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Braiding Stories, Braiding Kinship: How Cree Storytelling Restores Relationships in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

This article argues that Cree author Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* celebrates Cree storytelling as a way to restore kinship relations that have been impacted by residential schools. In doing so, Highway's 1998 novel rethinks what it means for residential school survivors to tell their life story. Scholars have published substantial criticism on Highway's novel by analyzing it through an Indigenous Queer/Two-Spirit lens or by focusing on how it involves the land and urban Indigeneity.[1] Several scholars point out the connection between Highway's novel and Cree storytelling via its use of figures such as the Weetigo and Weesageechak.[2] I argue that the extent to which the novel incorporates the power of Cree storytelling goes further than acknowledged by critics to date: *Kiss of the Fur Queen* shows how storytelling as an inherently relational practice can be central to the restoration of *wâhkôtowin*, Cree kinship relations.[3] In this article, I employ Cree storytelling principles in order to analyze a part of the novel that has received surprisingly scant attention from scholars: the plays that protagonist Jeremiah creates toward the end of the novel. I furthermore shed new light on the significance of these plays and the novel's ending by discussing an unpublished play written by Highway, which I came across in the Highway fonds at Library and Archives Canada. My discussion of this unpublished manuscript will demonstrate how the novel's characters create plays to reconnect with kin and culture by weaving testimony and Cree storytelling. As a settler scholar, I aspire to respectfully engage with Indigenous intellectual traditions. I consider Indigenous knowledges like the Cree story cycles that underpin Highway's novel, as well as analyses of other versions of Highway's story that are preserved in the archive. Nevertheless, I need to acknowledge that my perspective is that of an outsider and that there are therefore limits to my understanding. I have been engaging with Highway's novel for almost a decade, and my interpretation of it has changed as I have been learning about Indigenous storytelling and unlearning approaches that emerge from the context of

Western courtroom testimony. The present article is the culmination of all these years of listening to the story that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* has to tell.

Kiss of the Fur Queen tells the life stories of two Cree brothers from northern Manitoba, Champion and Ooneemeetoo Okimasis. It follows the brothers from their childhood on the reserve Eemanapiteepitat to their experience at residential school, where they are forced to take on their Catholic names Jeremiah and Gabriel. The action then turns to urban Canadian centres such as Winnipeg and Toronto, where Jeremiah becomes a classical pianist and Gabriel a ballet dancer. The novel is loosely based on Tomson Highway's and his brother René Highway's own life stories.[4] Throughout the novel, Highway emphasizes the connections between Cree storytelling and kinship relations. In Cree, kinship relations are expressed by the idea of *wâhkôtowin*. Métis writer Maria Campbell's description of *wâhkôtowin* extends this state of kinship beyond the human and includes kinship relations with the land and the other-than-human: "Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place it meant the whole of creation. And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and inter-connected to all things within it" (5).[5] From the beginning, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* emphasizes a connection between storytelling and *wâhkôtowin* in what might be referred to as the brothers' "pre-birth stories." These stories emphasize the relations between humans, the land, and the other-than-human, as well as the principle of reciprocity on which these relations are built. The two stories are inserted right before Champion and Ooneemeetoo are born, and they demonstrate how Cree storytelling encapsulates teachings of relationships. Champion's pre-birth story evokes a storytelling performance, because it opens with an onomatopoetic "*Poof!*" as the child lands "on his bum, smack into the most exquisite mound of snow in the entire forest" (19). By describing how "a small spruce tree that happened to be sleeping there . . . opened one drowsy eye" (20), the story attributes human features to parts of the land. The story teaches about the land as a relative—a notion that is addressed in Maria Campbell's statement on *wâhkôtowin*. Reciprocal relationships to the other-than-human are encapsulated in the story of the baby's encounter with a rabbit which, upon seeing the freezing child, "slipped off his coat and wrapped it around the child's shivering, plump midsection" (20). The baby reciprocates, as he "made his gratitude clear to the rabbit" (20-21). Later in the novel, Abraham Okimasis tells stories to his two youngest

sons about his interactions with the land. His stories also emphasize that human relationships to the land are not dissimilar from those to other humans, when he speaks "of arguments he had had with the fierce north wind, of how a young pine tree had corrected his direction on his homeward journey and thus saved all their lives" (104). His story depicts the land and its elements as animate beings with whom humans interact constantly. It teaches the brothers how they are embedded in a network of relationships—even when they think they are alone.

The novel also shows how stories themselves reinforce relationships. The beginning of the novel (Abraham Okimasis' victory at the 1951 World Championship Dog Derby) is characterized by sentences that turn the story's present into a future act of storytelling: "The next thing Abraham knew, *or so he would relate to his two youngest sons years later*, the goddess floated up to a sky fast fading from pink-and-purple dusk to the great blackness of night" (12; emphasis mine). What is unfolding in the reader's mind is not what happened at the derby in 1951 but what Abraham Okimasis later tells his sons. Noteworthy is Highway's word choice for this act of storytelling as a process of "relating," which suggests that the father is not only telling a story to his sons but is simultaneously connecting with them in an empathic process that strengthens kinship bonds. Highway puts an emphasis on this process by including a second instance in which Abraham Okimasis "relates" a story to his sons (13).

