, while, as Justice stresses about kinship, also keeping him connected to his traditional territory, a connection that Jeremiah in the novel attempts to suppress. Jeremiah remains connected to his parents' Roman Catholicism, which alienates him from Gabriel. But by the end of the novel, Jeremiah looks after Gabriel by ensuring that a medicine woman performs ceremony when Gabriel is dying, rejecting their mother's insistence that a priest be present.

The caribou scene in both versions illustrates how Jeremiah protects his younger brother before they go to residential school. In the novel's caribou scene, Jeremiah plays his composition "'*Ateek*, *Ateek* II,' written in G major, Jeremiah's favourite key because it made him think of oranges" (42), while Gabriel, "three years of age and graceful as a birch sapling" (41), imitates a caribou with his hands above his head. Jeremiah, Gabriel, and their parents

are caught unawares by the arrival of the caribou. Jeremiah "can just make out Gabriel sitting, legs spread on the ground not ten feet in front of him, his tear-stained face bewildered, his mouth open like a little beak, expecting food, his arms spread like small wings" (45). Separated from their horrified parents, Jeremiah rescues Gabriel, holding him on top of the rock, safely above the caribou herd. The caribou, whose

> blur without end took on form, but what? Dancers? Spirits? Whirlpools of light and air and shadow? The shapes became one pulsing wave of movement, throbbing, summoning him, beckoning him on. "Come with us, Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel Okimasis-masis-masis." . . . Slowly releasing his hold, Gabriel opened his arms to embrace this immense field of energy. And he began to weep. (46)

The novel depicts the encounter as life changing, with the caribou energy entering Gabriel and engendering a restlessness that endures until he finds an outlet through dance.[6]

Highway entitles the equivalent movie scene "Jeremiah Okimasis, at the age of 4, saves the Okimasis family from destruction," dating the event May 30, 1956. Jeremiah, "now 4 years old, plays at miming a dancing caribou using twigs for antlers . . . he now has a responsibility: a little brother named Simon Okimasis, 2 years old, who sits right there beside his mother nibbling on a bannock" (3). Pelagie and her other children "shriek with horror" when the herd arrives but "above the absolutely heart-stopping writhing mass of a million antlers, Jeremiah hovers like a little angel, holding his little brother in his arms, both boys laughing with glee at the miracle unfolding all around them. . . . How Jeremiah got his little brother up there in the nick of time is the talk of the hour" (3). The movie treatment is couched in decidedly Catholic terms, with Jeremiah depicted as an "angel" and the caribou energy described as a "miracle." Highway uses the miraculous to stress that the Catholic view of the other-than-human world as less important than the human world is contradicted by his insistence on animal autonomy.

Although Gabriel, "through dance, music, sex, and the renewal of Cree traditions . . . crafts for himself a range of personae that appear to blur defiance and submission" (McCall 67), Simon and Jeremiah actively and unequivocally challenge racism and homophobia in the film treatment. Simon is more than able to take care of himself when he confronts a racist bartender at a western-themed gay bar where the cast of one of their plays celebrates. Jeremiah's drunken antics become out of control and when the bartender asks Jeremiah to leave, Simon points out the racism in white gay culture: "An argument ensues, etc. until, before we know it, Simon is

vamping all the way down the long bar to the pounding beat of k.d. lang, kicking piles and piles of beer glasses, baskets of popcorn and what not all over the place, shouting at the cringing bar-tender as he passes him 'you don't like Indians? Well fuck you, sweetheart!'" (42). Simon uses dance in a decidedly decolonizing manner.

Dance is a tool of decolonization for Gabriel, even though it is connected to the first time he is abused by Father Lafleur. Inspired by his dance in the residential school Christmas pageant, the six-year-old Gabriel is dreaming of doing a do-si-do with Carmelita Moose, except she keeps "floating up balloon-like, so that, while his feet were negotiating quick little circles, his arms had to keep Carmelita Moose earthbound" (77). Dancing while trying to keep Carmelita Moose earthbound is echoed by Gabriel's pleasure at being masturbated by Father Lafleur, a sinister figure who is nameless until the end of the passage. However, not everything is unknowable:

> The undisputed fact was that Gabriel Okimasis's little body was moving up and down, up and down, producing, in the crux of his being, a sensation so pleasurable that he wanted Carmelita Moose to float up and up forever so he could keep jumping up, reaching for her and pulling her back down, jumping up, reaching her, pulling her back down. (77)

Jeremiah disassociates when he sees his younger brother being sexually abused. While Jeremiah "wanted—needed—to see more clearly" (79), he ultimately cannot comprehend what he is seeing: "he had not seen what he was seeing" (80).

In the movie treatment, the brothers' relationship makes them strong enough to confront Brochet's Father Bouchard and, by extension, the Catholic Church about their sexual abuse. While the treatment does not mention Jeremiah's abuse, it depicts Simon's abuse from his own point of view. The scene is entitled "Simon Okimasis 'meets' Brother Nadeau":

> The night of December 8, 1964, in a dormitory of the Guy Indian Residential School. . . . Simon, now 10 years old, kneels in the middle of the room. They finish the last prayer. As the boys climb into their beds, Brother Nadeau tells them that, as a special treat—because it is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception—he will play music in his room just next door that they can hear through a little speaker he has hooked up in the dormitory, to lull them to "sleep like a lullaby," Brother Nadeau says.
>
> The lights in the dormitory now out, a tinny distant version of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles seeps out into the room. Simon's POV [Point of View], the dark figure of Brother Nadeau, dressed in his black robe, glides into the room and goes silently from bed to bed, kneeling and appearing to bless each sleeping boy.

> Brother Nadeau appears at Simon's side holding a small bible in one hand, puts his other hand under the sheet and whispers into Simon's ear. Simon pretends to sleep but through the slit in his eyes, he can see Brother Nadeau's shadowy face, caught in the grip of a kind of "holy ecstasy." (8-9)

Unlike the depiction in the novel, Simon's abuse is portrayed in this passage solely from his point of view, without being witnessed by Jeremiah, whose own abuse is not depicted in the movie treatment. Like Father Lafleur, Brother Nadeau is a wîhtikow, the Cree cannibal monster, eerily gliding the dorm in his black robe, insatiably using the boys in his care for his own pleasure. Highway stresses the links between the residential school abuses and the Catholicism by having Brother Nadeau hold a bible in one hand while he masturbates Simon with the other.

Jeremiah and Simon challenge Father Bouchard, the priest at their reserve, at the annual Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage in Alberta, where "St. Anne, the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is reputed to have made an appearance years ago and whose waters are said to have miraculous powers of healing" (50). While Simon pleases his mother by attending mass, Jeremiah "sits on the shore close by watching all this, writing it all down in a steno pad" (50). Father Bouchard's appearance triggers the brothers to confront the priest about colonialism and residential school, saying:

> that the priests and brothers at that boarding school Father Bouchard sent the boys to years ago molested them sexually, that the way Father Bouchard and the missionaries converted the Indians to Catholicism is dishonest and immoral, that using the children of a people to conquer the hearts, minds and entire culture of that people and thus subject them to the status of third class citizens—in their own country—is not right, the boys even go so far as to say that if "the Apocalypse" as predicted in the bible is to be averted, that a religion that relates more realistically to the Earth as a living, FEMALE, PRO-CREATIVE, animate being will have to be seriously reconsidered, and soon, etc. (51)

Highway describes the argument as "fierce . . . bloody" and "unrelenting" (51), but it is one-sided. The brothers—Jeremiah is twenty-five and Simon is twenty-three—have all the power in the scene, as the Father's responses are not included; an Indigenous version of history triumphs. It is also the only time Jeremiah's abuse is mentioned, though it is unclear which brother (or it may be both) discloses this trauma. The brothers' assertion of Indigenous rights by situating Canada as Indigenous territory ("their own country"), in which Indigenous people are treated like "third class citizens," is provocative politically. Highway doesn't focus on sexual abuse, but places it within the larger spectrum of genocidal strategies.