When Champion turns seven, he is forced to go to residential school. Gabriel is forced to go a few years later. The school not only physically separates the brothers from their relations, but also attempts to separate them from all of the cultural practices that uphold these relationships. Speaking Cree and telling Cree stories is forbidden by the school, as it forces a Euro-Christian worldview on the children. The school deeply harms the Okimasis brothers' kinship relations, as they are separated from their family and the land. The novel also describes how Jeremiah witnesses Father Lafleur abusing Gabriel (79). Jeremiah blames himself for the rest of his life for not protecting Gabriel, crying out his sense of guilt at Gabriel's deathbed: "I promised Mom and Dad I'd take care of you. And I fucked it up" (301). The reader does not learn about the sexual abuse that Jeremiah himself suffers until the end of the novel, when Jeremiah, as an adult, is overwhelmed by the memory that he suppressed all of his life. The abuse not only impacts the relationship between Jeremiah and Gabriel. It also impacts the brothers' relationship to their Catholic parents, whom they

cannot tell about the abuse because, as Jeremiah says, "Even if we told them, they would side with Father Lafleur" (92). The silence around the abuse is indicative of the brothers' loss of trust in their parents and thereby addresses the intergenerational effects that decades of residential schooling have had on the ties between parents and children.

Because of the ways in which residential school harms their kinship relations, Jeremiah and Gabriel struggle with isolation later in life and at times behave in ways that are detrimental to the meaningful relations of *wâhkôtowin* in which they were embedded in their early childhood.[6] When Jeremiah moves to Winnipeg after residential school, he feels completely alone and thinks back to his father's stories of being alone with the land—stories that do not offer him any solace now because they "never told us how to spend time alone in the midst of half a million people. Here, stars don't shine at night, trees don't speak" (104). Jeremiah's isolation in the city does not stem from any incompatibility between Cree *wâhkôtowin* and the city but rather shows that the residential school's assimilatory practices, while harming Jeremiah's relationships, did nothing to teach him how to forge connections in this new environment. Still living on the reserve, Gabriel comes to realize that "there was no place for him in Eemanipiteepitat or the north" after his father insists, "The Catholic church saved our people. Without it, we wouldn't be here today" (109). Colonialism and the worldview that comes with it make it exceedingly difficult for both brothers to uphold their kinship relations or to forge new ones. This does not mean that the brothers do not resist. Jeremiah and Gabriel try to find ways to uphold kinship relations throughout the novel. Jeremiah at times imaginatively connects to the land when he plays the piano (213), and Gabriel expresses his father's dog sled stories in his dance (237). However, the novel suggests that the temporary relationships that are created by these actions are not sustainable.

Highway utilizes the Weetigo as a metaphor to express how residential school imposes behavioural norms on Jeremiah and Gabriel that are further detrimental to kinship ties. The Weetigo is a figure from Cree (and other Algonquian) storytelling traditions and can be seen as the opposite of all of the principles that are expressed through *wâhkôtowin* as outlined by Campbell.[7] As Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew points out, "[t]he *Wihtikow*, in Cree tradition, like the *Windigo* of the Anishinaubae, is a giant insatiable cannibal spirit who eats everything and everyone in its path; it is the personification of greed" (176). This cannibal spirit stands

in stark contrast to the principles of balance and reciprocity. Omushkego Elder and storyteller Louis Bird says that the "wihtigo . . . was created by starvation—humans starved, went crazy, and ate human flesh when it was decayed . . . And you become a wihtigo" (112).

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, there are instances in which both Jeremiah and Gabriel are associated with the Weetigo. In one scene, the narrative represents the little girls in Gabriel's ballet class as making "him look, and feel, like a Weetigo" (152). Jeremiah is told by a little boy that he was eaten by a Weetigo (271) and according to settler scholar Sam McKegney's analysis, Jeremiah is in this moment confronted with "his latent capacity to become an abuser" (170), to turn into a Weetigo himself. Building on McKegney's interpretation of the cannibal spirit as a metaphor for cycles of sexual abuse, my own reading, based on Bird and Episkenew, adds the dimension that the Weetigo figure in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* can also be understood as a metaphor for behaviour that is detrimental to the reciprocal and respectful relationships that characterize *wâhkôtowin*. The central question is whether storytelling, specifically Jeremiah's act of telling his life story, can be a way to restore relationships and to metaphorically battle the Weetigo. The last part of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* offers a powerful demonstration of how this is indeed possible.