In a CBC TV interview on 30 October, 1990, residential school survivor Phil Fontaine (Anishinaabe), then the Manitoba Regional Chief for the Assembly of First Nations, publicly disclosed the sexual abuse he suffered at residential school. He told Barbara Frum, "in my grade three class, if there were twenty boys, every single one of them would have experienced what I experienced. They would have experienced some aspect of sexual abuse" (n. pag.). René and Tomson Highway were also among the first residential school attendees to speak frankly in public about their abuse; they were also among the very few 2LGBTQ+ people to do so.[7] In a June 1990 interview (posthumously published in March 1991) for the monthly *Toronto Life*, René Highway told Gerald Hannon of a

> dream he had just had. In it, he is flying above a priest, a handsome man stripped down to his underwear and white socks. And in the dream, they begin to fight and the struggle is charged with eros. He spoke to [Hannon] of the first time he heard a Beatles song[8]—he was in the car, being masturbated by one of the teaching brothers from school. (33)

René Highway's account is initially framed like the novel's depiction of Jeremiah seeing Gabriel's masturbation by Father Lafleur: through the distancing lens of a dream. But then René Highway, whom Hannon describes as willing to answer any question (36), becomes explicit in his description. René Highway's dream is mixed with desire, but he places himself in a position of power as he is the one flying over the priest.[9]

The relationship between Simon and Jeremiah in the film treatment, however, is not fractured in a similar way, even though tensions pertaining to erotic desire persist. For example, when Jeremiah spots a teenaged Simon leaving a Winnipeg gay bar with theatre director Gregory Newman, Simon is more ashamed by his brother's drunkenness than about being seen with his male lover outside a gay bar:

> Jeremiah walks homeward down Portage Avenue when he runs into Simon exiting from the city's only known gay bar, in company with an older, non-native man named Greg Newman. Jeremiah, half-cut, berates Simon ("aren't you a little too young to be going into a bar?") but Simon merely fights back ("You should talk. Look at you, you're drunk. Go home. I'll talk to you when you're sober"). Simon, embarrassed, walks away without even introducing his new friend. And Jeremiah pretends he doesn't know that this is a gay bar. (22)

Later, Jeremiah attempts to confront his brother about this incident while Simon dances and Jeremiah plays piano for their high school production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*: "in Cree, Jeremiah asks him who that

man was that Simon was with the other night and what kind of bar that was. Simon manages to evade both questions and is saved in the nick of time by the next 'episode' of the gavotte. He glides onto the stage" (22). While such avoidance and tension betrays difficulty within the brothers' relationship—extending from the trauma they endured at residential school and the heteropatriarchal teachings they had encountered therein—the brothers from the film treatment do not separate for an extended period as do the brothers from the novel after Gabriel's queerness is revealed.

Jeremiah, in the film treatment, appears to be more upset that Simon is not spending time with him than that he is gay. He appears hurt, for example, when he telephones Newman's place to tell Simon about the death of their older brother: "It's just . . . well . . . you've been spending an awful lot of time over there. You hardly ever sleep here anymore" (23). After his initial discomfort, however, Jeremiah supports Simon:

> March 12, 1972, in a practice room at the University of Manitoba School of Music, Jeremiah practices the Chopin "Winter Wind Etude." The door opens and Simon enters: "you wanted to talk to me?" Simon says. Jeremiah asks Simon about his relationship with Greg Newman. They have a violent argument and Jeremiah eventually forces it out of his brother that he, Simon, is a homosexual and that Greg Newman is his lover and that, yes, he will be moving to Toronto with him as soon as Simon graduates from high school. The two boys fall into each other [*sic*] arms crying. (24)

Two-Spirit Swampy Cree scholar Alex Wilson explains how Cree people position an ethic of principled non-interference as a way of life, in which community members should not "interfere in any way with another person" (307). Moreover, principled non-interference would require family, friends, and community members to "respect and trust the choices [a Two-Spirit] person makes" (Wilson 310), providing a way for 2LGBTQ+ people to be seen as integral to their communities rather than as anomalous. Highway highlights the power of principled non-interference by having Jeremiah understand the importance of protecting Simon, which includes accepting Simon's sexuality. While it is not apparent why the brothers fall into each other's arms and cry, based on Jeremiah's sorrow that Simon is not spending enough time with him, Jeremiah seems more upset that Simon will be moving from Winnipeg than that Simon is gay.