Towards the end of the novel, Jeremiah tells his life story in a couple of plays entitled "Ulysses Thunderchild" and "Chachagathoo, the Shaman." *Âtayohkewina* include sacred stories such as creation stories and stories "emphasizing that animals and other non-human agencies spoke and behaved like humans." *Âcimowina* describes a category of stories where "[t]he narrator knows the characters or has direct or indirect knowledge of them through human intermediaries" (7). *Âcimowina* is the category that life stories (*âcimisowina*) or testimonies would fall under.[8] Another subcategory of *âcimowina* is *kayâs-âcimowina*, *kayâs* being the Cree term for "a long time ago." As Brightman describes, *kayas-âcimowina* are oral histories of events (7).

In his first play, "Ulysses Thunderchild," Jeremiah adapts "The Son of Ayash"—a traditional Cree *âtayohkewin*—to his own life story or *âcimisowin*. There are many different tellings of "The Son of Ayash," but the essence of the narrative is the story of a child who is separated from his parents and must find his way back home (Brightman 94). From a non-Indigenous perspective, Jeremiah's creative process could be described as fictionalization, "the action of writing about a real event or character but

adding imaginary details and changing some facts" ("Fictionalization"). However, the problem with the idea of fictionalization is that it connotes "fiction," which is generally defined as an "invention or fabrication as opposed to fact" ("Fiction"). Looking at a residential school survivor's life story through the lens of "fiction" is potentially problematic, especially in the context of Canadians who refuse to acknowledge the atrocities of the residential school system. I propose that Cree storytelling principles can help us understand Jeremiah's play differently. As pointed out above, *âtayohkewina* are understood as true accounts, and Jeremiah's blending of stories is therefore not a process of fictionalization in a Western sense. Jeremiah's combination of *âcimisowin* and *âtayohkewin* is a process in which he blends two stories (both of which are true accounts) in a creative manner in order to enhance the meaning of each and to carve out aspects that are important to him.

One possible way of understanding how Jeremiah braids *âcimisowin* and *âtayohkewin* is articulated by Cree scholar Neal McLeod as *aniskwâcimopicikêwin*, which "literally means 'the process of connecting stories together'" (8).[9] According to McLeod, "the dissonance between" the stories, the space in-between, allows the reader or listener to understand each of the stories "in new ways." Meaning not only emerges from each of the stories but also lies within the relationship that is established during the process of *aniskwâcimopicikêwin*. Jeremiah creates new meanings when he braids his own life story with the traditional Son of Ayash story. Jeremiah can thereby make meaning of his own experience while reclaiming a story from a tradition that the residential school tried to suppress.

As suggested in the first part of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Indigenous storytelling creates relationships. The fact that Jeremiah decides to testify in the form of a play can be read as his attempt to recreate a storytelling situation in the city far from the storytelling contexts he grew up in. As Highway himself points out, theatre can be seen as "a natural extension of the oral storytelling tradition" (Interview 95). Jeremiah's choice of genre suggests his realization that he is in need of relationships. By asking Gabriel "to direct it" (*Kiss* 278), Jeremiah hopes to work with Gabriel on the play, but he also implicitly hopes to work with Gabriel on restoring their kinship relationship. While I agree with McKegney's argument that writing the play allows Jeremiah to claim agency, I disagree with his idea that Jeremiah controls the story as a writer (171). Jeremiah certainly *attempts* to control the story of his play as a writer, which becomes visible when

he uses James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a second frame of reference and refers to "Ulysses Thunderchild" as depicting "one day in the life of a Cree man in Toronto, 1984" (277). Joyce's novel is usually taught as a prime example of a Western notion of literature that celebrates the author as a solitary genius whose work is directed at a small audience of similarly intellectual readers. Theatrical plays, however, "are not the creation of solitary individuals working in isolation. They are communal both in production and in performance" (Episkenew 147). Jeremiah's attempt to have sole control over the story as a writer goes against the idea of co-creation that is central to both theatre and Indigenous storytelling. And indeed, while rehearsing Jeremiah's play, the actors complain that it is "unplayable" (279) and that it's "all head and no gut" (280). After the accusations, Jeremiah angrily starts playing the piano, singing and shouting the words "the son of Ayash" in Cree. The group of actors joins in, making it "a dance, a Cree rite of sacrifice" (280). It is only when they all work together that they turn Jeremiah's play into something that can be understood and felt. Gabriel teaches Jeremiah that storytelling is an act of embodiment that needs to be felt "with the tips of your fingers, your forehead, the soles of your feet, your toes, your groin." *Kiss of the Fur Queen* therefore conceptualizes testimony as a holistic process of collective and creative storytelling. Working with Gabriel and the actors on co-creating his testimony, Jeremiah experiences the relational power of story as he connects with a new, self-chosen community of artists and starts to restore his kinship ties with Gabriel. The rehearsal scene in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* suggests a process of creative co-creation of story that happens among Jeremiah, Gabriel, and the actors who grow together to build a community. This act of co-creation is reminiscent of oral storytelling when story emerges from the interaction between teller and listener. For Jeremiah, his community of actors is more important than his relationships with the audience.