Like his brother, Simon's community is supportive of his sexuality, enabling him to be openly gay. Highway portrays Simon's monogamous relationship with musician Robin Beatty as loving and nurturing. While Robin only plays a small role in the novel and is not part of the larger

Indigenous community, he actively contributed to the brothers' artistic process in the film treatment by playing the music during *Ulysses Thunderchild*. Furthermore, Robin encourages Simon's dance career, telling him "not to despair about his choreographic skills, that he has to try . . . right up until the day he dies" (29). While Robin is absent from the novel when Gabriel is ill, except when Gabriel is dying, in the film treatment Robin looks after Simon, accompanying him to the doctor, and poignantly, helping him with his AZT[10] inhaler while Simon cries (46).

The movie treatment confronts homophobia and AIDS discrimination within the Indigenous community by depicting the ways in which Simon and Jeremiah's friends learn to honour wâhkôhtowin by including 2LGBTQ+ people as part of their community. The Indigenous drag queen Mama Teresa becomes an integral part of their community; she wears a sandwich board and flags down potential audience members to attend Simon and Jeremiah's first production. Simon and Jeremiah meet Mama Teresa at one of Robin's shows at Toronto's iconic Horseshoe Tavern: "A young man with an outrageous sense of humour, whom we will get to know as Mama Teresa, sits with them" (30). The death of Mama Teresa's lover of an AIDS-related illness also foreshadows Simon's own death as "the gang"—"Jeremiah, Pamela, Robin, [lawyer] Lena Big Horne, actors, etc"—attends the funeral, which is centred in Indigenous spirituality: "[Elder] Ben Ghostrider, waving an eagle feather over a burning braid of sweetgrass, stands beside Mama Teresa and explains the meaning of death, from the Native viewpoint, that death is not necessarily the end, but the beginning of a new form of life etc" (45). Ghostrider's ceremony provides comfort to Simon and his friends, who are aware at this point that Simon has AIDS.[11]

Simon's friends, particularly Pamela Buckskin, honour wâhkôhtowin by defending Simon from homophobia and AIDS discrimination. At a fundraiser for *The Killing of the Last Shaman* thrown by Mama Teresa, all the attendees cross dress, including Jeremiah, who is "in a long black gown and fake pearls" (43) while playing piano. Pamela Buckskin has a drunken argument with the "butch macho actor" in one of their productions about Simon's gender, declaring "that Simon's disease, now publicly known, affects all people, regardless of gender. The butch actor makes a strong case for the rights of heterosexuals and Pamela shoots all his theories down with aplomb ('if all men were 'faggots' like Simon, we wouldn't have women going around being killed and raped with screwdrivers!'). The butch actor finally admits defeat and Pamela toasts her victory with a glass of champagne" (44).

Highway shows the homophobia within Indigenous communities but also the love and support within the community, particularly from Indigenous women. While Pamela is initially homophobic, she becomes a fierce advocate for Simon through the reciprocal responsibilities emergent from their relationship, which becomes a form of kinship; he becomes an integral part of her community, her family. For example, when Pamela, Simon, and Jeremiah rehearse *Ulysses Thunderchild*, "the story is about how Weesageechak [Elder Brother or the Cree trickster] first came to the city of Toronto, 'As man? Or as woman? Which gender? Is God male? Or female? Maybe like Simon, he/she is half and half . . .'" (31). Pamela initially finds the idea blasphemous, but her relationship with the brothers changes her into one of Simon's staunchest defenders.