The audience, however, still plays a crucial role in this particular process of testimony because, as Jeremiah points out to Gabriel, "I want my *Muskoosiuk* to understand it" (278). *Muskoosiuk* refers to the children whom Jeremiah teaches and who embody the next generation in the novel. Jeremiah here explicitly states his intention to create a situation of intergenerational witnessing and education. The fact that Jeremiah shapes his testimony into the form of a play also gestures toward his desire to confront the public with the atrocities that were committed in residential schools. In his play, Jeremiah discloses an act of abuse by showing the

figure of a Weetigo "shedding his costume at death, revealing a priest's cassock" (285). The element of disclosure, however, is not acknowledged as such by all audience members. As Jeremiah reads later in a review of his play, the image of the Weetigo-priest "comes from nowhere. And goes nowhere" (285). The review demonstrates that not all of those witnessing his play are aware of its testimonial nature. The audience is not able to reconcile testimony and the Cree custom of metaphor and does not understand that the metaphor is part of the active engagement that Indigenous storytelling asks of the audience. Or as Gabriel puts it, "You didn't say it loud enough, Jeremiah" (285). By including the image of the priest as Weetigo in his play, Jeremiah enacts what Neal McLeod refers to as the Cree way of *kiskino*, when things are "pointed to, but never completely articulated" (5). According to McLeod, "this space allows the listener or reader to arrive at his or her own understanding." Jeremiah's reimagining of testimony challenges Western understandings of testimony just as his play challenges Western theatre, as is pointed out when his script keeps getting rejection comments such as, "No conflict. It's not a play" (278). This comment indicates that readers of the script do not recognize the conflicts in Jeremiah's play and therefore do not understand its implications. Therefore, in Jeremiah's case, the (presumably non-Indigenous) reviewer and, by extension, the broader public do not know how to understand his testimony. Despite some audience members' lack of understanding, seeing his play performed still has an impact on Jeremiah, since it is only after the performance that the suppressed memory of Jeremiah's own abuse is revealed. Here, the novel itself mirrors the disclosure in "Ulysses Thunderchild" by disclosing to the reader that it was not only Gabriel who was abused in residential school.

Even though the performance of "Ulysses Thunderchild" as a collective and creative testimony helps Jeremiah to restore kinship ties, it is not a magic remedy. In fact, it is only the starting point of this process, which he continues with his second play, "Chachagathoo, the Shaman." The story of Chachagathoo is alluded to throughout the novel. Jeremiah and Gabriel grow up hearing it from their parents, who tell them that "Chachagathoo was an evil woman. Because she had *machipoowamoowin*" (90), which the narrative reveals elsewhere means "bad dream power." The novel later shows how this image of "the wicked Chachagathoo" (196) comes from a sermon in which the reserve's priest Father Bouchard tells the community, "There was a woman here who flouted the church, who did not worship the

one true God, who practiced witchcraft" (197). The two brothers later learn that their "parents' generation" was "[l]ied to and lied to and lied to" (247) about Chachagathoo, when an Anishinaabe Elder Ann-Adele Ghostrider tells them the actual story:

> [O]ne day, a man became possessed by Weetigo, the spirit who feasts on human flesh. At this time, the first priest arrived on Mistik Lake . . . The crazed man was brought to the priest, who proclaimed his soul to be possessed by Satan. But the shaman said no. When she started curing the man, when she started exorcising the Weetigo, the priest stopped her. The man died. And the priest accused the shaman of witchcraft. He had her sent to jail in Winnipeg. There, in despair, she hung herself. (245-46)[10]

Jeremiah utilizes his knowledge of this story for his second play, "Chachagathoo, the Shaman," in which he blends *âcimisowin* and *kayâs-âcimowin*.

Jeremiah's creation of "Ulysses Thunderchild" and "Chachagathoo, the Shaman" is described in a thirty-page section towards the end of the novel. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the original manuscript of the novel was about eight hundred pages long before it was edited down to the three hundred pages that were published (McKegney 153). Drafts and fragments of Highway's longer versions of the novel are available at Library and Archives Canada, and an early draft of the novel from 1995 describes Jeremiah and Gabriel's work on staging the two plays over the course of more than ninety pages. I looked at even earlier manuscripts from 1994, when Highway had not yet started working on the novel but was still hoping to have his story told in a two-part TV movie. Highway's screenplay for "Kiss of the Fur Queen" puts even more emphasis on Jeremiah and Gabriel's use of testimonial theatre as a means to renew kinship relations in the aftermath of residential school. The screenplay particularly focuses on Jeremiah's play about Chachagathoo, which in this early version is simply entitled "The Last Shaman." The screenplay suggests that "Kiss of the Fur Queen" opens and ends with the staging of this play, and it includes several rehearsal scenes that give far more insight into the play than the published novel does. Among Highway's many other drafts, I found a complete manuscript entitled "The Last Shaman" in which Highway imagines how Jeremiah would have written and designed this play. Presumably, Highway wrote this complete version of "The Last Shaman" to make it easier for

filmmakers to stage the rehearsal scenes that are included in the screenplay. As I argue in what follows, "The Last Shaman" is a crucial document for understanding the importance of Cree storytelling traditions to Jeremiah and Gabriel's conception of theatre as a site of kinship renewal.

"The Last Shaman" is set in 1860 at Brochet (which the novel reimagines as Eemanapiteepitat on Mistik Lake). It tells the story of Kichimakskwew the shaman (who takes the name Chachagathoo in the novel). In a note, Highway points out that "[a]ll dialogue is in Cree, unless otherwise indicated" (1). In 1860, the Cree community of Brochet is struggling with famine after a harsh winter during which "[t]he caribou have not come" (2). The play opens with the description of a family's fruitless attempts to hunt caribou north of the community's village. As the hunter Migisoo, his wife Cheechagee, and their three children face starvation, a Weetigo takes possession of Cheechagee. The play then focuses on the community, which welcomes Father Egenolf, a Catholic priest or "holy boss" as he likes to be called (11). Some in the community have high hopes for the priest to end the famine, having heard that one of these holy bosses "changed two trout into five hundred pickerel" (11). Kichimakskwew, the community's shaman, remains skeptical, extolling the community to "doubt. Question. Fight back. Don't give in so easily" (11). Soon after his arrival in the community, Father Egenolf starts to build a church and to teach the community's children about Catholic beliefs and practices. The play's climax unfolds as Migisoo the hunter brings his Weetigo-possessed wife back to the community, asking Kichimakskwew to perform a ritual to help her. The ritual performance requires Kichimakskwew to hold Cheechagee "firmly around the throat," which Father Egenolf views with horror, running toward the shaman yelling, "No! Get away from her!" (43). Despite Kichimakskwew's warning not to interfere with something he knows nothing about, "[t]he priest continues pulling at the Shaman, trying to break her hold on Cheechagee. In the ensuing confusion, Cheechagee turns on the priest, murderously, with her teeth at his throat." Protecting the priest, Kichimakskwew "intercepts and strikes Cheechagee across the throat," causing her death. The play then depicts the ensuing trial in a courtroom in Winnipeg, Kichimakskwew's sentencing, and her suicide in prison. The play's last scene depicts Father Egenolf's mass in Brochet, which is drowned out by Kichimakskwew, whose spirit returns to the community to offer a warning to the priest to "[t]ake care of our young men . . . For before you know it, the seventh

lifetime will be upon us all . . . And the souls of men will not die. And the caribou will be plentiful once again" (50).

When looking at Highway's unpublished playscript, it is important to keep in mind that within the world of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, "The Last Shaman" is written by Jeremiah and staged by Jeremiah and Gabriel. Even though its narrative is set in the historical past, "The Last Shaman" interweaves the *kayâs-âcimowina* of Kichimakskwew with the life experiences of Jeremiah and Gabriel. In a note that precedes the unpublished playscript, Highway points out that

> bits and pieces of this show will resemble, visually, aurally and otherwise, elements from all other shows the Okimasis brothers have done before, as well as scenes from their "real" lives. For instance, the first set piece we see here will be a facsimile of the meadow in the northern Manitoba tundra, with its large rock in the middle, where the herd of caribou almost stampeded over Leo [Gabriel's name in the unpublished screenplay] and Jeremiah as children.

Highway's note on what the performance of "The Last Shaman" should look like in the film version of "Kiss of the Fur Queen" suggests that Jeremiah creates yet another act of testimony because he lets the play be influenced by his personal experiences. The way in which the play connects the story of the shaman to stories from Jeremiah and Gabriel's lives—e.g., the time when Jeremiah saved Gabriel from a caribou herd—is yet another instance of *aniskwâcimopicikêwin*. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, this aspect of Jeremiah's second play is lost because the novel was edited and shortened for publication. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* only retains fragmented references to Jeremiah's second play, and therefore readers of the novel cannot get the full experience of how this second play works towards the restoration of *wâhkôhtowin*. I argue that even though the playscript for "The Last Shaman" is not part of the published novel, it is still part of the story that Highway originally conceived. I also argue that an analysis of how Jeremiah's "The Last Shaman" works towards the restoration of *wâhkôhtowin* explains Jeremiah's turn against Catholicism and towards Cree culture at the very end of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*.