After Simon's death, the movie treatment ends with a tribute performance of the triumphant *The Theft of Children*. Jeremiah and the cast stand on stage while he makes a speech:

> "this is Simon Okimasis' last show, that though his body may have left this Earth, he is still here, right here on the stage of the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, that his work is not done yet, that he has at least 37 more shows to do. And that these 37 shows will get done. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. Goodnight." (60)

Simon lives on through his art and the people with whom he has acted and choreographed, showing the power of wâhkôhtowin to create a supportive urban Indigenous community.

Highway's portrayal of Gabriel as a promiscuous gay man who has unprotected sex while he is HIV positive is highly controversial. Justice believes *Kiss* "insists on the inextricable association of pedophilia and assault with either twisted and exploitative homosexual desire or excruciating self-hatred, repression, and denial. . . . There is no room in the novel for gay desire that is not deeply condemnatory and compromised by abusive relations" ("Literature" 106). I believe Gabriel turns around the idea that AIDS is god's punishment for being gay to reflect on a colonial culture built on aggression and heteropatriarchy. Mark Rifkin offers a reading of Gabriel that does not label him as damaged. Rifkin not only positions Gabriel as "making room for Cree homosexuality," but also argues "Gabriel's insistence on the legitimacy of his pleasure, despite priestly efforts to claim his body and insist that he understand his own sexuality through a non-Native narrative of Indian defilement, expands to a broader critique of the colonial regulation of Indigenous pleasure" (142). Seeing Gabriel as exploited

and self-hating neglects the necessary historical context for his actions, particularly the sexual freedom before the discovery of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s.[12]

In the novel, Highway clearly shows the devastating consequences of Jeremiah neglecting his brotherly responsibilities, creating the opportunity for the conflicted depictions of queer sexuality. Rather than uniting against colonization, Gabriel and Jeremiah split apart because of Jeremiah's homophobia, caused by the traumatic colonizing tactics of the residential school system. Jeremiah contravenes the ethic of principled non-interference because he can't tell Gabriel how to be without breaking their bond and disrespecting his brother's autonomy. For example, rather than accept his brother's sexuality, Jeremiah abandons Gabriel when homophobic young men confront the latter at the Wasaychigan Hill pow wow. Jeremiah is "embarrassed to be in cahoots with a pervert, a man who fucked other men . . . On an Indian reserve, a Catholic reserve" (250). Jeremiah only begins to truly care for his brother when Gabriel is dying; he fights to have a traditional ceremony for his brother in the hospital.

The novel shows how the erasure of wâhkôhtowin leads to less safe space for Gabriel to live as a gay man. He has the strength of character to critique colonization, but because he doesn't have the support of a larger community, he is reduced to confronting the emotionally stunted Jeremiah.[13] Gabriel taunts the scandalized and religious Jeremiah: "Do you wonder why the world is so filled with blood and war and hate when it has, as its central symbol, an instrument of torture?" (184). Although Gabriel rails against Catholicism, his sexuality is intimately bound with Catholicism's masochistic tendencies. But as Simon's confrontation with the priest and the racist bartender show, he is more than willing to confront colonization, racism and homophobia outside of the theatre because his communities enact wâhkôhtowin. Reading the movie treatment alongside the novel shows the power of community and kinship in helping Simon and Jeremiah to stay connected to Woods Cree ways of knowing despite residential schools' genocidal assault.

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NOTES

1 A film or movie treatment can be "a lengthy document that is a scene by scene breakdown of a script," as in the sixty-page *Kiss* (Horowitz n. pag.). A movie treatment is the step before a screenplay, which contains complete dialogue, descriptions of locations, and camera shots. Highway's movie treatment contains few shooting directions.

2 *The Theft of Children*, inspired by *Sweeney Todd*, is a "musical about a priest / barber who steals Indian children, bakes their flesh in pies and, claiming these pies are made with the choicest of northern Manitoba caribou meat, sells the pies to convents and seminaries across the country" (51).