Looking at the playscript "The Last Shaman" and the note from Highway that precedes it, I argue that the fact that Jeremiah stages the *kayâs-âcimôwin* of the shaman using imagery from his own life

demonstrates how he once again uses this form of storytelling to restore relationships to his brother, the land on which he grew up, and the Cree language. As Highway's note suggests, Jeremiah's writing of the play creates an opportunity for the brothers to keep working together. In the screenplay as well as in the novel, the caribou stampede that almost tramples Gabriel to death is, tellingly, an incident in which Jeremiah is able to protect Gabriel by pulling him up onto a rock—and thereby fulfilling what he perceives as his kinship responsibilities. The image of the rock from this incident features prominently in "The Last Shaman" and can be read as Jeremiah creating a reminder for himself and Gabriel of a time in which their relationship was still characterized by *wâhkôhtowin*.

The landscape of northern Manitoba features prominently in "The Last Shaman" and the playscript suggests that Jeremiah uses the play to reconnect with his home territory. For example, the audience is taken to "the bush a distance from the village of Brochet" (22), and snowstorms and starlight are visible on stage (20). In this production, Jeremiah and Gabriel revisit memories of their home territory and thereby potentially create a feeling of connectedness. They attempt to bring their home territory to the city—even if this has to happen through the use of unnatural props such as "125 green garbage bags sewn together" to indicate a lake (13). As Highway describes it, the play makes extensive use of the Cree language, which also helps to restore the brothers' connection to place. As Cree playwright Floyd Favel explains in "Theatre of Orphans," "Language is related to place; it is our umbilical cord to our place of origin, literally and symbolically . . . It is a doorway and a window . . . Present in the immediate words are the ancestors" (9).

Through "The Last Shaman," Jeremiah testifies to the atrocities of residential schools and his and Gabriel's suffering of sexual abuse in a number of ways. Even though the play is set in a time before the community was affected by residential schools, it foreshadows residential schools in a scene in which Father Egenolf, "[l]ike the Pied Piper . . . leads the children . . . as he teaches them snippets of Gregorian chant from the mass, so that, as they progress, the children's chant changes imperceptibly from Cree to Latin" (33). The play also evokes Jeremiah's experiences in residential school in a scene in which the priest teaches the community's children with a "chart which depicts a map of heaven and hell" (34). In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, young Jeremiah learns about heaven and hell with exactly such a map (59-61). "The Last Shaman" implicitly addresses

the issue of sexual abuse in a scene in which, according to the stage directions, "three children . . . finger Father Egenolf's crucifix with intense curiosity. The crucifix rests just above the priest's crotch" (27). To direct the audience's attention, a "pinspot focuses on this visual." Jeremiah also connects Father Egenolf directly to his and Gabriel's experiences of sexual abuse by adding a scene in which Father Egenolf "transmutes" into the community priest that Jeremiah and Gabriel grew up with and then into the priest from residential school who abused them (49). Thereby, Jeremiah illustrates a long line of abuse and connects his and Gabriel's experiences to this lineage. Jeremiah also addresses the transgressions of the Catholic Church through the figure of the Weetigo. Jeremiah's play depicts the community members' encounters with the Weetigo as originating from starvation. The play uses a different strategy, however, to connect the priest to the Weetigo. In several instances, the play describes the Weetigo as lurking in the background when the priest performs mass (39, 45). More explicitly, the play notes in a stage direction that when Father Egenolf performs this rite, "subliminally, it is like the Weetigo eating human flesh" (40). In short, the play explicitly represents how the Catholic Church brings practices into the community that threaten the community's health and *wâhkôhtowin*.

The reader of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* has no access to all the statements that "The Last Shaman" makes about Jeremiah's life and his attempts to reconnect while disclosing the Church's assaults. These statements are, however, crucial for understanding what happens at the end of the novel. The novel represents Jeremiah and Gabriel working together on a second play, "Chachagathoo, the Shaman." But it does not include the extensive rehearsal scenes that feature prominently in the "Kiss of the Fur Queen" screenplay. The novel mentions that the audience deems the play "so controversial that the cardinal of Toronto had snuck into the show dressed as a Rosedale matron" (295-96)—and the "The Last Shaman" playscript certainly sheds light on why Jeremiah's version is considered controversial by the church. At the end of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Gabriel, who suffers from AIDS, is on his deathbed in the hospital. The novel hints at the fact that Gabriel was supposed to play the community member who is possessed by a Weetigo in the production of "Chachagathoo, the Shaman." In the novel, Gabriel dreams about this role, reciting lines such as, "Haven't you feasted on enough human flesh while we sit here with nothing but our tongues to chew on?" (299). He also conflates the Weetigo with Father

Lafleur, who abused him in residential school (300). On its very last pages, the novel establishes parallels between Gabriel's death and the failed Weetigo ritual in "The Last Shaman." These parallels speak to the ways in which the Catholic Church and its practices assaulted Cree practices and beliefs—but also to how a resurgence of Cree practices can counter the harm that was done.

As in "The Last Shaman," Indigenous and Catholic worldviews clash in the hospital scene that concludes *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Ann-Adele Ghostrider performs a sweetgrass ceremony for Gabriel. Like the shaman in the play, she performs a traditional ceremony that the situation calls for. Jeremiah and Gabriel's mother, however, brings a priest to the hospital, who is supposed to give Gabriel his last rites according to the Catholic faith. The mother and the priest's intrusion on Ann-Adele Ghostrider's ceremony parallels the intrusion of the priest on the shaman's ceremony in the play. In the playscript, one of the characters tries to pull the priest back in order to prevent him from interrupting the ritual, yet fails (42). In the hospital, Jeremiah stands up against his mother and the priest by literally blocking the door. Ann-Adele Ghostrider is able to finish her ceremony and Gabriel dies peacefully, surrounded by his family. In the playscript, the community member who is possessed by the Weetigo dies as a victim of the Weetigo after the ritual is interrupted. I argue that Jeremiah prevented Gabriel from such a destiny by ensuring that Ann-Adele Ghostrider's ceremony can be performed as yet another act of reconnection that battles the relationship-harming Weetigo. The Catholic priest's disruption of the ritual in the play can be read as a metaphor for the Church's disruption of Indigenous cultural practices through Catholicism and residential schools. However, as the ending of Highway's novel shows, it is possible to reconnect with Indigenous cultural practices. Gabriel's death therefore comes to be a statement of resurgence, demonstrating that the prophecy spoken by Kichimakskwew at the end of "The Last Shaman" will become true. Jeremiah's act of keeping the priest out of Gabriel's room is not only a rejection of Catholic beliefs. It also honours Gabriel's last wish not to have "priests anywhere near my bed" (299). In honouring Gabriel's wish, Jeremiah fulfills his kinship obligations. In conclusion, the novel once more gestures towards a restoration of relationships.

As I hope to have shown, Highway's novel addresses the role of Cree storytelling in restoring kinship relationships in the aftermath of residential schools. From the beginning, the novel showcases the importance of

storytelling for *wâhkôtowin*. It demonstrates how residential schools were designed to disrupt these relationships, and it imagines how storytelling can support the restoration of these relationships. The novel emphasizes the importance of residential school survivors telling their life stories and imagines a Cree form of testimony, grounded in Indigenous storytelling principles. Jeremiah's creative and collective testimonies braid together personal story, history, and Cree storytelling, enabling the brothers to restore their kinship ties and to vanquish the metaphorical Weetigo. By choosing the medium of the play to tell his life story, Jeremiah chooses a collective process of storytelling. Director and actors work together to bring a story to life through an interpersonal process that is similar to the collaboration between storyteller and listener in Indigenous storytelling.[11] Highway's novel demonstrates that art can be a form of testimony that is creative and truthful at the same time. At first glance, Highway's reimagining of testimony seems very different from the kind of testimonial process that occurred as part of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which gathered about seven thousand life stories of residential school survivors. Highway's focus on testimony as a process that is embedded in Indigenous storytelling principles and that helps to restore relationships can teach us alternative ways of listening to TRC testimonies.[12] For example, it can help us see how survivors involved their listeners and created communities while giving testimony. Jeremiah's desire to educate the audience with his testimony—to have them acknowledge its truth—evokes the TRC's emphasis on witnessing. The TRC asked everyone who was present during a testimony "to store and care for the history they witness and to share it with their own people when they return home" (24n32). Many survivors who spoke out at TRC events emphasized (like Jeremiah does in Highway's novel) that they spoke out so that their children and grandchildren could understand what they went through.

Kiss of the Fur Queen suggests that by braiding his testimony with other stories, Jeremiah enhances the meaning of his life story as this act of braiding helps him to add more depth to experiences he wants to emphasize—if the audience knows how to listen. Braiding one's own life story with other stories, the novel suggests, also enhances the relationship-establishing potential of testimony as it connects speaker and listener to additional places, additional voices. Highway (like Jeremiah), however, braids life stories with traditional Cree oral stories and historical accounts in order to make them more specific and more grounded in place and

culture. Telling one's story through other stories does not take away from the truth of testimony. Highway blends his own life story with traditional Cree oral stories and historical accounts in order to tell the truth about his experiences. Like Jeremiah, Highway creates a carefully braided novel that also functions as testimony that includes references to different Cree oral stories and that uses different genres of storytelling, such as theatre. The essence of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* has undergone many transformations and it exists in relation to other stories and texts such as "The Last Shaman" and also traditional Cree oral stories. Here, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* mirrors life itself just as all of our own life stories and identities grow in relation to those of others. Jeremiah's plays come to life through the collaboration of actors. Similarly, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as testimony comes to life through the collaboration of the reader, who is asked both to witness and to participate through interpretation. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers are invited to enter a network of story relationships. For Indigenous readers, this might spark processes of reconnection. For non-Indigenous readers, this kind of testimony is a gift that comes with the responsibility of finding a way to honour these stories.