3 Two-Spirit is a specifically Indigenous term that is different from gay, lesbian, trans, bisexual, or queer. Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) defines Two-Spirit as an "umbrella term for Native GLBTQ people as well as a term for people who use words and concepts from their traditions to describe themselves. Like other umbrella terms—including queer—it risks erasing difference. But also like *queer*, it is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous and fluid" (72). Two-Spirit Swampy Cree scholar Alex Wilson defines Two-Spirit as a "self-descriptor increasingly used by Aboriginal gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Canadians who live within a traditional Aboriginal worldview. It asserts that all aspects of identity (including sexuality, race, gender and spirituality) are interconnected and that one's experience of sexuality is inseparable from experiences of culture and community" (iv).

4 I describe Simon and Gabriel as gay because the characters die before the term Two-Spirit was coined at the 1990 gathering of Indigenous LGBTQ+ people in Winnipeg.

5 The scenes in Highway's movie treatment are written more like a play, which is not surprising given Highway's work as a playwright. Thanks to Tasha Hubbard (Nehiyaw / Nakawe / Métis) and Ric Knowles for explaining the unusual nature of the *Kiss* treatment during my paper presentation at the 2015 Indigenous Literary Studies Association gathering.

6 René Highway recounted his own version of the caribou story in an article he wrote when he was twenty-one: "It happened so fast that all I saw was a moving mass of solid animal energy. It was an overwhelming feeling to watch this mass of thundering hooves and flashing antlers rush past me, so close that I could have reached out to touch it. This energy seemed to stir something within me. It was like watching life rush past, exciting and stimulating. It felt so attractive and compelling that I wished I had some too. . . . The energy I had seen and felt was, and still is, within me. For the energy was life itself" (13).

7 In a March 1990 article in the *Toronto Star*, seven months before Fontaine's disclosure, Judy Steed writes, Tomson Highway "was taken away to a Roman Catholic residential school for native children, where he was, along with generations of native children, sexually abused by the priests who were his teachers" (D1). René Highway's own choreography, such as in 1988's *New Song . . . New Dance*, confronted residential school abuses through the use of Woods Cree language and stories, which he shared with Indigenous peoples in the city.

8 The Beatles' "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" is playing when Brother Nadeau assaults Simon, showing the more autobiographical nature of the movie treatment.

9 See Scudeler, June. "'Fed by Spirits:' mamâhtâwisiwin in René Highway's *New Song . . . New Dance*." *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 39.4 (2016): 1-22.

10 AZT is azidothymidine, an "anti-HIV drug that reduces the amount of virus in the body. Anti-HIV drugs such as AZT slow down or prevent damage to the immune system, and reduce the risk of developing AIDS-related illnesses" ("Zidovudine (AZT, *Retrovir*)" n. pag.).

11 Simon shares his HIV-positive status with his friends: "After [Robin's] show, Simon, Robin, Pamela and Jeremiah decide to walk home. Through their chatter, Simon inadvertently reveals that he is HIV positive, that he thinks he has AIDS. 'What do you mean, you think?' Jeremiah asks him. Swallowing their terror, they grapple with the huge question. They walk on in silence" (40). Gabriel keeps his HIV-positive status hidden until he is close to dying because doesn't feel he has support from Jeremiah and his community.

12 Gabriel's sexual life is part of the times of greater sexual freedom for people of all sexualities. The 1969 decriminalization of contraception made the birth control pill easily available, enabling women's sexual and reproductive freedoms. In the same year, Pierre Trudeau's decriminalization of some aspects of same-sex activity between consenting adults led to greater sexual freedom, but not necessarily for 2LGBTQ+ people, who still faced considerable discrimination. However, between the advent of the birth control pill and the discovery of AIDS in the early 1980s, it was possible to have sex without fearing either pregnancy or a likely fatal illness. For about twenty years then, a generation grew up that could free itself from many constraints on an active sex life with more than one partner.

13 Jeremiah becomes "intellect—pure, undiluted, precise" (205) when he sees Gabriel kissing Gregory Newman, an act that reminds him of his sexual abuse at residential school.

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