Notes

1. For discussions of sexuality in the novel, see Belghiti, Buzny, and Scudeler. Discussions of land and urban spaces in the novel appear in Van Essen and Smith.
2. Settler scholar Sam McKegney discusses the novel's political effects through what he terms "trickster poetics." (137). He also discusses how the novel draws on a Cree mythological context (152). Settler scholar Sophie McCall discusses Highway's use of the Weetigo in relation to the politics of reconciliation.
3. My reading resonates with Métis scholar June Scudeler's thought-provoking article on the importance of *wâhkôtowin* for decolonization in the 1992 movie treatment of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. While Scudeler focuses on how honouring *wâhkôhtowin* may foster a community's inclusion of 2LGBTQ+ people, I look at *wâhkôtowin* in the broader sense defined by Métis writer Maria Campbell as kinship relations to all of creation.
4. In 2015, the *Huffington Post* quoted Highway on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with the following words: "You may have heard 7,000 witnesses in the process that were negative . . . But what you haven't heard are the 7,000 reports that were positive stories . . . Nine of the happiest years of my life I spent it at that school" (Ostroff). Highway's comments were picked up by those who deny the traumatic effects of residential schools. In an address to the Senate on March 7, 2017, Lynn Beyak laments that Canada ignores "the abundance of good" that came out of residential schools (2514). In her appalling speech, Beyak refers to Highway, saying, "Tomson Highway is an accomplished playwright, novelist and classical pianist. Of residential schools, Highway says this" (2514). Beyak then quotes Highway's statement without contextualization or offering any of the numerous quotes in which Highway speaks about the negative impacts of residential schools. Tomson Highway never commented on his more than problematic statement from 2015. His

brother Daniel Highway told *CBC News* in 2018, "People kind of cherry-pick what [Tomson] says . . . If Tomson were ever to tell the whole story, things would change pretty quick" (Meloney; square brackets original). In my opinion, Tomson Highway did tell "the whole story" in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which makes the insidiousness of the residential school system and its harmful effects abundantly clear. Those who cherry-picked Highway's comments for the purpose of denying the atrocious nature of the residential school system were quick to turn Highway's brief comments into an encompassing experience and a single man into a spokesperson for 150,000 survivors. For me, this is an important reminder for my work as a witness and literary scholar: the stories that we hear are personal perspectives that arise from specific times and contexts, and one testimony never speaks for everyone in a community—whether this community is one of residential school survivors or a specific Indigenous nation.

5. In my work with *asiniskaw īthiniwak* (Rocky Cree) communities, I learned that there can be community-specific protocols around *wâhkôtowin*. For the Rocky Cree, for example, *wâhkôtowin* entails extended kinship and adoption practices (Dumas 37). For this article, I choose to focus on Maria Campbell's description of *wâhkôtowin* because over the years, I have found it most helpful for understanding how storytelling works in Highway's novel.
6. After years of listening to Indigenous stories and engaging with Indigenous literatures, I have learned that meaningful relationships are relationships that sustain one's well-being in a holistic sense and that are ongoing lived experiences emerging from and sustained by reciprocity, accountability, kindness, and the commitment of those involved.
7. I adopt Highway's spelling of "Weetigo."
8. A thorough theorization of *âcimisowina* can be found in Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder's *Âcimisowin as Theoretical Practice*, which demonstrates that autobiographical stories are part of Indigenous intellectual traditions.
9. In 2014, Neal McLeod was charged with domestic violence, behaviour that is clearly contrary to the respectful relationships he often writes about. McLeod took responsibility for his actions, and I choose to include his work because of the important contribution that it makes to the study of Cree literature.
10. Highway's story of Chachagathoo draws on a historical event that occurred in Norway House in the fall of 1907. "Jack Fiddler, a shaman and leader of the Sucker clan from the upper Severn River in what is now northwestern Ontario," and his younger brother Joseph Fiddler were charged with killing "a possessed woman who had turned into the dreaded windigo" (Fiddler and Stevens vii). For *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway turned the shaman into a woman.
11. The way in which Highway's novel imagines testimony as a collective and interpersonal process resonates with other creative Cree testimonies, including David Robertson's graphic novel *Sugar Falls*. The graphic novel is based on the experiences of Betty Ross, an Elder and residential school survivor from Cross Lake First Nation. Ross shared her life story with Robertson, who expresses it creatively together with Scott B. Henderson, who draws the images. *Sugar Falls* as a creative testimony that is told collectively displays certain parallels to Jeremiah's process of creating a testimonial play that is enacted collectively by actors on a stage. Cree poet and residential school survivor Louise Bernice Halfe's collection of autobiographical poems, *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, also creates a creative form of Cree residential school testimony. Like Highway, she focuses on relationships—especially through her use of family portraits.
12. I write about Highway's novel and how it can change our perspective on TRC

testimonies in detail in my dissertation, *Restorying Relationships and Performing Resurgence*.

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